Flash Fiction Competition 2014

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Let Her Sail by Steven Archibald

We lived on an island, part of an archipelastay, we visited nowhere and nowhere visited us.

We breathed the briny breeze, part of the ocean calm, we carved the land and the land carved us.

We ploughed the sink sea, part of north lack, we roughed the waves and the waves roughed us.

We grave our own timber, part of the terminal trees, we prepared her body and her body prepared us.

We pushed her out seaway, part of the family fraction, we loved our mother and our mother loved us.

The seaweed wasn’t footfelt for once, nor the air lungfelt, there was only the void, the one greater than the inky sea that glowered back at me, that roared at me, I roared back at she… nothing, still dead, still drifting. Still trailed by my wee craft of twigs and styx and coin – a legend she told. I wanted to follow… trouser leg rolled… ready… I looked around, no other cloth moved but for that in the briny breeze. Nobody to watch over, no Charon to guide the way... READY... frozen....... Uncle placed his hand, my shoulder felt his gentle strength, my ears the compassion in his words ‘I know son, I know, you have to let her sail now’. Father looked on, or rather stared off. His void was, and continued to be, deeper than all of Oceanid’s waters, than his own heart could bear. He didn’t move a muscle, but the undercurrent of that moment swept his core clear out seaway. We loved our father, but from that point on the shore, it was never clear if our father loved us. Mother had died, but father was the apparition, a vessel. The tide may have pulled me from myself, but uncle held firm, our nowhere flock rallied and the memory of mother’s words healed.

When the seaweed was felt, when I was grown, when roughed enough and curious of the otherways and otherwheres mum regaled (when haunted enough by father’s spectre) I left the island, the archipelago. As I sailed those shores for the final time, the island flocked once more, fifty-five flapping, squawking and smiling souls that wished me well, but it was the shadow of father that cast my eye, as once again he stared off, combing the shore where mother departed. I had not fully considered him, he was watching me be taken by the same seas that took his love, and for once, I hoped he did not love me.

I couldn’t help but search the waters for our distinctive timber, in vain, I knew, not in pain, I did not - and so with a peaceful permanence I let her sail the Hades horizon. Mother’s words washed over ‘follow your heart’, and in that moment, forgiveness, and the realisation that we were all at once watching over one another, guiding our ways, not through some angelic afterlife, but through what we shared in this - our only life.
Samuel’s feet bled. The sharp blades of broken shells hidden amongst the dark seaweed and the shingle had done this. He didn’t notice. The deep darkness of his desperate eyes was visible to the watching sea showing the depth of his misery and mourning. Redness rimmed his eyes as he blinked. The waterfall of tears had stopped but left their marks. He looked out over the moving water, watching the colours change.

He wasn’t alone long. One minute he was, the next he wasn’t. The man’s clothes almost mirrored his own, old and done, tattered and torn and hanging raggedly down his thin body, patches of blood smattered here and there.

Samuel didn’t notice this either. What he did notice was the man’s face, kind, compassion in every crag, in every wrinkle. And in his eyes. Didn’t know who he was and wondered why he reached out a hand to lay it gently on Samuel’s drooped shoulder.

There was no breath on the wind as Samuel spoke. There were no questions asked of him, but he answered them anyway.

“I’m lost. I don’t know how I got here. Mam was ill, really ill. Then she ……..” His voice cracked and he couldn’t say the next word. A silent pause filled the air. He swallowed. “Dad went to war, but never came back. I was put in another house ……..” Again the pause.

The man smiled, encouraging more words to come.

“The woman hit me, hit me bad. So did he. He wouldn’t stop.” The boy turned back to the sea, but the memory clouded his vision and he lowered his head, not wanting the water to see. “I tried to do what they wanted. Gave them all the money I got in the streets, but I was hungry.”

He glanced back at the man for a moment. “I’m sorry I took the bread but I couldn’t help it.”

“I’m sorry, Mam,” he whispered, his eyes closing.

A wave tickled his feet, tenderly moving over the roughened, coarse skin of his feet. A second wave followed quickly and he opened his eyes to look down. He stared at the soft, warm water. Something in his heart opened and he stared out to sea as the tears again poured down his dirty face.


The hand tightened on his shoulder. His torment quietened and he turned back to the gentle face to listen to words he knew were coming.

“You are home, Samuel. Look.” The man pointed out to sea where a pathway stretched in front of them and a young woman stood, her arms outstretched to the young boy.

A radiant glow illuminated his face as he walked down the pathway into the sea. The water and the waves began to sing a soft song as they closed over his feet.
Look at the Fool. by Josh Turner

“You kent ya’s been a fool Tommy?” Da’s says, droppin’ his hond tae rests aboot ma shou’ders.
“Aye Da’, the sea telt me.” I can still mak oot the whispers between each wave.

Look at the fool.
The celt wata rushes up betwa ma toes.
That love brings me.

Wi’ a tickle it rushes awa’, leavin’ me alane. Alane wi’ that hond on ma shou’der.
“Ya kent why though?” Da’ asks.
My toes curl intae the sand, teeth crunchin’ tae’gether. I wanted them tae shatter, fall intae the seaweed and be washed awa’ wi’ ma pain.

Look at the fool.
The wata brushes ma feet.
“Disnae mean I have tae stop,” I whisper.
That love brings me.

It’s just the hond again.
Da’ sighs, the hond droppin’ fae ma airm. The brush o’ his breath tickles ma ear like the sea curlin’ roond ma feet.
“She widnae want ya like this Tommy,” Da’ says. He digs his ain feet doon intae the sand, hidin’ fae the sea as it rushes back toward us.

Look at the fool.

“Ma choice tae make though.” I dip doon, washin’ ma honds in the salty wata. The sea feels celt but warm at the same time. Ken like a soft blainket ya’s just tak fae the chest. It feels queer at first, but ya can tell if ya’ just ho’d still fae lang enough it will be ok.
That love brings me.

But the wata rushes awa’ afore the blainket settles.
“Wa’s the plan Tommy?” Da’ asks. I ken he wants tae ho’d ma shou’der again. That was her job though. That was what she had tae do.
I didnae respond.
A gull circles up high, cawin’ out ower the sea. The sea dosnae answer. There’s on’y yin whisper in the swirlin’ froth o’ salt and wata.

Look at the fool.

And I can feel the wata rushin’ doon my cheeks too, curlin’ up ower my lip tae drop tae the ocean below.

“Here Tommy, we’ll mak it ok. You’s got tae be strong like she wanted,” Da’ says. His voice cracks at the end though. His shou’ders twitch, a hond reachin’ oot like he wants tae tak’ me in. The wata rushes oot toward’ the horizon.
That love brings me.

As the celt wind rushes in where the wata left behind my da’ stops, his honds hoverin’ between us.
“Ken Tommy, how lang ya’ plannin’ on stayin’ doon here?” he asks. His voice is tired, shattered by what was here. Shattered by what wasnae.

Look at the fool.

“’til she comes back,” I finally reply. As I speak the tears drip doon intae ma mooth, the salty breath o’ the sea rushin’ in behind.
That love brings me.

Da’ tak’s the words in, then steps ower tae me, wrappin’ me up in his airm.

That love brings me.

His airmes are warm aboot me. The wata is celt aboot ma’ feet.
That love brings me.
The World stops for nobody by Kieran Buxton

The wind whistled on the exposed shoreline. He stood alone before the water that relentlessly washed up on shore small wave after wave. As he looked out emptily on the vast sea he tried to fathom what had happened. It was a harsh situation for such a young boy to be in.

His grandfather laid a caring hand on his shoulder, but it could not conjure a response as he stood silently in consideration, staring down and out towards the vast waters. ‘We are all at a loss, Oliver’ his grandfather said, in an attempt to detract the boy from an unyielding focus on the water.

Oliver snivelled, holding back the tears. That sense of security that so many appreciate was gone - forever. The loss of a relationship that is so unequivocal in depth and understanding yet so difficult to quantify.

‘Are you sure he’ll never be back?’ Asked Oliver.

His grandfather did not know how to respond to confirm such a horrific truth. ‘Yes,’ he paused as he tried to maintain his own emotional neutrality ‘I’m afraid so’ he finished, as he maintained his support on the shoulder of his grandson.

