Between Waters

Night waves pummeled them in the long, open sea between the islands of Luzon and Samar. Solid walls of cold, green, frothing saltwater hammered the 3-foot-wide wooden outrigger, dousing Gloria, her toddler and infant, her two barely-teenage brothers, and the twenty defeated Filipino soldiers wedged beside them them in the narrow boat.

It was 1942, and behind them—on Luzon—Japanese infantrymen walked with their guns through the streets of Manila and filed off in columns to the edges of the city, firing bullets into an endless jungle, chasing away Americans with guns, some of whom would come back later to kill them and some of whom would die on the island, marching and starving through that endless jungle on bare, bloodied and muddy feet.

Jaime, the strong, athletic and older of the two brothers, had come to Manila from Samar to bring his sister and her boys and his brother, Paeng, home early from a long holiday—back to the town of Ipao, where the Japanese soldiers had fewer reasons to kill Filipinos.

Soon after Jaime arrived, just before dawn amongst the bedlam of the overrun capital, he was mostly hopeless. His family was no longer in Manila; they had escaped to somewhere in Cavite. Somewhere. How would he find them? He wouldn't, he thought. How long would he look? Should he stay there until he died too? But he would go. Jaime ran—between the soldiers' boots and the people fleeing—along the road to Cavite.

He kept his head down, gazed in no one's eyes, wore the demeanor of someone with no business in this world worth knowing. He was simply a boy in a war, running from one chance at death to another. He was the wallpaper that soldiers splatter each other's blood across.

And though no one seemed to notice him, Jaime watched everyone—from the corners of his eyes, he saw everything. He saw the grieving panic, the shriveling direness in the faces of the fleeing. He saw never too far off in either direction down the road: fire- seared flashes, followed by a dead thud, then some brackish pillar of smoke. Sometimes he saw the fleeing cover their mouths and noses when they walked through the lingering, gray and gunpowdered wisps above some freshly- rutted and body-speckled ground.

He saw that there were two kinds men with guns: those who were already weary of the killing and those who were hungry for more.

But all the gunned men stomped along together —the murderers and the soon-to-be victims. He steered clear of every huddled, worn-out and agitated clump of uniformed humans, kept away as much as he could from the stench of their terror. Jaime shuffled past them like a moth, an almost nothingness, and wherever the road flushed him out again into an open and anonymous stretch of tree-walled, tire-tracked dirt, he ran.

When he finally sprinted into the streets of Cavite, Jaime's heart began to swell with panic. His breath would not come back and his skinny legs froze; the numbness of terror prickled in his hands. *Where would he begin?* The intersection before him was chaos: horses dragging over-piled carts trying to nudge past each other, trucks overstuffed with Japanese soldiers blaring through, clutches of people scurrying. He would never find his family here.

But he looked. Jaime ran from street to street, hollering their names. He asked random strangers as they passed: *Gloria, a young woman from Samar, beautiful, fair-skinned, with her two babies, and my brother, Paeng, a boy*. Many didn't answer. Some took the time to shake their heads and a few stopped to pity him—they were the ones who seemed most wise and none of them tried to offer hope.

Down a wide, quiet alley, he found a wrinkled, dark-skinned, white-haired woman like a hunched statue behind an empty fruit stand. After Jaime asked about his family, she smiled and grabbed his face in her thin, coarse hands, then kissed him gently on the forehead and said, *You are a good brother. There will be better times*. He scampered for another hour through the streets, believing the woman was an omen of fortune, but every blank look and answerless shout brought him closer and closer again to his questions: How long would he look? Should he stay here until he died too?

And then he saw him there, in the middle of the next intersection with his short-cropped hair in the late afternoon light, peering at and waiting for a mule to cross, and balancing a sack of rice on his shoulder: *Paeng*. Jaime was looking straight at his brother. When he yelled his name, Paeng nearly dropped the sack; from the sound of the voice he could see Jaime's round face before he even looked up.

