

translated by Michael Emmerich

# THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A BUOY

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I've been told my grandfather was a buoy—or rather, that he became a buoy. One of those things that bob lightly about on the ocean. Those signposts on the vast and ever-shifting sea, markers that trace—across an expanse of water that otherwise, with minor variations, looks the same the world over—invisible, imaginary lines (if you see two buoys, you can picture a line connecting them) that help you gauge the distance separating one point from another, whose very presence signals that human hands have been there, affording the illusion that, although we may not be able to inhabit the sea as we do the land, even so we are its masters. That's the kind of buoy my grandfather became. I heard the story from my grandmother.

We've always lived here, on this small inlet. Looking out our window you can see the bay, a bit of ocean bordered by a ring of hills as squat and sorry-looking as a sick cat, so twisty and curvy they could almost be some species of slime mold. For generations, the members of my family have lived out their lives on this spot, on this tiny little inlet stuck to the small, cloudy green bay. It's quite a narrow patch of land, sandwiched between the meandering shoreline and the hills, and all day long the scent of the tide and, mixed in there somewhere, the stench of rotten fish hang in the air. There's hardly any land suitable for farming, and the soil in the few likely spots is so poor nothing but sweet potatoes will grow, and even then you can't expect a good harvest. As a result, the people who live on the inlet have no option but to work either on the ocean or in the hills. And no one gets rich doing jobs they can't choose not to do. Still, it's not as if people are living in the most dire poverty, struggling to get by from one day to the next. We can't afford luxuries, but when you're focused on living your life, luxuries aren't really necessary. And I suppose the fact that everyone is equally poor keeps us from being jealous or envious of

our neighbors. We may not be completely satisfied with our lives, but neither are we dissatisfied. We do okay. Which explains, perhaps, why you never see anyone leaving the inlet. Never. That's not an exaggeration. We are born here, we work here, and we die here, as if we're attracted to this place (or bound to it) by some marvelous magnetic force. My grandfather, too, was like that.

When I say he became a buoy, you may think this is just another way of saying he worked out on the ocean—that he was a fisherman. This would be an entirely reasonable supposition; in fact for a long time I myself thought this was the case. I was wrong. Hehza woodcutcha thatsut at manuz, my grandmother said. It seems he didn't go near the ocean much, perhaps because his father had died at sea during a storm, or because a friend of his had been swept away by a great wave right before his eyes, or because he himself had nearly drowned once. Presumably he went to work in the hills as a way of avoiding the ocean, of distancing himself from it, of fleeing it. My grandmother says she got that sense. All of us who live here on the inlet have experienced some sort of trouble, more or less serious, involving the ocean (its random violence made all the more terrifying because we have done nothing to deserve its anger). I suspect that those who come to terms with their memories of that terror become fishermen, while those who nurse their spiritual wounds for the rest of their lives become woodcutters as a way of averting their eyes from the sea. Just as my grandfather did.

The truth is, I don't know why my grandfather became a buoy. One day he was on the veranda fixing the basket he carried on his back when he went up into the hills, when the headman came and told him, out of the blue, that it had been decided he would be the next buoy. "I see," my grandfather murmured, without so much as a flicker of surprise or anger or grief in his eyes, and then he just went on working as he always did, without saying another word. So I'm told. Evidently my grandmother's reaction was the same: "Ah well, seems it's Dad's turn," she thought, and that was it; no special emotion surged in her breast.

Who was the person (or who were the people) who chose my grandfather as a buoy, and for what reason did they choose him, and on what authority? And how could my grandfather and grandmother simply have accepted that demand (or order) without question? I asked my grandmother about this. And—while I don't think it was intentional—her reply half-assuaged my doubts and half-skirted the issue altogether. Mabczu hehzgot maw hairn anyone, anit blackrn coal lemtel—ontopwhat heh hadsum normous head onhit sholds, ahy thatee did, my grandmother said. According to her, the person who had been the buoy before my grandfather hadn't had all that large a