A solitary tear rolled down the face of the young boy. Yet, the water continued to wash in on the shore and erode the rocks. The wind continued to whistle and blow across the exposed face of the young boy.

‘What do we do now, Grandpa?’ Oliver replied whilst trying to hold back the inevitable tears that would continue to roll down his face and drop onto the water that washed in at his feet.

His grandfather looked out at the water. He loved his grandson so dearly. Oliver was so inquisitive but so sensitive that he never really wanted to tell his grandson the truth. Perhaps, he thought, the truth is what he should pass on because that is what his own son would have done.

He took a deep breath. ‘Oliver?’ ‘Yes’ Oliver slowly turned his head to look at his grandpa.

‘Nobody will be able to forget your father as long as we remain. We all loved him dearly. Sometimes in life when bad things happen, you have to remember that the world stops for nobody. The waves and the wind never stop despite the fact our worlds have been tragically halted and turned upside down. Your father was a noble man. He would want us to remain strong and remember the good memories we enjoyed rather than bereave his loss. We have to stand strong like the rocks on this bay have. They have been eroded but they still stand there. We have been hurt by your father’s loss but we must continue. Remember, the world stops for nobody. Even your father, my son.’

Oliver nodded as he looked up to his grandfather and embraced him. ‘Grandpa, we can be strong together.’ ‘Yes, we can.’ Oliver’s grandfather held back the tears as he smiled at the young boy’s response.
My grandfather once gave me the gift of a true story.

I, Cade, am fearful. The Finfolk, those dark and gloomy Orcadian sorcerers, are brazenly in our settlement on the summit of Ben Nevis.

The sea lashes sixty feet below. I gather bones, and shells. In my cubicle, they are shaping. The Finfolk say they’ll help us, but they’ve power over storm and sea, and could have stopped ‘The Second Great Flood’.

Jamie’s here.

“The water’s receding. We’ll soon be growing vegetables,” he says.

“Seed? No God,” I say.

He’s my age, twenty-five, and his looks weigh heavily on him; barely five feet, and a crooked spine.

“I can feel His presence,” he says

He stares at the curtain.

“Don’t ever look behind,” I say.

“A shell woman? We’ve not been given mates,” he says.

Dougal decides,” I say.

“You desire Anne. Abductees aren’t trustworthy.”

“Only hiding. Her father ordered her to marry Neil,” I say.

“A Finman’s here,” he says.

Twenty ‘selectees’ sit with a Finman. His skin’s fish-white, hateful.

We focus on the marble stone Finfolk use for telepathy. He’s offering us kelp, and says his people took seeds from wheat, and berries, before the Flood.

“Come to me, at dusk,” Dougal says, later.

I lope to Dougal’s cubicle. He’s holding a book. Books are sacred relics.

“The Finfolk will give us seeds if you marry a Finwife,” he says.

I am in despair.

At dawn, a Finwife’s outside my cubicle. She’s telepathically talking with me. They’ve found an enormous bed of silver, and want humans to toil in it. Suddenly, a Finman appears, and strikes her. She hurtles dead into the waters. I pass out.

A stranger’s by me.

“Where am I?” I say.

“Càrn Mòr Dearg.”

A week passes, and a huge drop in water level occurs. I can see Ben Nevis.

Dougal pretends joy at my return. But the Finfolk have promised him personal rewards to further betray us.

I walk to the rim. Jamie’s flanking me. I feel safe. Suddenly, I’m shoved. I slither on scree, but don’t fall.

“Why, Jamie?”

“I’m Dougal’s son, born of another man’s wife,” he says.

“You’re too old to have been born here,” I say.

“I’m seventeen.”

The punishment for having sex with another man’s partner is drowning. No wonder it was kept a secret.

“The elders chose you as next leader, and so father got the Finfolk to offer you a Finwife. You were to be killed. I’ve always hated you with your good looks. The Finwife was so smitten she betrayed her kind,” Jamie says.

I’m silent.

“You’ve a boat of bones, and shells, behind your curtain. God would have given us boats if he thought it right. Disobedience! God, the Almighty! God the Most Powerful!”
Jamie’s insane.
  “Why is the Bible locked up?” I ask.
  “A control method. Our first leader was a psychologist,” he says.
He dashes himself onto the rocks below.
  I smash the bone and shell boat. A symbolic bridge is superfluous.
End
Standing on deck, he gazed out to sea towards the island he’d left as a small boy. The wind had the tang of the sea, bringing back a vivid memory of that long ago day when his life changed. He had only been nine. They hadn’t had a lot but then no one did so he didn’t notice. They got by, him and Ma. His Pa had been gone for a long time, off to America to get work (and adventure? He suspected so). Then Ma got sick. He wasn’t worried at first, it wasn’t unusual, but this time it was worse. Some days after she died, Grandpa took him to the beach. He didn’t even take time to get his shoes. Grandpa told him he was to go to Pa, all the way across the sea that had dominated his life for nine years. Away from everything and everyone he’d known. He thought he’d stay with Grandpa but Pa wanted him, so that was that - decision made. 

As he stood on the ferry he remembered. The confusion, fear, sadness, resignation. Now he was going to stand on that beach again. Say goodbye to Grandpa. 

He stepped ashore and made his way to the shiny new terminal. He picked up his hire car and, driving past Tesco on a sparkling road, he couldn’t quite believe he was on the island of his memories. Normally everything seems smaller when you go back to places of your childhood, not so here.

Up the hill, down towards the bay. Mile after mile until he saw the village in the distance nestled against the shoreline. This was what he remembered; the last view of home through a dusty bus window. 

Home. How could that be? How can you live somewhere for only nine years and call that place home despite spending thirty years somewhere else? Despite growing up, working, having a family there? How can you explain that?

Well no need, it just is. He was home. He wished he’d come home sooner, spent time with his memories, visited the house, gone to that beach. Spent time with his Grandpa. 

Sitting in Grandpa’s house, sorting through bits and pieces from a long life, he found the letters he’d written for thirty years, tied up carefully with a ribbon, so out of keeping with his image of the old man. He was glad he’d written those letters. Glad Grandpa had known he was loved, even from a distance. Glad he was home to pay his respects. 

He’d go away again of course. There was nothing for him here now. But this place would always be a part of him, the village had formed him, was at his core. He would never forget it.
That One Night by Meredith Brown

The waves lapped up on the seaweed covered shore, washing my blackened feet in its cold water and the sea salt filled air stung on my skin but somehow it was all slightly refreshing. The sound of seagulls cawing as they flew high in the clear blue sky and the waves roaring as they collide against the rocks at the far end of the beach, all of these natural sounds, as loud as they were, rang silent in my ears. Although my feet were frozen I didn’t move and although my eyes were sore, I remained staring down at the icy waves as they caressed my feet with its icy grasp.

“Son,” The old man said as he placed a hand on my shoulder. “There was nothing that could have been done. I’m sorry.” He stood there silently listening to noises waiting for a reply but received nothing. I just kept my eyes staring down as they, like the sea, began to swell with salty tears again. I began to quake once more as the tears trickled down my face, stinging my cheeks as they went but not once did I move to wipe them away.

That night, that one awful night, I was late.
I thought I could play with the other kids before I came back from market. A little game of tag that was all. One game, just one game and I wouldn’t be too late. I thought that they wouldn’t mind.
As I walked down the dirt path to our house, a strange auburn glow from above the hills caught my eye. As I veered around the hillside to look upon the empty field my house sat in, I froze. The bag of fresh groceries from market dropped out of my hand and clattered against the ground with an empty thud.
My small house;
My cosy, small house;
My safe, cosy, small house was alight.
I tried all I could, running straight for the door, singeing my hands, throwing it open to fire and smoke. The flames roared wildly scorching everything in sight, spreading and building the already intense heat. Burning off clothes and skin in the process I ran straight in. I screamed and screamed, calling out every name I could but in this maze of flames nothing but the constant roaring sound replied.
I began searching. I searched through the flames, through my crying and choking and screaming, I kept searching. I searched and searched and searched until I was dragged out of the building by the old man, kicking and screaming as he pulled me to safety.
Through my struggles and protests he gripped me tightly, refusing to let go, until eventually I slumped to the ground. I sat there, staring, watching as the sky filled up with fire and smoke.
Watching as my safe little house disappeared into the flames and then watching as the auburn flames climbed high into the night sky.
And I could do nothing about it.
Sacred Waters by Erin Webster

There are many seas and many waves sailors face as they sail from one ocean to another. There are also many wonders and secrets that lie above and below the waves. Some that are from stories sailors tell their children, while others remain hidden and undisturbed, until the sea decides to show them.

