

SHORT STORY

# This Place Has Been Doing Me Some Good

by Zosia Koptiuch



"Wavee" by Suresh Babu

The first thing I find in the sea is a bottle. At first, I assume it's trash, a discarded reminder of someone's Sunday beach party or an empty vodka bottle that ended up in the water. But it's a bit too small to be an alcohol bottle and the color looks worn — a pale and faded greenish blue that you only see in museums and on tiled bathroom walls. The sea is shallow here, and even without my equipment, I can reach out to touch it. Once I do, it breaks. The shards drift slowly towards the sand.

It's been three hours since I got off the plane. I spent most of the time driving aimlessly around the city, pretending to be looking for the hotel. Gdańsk is a lot like the sea it has instead of lungs, cold and blue. The wind follows me around like a ghost.

I went swimming right after checking in. Now, as I come out of the water, I'm trembling and exhausted, and the wind throws sand at my face. The sand here is the palest I've ever seen: the color of hospital walls, of blinding lights shining in my face, of nothingness. It hurts to look at.

I think of throwing my body on the ground and lying there until layers of that eerie, perfectly white sand pile up and bury me. I think of going back into the water. I've learned that there's something secure about it.

Instead, I slowly walk back towards the archway in the wall that separates the beach from the park. I change into my pink hoodie and put on my uncomfortable yellow sandals. Colors that seem shoehorned into the landscape, ripped out of a fashion magazine or a TV ad and pasted here.

That night, a seal dies on that same beach. I'm still in the park, sitting on a bench and watching a squirrel across the road from me. I don't want to go back to the hotel. I don't want to go anywhere.

Someone screams. I get up and walk in the direction of the sound. I hear someone arguing in Polish, voices shouting over each other.

And then I see it: something large and grey and shapeless, glittering in the evening light. A woman is kneeling next to it, talking rapidly on the phone. Another woman is pacing around the beach, muttering something under her breath. The rest are standing in a semicircle, looking at the ground, their hands folded like they're at a funeral.

The thing moves, and I jerk away in fear. Then I realize what it is.

The woman puts the phone down and looks at the seal. I'd like to think she's looking into its eyes, making sure it's still looking at something, still present, still alive. I want to ask if this happens often, if it's normal for things to just get washed up and die here.

The seal moves again, for the last time.

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My mother died quietly, with a missed call. In my last year of university, on the day before Christmas break began, I left campus to a barrage of messages from my family.

I walked home slowly that day. I watched a little girl let her dog off its leash in a nearby park. I stopped to listen to the loud pop music blaring from a car window. The streets felt broader and fuller than usual. There was not a trace of snow in the entire city.

If there was a wrong time for someone to die, this was it. In my mind, death was supposed to crack the ground beneath your feet, block the sun and cloud your eyes. It wasn't supposed to hide in trees like a squirrel. It wasn't supposed to slip into your reflection.

My mother always wanted my brother and me to see Gdańsk, but something stopped us every time we tried. We failed so many times that I started to think of it as a place that only existed in our imaginations, a fairy tale, a monster under my bed. I pinched myself every time I saw it on the map. Now I'm there, and it doesn't feel any different.

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The group diving boat arrives at noon. I've barely slept, and I'm surprised that there's enough strength in my legs to take me all the way to the shore. *You'll feel better once you're in the water*, I assure myself. *You always do*.

There are around fifteen people with me on the pier — mostly unfamiliar, speaking an orchestra of languages I don't understand. The rented diving equipment is heavier than I'm used to and feels foreign to the touch. I close my eyes and breathe. It doesn't work. The breath gets caught up in my chest and turns into a tornado chasing its own tail.

After we get on the boat, someone recognizes me.

"Karo?" He calls my name, and I jerk my head away from the water. It's a man in his thirties leaning on the railing next to me.

He might have looked familiar to me once, but now everyone looks vaguely the same. Their features melt away in my memory until they start to blend into each other like a dense, black flock of birds.

"Hi," I say, tearing my palms away from the cold metal surface of the railing.

"Remember me?" he asks. "I'm Tobias. From Egypt."

"Ah," I respond. "Yeah."

Tobias grins.

“Why are you here?” I blurt out. “I- I mean, Gda?sk... Not a very popular...”

“Cheap,” he runs his hand through his hair. His voice, loud and expressive, scares me every time he speaks. “And close to home.”

“Home?”

“Oh, I’m from Munich.”

“Cool. Cool,” I nod and look away.

“You?”

“What?”

“Why are you here?”

“My mother was from here.” I stare at the white foam ringing the edges of the moving boat. I look for fish in the water, seaweed, bits of garbage, anything I can use as an anchor for my mind. An image of yesterday’s seal comes to my mind.