head, but he was old and had hair so white—so clear, even—that it was like moonlight. Before that it was a fisherman of a type you sometimes see around the inlet, a brawny man with bronzed skin and hair that had faded to a reddish black because, I assume, he worked out there on the water with the glaring sun bouncing off the waves around him. Before that, it seems, it was a priest whose skin had the dark, unhealthy coloring of a blood clot, perhaps because every time he went to perform a memorial service at someone's house he would get drunk on the sake they offered him, and that was pretty much all he did. And before that it was someone with fair skin, and before that it was a man with red hair. A red head, small as a poppy seed, blinking in and out of view between the waves on the rather choppy May sea. A black head that you could just barely make out against the dark, cold winter ocean. A white head that you could scarcely locate in the midst of the dazzling bursts of light glancing off the undulating surface of the ocean in summer, but which leaped to the eye in the winter. No matter what the season, you could see a tiny dot of one of those three colors out in the offing. The buoy's color would go from red to white, and from white to black—that was the progression. And so it was only to be expected after the old man with white hair had done his turn that someone with the requisite physical characteristic—blackness—would become the next buoy, and since my grandfather was known to be the darkest of anyone living on the inlet at the time, it must have been clear to both him and my grandmother that he was bound to be chosen. But why didn't he refuse? My grandmother tells me that his daughter (my mother, that is to say) was five years old then, growing fast and furious, and her brother was still nursing. If my grandfather agreed to be a buoy, he would no longer be able to work as a woodcutter. After all, being a buoy isn't the sort of thing you can go and do in your spare time—it's a very demanding job. It wouldn't be impossible for their family of four to make ends meet if my grandfather stopped working, but obviously life would be very difficult, even if my grandmother did go out and do little jobs herself, helping out the other woodcutters, lending a hand to the fishermen. So why did my grandfather accede to the request, and why did my grandmother accept his decision without a murmur of protest?

My guess is that my grandfather didn't want to ruin a convention that had been kept alive for ages simply on account of his own selfish concerns. Doubtless if you were to survey the whole long history of the buoys, you would find any number of people who had confronted situations even more grave than my grandfather's. But my grandfather and grandmother had never once heard of anyone citing unavoidable circumstances as a reason for refusing to be a buoy. I'm sure some people endured agonies and

tensions awful beyond imagining, and yet everyone who has ever been chosen to be a buoy has accepted the responsibility without a murmur, despite the unease and pain and despair that rolled like waves through their hearts. If my grandfather had declined to be a buoy—to do his job as a buoy—it would have delivered such a shock to the whole order of the inlet, at the most profound level, that everything would have come tumbling down. I'm sure that's how both my grandparents must have seen it. I don't think I'm exaggerating here. This, I'd say, is precisely why neither of them could say no. At the same time, I doubt it ever occurred to them to question why my grandfather had been chosen, or what sense or justification there would be in carrying out such a task. Because of course doing so would have had no effect at all on the situation. Or maybe it would have, who knows. Either way, I doubt it ever crossed their minds that they could request an explanation. We don't live our lives the way academics write their papers. I am, I think, well enough aware of the importance of adopting a critical attitude toward the things of this world whose existence we take for granted, before which we feel no need to pause, without a suspicious look in our eyes—the tasks we are asked to carry out because they are necessary, that is to say, because it is our duty to perform them—but which are nonetheless subject to chance, to a certain degree of arbitrariness. After all, engaging with reality in such a proactive manner can sometimes bring about a change in our perspective, in how we think—how we live, in other words. I suppose my grandparents ought to have taken the trouble to do that. But could they have? It's easy for me to talk because I'm *here* right now, but my grandfather was *there*. In the inlet in my grandparents' day, or rather in the world they inhabited, they were simply doing what was expected of them, with none of the victim's sense of injustice or discontent, none of the hero's grim resolve. In their world, if you were chosen then you simply resigned yourself without complaint—you had no choice. So my grandfather consented, he had no choice but to consent, just like the man who had taken the position before him.

Immemb thahday, hehz closa loosiz head. This was how my grandmother described my grandfather on the night before he started working as a buoy. Lemtel thasta hahd job, one hell hahd jobsutiz, yesin! Evidently you could hear the monkeys creating a ruckus, shaking the branches up in the hills behind the inlet—hills that lay slumped over, exhausted by a heat so intense it almost seemed to be slapping your cheeks, grinding away at your bones—as if they had understood how my grandfather felt, felt the leaden pressure in his chest.

