

**Oonya KEMPADOO**  
from *Tide Running***Sea Breathing**

The sea rolling and swelling up itself down by them rocks on Plymouth Point. Breathing out, sucking 'e belly back in. Every time it spuff slow, li'l crabs stop and hold on tight to the rocks. It fooling them. Only snorting and slurping back in, snuffling and bubbling. Them white crusty shells on the deep black rocks hissing and crackling every time the sea show 'e ribs. Big sea-eggs, urchins, tuck down in the holes and cracks. Some pack-up together so close, all you see is a poison-black patch, long prickas sticking out 'gainst the green coral. Make you skin crawl. I stay still, still as the rock face behind me.

Out past the swellin' chest, all blue and green, the sea stretch 'e arm way up along the hills. Past Arnos Vale, Culloden, Moriah and Castara. Every time it heave, the arm ripple and, far far away, white waves wash over rocks, silent. Long white fingernails stretching out, clawing and scratching at the cliffs. The hills don't take-on the sea beating-up on they feet. Them hills stand the way they always was. Spirits in the valleys, smooth green humps and dark trees. The only thing that does change on them is the colours. They browning quick now. Every sky-clear day, blazing sun burning off more green. Soon will only be dry brown - and then fire. Real fire. Smoking and spreading with the breeze over them hills' shoulders. Burning for days. Leaving black scars. And then the sea go laugh. Shake-up 'eself and romp with the breeze. Show-off to the beat-up hills, booming 'gainst the cliffs and blowing out the biggest waves 'e can push. Then the sea go turn up 'e colours, swallow down the green, lighten the light blue and darken the deep. Liven up 'eself and laugh. Everything 'bout the sea big-up in them dry-season days, even the fish and all. Them days, the sea does talk more. Make me want it more. And when I walk down the hill from home, brown grass go crunch under me foot and the hot smell'a the land go dry-up me nose. Trees drop leaves like brown paper, seedpods crack open and rivers disappear. But the sea, 'e does get stronger. I like it for that. If there wasn' no sea, I must would feel lock-up. In a box with only the top open to the sky.

An then, in the full'a the rain season, heavy rain does come and out the sea spirit. And the hills start living again, steaming, trees stretching out and bamboo bending with new leaves. The rain does bring-out every kind'a green you can imagine, everything dripping. I does say then 'It look like the sea turn upside down', 'cause the sea turn same grey like the sky, green as the land, water beating down everywhere like if the sea upside-down 'eself in true. But even then, the land can't give you that sea feeling. And I know when I look at the sea, dark and flat so, that big fish breeding, things that I can't see going on down there. Deep in the belly of the sea. Is the same sea that does reach everywhere. When I look at the silva-line on the sea, it more far away than the skyline on the land. That's 'cause the sea so big. If I could'a never see it at all, nowhere round me, it go be like you lock me up. Drain something out'a me and leave a hole in me chest.

I breathe in and let it out in time with the next swell'a water under me. Two li'l sergeant fish, yellow and black stripe, pass over the black sea-egg prickas. I pull up me t-shirt onto me neck back and watch me shadow move 'cross the coral. Wave me fingers to see the extra waggles the water make with the shadow.

## ‘E Rough Today

Ossi still sleeping. He always sleeping. All hours of the day sleeping he long lazy self. That's why he growing so, but I still taller than he. I step outside and early morning brace me with a strong salt breath. Sea rough today. White and frothy, churning. Breeze forcing ‘eseff all in me nose, me belly, waking up sleepy creases in me skin. Blow me pee sideways so it don’t reach the drain, wipe it clean away.

Back inside. I pass through the bedroom to the closed-up kitchen. Pan on the stovetop still warm, bay leaves and water left in the bottom. Mudda just gone out for the day. She gone to meet the goods boat in Scarbro. Me sister Lynette and she Baby Keisha still sleeping in the next half’a the bedroom, behind the plywood. I put some more water in the bay leaves and boil it up. Can’t find no green tea, no milk powder. Some bread in the bag hook-up on the wall. Unbolt the top of the kitchen door and the pushy breeze sweep the morning in. Past the hot tin cup in me hand and into the kitchen, brighting it up. Bright up the yellow counter that the wood ants eating out. Show up the brown lino mash into the concrete floor. But the kitchen clean, put-away. I finish the tea and make for the bedroom. Ossi still sprawl out. Mouth open, hand resting on he totee, bedsheet bunch up at the bottom of the bed. I bram the kitchen door on my way out. Stompy go be waiting for me by the jetty.