Sailon was very young when his father left him with his grandfather; no one knew where he went, all he said was that ‘he has a promise to keep!’ All young Sailon could do was to come to the shore each morning, hoping to see his father’s ship, with his grandfather beside him.

His father had told him stories about people called Seaborns, a race who has been touched by the sea and that you can hear their voices whispering in small blue shells. Just like the one he is holding now; and when he listens very carefully, he hears his father’s voice.

Nine years had passed since then and Sailon has been working hard to get his own boat. The one he plans to use to find his father!

Everyone in the village thought that Sailon was mad; trying to buy a boat that is no bigger than a lifeboat and using it to find a man that they haven’t heard from in nine years, on his own! But that didn’t stop him, the moment everything was ready, he set off into the unknown waters.

Two weeks of rough waves and storms didn’t stop him as he continued his search. But when he pursued his search by going south, a voice told him to go west, a voice that was coming from his small blue shell? Sailon may not know why, but he headed west and hoped that it will lead him to his father, but it only led him to a sapphire coloured mist. He passed out the moment he went through it.

He woke up in a cabin on a ship; the people on board must have found him and brought him there. But the cabin wasn’t like any other cabin he has seen before, the walls look like they were made from coral; same with the furniture and everything else on board was made by the sea.

He was starting to feel like he was in one of his father’s stories, as he was heading up to the deck. He’d wanted to thank the people who’d found him. But when he did, he saw the Seaborns, the people from his father’s stories!

All of his life Sailon had believed that the Seaborns were just stories, so his soul could be touched by the sea like theirs. But here they are right in front of him, people with aqua blue skin, hair and clothes like the sea.

The Seaborns told him that they are friends of his father and that they would like him to join them in their search. That led to one word from Sailon, ‘yes!’ As their story begins!
On the Beach by Richard Bennett

The story is in the stance, the posture of the figures. The man stands, one hand on the boy’s shoulder. His body sags with the weight of his words. The boy, about thirteen, as I was at the time, has no shoes. His hands hang. He will not look at the man. He is on the edge of the tide, watching the waves lapping at his feet.

My father had been off-shore for three weeks. He came back from the pub one night, and there was a row. There was a lot of striding about and loud voices. Dad grabbed my mother and pushed her up against the wall and shouted in her face.

“Go outside!” she cried at me. I ran downstairs into the garden. There was more shouting and banging, then silence. A few minutes later my father came out, carrying his company holdall. He came and put his arm round me. He was panting and shaking.

‘You shouldn’t have had to see that. Stupid, all that shouting.’

‘Where are you going, dad?’

‘Round to Granma’s. Just for tonight.’ He squeezed my shoulder. ‘Go inside.’ I watched him heave his big red bag on to his shoulder, trudge down the path, and head towards his mother’s flat two streets away.

I went upstairs. My mother was in the kitchen pouring gin into a glass.

‘Will he be back tomorrow?’

‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

Every time he came home, things would be fine for a week, and then the fighting would start. When my dad was offshore, men used to come to the house. They sat drinking and smoking and laughing. I’d seen a man in her bed more than once.

Dad wasn’t at Granma’s when I went round the next day. I saw him only twice after that. Two years later he was killed in an accident on the rig. By that time, I was living with Granma. My mother had sold the flat and left the town. She did come back to see me sometimes. She was always smartly dressed and wore bright red lipstick. Sometimes she had a man with her. I was always pleased to see her.

Once, long ago, I stood on a beach when the tide was out, and the irregular ripples of sand reminded me of my parents’ bed when my mother pulled the covers back. That night, on the garden path, I began to learn that I didn’t know who my mother and father were. Or who I was. That we can never know if those shadowy lines on the horizon are land or rocks and reefs. That, all the time, we stand, not on solid ground, but on an uncertain border between two lots of nothingness.
"Come on," I coaxed. "You can't watch TV all day. It's not healthy." I held his jacket open, trying to tempt him into it. "The fresh air will do you good - put some colour in your cheeks." I stepped into his line of vision.

An impatient hand waved me away. "It's just getting to the good bit," he protested. "You'll make me miss it!"

I reached for the Sky remote. "I'll pause it. You can watch it when we get back."

I wrestled him into his jacket and steered him to the car, securing his seat belt before getting into the driver's side. As I buckled up myself, I noticed that his was undone.

"You have to wear it," I chided, reaching across to refasten it. "It's the law." He snorted with contempt before staring petulantly out the side window. It was a half hour's drive to the beach; a silent half hour.

As I stepped onto the promenade I was instantly flooded with childhood memories. The salty sourness of the air carried a wealth of adventure: of castles and moats, pirates and treasure. This beach had been a Neverland of possibility where dreams were dreamt and wishes wished. I stood, captivated by its mystery and beauty, re-inhabiting my boyhood self.

I opened the passenger door. "The sea is calling us. Listen."

"I need to pee," came the sullen response.

We skirted the shoreline under the cliffs to where a large cave had once fuelled my imagination. "This is where the pirates hide their treasure," I confided.

He peered into the huge chasm. "It's dark," he whispered.

"It's okay," I reassured. "Here, take my hand."

It was cold inside. The walls, washed smooth by numerous tides, dripped dark and dank. And yet the atmosphere was of sublime reverence, like an ancient cathedral.

"Ahoy!" My voice reverberated within the massive cavity. I felt the hand tighten in mine.

"Ahoy!" he imitated, looking up to where the voice lingered. After a moment, he said, "I think the pirates are out at sea. Can we look for their treasure?"

For the next hour he pulled me this way and that, insisting I lift this rock, feel in that crevice, the whole time speculating as to the nature of the treasure. It wasn't until the tide began to lap at the entrance he reluctantly agreed we should give up and head back.

He was silent as we walked back along the beach but this time it was the silence of contentment. There was colour in his cheeks and spirit in his eyes. Keen to maintain the connection we'd found in the cave, I chatted about my boyhood memories of the beach as we headed to the
"I'm sorry we didn't find any treasure," I said as I pulled the seatbelt around him. A gnarled hand cupped my face.

"Oh but we did Son," he said.

And as I looked into his crinkled eyes, I realised he was right.
Our Granda’s as old as trees or hills. That’s what he says. Or rivers or stars or history books. He goes way back, he says, back to before clocks and train-timetables and school bells. His face is lined like a map of every place he’s ever been and his skin’s the colour of wood left out in all weathers – the colour of fence posts that are grey and dull and cracked. He has silver spiders in his ears and in his nose, and no hair on the very top of his head. And he smells of milk that’s been left out in the sun and is a little sour, or aftershave that stings and is called both ‘old’ and ‘spice’.

And Granda tells the best stories ever and he tells them over and over, a little bit different each time. Mam says his stories are a step further from truth every time he tells them, but Granda swears there aint no word of a lie in what he says and his voice drops to a hush-hiss-whisper so mam don’t hear him swearing.

I don’t know who to believe – mam, who says there’s just no such thing as mermaids, or Granda who says he danced with one once on the beach at Aberdeen and her name was Muriel, which is a Celtic name that means ‘sea’ and ‘bright’.

‘She just came ashore and stepped out of her fish-tail. Had the most beautiful legs you ever saw. Was a little unsteady on ’em, so I had to catch her in case she fell. And she thanked me for being such a gentl’man. Hair like sunlight on a field of late summer grass, eyes as blue as a hurting sky with flecks of amber adrift in ’em. And she started singing, there on the beach where everyone could see, ‘cept there was only me and Muriel there. Sang so beautifully my feet was dancing all by ’emselves.’

Granda and me, on the beach at Aberdeen when he first told me, and there weren’t no-one else there but us, and he began singing, his voice all crackle and spit, like listening to one of his old records. Granda dancing then and holding an invisible mermaid in his arms and that much was true.

‘What was she wearing, Granda?’

Granda put a finger across his lips, like it was the greatest secret he was about to tell me, and he winked, said it was just for my ears and I was not to repeat this to my mam or to grandma – ‘She was as naked as the day,’ he said. ‘And her titties were small as lemons and her skin as cold as early mornings, and she was bead-bonny-break-your-heart-beautiful.’

