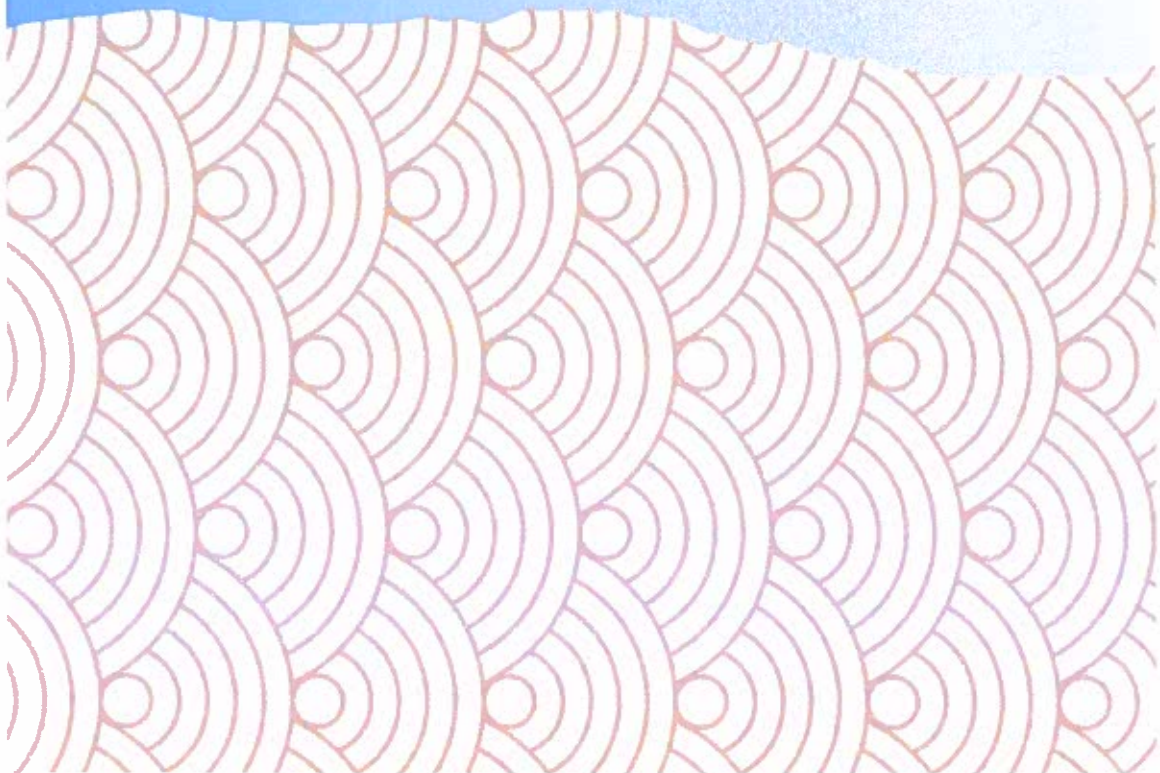




*Air*



## Air

i

Long banished from his mainland home and the inheritance of his father, Hu Ling felt the evening breeze against his windward cheek and saw the precious globe of fresh water drip from his long, drooping mustache onto the silk leg of his billowy, blue-and-tan striped pants. After each meal he fastidiously took a small, cupped handful of water to clean his lips and facial hair. Renegade or not, they would never find him adrift, tattered or torn. Hu Ling had sworn this to himself long ago, on that fateful first day of his watery exile.

He sat on his open deck and breathed in the salt air of day's end. On his lap he cradled a black and red lacquered box, whose channeled lid he slid aside to reveal the tea inside. Hu Ling relished its Indian aroma and taste since it was not the homeland brew he had foresworn and because he had stolen it while raiding a high-sterned, Dutch three-masted ship, as its crew slept and its guns were silent. From the bottom end of the hollow reed straw lashed to his ship's mast, he removed a small cork and let the sun-warmed, recondensed water drip down and fill his delicate blue and green, gold-filigreed cup. He replaced the cork and picked up another nocturnal trophy from his lap. It was a Venetian ceramic infuser, a perforated orb for brewing tea in the European style. With sure hands unperturbed by the gentle swells of the sea, he revolved the top of the globe-shaped ball to the side, placed just the right amount of tea in it, and suspended the re-closed ball into the cup. As his tea steeped, he slid the box lid shut and stored all his service items in a deck cask until needing them the next evening.