Road cool under me feet. Still chewing me bread slow, carrying me shirt on one shoulder, I clean out the yampy from me eyes, scrape inside me noseholes. Past Masta Barbar closed-up shop and Arnold Minimart. Past the junction, community centre, Bingey Rumshop, the school. All still closed-up. Reach the end’a the village by the Mystery Tombstone, turn down to the sea. Breeze quiet on this side. Fine-fine leaves on the big tamarind tree only trembling. Out past the point, white caps frisking and winking but in the bay by the jetty, the sea just lapsing. Little fishing boats rocking, dipping side to side. A yacht anchored and the big old trawler still there, the one the fella live on. Tide up. Only a small strip’a sand beach showing, rainbow colours moving on a engine oil patch. Stompy at the end of the jetty fixing and loading, he big tough belly shakin’ when he dump the gas container down in the boat.

‘Yuh reach late,’ he don’t look up. ‘I thought you wasn’ coming again.’

I don’t answer.

‘Pass dat bucket, leh we go.’ Stompy look up. ‘Pass de bucket! Wha’ happen to you, yuh still sleeping?’ Stan’ up holding yuh crotch . . . as if you have anything to hold!’

I pass the bucket and suck the last bread out’a me teeth. Stompy still looking up at me from the boat. Bleach-end hair sticking up round he big face. Big flat nose flaresing, small piggy eyes bury down between he fleshy forehead and cheeks.

‘Marnin,’ I lean right over he face, bracing on me knees.

Piggy eyes lighter than he black skin looking right back at me.

‘Marnin! Marnin! Is midday already, get yuh tail in and leh we go!’ He tug at the starter rope and I jump down in the boat jerking Stompy to one side as the engine ketch.

‘Wha’ wrang wit’ you dis mornin?’ He buffing me but I laughing. I push us off from the jetty and spread myself out on the bow, fixing me balls, squinting out to the skyline as the boat swing round.

Is years now I fishing with Stompy. Since I small. He the one always come and call for me when I don’t come out. Mudda always saying ‘Go, go! Look how much he tryin wit’ you.’ Stompy don’t talk much. And he like the sea but he don’t like going down in the water. He like to stay on top in the boat. He look out’a place on land though. Two fat laps at the top’a he thighs rubbing and smacking when he walk, two piece’a leather skin scraping together there. One’a he legs bigger than my waist. Slim he call me. Slim and Slims - me and Ossi.

I watch him as we motor out of the bay. Me going backwards, he forward, sitting by the engine. Belly forcing he legs to cock-open. Tight little tiger-pattern trunks peeking out from under. These trunks is he old ones, faded so you can hardly see the stripes. He have a new black pair he does wear when he taking tourist to fish. Specially woman tourist. I never go with him

then. He acting now like he don't know I watching him. He big shape weighing down the boat at the end, like it always been there, taking me out to deep sea. A warm flash inside me. Warm as the sun now heating up the day, flashing on the water. Great tot-tots shuddering over he belly as we start hitting the small swells. A bullneck join he head to he shoulders. Round shoulders slope down to arm, down to reach the throttle. Other arm always resting on he thigh, hand dangling down on the inside. A big black turtle sitting there, driving me out in this li'l yellow shell, bright against wavy blue. Behind him the flat sand-line, a green band'a hills behind grey coconut-trunk matchsticks, then the smooth morning-blue sky. Bright colour pirogues all round the jetty tipping like floating insects, bowed bamboo fishing-poles like whiskers dipping. They all listening to the one old zinc roof at the end'a the jetty preaching down to them. Swarmed to the lights in the night, then morning ketch them still scatter round the jetty-end, tipping and listening to the preacher-roof over the old diesel pumps. Pelicans and gulls does come and join the congregation sometimes, stirring them up, diving into the sea and clapping they wings when the roof sing out. On a afternoon, boys'd be jumping off the jetty, splashing and whooping back at the roof while the boats watch on.

