

My Hometown's Sea

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Original text available upon request.

A friend from my hometown came up to Tokyo recently and told me my village had a huge catch this year. Three whales, a couple and their child, chased a school of sardines all the way from Tosa Bay and ended up in Shodoshima. They said the sardines flocked to the fishing boats and, frightened by the whales, jumped right into them. It was as if the nets had scooped up a sea full of fish. As I wondered how these three whales raged on by the small bay of my village, the stuff of fairy tales came to mind.

Anyone would think that the inland sea is quite calm, but there are days when isn't always so. Around March and September, the seas are turbulent almost every day, the rough waves of the waters looming over and crashing into house gates. My village, which was at the southern tip of Shodoshima, had a good inlet harbor, but the inland sea gets the highest waves since the east side faces Harima Sea. When the ships from Osaka and Kobe enter these seas, the sailors rush into their cabins and those caught unaware feel a sense of foreboding. It is a demonic sea where your only escape is leaping to your death. In this very sea near my village, there is a small monument by the shore for those who took their lives this way. Even Shungetsu Ikuta has a monument engraved with his poem Sea Chart which now rests on the top of the village hill where the writer gazed upon the blue skies.

People did not only defy nature like this. There also were many instances when others faced the sea and their defeat. When I was younger, I saw a shipwrecked rice boat that was reduced to nothing but rice. There were no rice fields in the village nor was there anywhere to buy it, and so we valued every single grain we found. The elderly didn't want the rice to go to waste, so they took their draining baskets and went to scoop the rice up. Someone also took care to wash the sandy rice and make it into mochi. They were in my neighborhood, so I got some mochi, too. Looking back on it, I'm sure they were leftovers from last New Year. I remember the mochi having a dirty color and a bad texture, and I had a feeling that if I ate one I would die, so I didn't.

After that, I was happy to find a shipwreck full of baby mandarins. It was a colorful time. The water was full of mandarins that I daresay it was as if the blue sea had changed its colors. Mandarins were not like the rice that looked like sand; the waves washing over them made them look even glossier. (My memory is incredibly faint, so I might be using

my creative license here.) Anyway, it was certainly a moment of celebration for the village children, but I still find it strange how I don't have even the slightest memory of eating those mandarins.

I have one more story about a shipwreck.

This was from five or six years ago. It's not a matter I had firsthand experience with, but something I know from Denji Kuroshima of Shodoshima and letters from my younger sisters. This time, the shipwreck was a boat of geta or Japanese clogs. Just as you'd expect, many geta rode on waves and washed up on the shore. The villagers went to pick up the geta for fun and tried to find the matching left and right pairs. Among the villagers was a police officer who announced that they must gather the geta, and so these people were tasked to collect them. I think they even piled them up upon the dirt floor of the village office. In the end, the rescued boatman and shipper disposed of the drenched geta at the local general store. The store owner's name was Shigeharu Nakano, so my classmate Kuroshima thought it was funny that Shigeharu Nakano bought the shipwreck's geta in bulk and made a killing out of them. I wrote back to him, "They must be dirt cheap, then!" We laughed until tears came out of our eyes as we vividly imagined hundreds and thousands of geta floating in the clear, blue calm after the storm.

This was not at all a laughing matter to the people concerned, but it seems that there are people who like to laugh at the inescapable tricks nature likes to play on them.

However, there were times I can't bring myself to laugh at. Whenever we found a small cask washed up on the shore, we made a dedication to Konpira Daigongen in huge letters and around it, the names of the crew. Then, we tied it to a monetary offering tightly wrapped in a handkerchief. These were prayers from the sea's surface to Konpira, who watches over the lives of the shipwrecked. Most of those who made these prayers were the fishermen's children. Those who live by the coast do the same as they hold the same feelings in their heart, taking time off work to visit Konpira for fishermen they barely knew. A few years ago when one of my nephews went swimming in the ocean, he found this cask and tied an offering of fifty sen to it. My heart aches to think that there would be a fisherman or two who'd need it.

There are various stories like these about the quiet seas of Shodoshima. When I was a child, the puppet shows from Awa Province would arrive by ship every spring. When the ships approached the shore, the puppeteers would beat their drums and shout "We're back!" and the villagers would come to the shore to greet them.

My grandmother said that these puppeteers would meet them during the storm, for the waves would grow still as everyone fervently prayed to Kannon. The puppeteers from Awa would then first come to the village, where they would perform for the Kannon of the mountains at the coastal shrine before leaving for other provinces. They say "We're back" because we serve Kannon, and it was this village's Kannon who saved them. This is what the village means to them. This, too, is a distant, nostalgic memory. These days I think about what happens at the sea of my hometown each year and wonder if they will ever be forgotten.