At the harbor in Cavite, it was their sister—they called her *Glory*—with rambunctious, two-year-old Leo in hand and baby Ogie on her hip, who led them from boat-to-boat, looking to somehow squeeze their way along to Samar. Jaime pointed out two vessels that he thought might suffice, but Glory shook her head and frowned. *Those are too crowded already. They're fools. They'll die.*

Instead she carried Ogie and tugged Leo to the end of the dock, where 18 just-surrendered

Filipino soldiers—some bandaged and wrapped and most merely bleeding—filled edge-to-edge a small 3-foot-wide wooden outrigger with a sail. She knew they were going to Samar. Two men stood on the dock tossing a few rations and some packs of cigarettes into the boat. Glory stood beside them, waiting, but they ignored her and said nothing, except a few words to the other men. Behind her, Paeng stared at his feet and Jaime tugged at a small sack slung over his shoulder.

Then Glory yanked at Leo's hand, stepped around the two men and pulled on one of the ropes, bringing the end of the boat to the dock. Lifting Leo into her other arm, she hopped aboard. *We are women and children*, she said, *We're going to Samar. We'll barely take up any room*. The soldiers inched their slack bodies down the boat like a waning caterpillar. She motioned to Jaime and Paeng and they glanced over at the men on dock, who nodded, expressionless, toward the boat. The boys leapt aboard, and none of the other men looked at them.

Nearby on the dimming horizon steely-dark clouds glided slowly toward the harbor, patches of lightning sparking at their edges and white-capped waters percolating beneath. The travelers were waiting for the dark. The Japanese Navy lurked along the western coasts of the mottled archipelago, and the conquerors wanted no one else on their newly-claimed seas. *Moon. Wind. Open water*. These were the prayers of the men as they waited.

Glory thought none of those things. As they finally drifted out of the harbor and into the lapping and swaying of the sea in the night, she told Paeng and Jaime to always be thinking of what they will do if the boat turns over. *Grab something to float. Find each other and make sure I have the boys. Stay away from the men. It is better to be caught by the Japanese than to die in the ocean*. She told Leo to always yell her name: *Shout, Glooorrrryyyy! Not mama, everyone will be shouting for their mama.* And she laughed, although Leo wasn't sure why it was funny. Then Glory whispered to Ogie and told him not to worry, *I will never let go of you*.

Beyond drowning, she worried about food. She and the boys had barely eaten for days. The men would not be sharing their nearly-depleted rations, and the food that Jaime carried in the sack—fist-sized balls of sticky-rice, snugly wrapped in thin strips of bamboo like little, starch-filled grenades—would only last Glory's family a few days. Their journey, just at night, might last as long as ten, maybe more. In the moment, she had only one solution: *All of you, sleep now. The more you sleep, the less you will eat*.

On the first night the high clouds threatened and hid the moon, but the wind was good and no storm harmed them before dawn. As soon as

first light started glowing far away at the curve of the planet, they pulled into a cove of sheer rocks with overhanging vines and dropped an anchor. When thunderstorms swept above and deluged their enclave in the afternoon, everyone pulled tarps over themselves and most of the men fell back asleep under the damp drumming. Beneath the dark cover, Jaime and Paeng tried to gain a sliver of light by lifting an edge, then played games with the leftover bamboo strips and later, for Leo, made them into something like a little toy bike. Leo smiled and spent a long time running it around a small rectangle of light on the floor of the boat.

But the peace they found on the first afternoon was fleeting. In the next few nights the water grew rugged, an ocean of boulders and ledges—the boat was punishment. And by 9 already each morning, before any real sleep had set in, their anchored coves would succumb to the pure dead-heavy heat, ruining them in its sun. On the fourth day, all the food on the boat had dwindled. When they launched again into the rocky sea that night under true Armageddon clouds and electric skies, it was to the protests of some of the men who felt doom in the storm. But hunger drove the rest—hiding in the cove was not enough right now, they needed somewhere and its food.

Glory uttered nothing while the men argued, and eventually Jaime leaned over to her, *Why don't you tell them what you think?* She looked at Jaime, *I think I only need to tell them if I disagree with their choice.* Her choice was always to keep moving. She was a thing that other things didn't stand in front of.

But storms are not things, they are places; you cannot push them aside, you merely live beyond their presence. This storm this night was a harsh place. The canyon-walled waves drove high-enough all around the boat to build a city of looming watery skyscrapers, no view of the horizon. Jaime and Paeng encircled Glory and the boys, locking their arms together and cinching them into a bone-aching grip whenever a cliff of ocean broke down onto their human mound, soaking them in cold sea and sloshing piles of water across their feet. The boat became its own jungle.