As was his custom at this time each day, he reviewed the condition of the glass lens that heated the salt water in the octopus skin sack that hung halfway up the mast. It was still in place and wiped of salt grime, as was the perfectly curved silver horn that trapped the evaporating moisture and recondensed it into a shiny black painted cistern. It was from this cistern that the fresh water both for his facial wash and his hot tea descended through the hollow tall reed.

Hu Ling turned to see the sand falling in the smallest of the three timepieces. He knew his tea was halfway to being ready by the sand's progress in the purloined glass he had meticulously re-shaped, fired, and calibrated a year ago and then carefully filled with five minutes' worth of the finest grains of Polynesian beach sand.

Hu Ling turned to his starboard side. The last glimmer of daylight still shimmered in the water five feet below the surface. He bent over and looked through his tar-and-pitch-sealed tube, fitted with lenses at both ends, and saw the bait he had placed there was still in the fish trap suspended from the keel. He was quite pleased with how well his new scope worked. Tonight's dinner was even better than usual, since he had been able to watch his prey swim alongside the trap for quite some time that afternoon, before moving in for the bait. Squirring to get back out of the ingenious trap, the fish expired from the effort and

sheer panic. While he sipped his evening hot tea, Hu Ling savored the victory and recalled his pleasure at seeing his catch suffer and die.

His sea anchors were set for the night. It was pleasant and there were no clouds in the sky. Hu Ling decided he would sleep out on the deck and fall asleep watching his fellow wanderers in the sky as they blinked and twinkled from afar. He knew them to be, within, as hot and intemperate as the sun. He felt himself to be their fellows in that regards as well.

ii

The dawn's greeting was hot and humid. Hu Ling saw a line of haze settled on the far horizon and knew that he had drifted nearer to land during the night. He was wary but pleased. Where there was land, there were people. Where there were people, there was booty. Where there was booty, there went Hu Ling.

His was a practiced art, learned over enough years to become part of the sea lore told aboard East Indiamen, merchant ships of the seventeenth century South Pacific, and in backwater haunts of trading ports from there to the Adriatic. No one ever knew of a time the exiled Hu Ling had set foot on land, preferring to scavenge what he could, one-on-one with a solitary vessel. His sleek craft with its slanted sails could outrun a laden trader with ease, after he stole aboard in the night, strangled the guard, pilfered what he wanted, and set the boat ablaze as a distraction from his escape. Stunned seafarers could only tell tales of fantastically colored, billowing clothes shimmering across the water as the marauder seemed to fly from their crippled ship back to his own before they or the fire could sever his lines from the top of their burning masts. The last glimpses of Hu Ling's retreating vessel his victims would see were his colors, hauntingly illuminated by the fire on their decks. His was a bold and arrogant pennant, whose fierce red dragon was set against a black field. The jewel-studded dragon flashed the shooting glow of their flames back at them in mock reflection. The field swallowed the light into its darkness, emulating Hu Ling's disappearance into the night.

There were no stories of daytime strikes. Most supposed, incorrectly, that he only struck under the cover of darkness. Only the catheimeral Hu Ling knew his diurnal foraging was reserved to loners who were not left alive to speak to anyone afterwards. Strangled and cut through to the belly to fill with water and sink, they were discarded to be eaten by the fish of the deep before they could refloat to the surface to bear witness to his evil deeds.

iii

He stalked the vessel, meandering, closing in, circling so he could use the fine European spyglass he stole from a Portuguese spice trader. Hu Ling noticed a smaller dugout lashed loosely to the starboard outrigger. Both boats appeared unattended and far

enough from land to suit his needs. There must have been a reef or a sunken vessel they were working, though it would be uncommonly deep, because the color of the surface water did not give it away. He approached stealthily, as he had schooled himself to do over the years, sails down, quietly tilling forward without splashing and riding the tide, virtually unheard from close distance and unseen from afar.

iv

The young woman slept peacefully in the bottom of her dugout. She was tired from paddling for two hours, having set out at the break of dawn. Her intended had been upset with her for even thinking of finding him alone. Yet he was so happy to see her. He was thrilled she had been able to discover him on the open water. She was totally without guile. She could not slip away with him for the days at a time he was away without angering or deceiving her elders. She would easily and innocently be back safely by nightfall when they expected to see her again. She slept in the noon sun, knowing it would be an hour before he returned. Then they would eat the fresh fruit she had brought as a surprise, and she would head back for home. She dreamed of her beloved with a passion, and withstood it as well, while she absorbed the tropical midday sun.