It’s too cold. Nothing can survive here.

“Was?”

“Is.”

The boat takes us to a place where the shore is a pale line on the horizon. Here, everything is symmetrical: defined by the two near-identical sides of that line.

As we put on our diving suits, Tobias talks about the history of the wreck. I get caught up in the process and stop listening. Here’s what slips through the cracks of my mind: the ship sank sometime during World War II and bore the name of a woman.

Under the water, there it finally is: silence. I look up at the murky, shapeless sun above the surface as somebody from our group checks my equipment. It’s liberating: being able to distance yourself from the sun, from gravity, from everything human.

The shipwreck is around sixty meters deep: a dark, rusty, giant structure that still feels strangely alive, almost as though if we could only get it out of the water, it could be fixed. I remind myself that it’s gone, that it’s never going to see light again and I’m here to look at what remains of it. It feels sinful to be reveling in the beauty of something like that, but I can’t help but also think of immortality. Maybe I’ll die in a shipwreck. Maybe after I die, there will be something under the sea to remember me by, a place for my ghost to settle down.

I make it to the surface in the split second before I run out of oxygen.

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In the bathroom mirror, some streaks of my hair look blonde under a certain light. I've never noticed that before.

I can't stay in my hotel room for long, not in the company of the elevator's quiet mechanical noise and a fly that has been sitting passively on my windowsill for thirty minutes straight with no desire to leave, even after I raised my hand to swat it. After concluding that the fly must be dead, I change and slip out of my room.

I go to the beach through the park because the beach and the park are the only places I know here. The neighborhood is a mixture of new, glowing apartment complexes with neatly trimmed lawns and slightly shorter Communist-era buildings. The former, with their enormous windows, are nearly translucent, and I'm ashamed to catch myself looking into someone's empty bedroom. The room is messy, with books scattered all over the floor and unfinished paintings leaning against the walls, but with its lack of people it feels spacious. It makes me wonder about the type of person who lives there.

The Communist-era buildings all have balconies that look like boxes, and curtains on the windows. Private, safe from my hungry gaze.

The sign right next to the entrance to the park shows pictures of birds with captions: *czapla siwa*, *b?czek zwyczajny*, *dzi?cio? zielony*. The words curl up in front of my eyes like burning paper.

On the beach, I sit down on a log lying in the sand. To both sides of me, the beach stretches monotonously as far as the eye can see: the wall, indigo-green canopies, and sand.

A small female figure moves along the coast, and I follow her with my eyes. She's walking along the fluid border between the sand and the water, right where the waves invade the beach's thin sliver of own territory. Then she stops, kneels, and starts digging in the sand.

Her skirt is wet. Her hair is in her face. She pulls something small out of the sand and slips it into her purse. Then she moves on.

When she's already ten meters ahead of me, I notice an orange streak at my feet. I bend down and dig through the sand to reveal a peanut-sized piece of amber. The water has molded it into something smooth, eroded its rough edges, and now it's so light and perfectly shaped that I can barely feel it in my hand.

I look up at the figure.

“Hey!”

She can't hear me over the wind and the waves and her own thoughts. I get up and walk over to her. When I reach her, she's wading through another pile of seaweed.

“Here,” I hold my hand out and open my palm.

She looks up, takes the piece and mutters what I assume is a “thank you.” Then, after a pause, she says something else. It sounds like a question.

“I don't understand,” I say.

“Oh,” she stands up and cocks her head. “Tourist?”

“Yes.” I manage a shy smile.

“Good,” she pulls a brochure out of her purse and hands it to me. “Come here. It's jewelry.”

The brochure is printed on cheap paper, with pale circles on it from touching salt water, and advertises an amber jewelry shop (jewelry is misspelled as *jewellery*, but I decide not to tell her that). My head feels light from the idea of being advertised to. I've done my best to disappear into a place with no bright colors and no directions to follow, and here it is, the brochure, intruding into my nothingness. I want to hand it back. I want to throw it into the sea and watch its shapes and hues fade away in the water.

But I have no energy left for rage, so I thank her and stuff the brochure into my pocket. The stranger looks young, perhaps my age at most, and her cheeks and fingertips are red from the cold. She's staring at me as intently as I imagine I'm staring at her, and I can't read her gaze. Being seen like that makes me feel more tired than ever.

“Ania,” she says and holds out her hand expectantly.

It takes me a moment to realize she wants my name.

“Karo,” I answer quietly and shake her hand, “with a K.”

She nods and inhales like a dying fish, looking for the right words, and doesn't find them. Then she continues walking. I trail behind her.