Deep into the night—when the fatigue of holding on for life had made all their muscles heavy, but the thrashing seemed almost beginning to relent—the outrigger heaved over a sudden steep ledge of water, skipping airborne and slamming down concretely against the surface, gauging more water into the craft. The jolt thumped Leo and Paeng backward, hard into the side of the boat and tipping them partly over its edge. Leo's eyes bolted wide with panic and Paeng squinted as he coughed out saltwater. Jaime grabbed each in a man's grip and yanked them both into their huddle again.

When the storm finally ceased, midway through the morning, everyone had survived, but the rudder had not. And they were all hungry. The group made their list. *A shore. Lumber. Food*. By noon, the first was found: a broad, shallow, warm lagoon with a little beach, and just into the sandy island, a very tiny village sheltered by a small clump of trees. The village had no lumber nor any trees that were right for the rudder, but they would in two days when the next supply boat arrived. There was no food, though, on the coming boat, and the village had almost nothing to share. But their fishermen—three graying and thin, and one young and plump—were on on their way out. The oldest one said they had another boat that two of the soldiers could use. The villagers were hungry too and had waited three days for a group of Japanese ships to leave their waters. They hadn't seen the ships since last night; they couldn't wait any longer.

Three boats with six men left the lagoon under the clearing skies in the early afternoon. None came back. For the next two days Glory and her family kept away from the lagoon and didn't leave the tiny village, sleeping in one of the missing fishermen's thatched huts and eating almost nothing. She nursed Ogie a little at feeding times, but he always cried for more, and she didn't have much to give.

After the lumber finally arrived, they had the rudder fixed by that nightfall. Two less men made more room in the boat, but barely. The rest were starving and angrier, and Glory and all the boys could feel it solidly now: how the men were different from them. Jaime had been fooled by their softer Filipino faces and their torn, patriotic uniforms, but these men were the same as those he feared along the road to Cavite—murderers and victims. He wondered which ones might still have a gun, whom among them could be preparing to lose his mind. After staring at some of the men's faces in the shadows for a long time that night, he wondered if their skulls would crack and shatter if you wrapped on their heads with just a knuckle.

On that night more than any of the others, Glory thought of her husband, Salvador—a young ship captain who'd been away at sea for months, and then was recruited by the American Navy to help navigate their massive ships through the local seaways and harbors. Now that Navy and everyone with them was falling back and further away into the deeper and deeper oceans. Glory assumed that he—she called him by his nickname, *Badong*—was still alive and they would see each other again, because there seemed to be equal reason to believe both possibilities. And she wanted to see him again, badly. She closed her eyes and imagined inhaling his pipe smoke while she chopped

garlic for dinner in their home along the ocean in Ipao. *The Japanese cannot stay forever*, she thought. Glory glanced at her sleeping boys, then turned to the man steering the boat: *No stopping until we find a bigger village*.

But they did stop, the next morning in another hot cove and stayed for the duration of the sunlight after spotting a Japanese destroyer in the too-near distance. It was on their eighth day then, more than half-way to Samar that they saw a small harbor beside a large village and tacked toward it warily through the wind. As they neared the shore, armed men formed a line on the beach and some of the soldiers in the boat begged the others to turn around, but their outrigger sailed on to the harbor. Glory sat the two small boys behind her—Ogie on Leo's lap—and her brothers crouched on each side of her, shielding their nephews.

When the reached the beach, the armed men barked commands roughly and spoke from behind bandanas tied as masks, although they wore no uniforms. But soon everyone—the men on the beach and the men in the boat—realized that they were all Filipinos, and the armed men pulled down their bandanas. They were not official soldiers, but guerrilla fighters—men who said that they'd helped repel Japanese forces on an island just an hour south. The guerrillas didn't ask why the men in the boat had uniforms, but no guns, and almost none of the defeated soldiers said a word as they limped out of the water and across the sand.

Glory walked straight to the tallest of the armed men, the one who'd done most of the yelling, and told him that they hadn't eaten in four days. At first he agreed to feed everyone and give them enough food for the rest of their journey, but back in the village he heard that the soldiers had just surrendered. He called them *cowards*, *deserters*, and said they wouldn't waste their food on them. Others in the village argued for the soldiers and Glory's family, but no one pointed any weapons, and they came to a compromise: they would feed everyone before they left tonight, but they could not spare anything for them to bring with. Glory said only *thank you* to the villagers, and told her brothers not to leave her side.

