The Water Puppets

I love it when the tide comes in. The water rises clear and cold. It rises so quickly, and, after the first sweeping presence, is so silent. I love the change it visits on the world, making it over; the same things, but different, better. Everyone grumbles: the extra work, the danger, the things lost: always things are lost. But I love it, and always did, and await the big moon in its eccentric six-times yearly cycle with excitement, not fear, and the rising of the water which sets the rest of my village on nervous edge, instead calms me down, and I look into the glassy depths overwhelmed by a profound stillness. The colors are brighter, the movement slower and somehow orchestrated: in the one great motion of the sea the grasses all dance as one, with perfect grace. And the single-minded shoals of brilliant fish move too to some secret steersman’s cue, and the light ripples contrapuntally over it all. My own shadow is impelled to rhythmic motion, part of the same great aqueous symphony. The sea puts the world together for me, rebuilds it from its impossible fragments every tide, and I am enthralled by its power.

Our village is towards the top of the tide, so the water stays only a short time, and we don’t need such long anchors as the less fortunate souls many miles further down the beach, but (even as we do today) when I was a boy we looked with envy to the hills just visible to the west, where even at the highest of storm-fed spring tides a series of dark smudges remains visible on the horizon, the island tops of the hills, the promised land that was dry night and day, summer and winter, year after tideless year. There lived the tenders of the wealth of our world, the trees on which our lives depended. Although, perhaps when hurrying to complete a task before the tide comes in, I too thought of the apparent ease of life above the tide-line, the thought made me shiver: I imagined a dry world, naked, cracked and withered; tainted and unwashed. I could not go there and see: I would have had to fight my way up the beach, village by village. Our relative positions on the beach had been established by aeons of competition and conflict, and were guarded jealously. Movement between villages was rigorously controlled and ritualized, marriage being the main vehicle of change. The prettiest girls, the strongest boys, could be traded up the beach, but their partners would be the third string of the higher village, able only to maintain their
standing in the tide-line by marrying below them. The second ranks were able to marry across the line, a meeting of equals. The disappointed fourth rank would have to marry down the line, drifting out, generation by generation, into the deeper water, with its harder labor, its greater risks, its lesser resources and poorer diet. In the end, their descendants might find themselves at last at the low-water mark, where legend has it there was the possibility of being traded with the unanchored ones of whom the stories spoke, those who had cut themselves loose from the dry land and endlessly sailed the endless seas. I did not believe in them. But I loved those stories and dreamt of going against nature and turning my face to the tide and following it out to where I might see their great boats and somehow come to join them, and leave forever that small world huddled between the water and the sky that was everything I knew.

There are many ways to leave this narrow existence, however; many ways may be contrived by circumstance to make a brief life briefer. For instance, my sister was one of those who ‘dragged her anchor’, as the old people liked to put it, ‘is swimming with the fishes’ as we are told when we are small — and she was small, so perhaps that’s the way to think of her, as gliding through the clear water, as silver-quick as the fish with which she swims. But I do not think of her this way; I think of her as I think of all those who die; as drowned. She came into deep water, and was overwhelmed, as we all will be.

When she was born my parents had to bear the disgrace of having exceeded their quota. Birth control is strictly overseen by the village committee. This does make sense; our resources are strictly finite, and if you believe what the old people say, they are even shrinking: the tide rises a little higher, stays a little longer, every year. We live on a knife-edge, and an expanding population would indeed undermine the careful husbandry that keeps us on our perch. Growing hungry we would begin to cast envious eyes at our neighbors, or our neighboring villages — and that is why representatives from adjacent villages sit on our birth-control councils, and why we sit on theirs. It is a serious thing, and disobeying the council’s birth-plan is a serious offence in the eyes of the community.

Of course sexual relations being what they are, such offences do take place, with some regularity. Repeat offenders
have been given forced abortions, but a woman died recently after such a procedure, so the council has been reluctant to make such an order, though no doubt the memory will fade and someone else will be subjected to the bone tools of the medicine woman.

But while the mechanisms of birth are never wholly in the grip of the council, neither are the mechanisms of death, and since the object of the birth-plan is to maintain a stable population, accidents on the positive side of the equation are sometimes compensated for by accidents on the negative side. In such cases an over-quota pregnancy that the council feels to be accidental may be allowed to proceed to make up the shortfall created by the death of an adult who had yet to reproduce. Alternatively permission may be granted for the pregnancy to go ahead on the basis that the family will feed the newcomer from an unchanged food allowance. Our food is produced communally and allotted communally according to need. So an extra mouth in a family with an unchanged allowance means less to eat for the rest of that family. In a good season this may be no hardship, but our good seasons are outweighed by our bad seasons, and in many such cases the owner of the extra mouth does not last many years before being ‘cast off’; placed in a reed boat like a corpse and let go with the falling tide. The idea in such cases, both for the living and the dead, is that they are borne all the way out to sea, to drift forever in the great emptiness. The truth is that just as we receive the occasional cold grey corpses deposited in our territory by the receding waters, so, I imagine, do many of our cast-offs fail to make it to their poetically more pleasing destination, and instead end up tangled in the fishing nets of some village down the beach.