We right out of the bay now and the swells big and hissing. From down in the troughs, land disappearing. Stompy still looking ahead. Turtle and the engine ploughing on. Every time the bow shoot up in the air and crash down, my whole body lift up and dump back down. I bouncing and thumping, legs flapping up. Stompy grinning, still not looking at me, making sure my arse getting wet.

'E rough today!' I shout out.

He straighten he face and half nod.

Heading out towards Pigeon Point side, the hills dark and far away now. Is only deep-deep blue around. Rolling and frisking us up. I start baiting the lines. Stompy slow down the engine and I tying jiggly green and orange rubber squids on. I throw one line in and give him the roll. Fix up the other line and pitch it out. Bonitos start biting at a rate. One time, Stompy start hauling in. I can see flashings out'a the white water in the wake. Silver flashing fighting hard. Stompy pulling in easy, slow. Another one bite, jerking line back out'a his hand. He look at me grinning and haul in faster.

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She go be waking up just now, Baby Keisha. Scrambling over Lynette and sliding on she belly to the edge of the bed. She does always grip two handfuls of bedsheets to let sheself down. Plop down on the floor. I watched she yesterday again, poking about under the bed while Lynette still sleeping. Pulling the wash pans full'a clothes, the big white bucket with a strong tight cover. Pushing she head forward to get a better look, crawling into the dark, to the suitcase and tugging at the buckle. Soon as she hear Lynette voice, she hustling out, scrabbling to meet she mother face hanging upside down over the edge of the bed.

In we house, Baby Keisha is the everyday smile'a we lives. When we all watching TV, is Keisha that does make us feel like a family. She make us have something that is ours, we own flesh and blood. Lynette child, the same one Mudda beat her for getting pregnant with. She like to romp with Ossi. He know how to make she squeal and churgle till Lynette have to tell him, 'Stop! You go give the child short breath'. But she like me better. I have a way with she, like something, Lynette don't know what. Keisha quiet with me. Climb up on me lap, sit on top me head with no fear when I carry she about. Tight neat li'l body, shiny li'l fingers and toes, reach out to me whenever I home. Almost like I is she father. Lynette does watch, she don't know what to feel. Sometimes the way Keisha stick onto me when I leaving, crying when I don't take her, I know Lynette wondering how it would be if she was to live in a house with she baby father, just the two'a them and Keisha. Like that family in *Days of Our Lives*, he going out to work and she staying home with they lovely rosy baby. He kissing them at the doorway and waving goodbye every morning. Lynette feel bad that Keisha only have her. Make her feel like less of a mother, specially when she slap her and Keisha run to me. Still, is her pride and joy. And Keisha, the

smallest thing in the house, know how to bring out the best from each'a we. She know how to play she granny for a mint, Ossi for a tickle, me for a cuddle and Lynette for all the rest she need.

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Them fish giving us a fight this morning. About a dozen bonitos bouncing in the bottom of the boat already. All my arms aching, my knees and shins bungered and bruise up - and it's early still. Stompy like it so, when the sea getting on, not giving you an ease. It does raise up something inside him. Make him look different: wild-up and ready for anything. Is the only time he eyes shine and he laughing good, not just skin-teeth, real laugh. Pulling in the line, working the engine, checking the waves, all the time we rolling over them, near sideways. He could'a have four hands and a spare set'a eyes. He can stand up, sit down, turn round while he doing all that and not get knock down or grab onto the side.

'Whey we going now?'

He start heading out deeper.

'Tuna!'

I can rest now. Pull in my line. He standing up guiding the boat through the pitching. Keep going, quite out, the white line of the reef far back. Tobago nearly gone now, just blue hills with black cloud shadows.

'Ha-haai! De bugga's can't get away today!' He roaring.