Ania moves faster than me, with the grace of someone used to walking on the sand. I don't try to keep up and don't stop when she stops to dig. If she didn't occasionally turn to me to say something more to herself than to me, her eyes looking not at me but through me, I could pretend I'm walking alone.

It gets dark fast. Ania doesn't seem to notice, but I do. For most of my walk, my eyes are fixed on the horizon: the way it changes color like a thermometer's scale, the sun rolling into

the water like a coin in slow motion, and the first dim star that only appears when you're looking at it.

Ania checks her phone, exclaims, and turns to me.

"I need to go," she points at her phone.

"Yeah, me too."

Her shape blends into the darkness as she walks away. When I come home, the fly is right where I left it, still sitting on the windowsill and — so it seems to me at 11:30 pm — fluttering its left wing just a little.

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There's a picture of my mother in my wallet. In the photo, she's at a café, sitting across from me in a pink dress she'd later hand down to me and smiling awkwardly at my camera. It was my thirteenth birthday. I hated posing for pictures, so I don't have any photos of myself. I kept this one instead.

My mother and I have never had much in common. I look much more like my father: dark-haired, tall and big-eyed. I rarely say please, no matter how hard she tried to teach me to. I don't understand her favorite French movies. Even as a teenager, I sometimes snickered at her accent, covering my mouth with my palm. We rarely talked. I would say I wish I'd spent more time with her while she was still here, but even if I never left her side, even if I told her every one of my thoughts, nothing would ever be enough. The dead only get more and more insatiable.

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There's a narrow, shapeless entrance in the wreck, with cracked, sharp edges and rusty reddish insides — the mouth of a predator. A small patch of seaweed somehow survives right next to it. I let it swallow me whole.

The floor is coated with a thick layer of sand. The space is empty save for a few wooden planks scattered around. There's only room for one person. It's perfect.

It takes five minutes for my diving buddy to find me. She gestures at me to come out, and I reluctantly emerge.

On the boat, she subtly lectures me about it.

"I don't think buddies are supposed to stray that far from each other," she says. "Like, a few meters, sure, but... I was worried. What if something happened to me?" She pauses. "I actually envy you, you know what? You're small. You're, like, tiny. I could never fit into

that room you were in.”

“I’m 175 centimeters.”

“Oh, come on.”

On my way back to the hotel, I stop by the bird sign and take a picture.

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The old town is all light and motion. On the river, everything is symmetrical, brightly painted houses reflected in the water. It doesn’t hurt my eyes as much as I thought it would.

I push through the crowd, past the souvenir stalls and the women in long dresses and the candle-lit restaurant with muffled live music. My legs take me to a well-lit jewelry store window. I look up at the sign and recognize it immediately.

I walk inside, and the wind chimes jingle. Quiet pop music plays. The place smells like cinnamon. The woman at the counter looks up at me. At first, I assume that it’s Ania herself, but the woman is decidedly older.

“Hello, are you interested in something in particular?” She gets up and approaches me.

“Oh no, I’m just looking.” I look at the tiny amber animal figurines behind the glass. A bird in flight. A deer. A fox.

“You have beautiful eyes,” she smiles. It sounds earnest.

“Oh. Thank you.”

I’m not sure what to make of the compliment. I’ve never had a cashier compliment me on my eyes before. It’s more intimate than I’m comfortable with. Transparent.

I change the subject.

“What’s that called in Polish?” I point at the bird.

“Ptak.”

“Ptak.”

“That’s an easy word. You’re lucky,” she laughs. I don’t.

I hear footsteps from behind the counter. It’s Ania.

She takes me back outside. We sit on a bench near the river in silence. I smoke a cigarette. She refuses.

“Your eyes,” she says.

I sigh.

“What about them?”

“What’s it called? Heterochromia?”

I take my phone out and look at my reflection. One of my eyes is green. The other is blue.

“Weird. I could have sworn my eyes were brown.”

She shrugs. The bridge in front of us parts for a ship. The noise deafens me for a moment.

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My search history that night: "translate English to Polish", "amber in Polish", "learn Polish online", "how to learn language fast", "how to learn language for free". I google the names of the birds. I google my own name and it takes me a while to remember it.

I don’t look anything like my social media pictures anymore. When I’m not looking things up that night, I’m looking at the mirror: at my newly blonde hair, at my eyes as they both gradually turn blue, at my alien facial features. I repeat after the translation app and notice how my lips move differently than they used to, how my teeth are straighter, how my voice is now a bit higher-pitched than it used to be.

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The world narrows. I start to forget what my room back home looked like, as though it never existed and the only real thing is this place, with its lights and its shipwrecks. I learn that few things are real without language. The birds are only real because of the sign. Ania’s family’s jewelry store is only real because of the brochure, which has been crumpled up inside my pocket ever since my first encounter with her.

