

I miss the gentle hands of my mother. Cracked and careworn, marking my height on the wall.

Mine and countless of my brothers'. The plaster was streaked with dashes. My line was somewhere on there. The four foot scratch blended into the background, hidden in plain sight.

Blink and you'd miss it. There were so many of us growing up together that I would never stand out from the crowd. Still, I felt my mother's love. She knew what it was that separated me from the flock, that made me my own.

She is gone now, and there is no-one to draw me out from the huddled masses. The wreckage-strewn camp does not allow for individuality. So many brothers and sisters here but not her. I would trade them all, cast them into the ocean, just to have her back. What son wouldn't? I look for her in the throng and find it. She is here in the eyes of each sister kindling a fire with garbage or anxiously nursing. In all of them I can find her face.

Although it seems odd to do so, I can now look back fondly to a time on the edge of childhood when I was taken with a fever. Some bug bite or dirty water caused my throat to swell up and laid a heavy cough on my chest. My mother and father took turns nursing me through the infection. Beyond the delirium, I can remember lying in a dark bedroom with drawn curtains and both parents taking turns to sit at the foot of my cot. They would listen as my thickened windpipe whistled with each breath. During the respites from my spluttering and hacking, they'd force a bitter fluid down my throat which made me gag.

But then they'd hold me close. With my nose buried deep into their breast I'd be overpowered by mama's rosewater or baba's cologne, even through my blocked sinuses. These smells meant safety and the love and security of one's home. Now I have almost forgotten their aroma.

I hold all of the sorrow in. I become a container for it and I can feel the rich liquid emotion sloshing around inside of me, filled to the back of the teeth. I daren't show it though, we've all got our burdens to carry here. I just made the mistake of trying to dig out all of those old longings. I thought that if I forgot and made myself immune to the memory then I'd be safe. Instead, misery poured in and misery packed into the space. It was natural to take my place in line with everyone else in the camp, another saturated refugee.

If you'd tried to warn us we might have laughed. But one day, the clouds opened and didn't stop. The downpour that they released soon burst every levee and dyke. We were totally overwhelmed. Our dams crumbled and took all that we had with them. Soon everything was an island. All of that water; a blue frontier which only hems us in. So much of it turned to mud. A thick brash of no use. Or else it is saltwater, which is worse. I'd swallow a pond of stagnant water before even considering the sea.

Now we all look half-dead and rinsed of life. Certainly any possible high power has washed its hands of us. Our demiurge has marooned us and so we are all orphans, stranded on the shore. Instead we calmly accept our fate, even if only subconsciously. This admission of helplessness moves us along further, as if the mere acknowledgement of the decline takes you another rung down. Every day I climb a little lower and the bottom of the ladder is completely submerged. Each morning I must pick through the scree. This is the daily struggle, to find food. In a way, hasn't it always been? However, in these end times, sustenance is scant. The rubble is anything but bounteous. One of many hardships that really we can only pin on ourselves. Savvy men with twine bait and ensnare circling birds, but there's poor eating in that. If I had the choice between plucking freedom from the sky and going hungry, then I'd starve. But the option isn't there, my

unskilled hands cannot catch any birds. Had I the ability to do so then likely I'd think differently. Beggars can't be choosers after all.

My lot is to sort through the refuse and shreds of plastic bags just piled up with nowhere to go. From the start of the day to its merciful end, all I do is trudge across grey plain strand. The pickings are slim, but I scavenge what I can. Each sifting of the collective trash pile unearths a corner of history. None of it is good or useful. I cannot eat plastic bottles nor old ice cube trays. Just needless accumulations and empty holes with which to bury money. I cannot burn car parts or cling film, that's what got us into this mess. Instead I look for food. I'm not fussy; it can have four legs or more. On those days when there's nothing to be found, I can gnaw on a ripped rubber tyre.

Daily, I set out to my regular spot. It is under a claw of twisted metal which may once have been a billboard. The distorted structure provides some small relief from the midday sun. If I find my place at the litter tip taken by an urchin, I chase them away. If they're bigger than me, I know better than to try my luck. Usually I can settle down without much bother. Then I can set to work. My filthy nails claw into the pile. Sometimes I cling to an edible weed and come away with something to eat. Other days I grasp mere handfuls of dust which trickle away in the wind. Those are hungry days, lonely days. Nobody wants to be by your side if you have nothing to feed them.

Back to the tipping point when things were just starting to sour, there were lifeboats. This was after everyone who had a boat had taken to it and sailed away. A bright spark saw a gap in the market and the remainder of our industry was devoted to making ships to carry the rest of the population, or at least reassure them. 'Arks' they were called by their makers. When the

manufacturing companies ran out of materials the colloquial name became ‘The Hulks’. These craft sailed on the tide and were sold to us as life boats from our sinking civilisation. They were really piteous rafts and unseaworthy to boot. But they were hope, a beacon that there was and could be yet something better over the horizon. Yet how many other islands of dross and detritus are out there? How many gardens of earthly delights? I know in my heart that the balance swings one way and one way only.