Nehneh, but thez munks donlikli keh none fahow usn pehpl feel, my grandmother continued, discounting the impression she'd had at the time. It seems the monkeys

have always engaged in their monstrous pranks, then as now. And they really are a nightmare. "Sure," the monkeys must think, "these women who live on the inlet may be gutsy and strong as any man, and the kids more crafty than even us monkeys—and more muscular, as they make off with fruit (tangerines and loquats and the like) or squid drying on the beach, than you would think given their age—but still, women are women and children are children." So they come and slip their hands into the little children's pants as the poor things stand there stock still, rendered motionless, perhaps, by the unmoving glare the monkeys fix on them, by those almost inebriated eyes, and then the monkeys stroke and fondle the children's immature genitals. The monkeys' long, pink, fleshy fingers wander this way and that, little by little, in every conceivable direction, like overfed caterpillars taken aback at finding themselves plopped down all of a sudden in a spot utterly bare of vegetation. I myself have undergone this baptism of the monkeys' pranks. But this inlet is home to fishermen and woodcutters. They don't get all uptight about a little deviance. Indeed, people—and this goes for men and women alike—take some pleasure in the monkeys' doings, which help them kindle the fires of their own lechery.

The thing that really made the people on the inlet scowl was something else the monkeys did on a regular basis. Day after day, they never tired of descending from the hills and mucking around in the graveyard. It goes without saying that they would gobble up the meager offerings people left at the gravestones, leaving bits and pieces scattered everywhere, but they would also smash the little cups of water or sake (in the case of the latter, they would first drink it). They shredded the flowers people had left and sprinkled petals over the graves, as if they regarded it as an act of artistic creation. The old women had to sneak in to clean the graves and offer up their prayers: it didn't matter that this was a place meant for mourning human dead, they were more afraid of those watchful monkeys. This was a real problem. And yet, despite everything, my grandmother took precisely the opposite attitude toward the monkeys, offering them not disapproval but praise. Thez munks gain wruckt sah graves nall, truenuf, so wehzjus get thinkn bahtem graves alltime, mawn maw, nso wutwedo but getuptheh eben maw faw tkeepm clean, seeah oluns eben mawn befuh, thatsut. Lemtel, makme think thez animuls maybsdo undehstan us pepln ah feeluns aftahll.

I'm told my grandfather sat that night staring out at the ocean, its surface as black as if someone had painted over it with ink. After all, from now on he wouldn't just be looking at it, he would be spending about half of every day *in* it. It really is a tiny inlet—so small it seems to be clinging precariously to the intricately curved shoreline, like it

might drop off at any moment. You can see the bay from every yard of every house. You can't *not* see it. My grandfather had probably never before put himself in that position, face to face with the ocean—not only because he didn't like it, but also because it was such an utterly mundane part of the scenery. Evidently he stayed out there in the yard staring at the ocean even after my grandmother had gone to bed. The monkeys were making such a racket that night that it was impossible to get to sleep. What might my grandfather have been thinking, I wonder, as the monkeys' shrieking—sudden outbursts that tore through the night, as if someone were shredding a piece of black paper, one rip at a time—assaulted his ears?

The next morning, he went and talked with my grandmother. This is what he said:

The previous night, unable to sleep, my grandfather had been standing there gazing out at the ocean when, glancing back at the yard, he saw a monkey. It looked as if it had been standing there all along, watching him. My grandfather knew monkeys don't come after men or bare their teeth at them, so there was no need to chase the animal off. So he paid no attention; he turned his gaze back to the water. But then he heard a voice call out: Heytheh, friend. When he turned around, there was no one there but the monkey. He could hardly believe it, but it seemed the monkey was talking to him. Well, my grandfather thought, I guess sometimes maybe monkeys talk, too.

I've heard a similar story from an old woman who lives nearby. She came back one evening to find someone in the room where she kept the altar. It was a short little person, crouched before the altar—preparing, perhaps, to light a stick of incense. Some other old woman from the inlet, no doubt, but who? When the old woman turned the light on to see, she discovered a monkey reaching for a peach she had left on the altar as an offering. The monkey flashed a contemptuous grin, showing its teeth, and then all of a sudden it began speaking in the voice of the old woman's deceased husband. So thehya, fahnly got back homah? Ahben hungrah thanall, ah needsumn teat. Keeping his eyes on the old lady as she stood there too stunned to move, the monkey ambled out of the room, munching on the peach. Ah, streng thingsa gawn sumtahmz, thateydo, the old woman said. I guess that kind of thing happens sometimes.

The monkey speaks. So you're going to be a buoy? That's right, my grandfather replies. The monkey: We've been watching this inlet from the hills for ages. You're going to be watching it from the ocean. I don't think you'll be coming back to the hills. We've seen how you throw yourself into your work, from up in the treetops. You move your

body, wear yourself out. Being a buoy is different. All you do is float. Still, it's work. So go out there and work.

