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The Third Mercy

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shaking the shoulder of a tenant who had not answered his employer's phone call. "Mr. Fields, Mr. Fields, wake up! Wake up!" The body was still warm, in the hot summer without air conditioning. The curtains hung straight. "Oh damn, Marge," the landlord said, after feeling for a pulse, "he's gone. We'll have to phone the police."

From the doorway, his wife asked, "What do you think it was—a heart attack?"

He checked Field's wallet on the night stand, and took out all the dollar bills.

"Who knows? Maybe." He crossed to the door, stepped outside with his wife, shut

the door, and locked it. "I guess they'll have an autopsy. . . . I wonder," he added, as they started downstairs, "if he left any way to get hold of his relatives."

His wife said, "Probably at work."

Elsewhere, somewhere behind a mirror, all the king's horses and all the king's men were giving Henry Field's body (or what passed for his body in their world) an elaborate funeral. The drums were beaten slowly. Black banners waved in the air. The funeral cortège made its way down a winding road.

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The Third Mercy

by

William H. Wandless

The Mayawari were a hard people, which is why the mercy of the ocean almost broke them.

Over centuries they had learned to bear the yoke that fell to them as a consequence of their great ancestor's ingratitude. At the dawn of all things, when earth and sea and sky still honored one another, the sea had gifted its loveliest child to the earth, heaving up the willful boy on the island's splendid shores. The earth had welcomed the sea's son warmly, arraying all the delights of seed and soil before him, but Mayawi had scorned her embrace, wishing only to drowse once more in the arms of his father. Ashamed of his scion's behavior, the sea vowed never again to receive him, and the spurned earth nursed evermore a mother's grudge against him. He cried to the heavens for help, but sister sky, impartial as always, offered

Mayawi neither succor nor solace.

Mayawi's pride and folly left the soil sour and the ocean unforgiving. The sea still yielded fish, as it must, but they were hard to catch and their flesh was foul; the earth still yielded fruit, as it must, but the crop was small and the best were bitter. Mayawi toiled day and night to earn a scant subsistence, and when he slept he dreamed of only toil yet to come.

The first mercy was an act of concerted compassion: the earth and sea agreed to yield up young to share Mayawi's labor. He fashioned crude figures from soil and salt water and set them to their tasks as they writhed on the sun-bleached shore. Mayawi did not love them, nor did the Mayawari love their father. Theirs was a slender bond of debt and grim dependence, sullen service rendered for the gift of borrowed breath.

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Thus they labored all together for a barren, aching age until the weight of days at last bowed down the shoulders of the father. When Mayawi died his children cast his body back into the sea and returned to their work. They shed no tears and sang no songs, said no words to send him to his rest.

The ocean, however, foamed and roared, gave vent to its immortal grief. It drew down the broken body of its boy unto its breast, and it raged in waves that drove the surf to lash against the land. In those early days the seething deeps claimed every third canoe, stirring the currents to haul the luckless headlong out to sea. Monsters came to haunt the pale beyond the shallow waters, claiming limbs and lives to teach the ingrates how to feel a father's loss. The Mayawari knew all too well the cruelty of creators, and they faced the wrath of fathoms with the same resolve they called upon to weather every other undeserved curse.

Denied the welcome of the water, the Mayawari chose to dedicate their days to the service of the earth. They plied it with prayer and the stroke of crude tools, and centuries of diligent devotion began to soothe the pride their ancestor had wounded. At the end of an arduous age the earth requited the work of its orphaned wards with the gift of the second mercy.

Every twenty generations the earth blessed the Mayawari with a white-haired child who would grow to be versed in the lore of sand and soil. Before the first could talk she taught the tribe how to find and stew edible roots to stead them in times of unusual dearth. The next, a boy with hair the color of clouds, showed them how to strand savory fish in circles of stone filled up by rising tides. Still others taught them the ways of whetting, netting, and weaving, the arts of salt and spice and fire. Forever beset by the sea the Mayawari never truly flourished, but the insight of every ivory child eased and enlightened their lives. If the weight of days steadily dimmed and diminished their wisdom, their wild whiteness fading into

shades of dismal gray, the children confirmed the worth of prayer and the earth's maternal mercy.

The latest display of this mercy was greeted with riot and revel: a young mother bore a beautiful girl with hair the color of pearl, and the Mayawari danced and drank and spat into the sea. The fathom-father foamed and roared and crashed against the shore, but the earth blunted the rage of waves with shoals and shelves and banks of sand. The young Mayawari caroused and rejoiced, singing hymns to the liberal earth, cooing and clucking and clapping around the crib of the newborn babe. For their part the dutiful elders burst and burned the first and finest fruits of the season, eager to prove Mayawi's heirs had finally grown into gratitude.

They named her Amaya, and when she could walk she wandered the isle, exploring and learning the lore of the land. Sand and soil yielded their secrets to her freely, and the sight of her scouring the shoreline made the hearts of the hardest and hoariest tribesmen light. Even the sea seemed willing to suffer her presence; its native fury abated wherever Amaya went to wade or bathe. The Mayawari regarded this forbearance as a hopeful omen, a token that meant the ocean might someday relent.