Mam says it’s just a story told by an old man who’s lost his reason, but the thing is I want it to be true and so I stand by the shore looking out to sea sometimes and I’m looking for a Muriel of my own.
The Girl from The Mediterranean Island by Mohammed Riz Zama

Sun was melting slowly in the Mediterranean bringing end to yet another day of our lives. I was sitting while my ten year old grandson was playing with other children on the beach of Malta where we have come to spend our vacation again. He came and sat beside me. After a pause he asked, “Why do we come to Malta for spending our holiday every year”?

I have managed to avoid this question all these years making some stories about why I took my family to Malta every year. In a slow voice I narrated, I met a girl, Rachel in my University. She was from Malta. She came in my life when it was least expected and changed my life forever. She was too perfect for the imperfect world around her and that’s why she decided to leave in a short time. I came to know her in these two weeks and saw life with her ambitious yet innocent eyes which was full of love, hope and peace unlike many girls of her age around. Having big dreams in her eyes, she tried her best to control her emotions which she needed to face the modern selfish environment.

She taught me happiness is achieved when we are content with least, and I started developing a habit of her presence and aura around me. She used to have the most beautiful smile which blended perfectly with her selfless personality and was enough to steal someone heart at first sight. At least did in my case.

Time flew by, and I got her message one evening saying she is leaving in next 48 hour for Malta as she was not sure of her future with this course. I didn’t know what to reply or how to react. I was clueless whether I should feel happy for her or sad to lose her, but I knew I will be losing someone precious from my life. I didn’t knew why I felt the pinch, why it looked as if her departure would create void in my life but I cried in the darkness of night feeling helpless for the first time in life. How can I fall in love with someone in a couple of week or was it even more special than love. I had too many questions to be answered and feelings to be expressed but she didn’t have enough time. She Left.

And I lost her. I tried to find her but all in vain. In her last message she was excited on her plans for upcoming UNO environment conservation mission.

“I will be coming to Malta with a hope to meet her someday and spending time here reminds me when I first saw her, with her voice echoing the beauty of Malta”.

Walking down the beach holding my grandson we were heading towards our hotel, when someone called me from behind. And when I turned back, I saw that same smile, I saw my Rachel again.
The Fountain by Amanda Dolby

Howling wind, spitting rain. The weather seemed to be in just as miserable a mood as Emily. Her car had coincidentally refused to start so she had been forced to walk home. She was taking a shortcut through the park, squinting as the wind whipped her hair into her face. “Darn” she whispered, she had been walking for 10 minutes and was certain she had seen the same willow tree twice. She spotted a clearing in the distance and made her way toward it. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the fountain. It was the centrepiece of a large ornately paved area. Cast iron benches covered with climbing ivy formed a protective circle around the outskirts of the clearing. Despite the rain, Emily made her way to one of the benches and sat down, her eyes fixed on the fountain. It was made of grey marble, covered in cracks and stains but beautiful nonetheless. Four life-sized horses adorned it, rearing up with their backs to the heart of the fountain. Flashy fish statues were placed randomly around the horses, all of them with their mouths open, poised to spray water in organised streams. The fountain had been long since abandoned, moss making itself at home in each crevice. The only water in the fountain was that which was falling from the sky. Emily closed her eyes and listened to the pitter-patter of the rain, the howling wind. The squawking of seagulls? The lapping of waves? Confused, Emily opened her eyes and was shocked by what she saw. She was on a beach, too distracted by the beauty around her to worry about how she got there. The water was a deep blue, the waves topped with white foam. The setting sun belched pink and orange colours into the sky, fluffy white clouds obstructing their view. The sand reflected the colours in the sky, the water creating a silvery sheen across the beach. All of a sudden, there were fish leaping out of the water, squirting water from their mouths mid-flight. Grey horses galloped through the surf towards her. They seemed to be smiling as they frolicked in the water, kicking up sand and sea foam as they moved. One of the horses stopped in front of her, leaning down on its front legs. If Emily didn’t know any better, she would have thought the horse was bowing to her. The horse only stayed for a few seconds before it jumped up and galloped away. Emily blinked and was back in the cold, windy park. Her skin was cold, her clothes were soaked but that didn’t dull the smile plastered on her face.
Youth by the Shore by Richard Ross Hunter

As he looked out to the sea, Ally couldn’t comprehend how so much water could gather in one place. Ally had never seen the sea before. Ally’s grandpa had decided to rectify this injustice – fancy a boy reaching six years old and never having gone to the beach! Ally’s grandpa loved the beach. That afternoon was the first time he had been allowed to look after Ally all by himself, and he hoped he could inspire the same love he had for the sand and the waves in his grandson.

“Grandpa,” muttered Ally whilst fingering the hollow of a shell “how old is the sea?”
“Old” said Ally’s grandpa “Very Old”
“Even older than you?”
“Oh yes, even older than me, Ally”
The boy dropped the shell and quickly picked up another.
“It must be really old then”

Contrary to the boy’s remark, his grandpa always felt young when he was near the sea. The fissures on the rocks were far more telling of age than the wrinkles on his skin. Though it wasn’t just this; the sea made him fearful. No matter how young or old, the mangle of a wave in a tempest could strike fear into any being of the land. The sea was power unbridled; a loose stallion, trampling on whatever may come under the shadow of his hoof. The old man scooped up a palm of sand and thought how every little grain had once been part of a mighty boulder. Nothing else he knew of could take something so large and make it so small. Fear made him feel young.

Ally had taken off his shoes and was dabbing his feet in the up-rush of the waves. He giggled with the cold. His grandpa sat upon the sand and watched the boy; youth by the shore and age on the sand, he thought. He thought about his wife too and how she would disappear into mere particles of the earth, like the sand; how she was doing so right now, as he sat on the beach still perfectly alive.

A seagull harked its splitting call overhead as Ally and his grandpa left the beach.
“Bye, sea!” called Ally

When the water was only a few moments out of sight Ally gripped his grandpa’s hand tightly and began to cry.
“What’s the matter laddy? Are you cold?” The boy wasn’t usually one to cry over nothing. For a moment the old man worried he had given the boy a chill.
“Wi...” Ally tried to speak amid his sobbing, but the words came out broken and incoherent.
“Will the sea still be there tomorrow?” said Ally, after much trying.
“Of course! For as long as you live the sea will be right where you left it laddy” The boy smiled. The sea wind had bejewelled his hair with sand, and his eyes were large and wet from crying.

“I was worried someone might drink it” said Ally.

The old man laughed.
Remembering the Sand by Stephen Shirres

In the summer of 1932 my mother sent me to work at my Grandfather’s shop in the coastal village of Glenbay. I stepped off my train and breathed in the engine steam and sea salt. At the far end of the platform was my Grandfather.

“Alec.” He gave me a curt nod. “This way son.”

He led me down the station steps and into the village. Every house we passed, he would tell me about the people who lived inside, what they ordered from the shop and how they lived their lives. The only place we stopped at was his own shop. Through the window, I saw the shelves stacked high with boxes while great sacks of dried food menaced the floor. Behind the counter Grandfather’s young assistant Willie was talking to a beautiful woman. Grandfather watched in silence until he said, “that boy needs a haircut.”

Grandfather’s house was marked by a thin red door. The other side was unchanged from my childhood: pipe smoke and family photos decorated every shelf and wall, my late Grandmother’s work.

“You are in your usual room. I’m needed back in the shop before that assistant of mine does something silly.” He looked at the grandfather clock that dominated the hall. “Go out and learn the village. You are on deliveries tomorrow. Back by six for dinner.”

I took the back road that runs along the bottom of the cliff. When it reached the Banks Hotel I could either follow the road out into the green hills or turn back towards the grey buildings and brown beach. Nostalgia pulls me towards the sand.

Whenever we visited Grandfather we would always go to the beach. My sister and I would carve out rivals to the British Empire in sand. Today they slowly shimmered back into life: towers, moots and walls. A seven year old’s excitement boiled up inside. As the vista filled in front of me I noticed Grandfather, stood on the rocks, staring out to sea.

My greeting was answered with silence. “What are you doing?”

He stirred. “Remembering.”

“Remembering what?”

“My regrets.”

