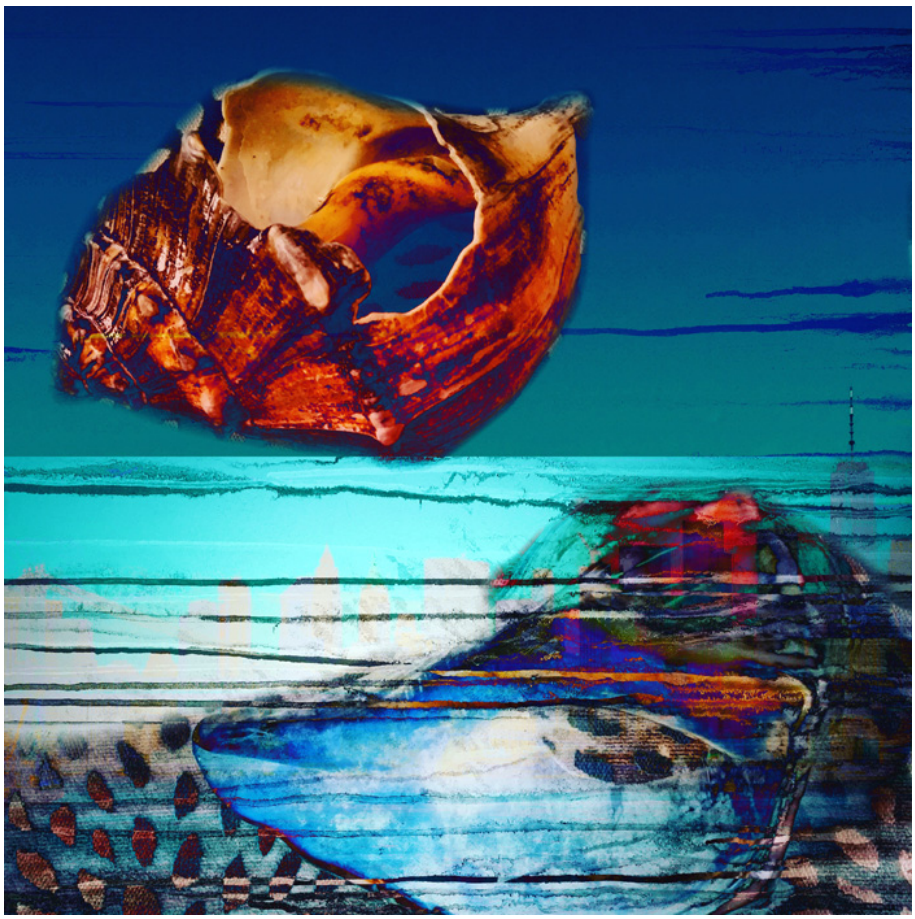
SHORT STORY

A Wasteland Fugue

by Yael Kastel



"My Ocean, Your Sky" by Claire Townsend

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On days like this you don't know what to make of the sea. It is deep and dark and blue and the skies are a numb grey. Your bag is empty and your hand clings to your metal detector which hums a distant, quiet song. It is a fugue, and that is the main theme:

Bring usssss a gift. Bring usssss a gift. Bring usssss a gift.

Now it is your part to add the variation.

Bring ussss a gift:

"A long-forgotten trinket, wires and springs."

Bring ussss a gift:

"A piece of something that belonged to some lost spirit."

Bring ussss a gift:

"A memory trapped in a box."

You sit on the sand and stare at the sea, waiting for its answer. But perhaps today is no day for gifts.

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On gloomy days the sea is deep green and raging, collapsing at the shore, as if it's battling the rocks. One strike after another, it wins, and the rocks are cracking and crumbling into sand. The sea has no mercy. Observing its cruelty makes you feel strangely serene.

On summer days the sea masks its true face with softer blues. The waves touch your legs and cool them from the burning sand. And you dive inside it, the salt and vastness of it surrounding you. You open your eyes, and they ache for a while; but then the ache fades and seaweeds and small silver fish appear before your eyes. They sometimes bite your leg, but it doesn't hurt, only itches.

