

# Half-Eaten Cities

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*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

- 1 And the sea came up in the streets, grinding its briny teeth down on broken asphalt and naked concrete.
- 2 And the sea went down the winding lanes, slipping under doors warping and peeling in the damp, coating the faded red polish of our bedroom floors so that when we swung our feet down in the morning they splashed, and we stared down at our shivering reflections in disquiet as the water slowly rose up our ankles and scaled our shins.
- 3 That floor polish came in cheap metal tins, waxy and cherry-toxic, rated H411 in the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals: toxic to aquatic life with long-lasting effects, inimical to the sea. Hostile to us, suddenly, now that we too were once again becoming aquatic. Wet apes, remembering.
- 4 We relearned to swim, or at least paddle. We learned to float in our sleep, weightless and dreaming.
- 5 And the sea climbed up the stairwells, turn by turn, to spill out again from windows, to turn rooftops into waterfalls. The sea came uneven like the future. The sea came unlevelled like we already were. The sea recognized that we were an *us*, and they a *them*.
- 6 The sea followed us home. The sea filled up our homes; we had never before noticed how much of a room was empty space. We learned to hold our breath. We learned not to panic. We learned to reach out for each other's drowning hands.
- 7 And the sea went all the way to their gated communities, and the sea stopped.
- 8 And the sea went all the way to the gates of their mansions, and the sea stopped.
- 9 And the sea said gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate.
- 10 Our scientists investigated this boundary, this difference. They said the curvature of the sea was an effect of massed concentrations of wealth. Our scientists hastened to add that the effect of mere currency was negligible, so that we wouldn't start stuffing our mouths with paper money to float, or putting coins over our eyes to see better underwater. Our scientists entreated us in earnest public service announcements to specifically not do those things.

- 11 Petty physical manifestations of money were negligible to the sea, our scientists said, even in the volumes stored in vaults. The sea was affected only by the ownership of broad money, not narrow money: broad and massive, an invisible seawall to break upon.
- 12 The sea was repelled only by true wealth, the kind we had never even understood, the kind that only they possessed.
- 13 They could not drown. They couldn't even get wet, or at least not in the sea: they were surrounded by a bubble of the sea's absence at all times. The sea retreated from them whenever they advanced. We saw them experimenting with the boundary. They could walk all the way out to the original sea bottom and the water would keep pace in retreat, peeling back like lips over teeth, baring in what they took to be a smile. Even after they left, the sea was cautious in returning. The sea had been burned before.
- 14 They reclaimed more of the city as their own. By adjusting their movements and habitats they could claim contiguous zones free of inundation. They established new lines of supply, installed satellite dishes and landing pads for their helicopters and delivery drones. They moved on with their lives, enclaved by towering cliffsides of water.
- 15 Sometimes—carefully, so as to not alarm the sea—we visited those borders. We paddled as close as we could get, trying to find an angle with a clear view of their windows. We tried to watch the new seasons of TV shows we'd once loved on the 150-inch Ultra HDTV screens in their living rooms, but it was hard to follow the dialogue at a distance, without subtitles. We wrote damp critical essays about why those shows were just not as good anymore for mostly failing to acknowledge the rising of the sea, which they always quote-tweeted and said "This." We found their depictions of the sea problematic because they always showed it from the perspective of a beach. They said yes, how true.
- 16 We took to observing them instead, in their unnatural habitats. We tried to follow their drama, but it was too dry.
- 17 Without TV to watch, we had more time to practice not drowning.
- 18 Our scientists proposed that we should consider having gills. This was controversial. Our scientists were not as credible as their scientists; a white coat would quickly become a shroud in the sea, stained cherry red like the water in our homes from rust and a city's worth of toxic floor polish.
- 19 We argued for treading water, first indoors so that our faces were brushing the ceilings, and then outside—by that point the distinction was moot. The tide would take us far from home while we slept, floating uneasily in our dreams.

- 20 We argued for making dry habitations on the asbestos roofs of our tallest buildings, the only things still above the waterline, but we could never get comfortable on their corrugations. They were burning hot during the day, and we worried about breathing in their carcinogenic fibres. It was far too late to start worrying about that, of course, but we were new to a lot of things.
- 21 The sea rose above it all. The sea took it out of our hands. The sea grew cloudy with asbestos and naphtha and the unnumbered plastics of the dying aeon. The sea grew crowded with all of us treading water.
- 22 Gill-doomed we leapt like whales out of the water before we went down into the mesopelagic evening. When we finally gave ourselves those gills we had so long denied and sank beneath the surface of things for the first time, we breathed in that wine-dark sea and it tasted like the salt that will be left behind on our faces when someday the sea evaporates in the sun, and we learn to walk again.