The moon was full and enormous that night as the uniformed and bandaged men filed across the sand toward the outrigger after their meal. Glory trailed behind them at the edge of the village—Ogie was long-asleep and heavy in the sling across her chest, and Leo dragged his feet, drawing her hand back as he tugged. And as she stepped out onto the beach, a woman slipped up beside Glory, handing her a small bag with some bamboo-wrapped sticky-rice; there was even less than what they'd brought from Cavite. The woman put her finger to her lips before they could thank her, and Glory had just barely

nodded to the woman before she turned and flitted back toward the village. Glory broadened some of the sling's fabric and stuffed part of the sack into it, hiding most of the contraband. Jaime spoke low, under his breath, *You won't be able to hide that on the boat*. She walked faster and dragged Leo along, *I know*.

Glory and her sons were the last to board; keeping an arm over the bag, she squeezed the three of them between her brothers. On the beach the guerrillas sneered and held their machine guns at their waists while the outrigger opened its sail and drifted back out to the sea. In the boat, Paeng bobbed his knee nervously and Jaime narrowed his eyes at him. Leo blinked heavily and leaned his head against his mother's arm. A few of the men crouching near Glory craned their necks a little toward her sling and saw that she had a bag. They stared, but said nothing.

When they were clear of the small harbor and in the open water, Glory pulled the bag out of her sling and held it up. *I have rice here. It is not much and it is not our food. But if you eat it, my children will go hungry*. And with that she set the small bag of sticky-rice down at her feet on the floor of the boat. All of the men looked at it; some glanced back up at her before turning their eyes again to the ocean. No one said anything and the boat creaked and wrested with wind under the broad moon.

For the next two nights, the boat ran fast and they didn't want to stop, so they went past dawn both mornings and made up more time. By the eleventh day, Samar felt close. That night started the same, good gusts and open waters. But soon after midnight, the air fell more breathless, and then there was absolutely none: no wind, the sail didn't even lurch. The men began to grumble between each other—some talking of omens—and their noise woke Leo, who looked out over the silky glass water, amazed. He reached a small brown hand over its surface, hovering above the still perfect flatness. Jaime smiled at him, *Do you like it?* Leo nodded and smirked, then mumbled, *It's a mirror*. He'd seen water like this near Christmas just a few weeks before, not as smooth, but like an epic mirror: vast Manila Bay viewed from its edge, reflecting the sparkling and ear-cracking fireworks between Japanese and American fighter planes at battle not too far above. Paeng pinched Leo's side, *Don't you want to jump in?* Leo shook his head and squirmed, but kept his hand over the water—it was like a magnet beneath his palm. It made Leo feel something, but he didn't know a word for it. The whole time Glory just watched and resisted the urge to stroke his hair.

They were so close now, but that night and the next the wind was nowhere, and the rice was all but gone, and the men grew more agitated than ever. Two fights had broken out, one each night,

and one man was knocked unconscious in the second melee. The outrigger was a cauldron. Glory thought about going ashore before Samar; it would be easy to find their own way from here. Mistakenly, she thought that the men on the boat were now the gravest threat to her boys.

But Glory told herself they'd wait one more day, and on that night the wind returned. Now they would be in Samar by the next afternoon. Knowing they were almost there kept the men from each other's throats. When Leo awoke in the morning he complained that he was starving, and Glory said she might make him a whole meal soon. She tried to nurse Ogie, but there was barely anything for him. She assured herself that they would be sailing into the harbor in Calbayog before evening. And at twenty-five minutes past four, they were pulling up to the dock.

After one of the men leapt from the outrigger and looped a rope around a piling, shouting began to bellow from the beach and a column of soldiers started marching out the broad door of a nearby boathouse. Glory squinted toward them; they were Japanese. The man on the dock dropped the rope and stood stiff. A half dozen of the neatly-uniformed Japanese men trotted quickly toward him, rifles raised chest-high, a few angled down toward the outrigger. The man on the dock yelled, *We've surrendered!* Glory crouched and bent over as low as she could in the boat, pressing her boys down beneath her.