When you were a child, you were too scared to dive beneath the waves; as a wave approached your brother would yell, "dive!", but you were frozen with terror, and the waves would carry you with them with their mighty force. You rolled and choked on salt water. You were brutally bruised as your face smeared into the rocky sand. You then felt detached from everything completely – for a moment you became a separate entity watching itself in a dream. Then you woke up breathless, washed up on the shore. It was almost as if the sea had banished you for lacking courage.

You have found courage since, or at least you have tricked the sea into thinking that you did. The shoreline is filled with treasures, forgotten remains of those who'd left long ago. Like a thin blanket, the sea half covers skeletons of buildings, rotting boats, sinking jewelry,

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floating plastics and rusting tin boxes.

All for you to find and collect and trade.

Bring ussss a gift, cries the wind.

Bring ussss a gift, hums the metal detector.

“Bring us a gift,” pleads your soul.

*

Like the hermit crab, you were born without a home. You had to wander to find an empty shell to inhabit. When the shell was found, you tried to fit inside it and become its previous owner. You pieced together scraps of a life that blurred into your own. You inhabited everything that some stranger had left you until you felt that you had become the stranger.

For example — the clothes that you wear.

For example — the music playing in a white, round-cornered tape player.

For example — the pre-existing collection of cards that now have your additions.

At night you dream that you are looking at a mirror and your face is a whirlpool, or perhaps a black hole. You've never seen a black hole – only heard of one. The universe spins and twists into the swirling emptiness of your missing complexion.

Sometimes, when you wake up, you find things have changed. Little things, like the arrangement of the cards on the table, or a different tape playing from the tape player instead of the one that you have left there the night before. This time you wake up because something breaks. Something dry and thin. A shell. Your hand is clasping it, and pieces of it fall to the ground.

You stare at the broken shell.

You leave it there, and try to walk around it carefully.

You try not to think about it too much.

*

The next week, the traders come to visit, their boots pressing down on the creaking wooden slabs of the bay. By now you have some items to offer. An old coin that some of the officers like to collect. A broken watch you took apart and sold for parts. You exchange them for canned food and drinking water and a new coat. You slip into it quickly; the moment you receive it from the trader’s hands.

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It is cold and windy and the waves are tall and mighty. You tuck your hands into the long, spacious pockets of your new coat and they touch something unfamiliar. It’s a wrinkled and rugged note.

You don’t dare to open it, let alone move it from its place. You let it rest there, like some wounded animal. Your mind is racing, thinking of all the possible words that could have been written on it. You wish for the note to contain every message in the world. A message written just for you, from an old friend, or a stranger that is bound to you by fate, or perhaps the ghost of someone who had once walked on this very same shore.

In your dream, you open the note and it reveals a map to a treasure. You follow the directions that lead you out of the house and down to the shore and then into the sea. The water resists your body dragging against it. As you move deeper into the silent water you hear the sound of your metal detector humming in growing enthusiasm. You're clasping the note that stays completely dry. You're almost there, you can feel it. You can hear it, in the sounds of the metal detector and the violent howls of the wind. Then a tall wave rises, and you're frozen.

“Dive!” calls your brother, from a distant memory.
“Dive!” shrieks the wind.
“Dive!” says the note, in bold, urgent letters.

You can't, and you know that you are about to be banished from the sea once again.

The wave hits you, and you wake up.

You rush towards your coat and search for the note. For a moment, you aren't sure if you've dreamed its existence or not. But it's there. You take it out of the pocket and unfold it carefully, fearfully, in reverence —

As if it is sacred —

As if it is cursed —

As if it is fire —

The note is empty.

You leave it on a table and walk towards your bed. You pick up the remains of the broken shell and press them hard inside your palm and return to the table. You stare at the open, empty note. Bitterness and betrayal grow inside your heart. The shards dig into your skin and your palm opens and they fall on top of the empty note. You fold the note back like a shroud,

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sealing the remains of the shell.
Then you walk outside, and you bury it deep in the sand.

It is a new moon tonight, and the tide is high. When you fall asleep again, I dig the note from its wasteland grave, and slip it back inside your resting palm.

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