

Time

The fisherman stood on the deck of his boat, wrinkled beyond his years and with a posture that sagged. Both had seen better days—the thin layer of paint on the little dinghy had started chipping away, flaking apart to show underneath the faded colors of yesteryear, and the wrinkles in the old man's face hardened as he picked at the wood. Now, they both drifted alone in their own vast, unconquerable expanses, all companionship lost. Of course there once used to be a fleet of sorts—a family too. A lot, there used to be. And now, all gone—nothing more than fading ripples on his blank sea of memory.

For time is a thief, leaving nothing but a shadow behind.

In those days, to him the ocean was a gentle creature, with waves softly crashing against the rocky beach, their curling fingers brushing each stone on the shore with a gentle caress, wind ushering them gently towards the shore. But now, as he gazed out at the still, vast expanse, it seemed dark and unfeeling, a slumbering giant—only serving as a reminder of what it had taken from him.

As an old man he found himself much in demand to tell his grandchildren about life on the ocean. He was tempted to describe it as a wall of endless blue in every direction, where blue sea would merge into blue sky on the horizon. But instead he found himself describing the most violent storms they had encountered. He would describe his ship turning a figure of eight on gigantic waves, tossed about like a toy. He would describe how the wind roared like a jet engine and howled like a wolf in the night, blowing the foamy white spray right up onto the deck, encrusting his eyelashes and eyebrows with salt. He told them how the ocean was really a slumbering giant waiting to flex his muscles if awakened, ready to smash even the largest ocean liners to smithereens. But he would never be able to take it upon himself to tell them what the giant had taken from him.

Involuntarily, he stiffened as a peal of laughter rang out in the distance, where schoolboys played on the shore, reveling in their fantasies, the golden sunlight painting a soft shimmer over their skin. The man smiled for a moment, but eventually his mouth fell back into a scowl. The cry of the gulls cut at him, layering invisible wounds over his skin, and soon briny tears welled in the cracks of his lips.

Time is a thief, leaving nothing but a shadow behind.

Eventually he pulled his boat into the harbor, his salt-caked hands deftly tying it to the battered pier. That day the sea had not been kind to him, and he felt the repercussions on his aching, knotted joints. The jagged stones on the shore dug into his bare feet as he made his way across the sand, heading home.

A fleeting glimpse of a quicksilver light flashed in the corner of his eye—from across the sand dunes it resembled a mirror, perhaps a looking-glass left by a fairy in a

hurry. But upon closer inspection he could see that it was a tide pool inside a small cluster of glimmering pebbles, wet with sea-spray and caught in the last rays of the setting sun. The water was so still the clear blue could have been mistaken for a mirror, and the fisherman could see his reflection and that of the clouds above him as he bent over it. And by its side, two words scrawled by a stick into the grainy sand in a childish hand—wishing well.

The fisherman offered nothing more in response than a strained “Hmm.” There were memories—memories of days spent playing on the shore in wait for his father, his mother calling him in for supper. Memories of sandy hair, sandy clothes, sandy carpets, sandy hugs. Memories of salt-kissed faces, waiting for the breeze to turn south as a sign Papa would be coming soon. How little all the time that had passed seemed, and with it how much it had taken.

Wishing well. He contemplated this for quite a while. A laugh, from somewhere inside of him. “A wishing well.”

He searched around and found a peculiar pebble, greenish and winking in the sunlight, the color of murky shallow waters.

I wish...

He flicked it into the pool and opened his eyes. It was a surreal disturbance of a perfect mirror—he was transfixed by the ripples rolling like liquid glass until they smoothed into nothing again.

I wish...for time.

The future was always something he had worried about. He had never given thought to all the time that enclosed his life into only a small speck in a timeline. It seemed, back then, that he had so much time. So much time to live a good life, so much time to spend with his family and friends. So much time that he let it slide through my fingers like worthless pennies. So much time that he watched it drain away like water.

So much time that he let it vanish like a magician in an act. So much time I watched it dissolve like a mirage across a desert. So much time I stood as it flew across the empty horizon. And now I realize that I had so much time, and I wasted it. Now I realize that for some of us, today might be our last tomorrow.

But time is a thief, leaving nothing but shadows behind.

The little girl stood on the cliff, letting the whispers of a deserted and decimated town wash over her. Once there was a beach somewhere down there, she had been told. But whatever it once, was, the ocean had overtaken it. The water below was

almost still, lapping silently against what was left of the beach. Yesterday's high tide had washed the sand smooth and brought all sorts of rocks and shells and seaweed up to the tops of the cliff. The small, wet pebbles that lined the beach sparkled in the lingering light of sunset. She reached down to pick one up, running her thumb over its smooth surface. It was perfectly round, with no sharp edges or jagged curves, and the greenish color of murky shallow waters. Deep in thought, she swung her arm back and flicked her wrist, watching the small pebble skip across the surface of the sea. It bounced then pivoted into the water, sending out faint ripples. The people of the town had taken their time, but time had eventually taken them. A few decades more, the cliff itself would probably be gone.

For time is a thief, leaving nothing but a shadow behind.

Name: Emma Tian

Name of Teacher: Mrs. Linda Hochuli

Grade: 6

School: Stuart Country Day School of the Sacred Heart

Title of Work: Time

Media: Story

Date Completed: April 25, 2019

Artist's Statement: I was inspired by the piece's looping, atonal rhythms and repetitive but slowly descending ostinatos that reminded me of time passing, and gave the music a sense of continuity.