

Disassembly - McKenna Faulkner

32°N12', 8°29'

They lower their drenched hoods as father helps them on deck. Moth-eaten rags of undyed linen wrap around the women's necks like snakes hanging low above the mangroves. The travelers' eyes are a strange blue, the color of sun trapped just below the surface of a wave. They will not fare well in the land they stole, with cheeks pale as fog. Father nods at me, but I am already halfway down the ladder. Below deck I squeeze water from a wrinkled shirt, once an unnatural orange, now a pale yellow, into a bowl. We serve the fish biscuits cold today and keep an eye on the waves. Father offers them my bed as I hand out the bowls. I retreat back into the shadows, their whispered laughter ringing. At night, the hallway floor sticks to the side of my face. Father's old shirt does not cover my feet.

32°N25', 9°2'

Sinking over the sharp edge of the horizon, foamy orange clouds slip off an expanding blue sky. Father hums a marching song as we toss the nets. The sun pounding down, burning pockets of gold like blisters upon the waves, I guide the boat through metallic peaks jutting from the sea. Behind shattered glass windows, water sloshes. Father says the peaks extend far beyond the surface into the thick blue, and that people once lived in them like unmoving boats called cities. That the memories we fish out of the water drifted up rather than sunk down in the punctured hull of a ship. I tell him I don't care about concrete husks of loss, as long as our home is not ours. He sleeps trembling on deck tonight, and every night that follows. He says, "War is never won", though we have burned his uniform already, melted his badges.

34°N27', 9°12'

These ones have white opaque eyes, like the shards of china one may find in a fish's belly. Charcoal dots the curve of their cheeks and their brow. They speak of an east, of an ocean pimpled with land, which father says is covered in a green fluff the way algae can coat a ship. Though the sun still melts heavy and thick from above, father ties their boat to ours so hastily that we clunk against one another for hours. I find the salted seaweed father had refused from them later, long after they have left, and eat it curled up beneath my blanket. Until nightfall, I drag the harpoon's tip just below the surface, so that the metal seems to shatter and swim.

36°N15', 7°5'

The sky has been thinning for days; a crisp layer of ice from which morning dew drips heavily above a morning glowing white. In the mangroves, ice means storm, of the kind

that cause father to clasp a gun and tremble, so I scour the sky for rifts like lightning or like hell, which father says lies far beneath the sea, but the sky is also a sea that can flood or harden. Before dark, a boat pulls up to ours. A wailing underlies their silent gestures. Small, blue flags. I beg father to send them away, but he holds out his arm for the smallest one to climb onto our ship. I fall asleep guarding our provisions. Still, we eat nothing but salted shark meat for three days.

37°N29', 8°12'

I do not know where I last saw it. Father swears he lost the gleam in his eye long before the war, but father hides a white dress with red blotches like blood underneath his mattress- I've seen him cry into its fabric. Father lies. So I turn over the mattresses and tear holes into the pillows. I pick the old diary pages out from between the cracks in the cabin wall. I peak in. A gun. The carcass of a mouse recently starved, its stomach caved in. I stand in front of him, heaving. He is looking through me, at a ship in the distance. The whipping of flags somewhere behind me. Heavy. The blue kind. Hiding, until dark. Then no more looking.

41°N4', 8°16'

We watch them coming for miles, then minutes, with baskets in our hands. I ask about the baskets, half its contents beneath my mattress. "A war lost is not a war," father says. I wonder how much we have left to lose, cheeks red, as the boat travels to meet them. They speak with the buoyancy of a hull upon a storm and start to sing when we hand them the gifts. I bite the inside of my cheek. I do not pull my hands back. Left rocking in the boat, a lady with skin like rippling cloth beneath her eyes. Cannot walk, they say. Shrouded in black and draped in gold, she watches me. Later, our nets drag cans across the smooth surface. I polish them into money that evening, as if it'll be enough.

42°N10', 8°E20'

Nobody for weeks. The fish here wash up with four eyes and fins like crowns on their heads, so at night we inch closer to the cities to trade in the dark. Only through the stars do we glimpse the light of day. Father drags one foot behind him as he walks now, as if he's misplaced the movement it had before. I've heard stories before of ghosts returning from war instead of men. Or no, men blown apart in battle, stitched back together, losing limbs or thoughts to the slightest breeze, dripping air, no blood. Or no, of men who hunger for blood and those who cut off their arm to serve bowls of it. I think of cutting off father's arm just to be done with it. The next morning, a boat becomes a shadow becomes nothing on the horizon. The light of day, father on deck, watching the empty space the visitors left behind. I lay my head back down.

46°N10', 8°E27' Two boys wear crowned fish skulls on a necklace dangling down to their feet over white sheets they hold closed at their chests. Ribbons of shells sway before their eyes. I offer them two silver locket for the first oranges I have seen in years. They open up their mouths and wave a fleshy stump, shadows at the back of their throats thick as water. I wonder whether they threw away the medals they must have received, like my dad's but gold. Whether they fear blue flags now like we do. Drawing a tentacled monster in blood on the deck, they lower their heads and pray. Father thanks them. As they untie their boats, the pendants catch the sunlight, piercingly bright on their wrists, where father would never have let me wear them. I snatch them off, throw them in the water swelling up between us.

47°N23', 7°E24'

Heat blankets my arms and shudders up from the still water in plastic columns. Father is not father. Distant thoughts descend like mist over melting-ice eyes. As I wrap a plank of smooth driftwood against the back of his leg, I consider threading the rope around his neck instead. See if he'll cry something then. He won't speak- that much I know for sure.

49°N17', 6°E29'

I poke their bellies with the round end of the harpoon. I howl. I spread my arms and legs and make the noises I imagine those angry beasts of ships made when they blew holes in hearts and infections into gashes down legs. Their brows draw upwards at the center like they may cry. They don't. A mother, a son. They keep rowing. They push the harpoon aside gently, then me. I know now how much I have left to lose. A long night, spent listening to footsteps, a boiling nausea within. A promise without a voice to speak it.

52°N24', 4°E30'

He does not look at me, so I don't look at him either. I tell myself what they are getting is a ghost. I forget that makes them ghosts, too. Me, too. The boat doesn't rock as he climbs out, because it can't. His shadow does not pass over me, does not cool my legs, then my feet. I know how to live on my own, because I must. A wide ocean surges before me, a writhing creature.