5-1-2007

Incoming Tide

Holly Goodrich

Concordia University-Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Nonfiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol15/iss1/21
INCOMING TIDE

Holly Goodrich

My mind was drowning, engulfed by a terrible image of the ocean seizing and smothering me; I could feel the pressure of the water’s lethal embrace of my ribs and the burn in my nostrils as I struggled to breathe saltwater. It all started innocently enough. We were wading in the cold Pacific; my brother and I each grasping one of my dad’s hands. We just stood there as the tide came in and slowly buried us from ankle to knee. My brother and I shrieked with delight as each wave hit us and as the beach moved farther away. Then I panicked as my overactive imagination quickly moved from an observation of the distance we had “traveled” from the shore to a vision of impending death. But my daydream of doom was vanquished by my dad’s promise that we would head back after the next wave hit. As I grew older, I again found myself surrounded by waves. They engulfed me like the sea but this time my dad could no longer lead me back to shore; we were being torn apart by the incoming tide.

I realize now what I was blind to then: my parents were never really happy together. Like fuel oil and seawater, they could not coexist; each was an irresolvable and frustrating enigma to the other. My mother’s religious devotion and my dad’s equally firm skepticism had always been an issue. He was far more interested in perfecting his golf swing than pondering the cataclysmic end of the world which my mother considered imminent; my mother hated golf. To anyone who knew my parents the news that they were divorcing would hardly have come as a surprise.

But, I was stunned by this unexpected reef. My sole experience of divorce in my eight years of life had been in a game I played with the kids next door. The two older girls wanted to pretend that their brother, Nathan, and I were married and were getting a divorce. The oldest girl, Rachel, played the role of the judge, assuring me that all would be well as Nathan would later play another guy who I would marry. Nathan, who was deeply embarrassed by the game, decided to balance a book on his head. I can still remember Rachel asking in a deep voice why Nathan wanted a divorce and then declaring “young man you have a book on your head” when he refused to answer. The whole thing was incredibly amusing and did little to prepare me for the announcement that my dad would no longer live with us. I was devastated as the ship of my world splintered around me and sank. It was difficult for me to construct another or even make repairs; I was never very good at building things.

Yet on nearly every trip to the beach I tried to construct sand castles. On one particular visit, when I was twelve, I dug a series of interconnected trenches using nothing but clam shells. It began simply enough; I dig a circle in the sand. The top layers of sand were hard and made disturbing crunching sounds as I scooped through them, causing me to shudder. Grit packed under my fingernails until they felt swollen. Luckily, being so close to the sea, I soon hit water sparing me from this cacophony of unpleasantness and sweeping away the building tension under my nails. Once I got to the water, I used my hands instead of shells as these were better tools for spire making. I loved the feeling of the liquid sand running between my fingers and dripping down to form a castle in the center of my circle, though the result looked nothing like its medieval counterpart. Still, despite its craggy mountain-like appearance, I thought of it as a human constructed fortress, not the wild peak it mimicked.

One such fortress was hardly enough, so I began on another which also needed a moat and matching sea wall. Soon I had an entire kingdom of ten or so gray sand islands topped with darker mountain castles and surrounded by a canal system of moats. Many were adorned with simple gray and white seagull feathers, which served as pendants, as well as clam shell fragments, remnants of the many broken in their building.

This construction effort was part of a game I played pitting my pretend castles against the sea. The moats and sand walls were not truly my creations but were the attempts of the inhabitants to stave off the invading tide. These were daring souls who risked the wrath of the swiftly advancing ocean to protect their home. Of course, they always lost in the end and collecting their tattered sea gull feather flags and shell treasures,
they moved father back to build another palace which inevitably met
the same fate. They were unfortunately ruled by a stupid and self absorbed royalty who preferred this arrangement, finding that it facilitated the building of private pools which they used for parties. As a result, these miserable serfs were forever condemned to lives of fruitless effort, always striving to build what would inevitably be destroyed.

However, on this particular day, the oppressed slaves managed to build an entire kingdom which was rescued from destruction by the simple fact that this time the tide was going out, not coming in. It was amazing what all those workers could accomplish when their efforts were not smashed. Several people stopped and asked me about the castles. I merely nodded when they asked if I did all that. I did not tell them about the brave denizens who were the unfortunate subjects of a capricious royal family forced to wage a never-ending battle against the sea. Likewise, I also did not explain the game to my mom and step-dad who returned from wandering the beach hours later. Somehow, I did not think they would appreciate the struggle the way I did.

Yet all sand castles eventually collapse. The spring break of my senior year of high school my mom, brothers and I spent the week at the beach. For me, this was a time in which I found a strength whose power seemed to both shield and destroy me; I feared it would turn me to stone. Yet I longed for such a transformation because stone has no memory. The ocean beats against it and grinds it down to sand yet the rocks go on never caring, never crying. I envied such hardness.