There were three bad years following my sister’s birth. I remember being hungry all the time. The crops did not stand up again after their sea-drenching, the fish did not fill the nets with writhing silver. I remember too, painfully now, watching my mother feed my sister, and resenting every mouthful. My sister was a little stick figure with a swollen belly and I suppose that I, although several years older, looked much the same: the very symbol of life’s fragility.

I remember that winter that my parents spent most days in endless argument. I did not listen, or did not understand, or else the centre of their disagreement was left unstated. But I remember the long days of tension gnawing at
me from the outside as hunger gnawed at me from the inside. Eventually I fell sick.

It was while I lay in the grip of fever that it happened, or rather, it seems to me, it was as I lay recovering from fever, which always suggests to me some brute calculation at work on my fate and that of my now long lost sibling. I remember my mother mopping my brow with water, and it feeling wonderfully cool. She said my name and smiled, and told my father that I would get better now. I think I must have drifted off again, but I dreamt that I heard, or I actually heard them arguing in tones of muted despair. The raft-house we lived on was moving gently, so I knew the tide was in, and I was puzzled, because it was not tide-time for a week, and angry too that no one had told me when they knew that I loved to watch the rising tide.

It was night and as I lay in a kind of post-delirium calm, not quite yet part of the world again after my wanderings on its dark fantastic borders, I could see the bright stars through the window, I felt the raft-house swing on its cable as the tide turned, and I heard my mother sobbing.

By the time I could stagger weakly from my bed, the tide was almost out. My father took me to one side and told me that he had some bad news: that my sister, while they were distracted at my bedside, must have fallen overboard. They had heard and seen nothing. I hated my father then for trying to shift the blame for my sister’s death onto me, and I still think it ignoble of him.

They told me to stay in the house while they set to work putting to rights the tide’s work: the endless cycle of doing and undoing and doing again by which they lived. As soon as they were at work with the rest I went to look for my sister.

I had a strong intuition that I would find her, though in the end I had to walk down the tideline, imagining how the current would have taken her, farther than I had ever been before, but in truth that was not very far at all. I trespassed onto the land of the next village, keeping a careful eye out, fearful of what would happen if I was caught. Now I can see that one small, sick boy would have caused little stir as an invader, but then I truly feared capture and the tide-post. And as I searched for my sister’s tiny body my mind was filled with images of myself shackled to the post which every village had at its centre, as the water rose around me, lifting
the surrounding raft-houses, all filled with solemn faces watching me drown.

I found her caught in the spiky tendrils of a bush. Her body was bare and white, like the things that live under stones, though in life she had been as brown as a berry. Scouting around I found the remnants of the reed boat my father had made, hurriedly and badly; it had not borne her far. I would not mention it, but I knew what I knew.

I would not leave the body where it was though, and as we do not bury our dead. There was nothing to be done but to carry her back to the village, to be placed on the funeral raft to await the next tide. It would be a long wait, but the women did something to the body to preserve it.

In my weakened state even her small body felt like a great weight, and I had to rest many times as I walked home back up the gentle incline. The people in the fields saw me, and stopped work, and my father came over and relieved me of my burden, a strange look on his face: a mixture of grief and embarrassment I now suppose.

We had a proper funeral at the next tide. My father made the reed boat well this time and I hope her drowned body found its way out to sea. There is more dignity somehow in being consumed by the myriad strange creatures of the ocean than in slowly rotting in a ditch at the back of someone’s home. But I do not know if that was the case: this time I didn’t look.

My father’s tears as he made my sister’s funeral craft made me see him as less of a monster than I had begun to perceive him to be. But I never quite felt the same about him: I never really trusted him I suppose, but slept with one eye open when the hard times came again. And as I grew older I began to dream of marriage down the line, going against our culture’s values, and my father’s ambitions. Here nothing seemed to change, ever, and all we dreamed of was ascent to the dry land at the eye of our world. This to me became anathema. At the centre I imagined only stillness; stasis. Down the line I imagined change and drama and the possibility of new things that I had not even thought of. Above all I dreamed of the untethered lives of the boat-people. Did they exist? I did not know, but I hoped to find out, and to marry some determined sailor-woman of their people and head off for a new life in a new place. We spend our lives weaving and maintaining the great cables that hold our raft-houses in place.
I came to hate these cables and planned many times to cut ours one night at high tide, setting myself and my family free to drift out on the tide’s wide road.