Every single evening, Ania is waiting there for me. We go to the beach to collect amber, mostly in silence. That’s the thing: without language, Ania doesn’t have a last name. Ania doesn’t have an age. Ania doesn’t have an education or an address or a favorite color.

I finally start to understand the way my mother talked about Gdańsk. It’s like a movie or a half-forgotten dream.

Sometimes, though, Ania tries to teach me Polish. She holds up a piece of amber and says: „bursztyn”. I try to repeat it a few times. She shakes her head. I laugh.

Back in the store, she takes the amber out of her purse, examines it and swallows it.

“Why?” I wince. She thinks for a second, pulls her phone out and starts typing. Then she shows the screen to me. It’s Google Translate.

“I heard it makes you prettier.”

She purses her lips and looks into her pocket-sized mirror.

As though one day her skin will crack open like an egg and reveal another Ania, perfect and amber-eyed, simultaneously new and ancient. I wonder if that’s what’s happening to me.

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It’s 10:30 in the evening, and I’m walking home past a grocery store window. In the corner of my eye, my reflection looks off. I stop to look at myself.

My mother, just like the one in the picture in my wallet.

I take a step back and nearly stumble off the sidewalk onto the busy road. Someone honks, and I can’t tell if it’s at me. I tell myself I’ve got it all wrong, it’s a trick of light, grief does that to you, like that boy in your high school who claimed he saw ghosts. But the closer I look at the reflection, the clearer it gets.

The moon is inside my chest and it’s suffocating me.

I don’t know what to do. I want to move. I run. I can barely see anything besides my mother’s ever-shifting face. Grass, concrete, traffic lights. Glass, brick, broken bicycle. This is not my neighborhood.

I’ve never run this far or this long before. I could run more, but I’ve lost track of time and space.

The buildings here are all small and old. To my left, a gym surrounded by a rusty metal fence. To my right, a tree with the names of two lovers carved into it: *Agnieszka + Tosiek*.

I pull my phone out to look for directions. As I walk through the empty streets, my mother’s face flashes like a police siren, a different one each time. I can’t remember what her nose looked like, how big her eyes were, or if she ever wore her hair in a bun. Do I even look like her at all?

Here, in the depths of the city, there are sounds. There are cars and barking dogs and billboards, and even in the emptiness of midnight it hurts me to notice that. I feel like a grain of sand trapped between the cogs of a machine. I pass by a mall that looks more like a funeral with all the lights off, but a single neon McDonald’s sign pulls me out of myself, out of that one moment with the face in the glass.

Still, gradually, I start to pay attention to these things. I remember the words that pop up frequently on billboards: *wyprzeda?*, *rado??*, *samochód*. I memorize them better than I memorized my own mother’s face. I fill the absences in her image with words I’m starting to

understand. I fill the absences in her image with myself.

I don't reach my hotel that night, but I reach the old town. I spend the entire night sitting on the ground next to the Copernicus statue and waiting for the jewelry store to open. The shopkeeper recognizes me once she shows up.

"Looking for Ania, right?"

"Right."

Ania's asleep. I wait for her inside, my eyes fixed on the photograph, trying to tell if I look like her. Customers come in speaking Polish, and gradually, I start to understand them fully. By the time Ania runs in, English has faded into the background of my mind.

She takes me to a restaurant a block away from here. We don't order anything, but I spend an hour reading the menu and taking in my newfound understanding of the words.

"I've never seen anyone learn a language that fast before," Ania says.

"I know."

She looks up at me.

"You've changed since I first met you," she smiles. "I can't believe I've only known you for, like, two weeks."

"I know." I'm not surprised anymore.

"Maybe *I* just don't know you well enough."

"Maybe you don't." Maybe I don't.

When we come back to the jewelry store, Ania reaches into her pocket and takes out a tiny plastic bag with something orange inside. A pendant.

"There's an insect inside," she says. "Probably thousands of years old or something. I'm not sure. I'm not an expert."

The insect seems to change every time I look at it: a bug; a fly; a mosquito. The shape of its wings shifts as I turn the pendant around. I put it on. It feels warm around my neck.

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The water's warm — I've acclimatized. It's a Sunday morning, and the beach is full. I've seen every shipwreck, visited every tourist spot I found on the map, yet the place feels unexplored, as though I've just arrived.

I go to a seaside café before leaving for the airport. I pause by the window to look at my reflection: transformed, hatched, reborn.

I stay there in front of that window for a long time, unable to stop smiling until my face hurts. This place has been doing me some good.