Slow down the engine, lean forward and grab one of the smaller bonitos. It jerking and flapping in his hand before he gut it open. Bait he line with pieces, throwing the guts into the water, smiling like he know what he feeding down there.

Ketching a set'a kingfish today. He hauling them in, rolling about playing with them curving and arcing out the water, bawling, 'Whoa, yuh bugga!' Bottom lip glinting like the seawater drops on he black skin.

'Yuh like dat, eh?'

'Hunfh.'

He lean over and heave a big fish into the boat, scraping the fat stiff side on the edge and then let it slide down head first into the pile'a small fish. Set them off flopping again.

'Heh-hey!' He slap the smooth skin of his last fish hard and we heading in to the reef.

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When I reach home, Ossi still in bed, Baby Keisha after him. 'Os-si! Os-si!'

'Uhmh,' Ossi close he gaping mouth and suck in some dribble without opening he eyes.

Keisha bright li'l eyes just above the mattress, she reach up and slap a arm down on the mattress, hard as she could.

'Os-si! 'ake up!' Jumping, stamping and slap again.

Ossi roll he head and she grip the edge'a the bed excited. Nuthing happen. She bram the bed with both arms, hardly making the sponge bounce, tiptoeing to reach. She stay like that, stretch up on she toes and look down at them. Ossi open one eye and spot the top'a she fuzzy head.

'Raagh!'

He lunge over and grab she hands, setting off shrieks full blast. He let go and pretend to sleep again, she gurgle and gee, ready to slap at the bed again, eyes and li'l front teeth shining.

Lynette knocking round in the kitchen. Listening to Ossi raaging and Keisha squealing was one of her morning pleasures. Ossi stand up in the kitchen doorway and Keisha butt she head through he legs.

'Whey Mudda?'

'I ain' know,' Lynette answer and go into her room.

Hear her dragging the clothes basin out from under the bed, back door banging open, and the basin drop outside. Then the empty metal squeak'a the standpipe. But no water sound. She

steups loud and come back in, big comb stick in she hair.

‘Ossi, you go have to fetch some wata fuh me. No wata in de pipe.’

Plunk sheself down on the straight-back chair by the table.

Ossi don’t answer. Stand up rubbing from the back’a he head to the front, leaning on the doorpost gazing out across the dirt yard to the sea crashing on the rocks.

I rest me sea-beat self on the bed and watch Lynette undoing she plaits. She keeping a eye on Ossi long back in the doorway, Keisha mash cooling and the steam rising out’a the pan on the stovetop.

‘Yuh hear me? I have to wash today.’

‘Oh God, I hear you. I ain’ even eat nuthing yet, drink nuthing yet, and you want me fetch wata?’

Hand drop from he head and he turn looking for the bread. ‘What washing yuh talkin’ ‘bout anyway when it have no wata in de pipe!’

‘You still have to fetch some wata fuh me to cook.’

The pan boiling now, shaking and rattling. Lynette eye on Baby Keisha trying to back down the outside steps.

‘Come here! Ossi, ketch her.’

He lift her by one arm and plop she on the kitchen floor. She start churgling again and patter back to the steps.

‘Come here gyal!’ Rumble through a mouth full’a bread and he grand-charge her, stamping he feet.

She squeal loud as she can and stick one foot out in the air behind her. Lynette finish plaiting the hair she had loose out and combed, stick the comb back in she plaits and get up.

Time pass like every day in Plymouth. Ossi fetch two bucket’a water from the standpipe down the hill, enough for Lynette to bathe Keisha and cook. Jump on he bike and gone for the day. She watch him curling heself onto the small bike wearing nuthing but the same shorts he was sleeping in. Gone. Off roaming. Hanging around them big fellas by Masta Barbar shop. Looking to trouble people girl-chi’ren, even though he is a child heself. One long aimless child.

Lynette can’t wash clothes now. Maybe the water might come back on later. She go cook something from what provisions it have in the house, straighten the gallery, sweep the front porch and yard, finish she own hair, Keisha hair, feed her and try to make her sleep. Before *Days of Our Lives* start at two o’clock.

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