The last hulk left years ago. Theirs was a searching mission. If they struck dry unsullied land then they’d come back for us. None yet have made a return voyage. We aren’t optimistic any more, but it is not too much of a stretch to think of a time when I was. Every morning I sit down or crouch on my knees while I rummage. Every evening it gets a little harder to stand up again. If I trace this back, there must have been a point where I felt happy. But it is a long time off in a place I can only visit behind closed eyes.

All of those golden summer evenings of yesteryear when we would sit out on the terrace and watch the swallows frolic in the wasting light. The youngest bouncing on baba’s knee (she was always the most loved). All of us together admiring the birds in their wide open sky. Baba sucking on his cigar as we clambered over his shoulders and sat at his feet, begging for change to go out and buy lemonade. He would hold out for as long as he could and then reach deep into his pockets. The withdrawn hand would scatter his loose change over the patio where we’d scramble to retrieve it all. Then, our hands filled with shrapnel, we’d all of us squeeze into the dukanchah. Baba always chuckled to see us return with the fizzy drinks and cool ices that we bought with his money. He would chastise us with comments on the nature of our prizes. “They’ll rot your teeth

and spoil your insides.” With sticky mouths from the sugary sap and rapidly melting ice we would pretend not to hear him.

These rememberings stir little emotion in me now. I do not cry; I have run out of tears. Instead, I keep these precious thoughts wrapped up like hardboiled sweets or pearls. On rainy days (that is an idiom, it rains little in the dry season) I can turn to them for comfort. Even if they’re cold from being left out for too long.

There was no sound nor great rush. Just a slow winding down, rehearsed almost. The ignorance of a developing problem, whether feigned or real. Or it could have been laziness. Either way, we were happy in our apathy. Gradually, the smaller things piled up. The air loaded with dark winds. Icecaps melted. Global temperatures soared. The stage was dressed for the ultimate scene. The actors acknowledged that closing night was upon them, then returned to adjusting their costumes. They would see it out with the tragedy that they felt they deserved.

And then those final weeks and months. The last days of man. We are still living through them now. Letting go of my mother was the final whistle, anything now is playing for extra time. This stale living feels akin to a hangover. The flat purgatory where everywhere is a beach. Like a morning after it is the consequence of the rich and fast life. I am trapped inside this unforgiving monster and there is no way out. Nature just needs to take its course. She has waited long enough while she was sucked dry. We’ve enjoyed ourselves and lived vicariously and now we must live through the resulting mess.

And what a mess it is. Mountains of discarded plastic and rubbish, the combined kipple of the centuries on centuries which chokes us. The pools and collections of human waste which collect and condense in the punishing sun. A muggy air thick with moisture and flies. It hangs and is

oppressive to breathe. When I cough, it comes copiously into my hands, thick and streaked with black. Did we do this? The guilty ones are long gone, like my mother. But I could never blame her.

From one of the few remaining hilltops I run my gaze over the sprawl. It is quiet, always quiet. Tall poles stick out from the tents. Even with their height they cannot escape being smothered by rubbish as they are wrapped in rags and ripped clothes so that they look like dead flags flying at half-mast. On ground, cheap tents and shanty structures compete for space like weeds growing on the forest floor. Mine is down there among them, an ancient disposable tent from a camping superstore.

There's no need for a lock or security. The sides of the tent are streaked with holes, which serve to show the meagre contents within. Damp insulation foam, wooden boards and rubber sandals.

The latter have to be hidden under my makeshift bed, or they're liable to vanish forever.

Otherwise I keep a few precious relics which I have found whilst trawling. An expired inhaler and a shoehorn. I cling to these as to my recollections. They are treated in much the same way, to be taken out and pored over and to act as touchstones to the memory of an absent world. I do not share any of these with my brothers, I do not know where they are. These treasures are mine and mine alone. Someday, they too shall be washed away.

The end came for us on a beach. There are only beaches now. We cram into narrow settlements spread out on each isthmus and thronged by an endless web of moats. But it isn't enough.

Surrounded by tall cliffs and water, we are imprisoned. From up above it would resemble a network of greedy and engorged veins. That sight would be missed; there is nobody in the sky to see it.

The end came for us and it arrived like this. The merciless summer ended and the monsoons started again. We thought we had more time. The rain came down. It poured and poured.

Trickling streams swelled up and grew violent. Hillsides became mudslides. At the very worst of it I was awoken by screams and cacophony. In the night, the waters rushed in. I scrambled from my tent to the highest ground. Morning came and the flood pushed us ever further back again.

Each cycle of defeat meant that we had to climb higher, though it felt as if we were sinking. Now we have gathered at the last place and there is nowhere else to go. And so we all wait here, at the top of the tallest ridge. Until the waves rise and we drown.