

The Enchantment of the Ocean

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Abstract

I wanted to create a fictional story telling what may happen to the earth in 100 years if humans continue living the way we have without any changes, allowing anthropogenic global warming to continue unchecked. Originally, I was inspired by the Australian and Californian wildfires and was going to create a piece that developed on that. As I began writing, I recalled the marine biology class I had taken my junior year and how we observed a simulation of the land that could be lost to sea level rise in the coming years. I thought that topic was more fitting for me as a marine biology major, so I went with it. I generally like to write my creative pieces in first person, putting myself in the shoes of the main character. I feel that it is more personal, and I think that my stories develop better that way. I was also inspired by Rachel Carson's piece, "A Fable for Tomorrow," which was a fictional story warning of the dangers of pesticides. I really enjoyed her style of writing and the warning she was giving to people, so I wanted to write something similar.

"Kara, come on." My collie whines and tugs at her leash, trying to go back to our apartment. She knows something is wrong. "No Kara," I tell her, "get in the car. It's too late." Reluctantly, she hops into the backseat of my beat-up car. Beside her, I throw in a small suitcase and a torn plastic bag filled with her bowls and worn-out toys. Closing the door, I swipe my sopping wet hair from my forehead, out of my eyes, and sit in the driver's seat. The rain has been pounding us for days, and the hurricane is coming closer. They've ordered us to evacuate, so I'm taking my dog and a few belongings, and we're going. This time we won't come back.

Driving slowly down my street, I pass neighbors that are all cramming their cars full of items they don't want to leave behind. I wave at them, giving them a polite smile. I've told no one of my plans. It's no use. No one listens. They'll return. They'll always return, until one day it's too late.

I grew up in Chesapeake, Virginia, only miles from the ocean. It was a paradise, but now it's underwater. I like to think of it as the lost city of Atlantis, but that's just a fairytale I tell myself to mask the grim reality.

Ten years ago, while preparing to do exactly what I'm doing right now, I begged my parents to come with me. "Listen to the weathermen," I begged. It was expected to

be the deadliest hurricane the city has ever known. "They're exaggerating," they said, "They always do." They insisted that they'd lived here their whole lives, so this would be where they'd stay. It would be fine. The hurricane would recede, and their life would go on. Like always. Except this time, it didn't.

The city had been seeing an increase in flooding for years. The land was sinking, caused by an indent left over from the last ice age, and the beach threatened to be lost to the sea. Still, the locals didn't want to give up their homes. It had been a long time coming, but the hurricane was the tipping point. The fall of 2108 marked the end. The hurricane didn't recede. It swallowed the city whole, along with my family.

Today, most of the city is underwater. Where there once were homes, now there is only water. The currents drag remnants of old buildings to the new shores, and the waves lap over the peaks of houses. The buildings that were tall enough to avoid complete submersion are slowly being chipped away by the ocean, collapsing further within themselves, fighting their slow demise.

A few years after the storm, I visited the city. I felt I needed closure. I needed to face the ocean that stole my parents from me and accept that they were part of it now. Without the ocean, we are nothing, and it won't soon let us forget it.

I traveled with a group of wide-eyed adventurers by boat, a small, crowded vessel where we struggled to keep our balance against the push of the surf. Most of these people came from across the country where the land rose well above the sea and the ocean never brought disaster. They talked about the trip excitedly. They'd never seen something quite like this. How disaster had become novelty, I'll never know.

I sat on the floor of the boat as it bobbed quickly through the waves. Through the

railings on the side of the boat, I peered down at the murky water. The vessel surged through throngs of plastic, crinkling as it jetted back into the wake. I glanced down to the plastic water bottle in my hand and my stomach twinged in regret. No matter how much plastic we removed from the ocean, companies pumped twice as much back. I wondered how much left of the ocean was ocean, and how much was plastic.

Eventually we reached the site where we were to dive, and the captain stopped the boat. Pulling my wetsuit over my swimsuit, I felt like I was donning a second layer of skin. The webbed fins I tugged over my feet were like brand new limbs. The dive master told of the storm that demolished the city and of how "lucky" we were to be able to come see the wreckage. Though I felt compelled to say something, I bit my tongue in resentment and heaved my air tank onto my back. Popping the regulator in my mouth, I took a deep breath and stepped off the boat.

I breathed slowly and sank into the water. Along with the tight cling of the wetsuit against my skin, I could feel the familiar cold tang of the ocean. I let my body float down, eyes closed, until I reached what I felt was a proper depth. Opening my eyes, I waited until the bubbles cleared from around my face and glanced around.

The adventurers hovered around me in a small semi-circle. No one moved. We simply took in the site in front of us. It's not like the whole city loomed in front of us. Besides the rising of the ocean, the city had also been sinking for years. That, coupled with the force of the storm, demolished the roadways and the earth that I used to walk on as a child.

Many of the buildings had collapsed and had begun to be eaten away by the saltwater. The homes that used to belong to people now belonged to the fish, the crabs, the mussels. Some of the sturdier buildings still

stood, eerily gazing at us through broken windows, daring us to slip inside. Gazing upward, I could see the top of one of the taller buildings jutting out of the surface of the water and could see the lapping of the water as it forced itself around the building. The sun shone above us, highlighting the dilapidated building, and it made me feel sick. It felt like I was gazing up at heaven from the depths of hell.

Eventually, we moved on, and I timidly followed the others, silently making note of the buildings that used to be part of my life. The supermarket. My favorite shop. My elementary school. Fortunately for me, we never came across my parent's home. I don't know if I would have resurfaced.

After that dive, I never looked back. I accepted what had happened, and I accepted that it would continue to get worse. Hundreds of years ago, humans began to destroy the earth, and they never stopped. This was mother nature's revenge.

I moved further inland to Suffolk, Virginia, where I was still close to my old home, but where it was safe. Or so I thought. It was beginning again. The sea level continues to rise, and with it, the James river. Every time a large rainstorm blows through, the river floods parts of the city, turning roads into rivers and fields into ponds. Now, another hurricane was coming, and with the coastal communities gone, that left us in danger again.

I told myself that, even just for the sake of my dog, I needed to accept what was

happening and leave the ocean behind for good. It took everything from me, so why do I still hold onto it so tightly?

Powerful and mighty, the ocean has a dangerous allure, and it draws me in. Without the ocean, we have nothing. It protects us and sustains us, but it can also destroy us. Often, I wonder what the world would be like if we'd taken care of the ocean like it took care of us. Instead, it turned on us.

I drive past my neighbors packing their cars full of items, and I hope that they'll be like me and leave. I don't want anyone else to end up like my parents, so entranced by the beauty of the ocean that they forgot about its anger and let it swallow them into its depths like a siren.

I leave the ocean behind, but I wonder, still. Is it too late? The ocean is the lifeblood of the planet, and our ancestors failed it. Is it too late to fix what they couldn't and rebuild what we've broken? Can we change our ways, to live harmoniously with the earth, instead of in fear of it? Or will we continue our ways until the entire earth rebels and purges us from itself in healing to regrow into what it once was?

I don't know yet where I'm going, but I hope it's somewhere I can be safe. Maybe one day we will change our ways and the earth will forgive us. Then, I will return to the ocean.

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