As if to announce the advent of such long-awaited grace, in Amaya's seventh year the third mercy crept up from the depths.

Amaya discovered the strange little thing in a tidal pool in the course of a morning meander. She prodded, poked, and finally stroked its supple, gummy skin as it shivered atop a sea-green stone. She thought it a wounded medusa at first, a jelly bereft of its tentacles, but it was rounder than any she had formerly found and it gurgled and purred at her touch. Delighted by the swirling iridescence of the glistening globe, she cupped its wobbly body in her palms and brought it before the elders.

They initially scolded and chided Amaya, rinsing her fingers and checking for stings, but the scintillating surface of the

sphere from the sea soon gripped and engrossed their notice. The wiser among them vied for the right to study the shimmering globe, and they examined it in morning mist, by noonday sun, by firelight. The longer they lingered the more fully the orb absorbed their attention.

On the second day a greater group gathered. They huddled around the shuddering sphere, tracing the course of the colors that stirred in its flickering skin. Some claimed they made out patterns in the spooling liquid hues, while others, lost in lucid reveries, stood by still and silent. The bravest made bold to cradle the quavering globe, and with glazed eyes they gaped vacantly as the visitor burbled and purled. Little work was done that day, but those that gazed long and late felt neither heat nor hunger. Amaya and her playmates made their own meals, skirting the verge of the circle and binging on breadfruit and berries.

A third day might have passed in the selfsame way had a maiden not tasted the stranger. After pressing the globe to her breast and caressing its clammy skin she furtively licked her sticky fingers. Her subsequent cries and sudden collapse distracted her vigilant kinsmen; they stood thunderstruck as a fitful fever seized her. She trembled, thrashed, and writhed, her body wracked with spasms, her eyes fixed on the sky. In ecstatic, gasping intervals she jabbered and babbled, screaming of sweetness and pleasure so keen that she could barely breathe. One by one the Mayawari followed her example, and each bowed to the throes of an exquisite bliss that none had known before.

The tribe indulged for days. Some halfheartedly started to resume their duties and set the children to tasks small hands could manage, but the promise of pleasure haunted their labors and dependably ended them early. They built a concave altar, a vessel they respectfully refreshed with ocean water, but fruit ripened, dropped, and rotted while the tribesmen attended their guest.

Whenever the children came home from their chores they found their parents spent and breathless, curled up on the earth.

Despite their careful ministrations, the skin of the visitor soon ceased to exude its soothing ooze so freely. Although they yearned for the delicate taste and the euphoria that followed, they found themselves forced to ration their raptures. Some searched the shores for other glistening globes; some gingerly licked the skin of other creatures of the sea. Every experiment failed, and the distraught Mayawari wept and complained as they impatiently waited their turn.

At last the anxious elders called the troubled tribe to council. Many ventured selfish measures to secure a greater share of the sweet slime they all prized, but the most sober among them readily settled the source of their misfortune: the ocean had conferred unto them an undeserved mercy, and they had neglected to render back the tribute it was due. Several raced to freight a canoe with the first yield of the season, but with horror they found that their stores were depleted, that the new fruit had fallen and burst.

With deference the eldest tribal teller was led to their tremulous guest. She knelt and kissed its gummy skin, licked her lips, and collapsed to the ground in a ragged, fanatical spasm. The heedful Mayawari hearkened to her hoarse, prophetic cries, eager to learn how they might renew or redeem the honeyed savor of the sphere. Though it grieved them at heart to hear what she screamed, they all could not help but agree: they had only one treasure to equal the luminous gift of the merciful sea.

The next morning they shouldered a laden canoe and mournfully bore it down to the shore. The boldest escorted it into the waves and warily urged it as far as they dared, wading out into the churning surf until a strong current snatched the craft from their grasp. When they were safe on the sand they joined hands with their kin and prayed that

the vessel would purchase the favor they craved.

Eager to learn if their work had served its turn, most of those assembled hastened home. Only a few loitered long enough to confirm that the earth's pearlescent mercy was accepted by the sea, the vessel and its

treasure guided by the tides toward some harbor beyond the horizon.

Amaya gaily waved until the distance dimmed the vision of her kin, her silver tresses shivering in the lambent sunshine loosed by sister sky.

October's Showers

by

Joel Zartman

In fairyland bright showers fall
while the sun shines
and colors all
in fluttering light descend.
And no one in those rains
is ever wet
or goes to any pains
of cover, shelter, or delay.
I went in an October wood.
Bright showers fell
where the trees stood,
and color filled the air.
The showers that fell
were dry and bright
and glad, to tell
the simple truth of it.
But unlike fairyland's fair trees
my trees did not
retain their leaves,
but sent them spinning all away.
How bright mortality
is beckoning,
and drawing me
in showers to another world!