

Claiming the Island

Taylor Connor

My people were at war. We were unwilling drafted, forced into the front lines. We had no hope. My people did not shape this war. Yet we were the ones who suffered the most. I stood to lose everything: my home, my culture, and my people. We were innocent, but that didn't seem to matter. Our blood would spill, an offering to atone for mistakes we did not make.

I toed the water. Tonight it was calm, deceptively peaceful. As a child, I loved the ocean. It had been playful and welcoming then. Now it was a vengeful spirit waging war against my island and my people. The ocean demanded retribution for the wrongs done to the world.

I walked further into the water, attempting to clear my mind. Then I stopped, waist deep and shivering. I raised a hand and placed it over my stomach. There was no movement yet, but I knew a life was forming there. Several moons had passed without blood. The symptoms were becoming more obvious with each passing week. I hadn't told anyone.

It was a well known secret that the medicinal woman had the means to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Any island woman was welcome to turn to her. She, like everyone here, was a trader. A woman could seek out her services but a price had to be paid. The medicinal woman asked for one thing: your hair.

I ran a hand through my forest of dark hair. Hair was a symbol of status and honor. Unbound, long hair signaled ones wealth. Hair tied back away from the face marked the laborers. A shaved head was a symbol of dishonor, reserved for those who broke tradition for the worst. The mark of criminals.

My knife glinted in the moonlight. Without hesitation, I cut my locks away one handful at a time. The ocean stole away my sacrifice, carrying it on the backs of rolling waves. I returned to the sand, my head unpleasantly lighter. My eyes met with the moon, the witness to what I had done, what my decision cost.

"It's not my fault," I whispered.

Hushed voices trailed my steps the next morning. Their eyes burned holes into the back of my head. I almost regretted forgoing a headscarf. Straightening my spine, I raised my chin in defiance. I held my face in a neutral expression as I made my way to my family's abode. It was a short walk, but time slowed to drag out this particular torment as the other islanders passed judgment on me.

"Tamah!" My mother exclaimed when she spotted my approaching figure. "What have you done?"

My chin wavered as tears sprang to my eyes. She took my hand, leading me inside to where the rest of our family rested. Gasps sounded the moment their eyes drank me in. My sisters were, for the first time in their lives, speechless. My father had only one word for me.

"Why?"

“You know as well as I do that our island is drowning,” I replied.

“That’s not an excuse to-”

“I have made my decision. It is final,” I declared. I held my father's eyes, refusing to be the first to look away. He turned to my mother with a deep sigh and a gesture that said “she’s your daughter, you talk to her.” My mother rolled her eyes and turned back to me.

“Tamah, walk with me,” she said.

I followed her as she led me from the abode to the ocean shore. Despite the gray of her hair and the wrinkles on her tanned face, she moved as though she was still in her prime. Her muscular legs marched confidently across the path. I admired how strong she was: physically and emotionally. My mother was a woman I could turn to for anything. She was always the first to know my secrets. Except for this one.

She halted where the ocean kissed the land. For a moment, we both stood there in silence. I watched her as she gazed out to some point beyond the horizon.

“What happened to you?” She asked, startling me from my thoughts.

“You know that I gave up the fetus. I had to,” I replied.

“I’m not talking about that. I mean *this*,” she said, gesturing between me and the ocean. “You always loved the ocean, you were my little fish out of water. This is the first time you’ve been this close to the water in years.”

That wasn’t true, but it was close enough. Last night had indeed been my first time back in years. I had avoided the ocean entirely- not an easy task considering that I lived on an island. Ever since the ocean began greedily feasting on my home, I had scorned it. It was only natural for me to behave this way after being betrayed in such a manner.

“I’ll return to the ocean when it swallows our island and everyone in it,” I said. “Until then, I have more important things to do.”

“Like what?” My mother demanded. “What have you been doing with your life these past few years? What are you doing that is so important to you?”

She didn’t bother to wait for my answer. She turned on her heel and marched away. For the first time that day, I felt truly ashamed of myself. I couldn’t have answered her had she waited for my reply. Everything felt so futile. What was the point in living when the world was dying? What was one island woman supposed to do when countries on the other side of the world were murdering the earth?

I dropped to my knees in the sand. Once again, tears formed in my eyes. But these tears were created by something other than sadness. A scream forced its way out of my throat. I pounded my fists on the ground, mourning everything I had lost and all the things I had yet to lose. I screamed for the child that could have been, for the future that should have been. I released all of my pent up rage. Still, no one listened.

The tide calmly ebbed and flowed. I studied the waves as my anger died away. I lost myself in the deep blue, drinking in the sight. Birds swam through the sky. Fish flew across the

sea. I sat in place, unable to form coherent thoughts. I tracked the westward movement of the sun. Time was running away from me, yet I couldn't find it in me to care.

That's when I spotted the ship approaching my island. From a distance, it appeared to be just another tourist cruise ship. As it grew larger in my perspective, however, I realized that it was different. There weren't any people on board hanging over the railings, eager to find the shore. I followed the ship to where it docked. People who had been unseen before flooded out onto the deck, most of them handling expensive looking equipment. Tourists often carried cameras with them, but I had never seen cameras like these.

I lingered near the docks, observing the strangers and their equipment. Upon noticing me, one of the men separated himself from the others. He smiled at me and spoke in a language I didn't recognize. I gestured vaguely to show that I couldn't understand him. He motioned for me to wait as he ran back to his ship. Minutes later, he returned with another man in tow.

"Hello. My name is John Heisenberg. What is your name?" The second man said, using my language in the most formal way possible.

"Tamah," I answered.

I showed the men with their equipment how much land we had lost to the rising sea. They had an unending stream of questions for me which their interpreter did his best to translate. I told them what I could, mapping out for them how the island had changed over the years.

"May we interview you? On film?" John, the interpreter, asked.

"What for?"

"To show the world," he replied, gesturing in a wide circle to pantomime *the world*. "To show people what is happening to island nations and the people who live here."

"What's the point?"

"To tell your story and to inspire people to want to save the planet, to help the islands."

"My name is Tamah," I began, centering my gaze on the filming equipment before me. "This is my island. As you can see behind me, the ocean is rising, claiming the island. Eventually, there won't be any land left for my people to survive on. There will be nothing here for our children."

I touched my shaved head, pausing to take in a deep breath.

"Last night I had to abort a fetus. If we were not on the verge of annihilation, I would have kept the baby growing within me. I would have watched that child grow up playing on this island and with the sea as my mother had for me. That child would have loved the ocean as I once did. But that future isn't possible. My home is drowning. I couldn't bear the thought of my child dying with it. I was left with no choice. I had to abandon the child that could have been. Until something is done to save the planet, there will be no future for our children. Unless the countries that are destroying my home make amends, my island will die."

As I spoke, John translated for the other men. Their faces were somber, softened by my revelation for the world. They knew that they couldn't promise me anything. All they had to offer was the hope that somebody with more power would listen. Their documentary would be played in living rooms and classrooms throughout their homeland and other countries with the goal of inspiring others to take action. All we had was hope. It wasn't enough for me.

Author Bio:

Taylor Connor is a sophomore student at Dixie State University. Their field of study is English with a Creative Writing emphasis. They are currently a manager at McDonald's on the side when they are not writing. This is their first attempt at writing and being published outside of the classroom.