During dinner I notice that Grandfather had a photo of the beach on his dresser. Inhabiting the black and white world was a man, with an outstretched arm talking, to a young boy. They are stood in the same place we had earlier.

“Who are they?” I point at the photograph.

“Your uncle and I.”
“Uncle Tam? He died in the...” I stopped when I saw the effect my words had on him. He seemed to have shrunk in his seat. A tear spilled from his eye, down his cheek and onto his signet ring: a block of gold in volleyed landscape of white. The same ring was on the man’s finger in the photo.

“He did,” he finally said. “He signed up too young and died a lifetime too young. Never teach a boy that war is glorious.”
The Sea by Andrew Gordon

Now her ghost wheels her barrow,
Through the streets broad and narrow,
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive, oh!

They often came to stand or walk by the sea, though this day was different from others and both father and son knew this in their own, separate ways. As the man spoke, the boy watched the surf crawl limply on the rocks, occasionally reaching his bare feet with a cold tingle. His father spoke of the fishing boats and how it was when they returned full, and he spoke too of how it had been the years of scant catches and empty nets. He spoke and in turn was silent, and the minutes did not tick as the two stood with the relentless whistle of the wind in their ears, their bodies taken by its brisk, salty embrace. And the boy felt another presence upon this day which was neither him, nor his father, nor the sea. And it stirred first discretely in his breast as a faint disquiet, unknowable.

He listened to his father meander purposefully towards a hidden destination, and as the words seemed to miss their target, somehow still in their flow they retained the weight with which they had been imparted. As he listened, he felt the unease grow slowly to a thickly veiled fear that bore with it that urge to remain concealed. Fear in the heart of man breeds yet more fear, and years later he would often recall this day and with hindsight also the dawning of its lessons. The prerogative of fear is to proliferate, multiply, and grow for as long as it can progress unchecked, unexplainable, unexplained, compounding the walls that contain and curtail the soul of man and his society. The old man put his hand on his son’s shoulder.

He could see from the boy's face he was in pain. But he knew all too well the unbridgeable gap that lies between the minds of men, and it made him smile a secret smile of ageless understanding. Pain, he thought, seems to grow, nestled deep in the body, and there is no eradicating pain, only learning to live with it in time. And time, like the sea, claims its territory slowly, unyielding. But there was no pain or fear as he spoke to his son, it was merely a part of who he had become, like the bend in his knee or the beard on his chin. And he did not speak of such things, for what occupied his thoughts were the sea, and his son. And he spoke of absence and the unknown. He spoke of the water that came and went, crawling ceaselessly up and down the shore, and he tried to share his vision, to mark the horizon with traces of his thought. And they stood by the sea, father and son, though this day was different from the others. And as the man spoke, the boy watched the surf crawl limply upon the rocks.
Seeing in a Different Way by Georgeena Allan

My father held firmly to my shoulder. We were at the beach, the sharp sand and moist seaweed lathering around my feet told me so. I had seen the beach before. A short stretch of sand, ridged rocks stacked much higher than me and the never ending blue of water and sky only a thin line to define the difference.

All was dark now. I could hear the waves, lapping and hugging the shore, feel the warm sun and cold, tiny drops of water that jumped at me. The hand on my shoulder pushed, urging me to walk. He said nothing.

His lack of words said it all. His worried thoughts: what am I to do with a blind son? Why his son? He knew that they could not be answered of course he knew, his firm hand held him steady in mind, me in balance. My cautious pace may be pushing his patience but I wasn’t use to walking in darkness. Each step brought a new sense of comfort; I made that step, now for the next one.

We kept walking.

I never noticed what the sea smelled like, or that it even had a smell -it does- It’s salty and potent; you could taste it on your tongue. The light sent of my father was what I focused on. He was still there; he hadn’t left. It concerned me that at some point my parents would be rid of me. Paying for schooling was hard enough, a carpenter’s family earned small, I worked hard in education as to not disappoint them, but I may have already done that.

My foot hit a rock. My jolt had caught my father off guard, his grip tightening, not letting me go. I was thankful to be loved. Thankful I was still alive, capable of feeling the harsh winds, hearing the roll of our feet, smelling the air, tasting the bitter salt pass through the wind. By this time we must have come to the wall of rocks because my father ceased, as did his hand then me in concession. His hand dropped.

I reached out, to nothing at first, a step forward and a cool surface met my fingers, smooth yet ridged. I shuffled towards the wall, pressed my palms against it, then my forearms, closer until I my cheek rested on the rock. I could hear it. A beat; the sound of the moving sea: imitating a heartbeat. Everything was stronger. The touch, the taste, the smell, the sound... but not the sight. I don’t remember what colour the rocks were. I didn’t want to ask, it would just remind my father of my disability.

I stepped back from the rocks, took a breath and turned around to face my father; at least I believed I was facing him. Taking my shoulder once again and we walked back. Maybe I could never see my father, mother or the beach again but at least they were still there for me.
A walk along the beach by Roderick Brown

Cold day, cold mood, cold fire place, and the cold dead memories of my parents confronting me, as I awoke from a restless, haunted sleep. He was there - my uncle, sitting in the living room, sipping away at tea, spelling out his duties as executor of my parents' last will and testament.

He suggested fresh air; I nodded, not really caring, and trudged out the door.

Waves crashed against rocks, a wind bit deep into all who braved the streets, a light patter of rain fell from the sky. I took no notice of these. Sand shifted under my feet, replaced by hard shingle, back to sand. I glanced at the cold water, shuddered at the thought of its embrace dragging my parents into a gloomy grave. I felt sorry for mother the most. She had never wanted to live by the coast, it was too cold for her...

'I'll try my best to look after you, but you may have to fend for yourself...'

I turned to look at my uncle, thick coat drawn tightly around him, unshaven, but a glint in his eye, ever alert, seemingly untroubled.

I nodded, and kept on walking.

Cliffs became more pronounced, rocks sharper, the path narrower, the waters below deeper, rain becoming heavier...

'Shouldn't we be getting back?'

My uncle turned. 'Let's keep walking; we have a lot to talk about...'

And yet we had barely uttered more than a few sentences...

We scrambled down a sharp jutting of rocks, my left hand recoiling as razor sharp flint sliced the skin, pain surging through my hand, my feet sliding away from me... My good hand grabbed for anything, as I barrelled into my uncle, sending him flying...

He fell comically through the air, smashing into the water like a brick through glass. I lunged out an arm to grab him, but he was too far away, his hands flailing in the air as though he was doing a drunken dance.

'Help!'

I inched forward, desperate to help, and then I saw it - silvery, glinting, a bracelet around his wrist, very valuable, one that my father had never worn, but kept stored away...in secret...

Our eyes locked and he seemed to understand my thinking. That could have been me, struggling and thrashing around for dear life, watching my uncle stand indifferently, as his plan came to fruition...

Turning away, I scrambled back up the rocks and walked back to the house...
For Love of the Sea by Jessica Doble

I took my son’s son to the beach to show him where his father worked, and also where he died. He shuffled his feet, sullen and quiet as usual, but I told him of the great fishing days, where 400 boats crossed the bordering water between the deep sea and the harbor’s waves, when thousands of women, the gutters, readied the fish for market. And at night, we danced. The fiddle and the accordion vied for attention as we spun, held hands, and laughed.

I splayed my hand toward the horizon, remembering a trip when we lost two men from our boat, barely managing to get ourselves to safety as the sea belched us on shore. Sometimes, my stories come out glorifying the old fishing ways, but I also remember the nights spent on the relentless waves, hungry and praying for a catch in the morning.

I placed my hand on his shoulder; he wore his jacket, the one his mother kept for him to grow into. In the satchel slung across his body, he had part of his mother’s radio, which connected her to the men out at sea who would share stories, sing, alert each other of impending storms, and reassure their loved ones, or relay grave news. The radio no longer received any news from the sea, but it was on that radio that his mother learned of his father’s death, long after he had gone to sleep and she rang us that night, me and the wifey, sobbing so much we had to wait for her words to form themselves again. “Grandad?” I remembered that night, so vividly, more vividly than my wedding day, my only child—

“Grandad.”

“Yes?”

“I’m ten. You don’t hafta make me feel better. I didn’t even cry at the funeral.”

“I know. You just look so much like your dad.”

“Do you think I will be a fisherman like him?”