In the end of course I did not cut the rope and have little doubt of the consequences if I had done so. Nevertheless I do still dream of an untethered life, and pursue change where change is possible in our straightened circumstance. I still love the implacable crystal drama of the sea-world which eases between us and the too solid ground six times a year, but there is also an aspect of the man-made world which floats above it that I have come to love too. When my grandfather was alive he used to say that our village had the finest water-puppets on the tide-line - up or down,’ he always added with a look in his black eyes as if daring me to challenge him. He was a skillful puppet-worker and told me that when he was young he dreamed of becoming the puppet-master, but shaking his head sadly, he explained that he rapidly realized, once he had learned to operate the puppet-mechanisms, that he did not have the water in his soul: the clarity of vision and perfect surety of movement that was the hallmark of a potential puppet-master. He laughed too when he said this, and said that he did not mind. He enjoyed working the puppets as an assistant, but that he did not have the obsessive relationship with them that a puppet-master had to have. So he was content to remain the world’s oldest puppet-apprentice, and to enjoy a drink with his friends like a normal man, instead of living apart as the puppet-master did.

For the village puppet-master was more than a mere entertainer. In our village he fulfilled a role something like that of a priest. Of course we had a priest, and he and the medicine woman performed their rituals at the set times, and people went to them with their problems. They were our intermediaries with the great otherness of the world, the otherness that swept in the water and sucked it out again, that drew the moons to our world, that called up the great winds and drove the fish into our nets – or withheld them – that sent the great killer-fish to punish us for we knew not what sin, and it was to them that we looked to tell us.

But the puppet-master’s mysteries were not concerned with that otherness, or only tangentially. His concerns were with us, ourselves: his mysteries were our mysteries. His focus was not on the tide, but on how we lived, and died, with the tide, and with each other. And sometimes I
felt that his complex tales, both old and new, were the stranger
and more potent of the two discourses.

The water-puppet plays were staged on every other high tide. Once I asked my grandfather why we did not have them every tide, since we loved them so much. He responded with his customary fire, appalled at my sacrilege, telling me that once every other tide was enough. It was the waiting that made us want them, and the resting that made the puppet-master want to set the gleaming puppets sweeping once again on their smoothly violent way across the stage. The water-plays were not an ordinary thing, and to have them on demand, conveniently, whenever we wanted them would make them appear to be an ordinary thing, and we would have lost them. He told me that the spaces between things were as important as the things themselves, and that that was the first rule of the water-plays, as true on the watery stage as in our watery world.

His words stayed with me, and I went out that day trying to focus on the gaps between things, and trying to understand what he meant, and in every play I stage, I am trying still.

So I became caught up in my world after all, drawn in by the subtle machinery of the water puppets. I used to beg the puppet-master to let me watch the puppeteers practice, and to my surprise, he let me. Soon I was operating the puppets myself, and I remember my first small part in the mermaids chorus as though it all lay before me still in the quiet clear water below the stage-hole in the floor of the puppet raft, sharpened and clarified by the refracting prism of time instead of dimmed by it. It always felt right to me, and I remember the puppet-master saying to me shortly before he died that a puppet-master must work from the back, but think from the front. And as I stood up to my waist on the puppeteers’ shelf of the puppet raft, working the mechanisms of three puppets at once, I hardly had to watch them through the gauze backdrop that hid our mystery from the audience, to know what they were doing. They danced not across the surface of my vision, but swept out of the deeper waters of my imagination, whole and round and perfect.

When the puppet-master died, I, naturally, it seemed, stepped into his place. There was no election, no choosing. I became the puppet-master and carried on the long story. It was a story everyone was enthralled by because it was the story of
our lives. Like the old puppet-master I always put on two plays: one old, and one a new play of my own devising. My own plays were longer than the traditional ones, with more talking and less singing. I wanted to create something like the world we lived in, only better: stronger and clearer; seamless, smooth and flowing.

When my parents were both long dead, I staged a simple story of a boy whose sister is sacrificed by his parents that he might live. I had new puppets made, carved very thin. I felt the stir of the audience as they absorbed this new element. I peopled the boy’s feverish dreams with many strange shapes and figures rising from the water, dancing strange individual dances, and the audience was silent, and I knew that I had them.

Towards the end, as the boy pulled the drowned figure of his thin sister across, and back, and across the small stage again, I heard a collective sigh, and when she reappeared, floating alone from behind the backdrop, there was silence again. We made waves from behind the stage, and slowly, to the slow beating of a drum, and the thin piping of a bone flute, the puppet corpse slipped beneath the surface. The waves and the flute stopped, but the drum kept on to tell the audience it was not over. And it was not over until the last ripple was gone, and the stage shone dark and impenetrable in the lamplight, like wet stone.