According to the story my grandfather told my grandmother, the monkey had said Wahks wahk, sah geton outn wahk, and then gone off into the hills. Who would have thought he would be told to *work* by one of those monkeys who traipsed about the inlet all day long, playing pranks and looking for food to steal? My grandparents found this so hilarious that they laughed until they cried.

Early in the morning, before the sun was even up, my grandfather would hitch a ride on one of the fishermen's boats and head out to sea. The boat would drop him off at the narrow mouth that led into the bay, right at the border, between two promontories that stretched out from the shore like the arms of a starfish. My grandfather would take off all his clothes and get into the water, and then he would just float. It didn't matter how he floated, of course, as long as his head was clearly visible on the surface of the water. The one restriction was that since he was a buoy, he couldn't just go where he wanted. Jellyfish can drift around as they please among the waves, but not buoys. He had to be careful to remain as much as possible in the same place. That said, the shore was quite far away, and the fishing boats were constantly changing position as the tide carried them this way or that, so he had nothing to use as a marker. He served as a marker for other people, but he himself had no marker.

Once he had dropped off my grandfather, the fisherman would leave, go to his work in the bay. So my grandfather would float there alone, far from the shore, at the tip of the bay, no one to talk to, rocking on the waves, until in the evening one of the fishermen would come to fetch him. Then, as the sun sank, he would ride their boat back home.

He found it rough going at first; since he was soaking in saltwater all day, his skin would become waterlogged and swell up painfully. Our bodies are remarkably adaptable, though, and he got used to it soon enough. He would simply go out into the ocean, bob there on the waves, and then come back. Apparently in the early days he would talk up a storm with my grandmother and their children when he returned, no doubt in reaction to the fact that he'd had no one to talk to all day, but then he realized that he had nothing to say. All he did was float in the uneventful ocean, gazing at the same changeless scenery, meeting no one, talking to no one. So my grandfather began devoting himself exclusively to listening, nodding to show he was enjoying himself but growing progressively more taciturn. The longer he worked, the more prone he was to fall silent, to sit without moving, sunk like lead in his thoughts.

Judging from the location where my grandfather was told to float—and from the fact that he was a buoy, obviously—one can only assume that his role must have been to mark the border between the bay and the open sea. There were, in fact, people who said as much—that this is what the men who became buoys were meant to do. Because once you went out into the open sea, you could never come back. Some claimed this was because the current was unbelievably fast out there; that if you happened accidentally to pass outside the bay, you would be swept off someplace far away; others said there were ghost ships that carried people off. At any rate, while the bay was deep the waves were gentle, and as long as you stayed within it you were safe. And yet there were always reckless types who wanted to break free from the customs and the knowledge born of past experience. None of them made it back to the inlet. Or maybe they chose never to come back, I don't know. They might have been swept away to some distant shore, started a new life there. I don't know whether that would have been a good thing or a bad thing. They hadn't set out looking for a new world, after all, and they hadn't been chased from the inlet. Is it possible that someone would leave behind the place where his beloved family and all his friends lived, simply because he felt a twinge of curiosity? It keeps happening: there is no end of these ignorant, careless people who mistake recklessness for adventure. That's precisely why we need buoys that can talk. Their purpose, originally, was to bob about at the bay's exit and issue warnings to anyone who wanted to go out—so it is said. This explanation has a faint air of plausibility, it's true, but hardly anyone believes it. Buoys only work during the daylight hours, after all, and of course whenever the sea grows stormy they stay home. You can go outside the bay all you like as long as you wait until the sun goes down, or choose a day when the weather is bad. Besides, there's really no way a naked man floating in the water could prevent a boat from going out into the open sea. It wouldn't matter whether the buoy was there or not, in other words—all he could do was issue pointless warnings, which would be ignored. It seems, in other words, that the notion of the warning buoy isn't much of an explanation after all.

Maybe in the end this practice of having people become buoys has no basis. Sure, you can come up with a possible reason. But however convincing it may seem, no one really knows the truth, and the presence of an explanation doesn't change reality.

The less free you are, the more your imagination soars. If you work as a buoy, as someone who does nothing but float, then there's nothing you *can* do but float, so in a sense it's just like being held somewhere. Only your eyes and ears are at liberty. The green ocean, the hills that crouch like beasts, the sound of the sea breezes swishing

across the bay, the cries of the kites circling overhead, the lapping of the waves that slaps your ears. All these familiar sights and sounds must have stirred the imaginations of those men and then transformed them into something else. Because there was nothing else to do but let your imagination wander. An excess of imagination leads easily into delusion, of course. Perhaps my grandfather knew this, and that was why he gravitated toward silence—yes, I think he must have feared that delusional words would tumble from his lips. He was afraid that once he started talking about himself, he would never be able to stop the unbridled outpouring of language. So he had nothing to say, nothing he could say.