That week I spent hours on the beach, even on days when the gray clouds unloaded their rainy burdens. I walked along the path on top of the cliffs, looking down on the dark ocean with its white tipped waves as the wind whispered a soothing lullaby through the tall sea grass. I went down a long stairway made of gray driftwood to the beach and searched the rockier patches of sand for agates which I stuffed in an empty bread bag. I loved to spend hours like that doing nothing but hunting for those stones which ranged in color from an almost opaque white to a deep amber. I loved the way you could see the light through all of them. Lost in the hunt, I did not have to think about all that had fallen apart.

Most importantly, as I strolled along the shore, I did not have to think about the trial. About the months before it in which I had desperately prayed for a plea bargain which would keep my shameful secret from the world. I did not have to think about the humiliation of the day the principal told me in a voice tinted with accusation and fear that a detective from Child Services had come to interview me. I felt the shock in his voice hearing in it his thinly disguised outrage that the outside world was intruding on his perfect Christian school kingdom. As ruler of the castle, he had seen to it that all the sections on sex crimes in a reference book for the law class had been ripped out; after all, such things did not happen to good Christian girls.

I did not have to think about standing in the front of a court room with twelve pairs of strange eyes on me as the defense lawyer cross-examined me. His friendly surface concealed the tiger I sensed lurking behind his eyes, just waiting to pounce on the slightest conflict in my story. I did not have to think about my former step-dad on the stand giving a twenty-first century update of the medieval “it’s the woman’s fault” argument. According to him, it was my short night shirts and naivété which had led him to touch me. He was only trying to teach me of the dangers of immodesty; all those salacious comments were meant to be educational. A photograph of me in one of those oversized, men’s t-shirts became exhibit A. In it, my face is bright red; I am obviously begging him not to take the picture. The lawyer used the adjective “disturbing” as he called the jury’s attention to it. Clearly, I was a seductive temptress. I did not have to think of those twelve pairs of eyes scrutinizing my every reaction as everything within me shouted, “He’s lying!” My nails dug into my palms as I squeezed my fingers into a fist to keep from uttering screams of primal rage. I did not have to remember the undertow of fear that tugged at my stomach for the entire day, the question “Will they believe him or me?”. Nor did I have to reflect on the conclusion, a conviction for Sexual Harassment and Sex Abuse III, crimes on the lower end of the punishment spectrum. He was sentenced to 30 nights in jail and counseling, in the day he was free; I had served 7 years. But in that moment none of this mattered; I had only to keep looking...
for another agate and that search was enough.

When I got bored rock hunting I would walk watching the waves and listening to the music of them sneaking up the beach and breaking over the rocks, a symphony of crashing and roaring. The wind would sing in my ears and now and then a seagull would join the concert. I could taste salt with each breath and wander completely free from expectations, memories, and questions, not having to be anything but Holly listening to the ocean. It was as if all the wild strength of the ocean could embrace me and end my silent bleeding.

I made the mistake of believing that this insensibility could last. I left home and went to college trying to pretend that none of my memories existed as if to transmute myself to stone through sheer willpower. I soon realized this was impossible and began the tedious process of facing the past. One night of this continuous process stands out. I had been attending a college worship group called Higher Ground throughout the school year. Here I learned about a God who was not like the Overseer of the private school fortress I had known before. He didn’t fake acceptance while keeping His distance. He wasn’t offended by all your shameful secrets or your family’s less than glittering past. He terrified me. I didn’t know what to do with such unconditional love; my previous experience had been ill preparation.

On this particular night, the struggle was overwhelming and fierce. I had gone up to take Communion and found I didn’t have enough strength to return to my seat. I collapsed on my knees in a corner, my head pressed against a pillar; I wept. Years of tears gushed out of me. An unknown person put a hand on my shoulder and I felt a wave of warmth spread through me. It was an embrace of acceptance and love and the same wild strength I felt while wandering along the beach. I let it fill me and returned to the ocean.

The summer after my first year of college, I journeyed there again for the day. I waded out in the ocean up to my knees and thought of the events of the past year. I wandered where beach and sea embrace, wading ankle deep in the ocean and feeling as if everything wrong inside me could just wash away and be lost forever in the nothingness of that blue-green. I knew simply that I was happy and that I could choose not to let my memories smother me. So there in the embrace of ocean and wind and all I could not define I said a prayer of release and gave myself up to the Presence which surrounded me. For me it was a baptism, and when I returned to shore I knew I had left behind another small piece of my pain to be forever lost, swallowed up like a shipwreck.

My story does not end; it is one I will write for my entire life. After all, shipwrecks have a nasty habit of resurfacing. When the tide gets low enough you can still see them, history’s mementos, moldering, rusty ribs. Yet they are not the past itself, not the life-suffocating oil slick or the panic of a drowning crew; they are simply reminders. On my journey, I stumble on these decaying wrecks. They are memories triggered by the most trivial of events, the title of a book, the headline of a newspaper or a nightmare; they are deep fears churning inside my stomach when I converse with unfamiliar faces. And above all, they are the waves of silent questions and doubts which often tug at my feet. Some days these pull me under in a lung-crushing squeeze, but most days I look forward towards the horizon and take another step along my coastline where the calls of the sea gulls and the music of the sea drown all lesser voices.