“Maybe. If you want to.”

“Ok.”

He kicked a pebble and gazed out over the sea. We didn’t say anything and I listened to the sound of the unusually gentle waves and seagulls calling to each other.

“Did I ever tell you the story about how your father named the first boat he made with his own hands after your mother, when he called it the Monte Clara?”

Even though he had heard it hundreds of times, he shook his head. “No granddad, you didn’t.”
Born on the rocks by Kim Adams

Doug often told the story of his beloved grandfather’s death; solemnly recounting his passing: the slow inward rasp, followed by a wet croak of breath as his spirit escaped skywards from the grimy hospital window; devoid of fanfare. As his life was tossed heavenwards with that final wheeze, the old man urged Doug to “…be lucky, m’boy…”.

A poetic thought? Yet Doug didn’t really believe it. His audience, however, were enthralled. Sometimes he would pause, his eyes glistening. The image of his grandfather as a boy, standing with an aged relative was the final slide in Doug’s carefully constructed seminar presentation entitled: ‘Boom Time’. The image demonstrated how simple roots (his grandfather) could bear magnificent fruit (Doug). Often, he received a standing ovation, and he would nod enigmatically, graciously fielding the barrage of questions.

The same photo, framed in sandalwood, sat on Doug’s desk in his plush penthouse office suite, with its impressive city views. Visitors would comment on the old photo, and gawp at the skyline; Doug would sip expensive whisky, reminiscing about his family from up’t North and his scant beginnings. ‘That boy done good…’ his grandfather might have said.

…Except…

…..there was no grandfather…..

Doug’s carefully crafted backstory hid a simple truth: prosperity built on rocky foundations. His successful investment business, founded on honesty, trust and transparency, served wealthy clients who called him The Fixer. Savvy Doug had carved his niche with hard dealing and quick talking; greedily reaping the ill-gotten benefits. Yet Doug’s lucrative business hid a crummy truth.

The photo that purported to show his impoverished relations had been culled from a slick magazine some years previously: the moment his new path had been conceived. Facts were jettisoned; a new history fashioned to suit his chosen direction. His life laundered, just like the investor’s money he surreptitiously washed.

‘Join me and profit…’ he would say. And so they did.

The 14 year old Dougy, from a rotten town somewhere, had stolen money from the coat of an old man fishing on the rocks. The old guy was spritely for his years and had spotted, and given chase to, the scruffy teen that made off with his cash. He pursued him across the rocks, leading to a slip for the man and a smashed skull for his trouble. As the old man lay bleeding, Doug feared the punishment his act of theft would demand, so he hardened his heart, pocketed the loot and ran home for supper. The old man, someone’s grandfather, died alone on the rocks.

Doug spent the cash and bore the advance of insidious guilt. No murderer he, but his careless boyhood act and subsequent silence, ensured the deed blossomed from a desire for pennies into something much greater, filthier: a craving for wealth.

As the old man’s head met the unyielding rock, the boy’s path was changed forever. The photo commemorated his tipping point; a need to pilfer, to prosper, born that day…. on the rocks.
A Buchan Tradition by Chris Cromar

It was a cold, brisk spring early evening on Scotland’s Buchan coast. As the rugged waves of the North Sea battered against the coastal rocks, the smell of the fresh catch of fish was still lingering in the air. This has been the way of life in this small, rural coastal community for hundreds of years, with only a handful of families making up the village’s population, a far cry from the bright lights and technological advances of the city just an hour’s drive away.

As Davie Buchan, a retired fisherman in his eighties and his grandson Chisholm Buchan, a schoolboy of eleven walked down the seaweed strewn beach, Chisholm asked his grandfather what his life was like at sea, he said: “Granda, I want to know what life was really like at sea?” Davie Buchan, a native Doric Scots speaker said: “Well son, we’ve not got all day, but I’ll tell you.

“Going to sea was the bread and butter of this community Chisholm, there was nothing else for us round here, aye son, it was a rare time, not like today’s life son.” As they both walked along the beach bare footed, Chisholm asked his grandfather: “What was the best thing about being at sea granda?”

“Good question son!” was Davie’s response. “There was many highlights of my forty years at sea Chisholm, just wait a minute till I think about it.” As Davie thought about it, he stopped on the spot and gazed into the sea as the lighthouse was to be seen far away in the distance. Davie responded: “My favourite moment was in the summer of 1985 when I and three others, Jimmy, Peter and Sandy went out to the middle of the North Sea in our fishing vessel, the ‘Buchan Battler’.” Eager to hear more, Chisholm urgently responded: “What happened granda?”

“Well Chisholm, it was a sunny day, another summer’s day at sea really, and when we were out we got a good catch of cod, and when we were heading back, I said to Jimmy, Peter and Sandy, ‘let’s have one more try at catching more’, and we caught a record amount of cod ever caught in Scottish waters, Chisholm.”

“Wow” Chisholm gasped. “And what did you do when you arrived back in the village granda?” Chisholm asked. “Well we took the cod to the harbour master and he contacted the authorities who came out the next day and confirmed the catch as a record.”

Surprised by this, Chisholm asked his granda: “How did you and the others celebrate?”

“Simple son, me and your grandma went to the fish and chip shop in the village and ordered our favourite, fish and chips, two rolls and a bottle of beer.”

As Davie and Chisholm walked back to the village arm in arm, both went to the fish and chip shop and ordered Davie’s favourite. They then walked back to grandma’s house, had their fish and chips and talked for hours about fishing stories.
Andrew picked his way over the rocks towards his grandfather. The morning mist had cleared with the rising sun and he could taste the salt in the air as the sharp rocks and shells pressed hard into the soles of his feet.

‘Let’s see what the tide has brought us today then lad,’ his grandfather said over the hiss of the waves.

They walked together along the shoreline. Andrew held his hand, enjoying the rough feel of his skin on his. The old man had taken him in after his had died when he was just a toddler and now Andrew could barely even remember his real father.

It was not long before they started to see the first debris. Scraps of splintered wood tumbled onto the beach atop the briny foam along with a man’s shirt and a solitary brown leather shoe washed up at the high water mark. His grandfather spared them no more than a cursory glance.

The first body was just a little farther along, arms splayed like a man-size rag doll as the tide nudged it ashore. The old man knelt and began a thorough inspection of the corpse. Andrew watched as his grandfather dipped his hands in and out of pockets. He was amazed as always at how quickly he worked. A rolled up sleeve revealed a gold wristwatch which he deftly removed. He held it to his ear to check it still worked before slipping it into his pocket. A quick tug on a finger also relieved the man of his wedding ring. The dead man’s head rolled from side to side as he worked as if he was objecting to his treatment. Finally, his grandfather’s long bony fingers plucked a cracked leather wallet out from an inside pocket. He flipped it open and carefully withdrew some sodden banknotes before tossing the empty billfold onto the sand at Andrew’s feet. The boy stooped to pick it up and opened it. A picture of a smiling woman and a little baby looked out at him.

‘Leave it be lad,’ his grandfather said. ‘It does no good to know too much about what washes up on the beach.’

‘Yes grandfather.’

Andrew dropped the wallet back onto the sand. The faces still stared up at him as the water washed over them making their features blur.

‘Let’s move on,’ his grandfather said wiping his hands on his trousers as he stood up. ‘Plenty more where this one came from I’ll wager, cargo too if we’re lucky.’

When they were done they would go home and count the day’s take and his grandfather would give him a share for helping. After the sun went down they would light their lantern and go for another walk along the beach. There were always plenty of ships plying their trade along the rocky coast and there were always a few that would be fooled by the light and founder on the reefs before spilling their holds into the waves.
Blame the water by Duncan Clark

Sand formed a new terrain as he curled his toes. Seawater flooded the small glens and retreated to leave a new loch.

They’d been walking along the beach, avoiding talking about the sea and the missing son and father they shared. They could discuss anything but the sea, it always took them to that point in conversations were they stopped and looked at their feet, or skyward or when someone would appear to change the subject, or where they’d walk until a new conversation started.

The water was boisterous today. Even so close to shore it looped and churned the seaweed before hurling it onto the beach. Somewhere in the past, the rocks that framed the beach had been thrown from the sea, or dragged there by ice, either way, water was to blame.

Small thoughts like that were his solace, he hoped the boy had an equivalent way to cope.