The soldiers ordered the man to lie down, and he dropped to his stomach. A Japanese officer, leading more men, came up behind the half-dozen soldiers, walked past them, and squatted in front of the man on his stomach. He asked if they were all unarmed. *We are.* He asked where they had come from and why they were not still there. *Cavite. We surrendered.* He said they should still be in Cavite then. He told them no one was allowed to travel. The officer ordered the man to stand and collect his men. *They are not my men. We are not at war with you.* The officer erupted and unsheathed a sword. He shouted at his soldiers, telling them to tie the men's hands and deliver them to the prisoners' camp. Before stepping onto the dock and having their hands tied, some of the men looked hard down toward the water in the bay, but none jumped in, and all of them went quietly with the soldiers. As the last men filed off the boat, Glory came out of her crouch and stood beside her brothers, her sons in her arms.

The officer turned and looked down into the outrigger. Glory began to step forward, but the officer held up his hand and she froze. He pointed to Paeng, and motioned for him to come toward the dock. Jaime fidgeted. As Paeng walked along the center of the narrow boat, two soldiers beside the officer followed him with the

tips of their rifles. Another soldier pointed his rifle at Jaime, and another pair aimed at Glory and her boys.

Paeng sweated and his hands shook; he wasn't sure he'd be able to speak. When he reached the end of the boat, he stopped and looked up. The officer called down to him, *And why are you here, not in Cavite—who has sent you? Did you surrender too?* His soldiers chuckled. Paeng tried to lick the dryness from his lips. *My brother and I go to school there, classes just finished. My sister came to get us, and she did not want to leave her boys*. Paeng did not know if he needed to lie, or if the tiny lie had even made things seem better. But the truth was that they were running from *him*, this man in front of him, those like him, and saying so didn't seem wise.

The officer tapped the end of his sword against of the dock, and soldiers pointed their rifles restlessly—at Paeng, Jaime, Glory, and the two tiny boys.

This moment in the long war would not actually be the closest that Leo and Ogie would come to having their lives ended by Japanese gunfire. Later, on this same island and not too far away, the boys would be 3 and 4, playing hopscotch amongst a small group of other kids, and after arguing about who would go first, Leo and Ogie would relent and stand at the back. In a moment, the first three children in line would be sprayed with gunfire and fall straight to the concrete, looking to Leo like dolls whose strings had been cut. But Leo and Ogie would survive that encounter too, and Glory would come running out to the playground and grab her children while other mothers wept.

Not long after, during the end of the war, Leo and Ogie and their mother would run in terror from the enemy one more time: while the Americans bombed their way back into Samar, and the Emporer's soldiers scattered in retreat, killing in bunches as many islanders as they could along the way. Glory and her sons would escape that brutal exodus by tearing through bullet-filled air along the Ipao shoreline toward the mouth of a river where they might hide and live. Paeng ran carrying Leo on his back, and the boy couldn't help but turn around to see again the ear-cracking fireworks of exploding shells and look up at the streams of sparking gunfire in the clouds.

Even later, Leo would become a doctor and a father in America, practice family medicine in Illinois for 40 years, a rabble-rousing pillar of his community. And Ogie would become an engineer and raise his family in Cebu—staying in the same home where Glory would bring them all, the two boys and three more girls when they outgrew the house along the ocean in Ipao. And Glory would travel the world to follow her children from place to place. New York City. Chicago. San Francisco. Near her end she would

attend the book party of her youngest and promising grandson, who grew up with her sometimes in his house and dedicated the book to her, and at the party he would ask her, at 96, to stand in front of everyone and be applauded. Her dear Captain, Badong, would see almost none of this, dying aboard his ship on the ocean in 1973, a well-earned heart attack forty years before his Glory would leave this world.

The officer lifted his sword and slipped it into his sheath. Then he turned around and pointed his men toward the boathouse. They lowered their guns. The officer didn't say anything and strode with his soldiers back down the dock.

Glory handed Leo to Jaime and carried Ogie down the boat toward Paeng—when she reached him, Glory placed a hand on his back, *That was smart. You made us seem innocent*. Tiny waves, echoes from some far off wake, swayed the boat side-to-side, splashing pebbled water against its hull. ~