One night, after the children had gone to sleep, my grandparents went out together to the yard and stood gazing at the ocean. Since he had started working as a buoy, my grandfather had grown so sick of the ocean that he didn't want to look at it, and when he was at home he tried even harder than before to keep it out of his view. He had become testier, more inclined to withdraw into silence. He was utterly exhausted. My grandmother had asked him to come out with her, thinking it might cheer him up a little to feel the cool breeze in the yard on his skin. *Tsah dahkat wone ebenbe ablah seeno sea*, she said. And it was true—the ocean, dozing before them, was as black as if painted over with ink. A cool breeze slapped their cheeks so gently you could scarcely believe the bone-grinding heat of the day had been real.

*Jesgit thinkn, mawn maw ahdo. Idnt angood, my grandfather sighed. Juslikat munky said, wakhsa hahd hell hahd ahz gotnah time teben getan oldah.* My grandmother said nothing in reply. She just took his hand in hers and stared out at the ocean—the invisible sea. *Kaniiiirawh . . . somewhere a deer was belling. Its melancholy cry drew a thin white line across the surface of the darkness massed around them.*

When they lowered their gazes to the ground in front of them, they saw stars glimmering everywhere. Countless points of light stretched out in a band, a torrent, as if the Milky Way had fallen to earth. Except that all the stars were an eerie red in color. They were startled by the sight. They strained to see in the darkness. It was the toads. Any number of toads hopping across the pockmarked road, bordered on either side by grass, from here to there or from there to here, searching, perhaps, for a mate. The narrow road was covered with toads, squirming about, pushing each other, clambering on top of each other, and the lights were their eyes. The obscene energies of their flesh burned in their pupils, glittered like the stars. A feast of flesh. There it was: life itself. My grandparents were overwhelmed by a sense of what it was to be alive. They gasped, they even felt themselves shudder. They kept staring forever at those toads.

Eventually the darkness would begin to disperse, as if it were being dissolved in water, and one by one the stars would disappear. The ridges of the hills, like hunched animals whose fur had fallen out, would glitter whitely in the air, and slowly the ocean would reveal itself. Some chemical reaction between the light and something in the water, perhaps, would cause countless scent particles to waft up and out in all directions as the morning sun beat down on the surface of the ocean. Soon the sea breezes would carry that scent over the inlet and onto the land. At dawn, my grandfather would go out into the ocean.

One day, when a fisherman went to pick up my grandfather, he was nowhere to be seen. The fisherman made sure that he was really gone, then headed back into the inlet. He wouldn't go out and search for him. This was how it always ended, after all. The same thing had happened once again, that was all. The fisherman came to see my grandmother, told her ever so simply that Yawh fahmlys gotnah fahthr anmaw. Was my grandfather carried away by the tide, or did he sink? No one knows. If he had sunk, no one would see him alive again. So all my grandmother could do was wait for his body to wash up on the beach. Often after a storm you will find a decayed buoy cast onto the shore. We don't know when or where the buoy was tossed out into the ocean, or what it was meant to mark. It's just another buoy, lying on the sand. Still, it is a buoy, there's no mistake about that. Of course, there was no guarantee that he would turn up that way, but it had happened before: sometimes a man who had been a buoy was found lying on the sand. So my grandmother would have to wait. Even if a buoy were to wash up on the shore, there would be no way of telling for sure that it was my grandfather.

Or maybe my grandmother wasn't waiting at all. Because if the buoy were to be pushed ashore by the tides, all that would mean was that she would have to see for herself that my grandfather had died. Nehneh, buoys fah flahwtn notfah sinkn, my grandmother said. I suppose she must have believed my grandfather was still out there, bobbing amid the waves, and that he would be there forever. When you think about it, a buoy has no roots to hold it down. There's a weight hanging from the bottom, it's true, but it's not attached to the ocean floor—it's not planted in one place. Maybe we're mistaken to think they remain in exactly the same place. A buoy is supposed to identify a particular location, of course, but on an even more fundamental level, it is meant to float.

Looking out my window, I can see fishing buoys that have been cast out on the bay. Their wet black bodies gleam in the morning sun. It's almost time for me to go out. The ocean is awake now; I can see it there, shifting and sparkling as if waiting for me. 🐼