His father, lost to a long forgotten war, his son, lost to the sea’s random malice. Both leaving sons behind to cope as best as they could. No one to make proud, or to learn from. Just the practicality of woman, never stopping from the endless round of cleaning and moving things around, never pausing to watch the infinite little actions that make the days pass. He guarded the boy from such joylessness, from the banality of other people’s sympathy, but only till they both had to move on and say farewell.

Dressed in the fashionable rural urchin manner, the boy had taken to running about barefoot. Even the older man couldn’t remember a time when he’d gone without shoes, but the boy had adapted to spending day after day outdoors.

They paused, looked out over the sea, sharing the strength of the broken, those who can’t be hurt anymore, knowing that the other had come to understand, if not accept, what had happened. Why should he accept it? He’d need that anger to survive. He’d needed the rage to get home from the colonies, further than the sea could ever stretch, but not as far as his anger.

He’d moved a century in the time it took to blink the sun out of his eyes.

His past was that, the past. It wasn’t for him to inflict it on the boy, he’d read what he’d need too, and other would fill in the rest. He could figure it out in his own time, that would be his gift, the time and freedom from ‘history’ for a few more years.

Time hadn’t made the wind any warmer at this time of year, nor had it made the boy’s mother any happier about him spending any time with his father’s family.

From the island’s shore, I looked out, past my beloved uncle. Through a blur of undyed wool, through the lose knit of his boat builder’s sweater. His back bent. His knees crooked. His hand resting on my shoulder. I can hear his whispered blessing still. Go n-eiri on bothar leat.

You travel the world over in search of something you left behind. But you never find it because once you leave a place, it changes forever. My uncle told me a story. The story of a man who wore a heavy over-coat and long boots in the summer. He was trying to protect himself from the harshness of this world. It was an attempt, he said, to wrap himself in the comfort of his childhood. To shield himself, to save himself if you like, from the consequences of life. The man in my uncle’s story lived in Russia, in a place so vast and so hostile there were consequences at every turn. He soon perished.

I know that he told me these stories to caution me. But I was irrepressible. My leaving was an unspoken thing. I was the best loved. The hardest won. Soft boiled eggs. Cow’s milk. Silver fishes. Kisses bestowed. Prayers prayed.

Why should one child be set apart? For his spirit, inquisitiveness, his love of nature, of God? Out on the currach with my father and uncle. The low lilt of their voices. The drag of the nets. The list of the boat on mighty waves. The lone white church blinking in the sunlight. I turned my head. Unexpectedly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw anarchy.

All my childhood. Stories. Stories of relatives. Of loss. Storms at sea. The cliff top. The vantage point. For looking to the past. For seeing come what may. All around me. God’s grace. And I, at the core of it. The sudden roar of a wave forced up through the grykes. Like a whale’s blow. Surging between the clints, then falling, falling, down to the sea. And I, rooted to the ground with the force of life.

I was whipped away. By the wind. By the Sea. A foreign road rose to meet me. It took me far away from my western isle to the desert nights of New Mexico. The same stars glinting over my new home as my island home. The sound of the sea on the shore, crashing, breaking up, running to ground, to limestone, to fissures. Memories of my childhood, my uncle, the perished man in his overcoat, all altered now, altering still.
The Decision by Lynne Williams

Flora thought she was good at making decisions, not faltering like some of her friends in the residence for elderly ladies, but still sharp and quick. Indecisiveness irritated her. She knew instantly what to choose from the breakfast menu for instance or which programme she would like to watch in the evening after the games of cards was played.

As she sipped her herbal tea, pear and honey with a note of ginger, she cradled the china cup in her arthritic fingers. The tea pleasantly warmed her (or so the advert suggested). At least she enjoyed the mellow calming fragrance.

Today she had woken up and decided she would sit in the sea view lounge. As her eyes gently closed an image appeared behind her eyes. It was like a photograph but she knew it was not a photograph she had ever seen. It was the back view of a man and boy; the man was comforting the boy. It was not of the present but came from some distant time and distant place. She found it deeply disturbing but couldn’t think why. A nagging sense of regret surfaced as she let the thought simmer and brew.

It was a blustery Friday or Saturday.

The man and the boy who stood at the water’s edge, looked out to sea from an island place, a grey sea and a grey sky filled the space behind her eyes. She had chosen someone else, a new love over the old one. She looked at her slippers and remembered they needed replacing, as they were worn. It was a shame about the boy; she wished he would visit her sometimes.

Had she made a mistake? No she liked enjoyed sitting in the sea view lounge usually. She noticed that a grey hair floated in the cup, flotsam.

Did they blame her for what she had done? Her friends probably were sitting talking about her now in the main lounge thinking she was being aloof.

She had not waited long enough to see their expressions.

The decision was made a long time ago. It was a last minute decision. Had they turned to see her leave? She picked out the grey hair from the china cup and looked at it.

She wondered if she had made the right decision and thought she should have chosen the usual Green tea after all.

It didn’t do to change things in the present and the past could always be undone in the mind she resolved. What was time anyway, but a series of present moments?
Memento by Kirstin Scott

He had lost count of the number of times that he had fell asleep under the stars. The sound of the waves gently lapping at the rocks and the light breeze against his face did little to soothe him. The war had been harsh. So many had died. He still had difficulty accepting that his parents were among the dead. With no other relatives to turn to for support he had turned to living on the streets, stealing when he had to. All he had left was the clothes on his back, and even those were falling apart.

He had lost the only memento he had of his parents the last time he had come to the beach. He knew that as unlikely as he was to find it, he still had to try searching for it. Although he hadn’t been expecting to find it, it still left him feeling hollow inside when his search came up empty. In order to quell the storm of emotions raging inside him, he had found a comfortable spot on a rocky outcrop where he could lay down and watch the stars in the sky. He felt numb. He refused to cry. What was the point?

The sound of footsteps coming up behind him had him standing up, alert. A look to the source of the noise had him raising an eyebrow. It was a man. The dark brown hair that was almost overwhelmed by silver and the crow’s feet around his eyes spoke of old age. Although the man’s clothes weren’t as worn as his own, they weren’t in the best condition. Probably a local fisherman.

“What are you doing out here by yourself, son?” the old man asked kindly, “Where are your parents?”

“Dead,” the boy replied cautiously, feeling that any further explanation was unnecessary.

“I see. You’re not alone.” The man looked so old and worn in that moment and the smile that played on his lips lacked any sort of warmth. It seems the war had left no one unscathed.

“I was looking for a locket. I couldn’t find it,” the boy shared after determining that the man was legitimately concerned.

The old man unexpectedly flashed him a bright smile, “I had found this yesterday. I thought that the owner might return to look for it so I’ve been holding on to it.” After rummaging through the pockets of his jacket, he held out his hand towards the boy. In his hand lay a familiar silver locket. The boy knew right away that inside there would be a photograph of his loved ones, sitting together, hand-in-hand as they smiled at the camera.

Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. He reached out carefully to take the locket, cradling it in shaking hands. He popped the locket open and gazed at his parents who smiled back at him.

The old man lay a hand on his shoulder, comforting, as the dam broke and he finally let the tears fall.
What the sea washes up by Lukasz Olender

I was seven, maybe eight years old, so my brother was eleven or twelve. Like every year we were spending holidays with the grandparents in a small village by the Baltic. The days looked the same during our stays. If it was not raining, on the beach from morning, reading stories, sunbathing and building sand fortresses, with a naive hope that we finally built something that would last through the night and was resistant to the waves. Then there was a lunch and an after lunch rest. In the afternoons, grandpa usually took me and my brother for a walk along the beach. Normally, we walked to the next village for waffles or ice cream, and beer for grandpa. One day when we walked along the beach, a round black shape enchanted mine and my brother’s attention. We ran to it.

When we were a few meters from our discovery, we saw it in full appearance. It was a huge, black, metal ball, all covered with kind of bristles. We stood a few meters from it, not really sure what to do with it.

‘Grandpa,’ screamed my brother, and we both ran about fifty meters back to him.

We were now jumping around him while he walked slowly, strong, calm, unimpressed with our excitement.

‘Grandpa, we found a UFO,’ we shouted one over another.

Finally we led grandpa to our discovery. He came closer to it, nodded, and tapped it few times. It sounded empty.

