# 渤海湾的海浪，或
# WAITING FOR THE WAVES AT BOHAI

We were far from home.

We were walking down a path of gravel and dead vegetation, swatting mosquitoes from our clothes as we went along. We kept our heads down and our eyes fixed on the wetland beneath us, only stopping when we no longer saw green under our boots. We had hit sand; it was soaked and heavy and it did not give way to our footsteps.

The beach tended red, but everything else was colourless. The sky looked like the water when the water stood still; together they resembled a pane of glass.

We were standing at the end of the bay, the furthest point before the sea turns into the Pacific.

A wet sheet of ice had washed up on the fringe of the beach. I pressed on it with my foot as it cracked into many jagged shards. I joked about how the ice must have been sent by Korean defectors.

To make a land bridge.

We had gotten lost the day before. In a torrent of rain, Mao and I crouched over our map while searching for a pool of sunlight with which to read it. But we were drenched, and there was no light, so we sat and made peace with the situation. We waited out the rain as it poured on us and flooded the insides of our boots. I mentioned how the rain could be put to better use in the steppe (for the yak), or in the village (for the wells). I told Mao about how we should be grateful, because rain makes for happy wells.

But Mao did not have a grateful look about him. He said everything that must grow had already grown, and that too much rain could kill the crops. This reminded him of a story we had both heard as children but could not remember the details of. A story about a drought and a village boy who drank the wells and rivers dry. Condemned for his gluttony, he turned into a snake or a dragon or a tyrant, but we could not remember which.

The tide was rising on the bay, and water and seaweed was now wrapping around our ankles. Mao and I stepped back and freed the weeds from our boots. We noticed that dirt from the plains still blackened the beds of our fingernails.

I considered asking if Mao wanted to swim. I thought about swimming out to sea.

I stepped into the water, and Mao trailed close behind. The water covered the tops of our boots before creeping up toward our waists. Our pants, waterlogged and heavy, were made of cotton spun by our grandmother and picked with our own hands.

“Take them,” she told us. “Cotton will keep you warm.”

Satisfied, we raced back onto the beach, lifting our knees high above the surface with each step. Back on shore, we fell onto the first dry patch of sand we found. We laid there on our backs, breathing by the mouthful.

I rolled over to my side to find a branch of driftwood lying next to me. I examined it: long, splintered, and dry to the bone. I rose to my feet and took it in my hands, finding it heavier than I expected. I let go of its one end and began to walk while it dragged behind me.

The wood left a deep impression in the sand as I went along. I stopped to notice how it had traced my steps, then took it in both hands and used its edge to write where the sand was still soft.

‘艾’ I carved in the sand.

‘奥’ I wrote next.

‘托’

I then laid back down with Mao.

The tide came in and filled the ridges I had made, washing the words from the sand. I nudged Mao and showed him how the words I drew had been taken away.

“Look,” I said. I picked up the driftwood and wrote.

‘科拉’

“It goes away. Try it.”

Mao etched his name. He finished the last stroke before the water flooded in. He drew his name again, and again the water took it. I laughed and grabbed it from his hands.

I planted the driftwood in the sand with one quick motion, burying its pointed end like a stake. It remained there as the water rushed around it.

“Wait for the waves,” I said. “They’ll take it.”

We sat up shore, trading stories we had learned back in the village in the steppe. It was there that we first heard stories about the Pacific.

As night approached, we sat and looked on across the unstill sea. We waited for the waves to arrive as we listened to the insects speak among the bushes in a language we had not heard since we left home so many days ago.

The sun had set, and still there were no waves. It was quiet in the dark. In that darkness we knew only horrible thoughts, afraid that we had gone someplace that did not want us there. We did not get up or make a sound until the morning.

We woke up to find the stake gone from the beach. The cold Pacific had peeled back and taken it. What remained in its place was a hole no wider than a tea bowl, smooth around the edges and shallower than an inch. There were weeds and bits of plastic nestled in its center. I knelt and put some of the weeds in my mouth, scraping off grains of sand with my teeth and spitting them out. I swallowed the weeds whole. They slid slowly down my throat, and my hunger subsided.

I thought about the vastness of the sea. I thought about how the tide, carried by forces cosmic and invisible, could not be brought any further. The beach on which I stood had denied those faraway forces. The tides and the currents and the waves and even the springtime monsoons, furious and immense—this was where they came to die.

I watched the water sit still and reflect the red sky above it. The water was now swarming with rafts, boats, and fishermen, which made the bay look smaller than I remembered it. Mao threw a stone toward the nearest boat. He called out to it.

"We could use a boat," he said toward me.

"But do you think they will take us?"

I felt a piece of driftwood nudge my feet. I looked down and noticed it was the same piece we had impaled into the beach the night before, having returned after a night of drifting along the shore. I retrieved it from the water, the wood now wet and rigid.

A small decked fishing vessel turned toward us, the captain waving from the stern.

"Here, take it," I said, handing it to Mao.