‘Oh well,’ he said. ‘It's a naval mine, to destroy ships.’

‘A naval mine. Will it explode?’ asked my brother.

‘No, it's empty,’ said grandpa, 'It’s just a shell.'

‘Where does it come from, grandpa?’ I asked.

‘I guess last night’s storm threw it here, it might be from the Second World War,’ he said.

We stepped forward and touched it. The surface was cold and rough. I looked around, grandfather now stood a few meters away, just by the water, and stared at the horizon. I came to him.

‘Did you go to the war grandpa?’ I asked him. He looked at me.

‘It was more like the war came here,’ he said. ‘But I was never a sailor. I was in Warsaw.’

‘Did you shoot anyone, grandpa?’ I asked. He looked at the horizon again, silent.

‘I don’t remember, it was so long ago. You can't remember everything.’

A cold wave tickled my toes. I did not react, imagining that this was what a courageous soldier would
'Grandpa, are there ships from the war under the sea?' I asked after a while.

'Certainly. Now the sea owns them, and sometimes it decides to wash something up if it doesn't want it any more'

'How old were you when you went to the war?' I asked.

'Seventeen.' I started to count on my fingers.

'Will I go to war when I will be seventeen?' I asked.

'Call your brother and let's go for waffles.'
F.I.N.E. by Olga Karagiorgou

17:03. I am outside Angus’ block and buzzing him. It always takes him thirty seconds to answer even though when he expects me he walks up and down the aisle. I can imagine him counting to thirty and then answering with his faded but sophisticated voice as if he’s been so busy that he forgot I would be visiting:

“Hello”?
“Hello Angus, it’s Ele…” I haven’t even completed my sentence when the door opens. Classic!
I take the stairs to the first floor. The door is ajar; Angus is sitting on the couch holding a book.
“Hello Angus! Long-time no see! I missed you!”
“Eleni, the Smiler. Yes indeed. Thank you.”
“How’ve you been?”
“Fine.”
“Fine? What a pleasant change! What happened to ‘unfortunately still alive’?”
“Don’t get excited Eleni. Fine stands for: Fucked up, Insecure, Neurotic, Egocentric. You always wanted me to use positive words... so there you go. I am F.I.N.E.”
“What are you reading?”
“A love story. Overripe as all of them. Al gave me it.”
This is interesting, I thought to myself. According to Angus, it’s been ages since they last spoke to each other.
“How is he?”
“He’s got cancer; final stage.”
“I am so sorry to hear that, Angus. That must’ve come as a shock. How are you feeling?”
“Eleni, are you here as a psychologist?”
“No.”
“Then why do you act as one?”
“How do you mean?”
“Your studious attention, upright posture, low and matter-of-fact voice, the questions you’re asking... You are practising on me! As you can see, I can be of some help to you, but you can’t help me. I want to die but I am afraid of death.”
“You are the only one who can help yourself, Angus. What did you say when he broke the news to you?”
“Nothing. He wrote.”
“Haven’t you thought that this might’ve been a desperate attempt to get some feelings out of you? He needs you, Angus!”
“Al is not a little kid anymore. He’s 66!”
“You will always be his dad though, Angus!”
God was I outrageous. I had never pushed him that far. But I always believed that the story with the lost connections to God, family and friends was an excuse to keep punishing himself for what
happened almost 50 years ago. And that’s why we started working with him; he made an attempt on his life. When he realised that he was gonna die, he called his son. He was desperate for some attention. For Al’s attention.

“Angus, your only son is dying. Don’t you want to make up for the lost time? Don’t you want to apologise for cheating on his mum with all those girls? For abandoning him when he was a child? For robbing him of his happiness and depriving him of a paternal figure? Don’t you have anything to say at all? How do you feel about all this, Angus?” I asked him with my now high-pitched voice.

“I told you, I’m F.I.N.E.”
Milk bottle ankles and ten nervous toes, wriggling to keep warm. The father reassures the boy that this is completely safe. The boy has made a wise decision in not believing him. Murmuring. Barely audible over the incessant crashing of the waves. But my hearing is excellent. It has to be. I am perfectly adapted for these circumstances. The boy is not. He cannot sense me, not really. He feels that something is amiss but his weakness lies in his inability to identify exactly what it is. His ruin lies in his decision to set foot into my domain.

The father tries to instil his own foolish love for the ocean into his child. ‘Look! Isn’t it incredible?’ The boy thinks it is terrifying. He is not wrong. I circle, stretching my long limbs. The father speaks more softly now. The boy tenses. The word ‘mother’. Her name is familiar on my tongue. I will know his name soon enough, I will round out the vowels and spit out the consonants and I will savour every syllable. I will sing him like a shanty and I shall be sated for a while longer. They used to sing for me. But now the sailors sing for their sweethearts and their whiskey.

The mother though, she sang out for me, she lured me to her and I returned the favour. And the boy, he sang too, rosy cheeks and salty lips and a warm heart. And he knows I am here, just as she knew but couldn’t understand. His father called me choppy water and this time he will call me rip tide and perhaps he will remain on land now; perhaps he will learn to love the rocks and the soil as he once so loved the ocean. If not, he will succumb eventually and I shall pluck the words from his flooded lungs.

The boy is leaking a little of himself into the water now and I can taste the remnants of a difficult question. ‘Was it my fault?’ A tight embrace, thick wool against leather, the wiping away of tears. I am impatient; I need him closer but he is tentative, swept up in emotion. His hair is stroked and his breathing quiets a little. The father joins his son in the sea; two generations side by side. The boy begins to relax and as he becomes easy, I tense. He splashes his father. I pick up speed. He kicks his feet out, he skims a hand over a wave, he notices seaweed and I swim. Laughter, a little conversation, some gentle nudging and finally, delicately, he slides two skinny legs into the breaking waves. He tests the ocean with a gentle kick. He is close to me now, so very close, I can almost taste him. My arm is outstretched. I am ready. I am ravenous.

Mottled green wrists and ten hungry fingers wriggling in anticipation. The father reassures the boy that this is completely safe and I strike.
Pass it on by Stefan Pascanu

"Pass it on to future generations" old father used to say to Martin. Even though he still does not know what the meaning of his father’s words is, he developed some sort of faith in the concept.

Martin is now a parent himself. His son, Nicholas, aspires to the ideals of the new world. Everybody nowadays talks about people mastering the sky. Nobody trembles in front of the eerie stories of the past, they all create monsters of they own. There are no longer any expectations for the future to be something rather familiar. There is no more mystery in the spoken word. Nothing but the water flows forevermore. Strangely enough, Nicholas craves for this novelty that Martin does not comprehend. What then can be passed on?

Suddenly, the realization of this absurd feeling of nostalgia wakes Martin up from the charms of his father’s voice, which was echoing in his head on that warm October day. Nicholas was sitting next to him, dreaming for the skyline as though sheer happiness was to be found in there. The freedom of the spirit is the gliding of the body through the clouds.

Martin does not feel any regret. There is nothing more to tell his son, there is no tribute that he needs to pay to the elders’ remembrance.

-Nicholas? What are you dreaming about?
-I wish I could fly. But I’m afraid.
-How can you be afraid if you never flew?
-I’m scared for you dad. What if I will never be able to walk again? What if I can’t take you with me?

-Nicholas, if you feel like flying, the biggest mistake you can do is to worry about walking. Sit down with me and look at the sea. This new world doesn’t await for you, you’ll have to run and if you’re fast enough, you might be lucky enough to shine in its light.

-What do you mean by that, father?
-I can do nothing more than to be here. If you’ll ever want to come back, I’ll be here. Ask the sea, wherever you’ll be and it’ll bring you to me.

-I’ll never leave you father.
-You’ll do it, you have to do it. It’s better this way. I’ll pass you on the future.

As time flows towards the inevitable separation, a great war starts. Nicholas became one of the best pilots. As he overflies a remote area of Siberia, one of the engines loses power. After he manages to bring the plane down over a region of fresh snow, Nicholas dizzily exits the flying machine, walks a few hundred steps and sits down in the luminous desert. There is no sun and the wind grows stronger. An overwhelming waterfall of sprinkling frozen dust heads towards Nicholas. Taking his flying cap off, the son remembers his father’s words. This is that exact moment. He shone in the future’s light.

-I’m coming back with the sea, father.