What an amazing young man he was. Her father, shortly before he died, had approved of their courtship. Now only two years stood in the way of their being old enough to wed. Two chaste years she had assured him. For his part, that was fine. He was too busy now working to secure his position and fortune. He resisted gleaning the seas for fish and instead taught himself to travel far, alone, and search out the fabled deep-sea caverns. Here there were pearls to be harvested by the thousands. He taught himself to free dive deeply. He survived on the trapped air in the cavern tops, and then ascended slowly to the surface, without bursting his lungs with the pressure. He inhaled carefully from pockets of air in conch shells he crafted for this special purpose, with bags of pearls slung from his waist as counterweights. The same skills brought him fabulous jewels and gold from sunken ships well beyond the reefs. All these would be sold to traders or bartered for goods to provide for himself and his island people. And the two of them would be happy, respected, and blessed with fine and healthy children whom their father would teach his secret ways.

The weight of Hu Ling's step into her dugout caused her to awake. She expected the man of her dreams, but stood to greet the stranger anyway. Her island was constantly hosting people with alien crafts and unknown ways. She had only seen a few people like this man before. His clothing was soft and colorful and rippled in the breeze. She drew the lei of flowers from around her neck and approached him. Laying the orchid garland over his head. She stood back to await his greeting.

Some minutes before, Hu Ling had drawn his craft to the port side of the outrigger, examined it, discovered bags of pearls, not yet cleaned nor polished, hurled them back onto his deck and stepped into the dugout. She awoke but did not scream. She stood and smiled and reached around her neck to remove the floral wreath. Her people would no doubt find her beautiful he thought. With her hands above her head, her exposed breasts were full and firm. The sarong fit tightly around her waist. But Hu Ling would not dream of sullyng himself because he had not enough fresh water to bathe with afterwards. No, he told himself, this would be quick. And he would be off to lay in wait for those below. Her forwardness shocked him somewhat, but she was unthreatening. He smiled beneath his trimmed mustache and gave the appearance of a ritual return of her gift of greeting. He raised the lei from his head, bowed in mock ceremony, and took a slow step forward to replace the flowers upon the young maiden's shoulders. She lowered her head in return, unsuspectingly, to receive what she intuited was a return of her greeting of welcome and peace.

Hu Ling's practiced, long fingers slid off the flowers as he gracefully touched the back of her neck with his fingertips only. She peered up at him with some surprise and her look turned to wide-eyed horror and confusion when the taller man pressed his thumbs into her voice box so she could not call out.

Her kicking did no good because he had lifted her up from the deck and there was no power in her legs. Suddenly, she stopped. She was not like his other victims. He felt cheated. She stole from him the thrill of the usual struggle, when he tried to imagine what was going through the mind of his dying prey.

This young woman was going somewhere Hu Ling could never hope to enter, in this life or the next. She heard nothing more. He wore the only human snarl she had ever seen in her young life. She willed it away and it was replaced with a spherical tunnel awash with a bright, but hazy light. Voices at the end of the space murmured and became clearer as she walked toward them. She recognized her dead father's voice and then saw him. She marveled that he stood and looked well. For the last time she saw him he was broken and bloodied under a large palm tree that crashed into his hut during last season's fierce storms. He turned and greeted her and gently called her name. She felt embraced in his fatherly love and smiled, too happy to speak anything more than his name.

Hu Ling was puzzled. The limp corpse in front of him hung in the air with a smile. A soft word, one he did not understand, tenderly escaped her lips in barely a whisper as she died.

He cut her from sternum to navel, turning her toward the water first to keep her blood off his clothes, and threw her overboard in disgusted disappointment. As he stepped through the outrigger and reboarded his craft, he told himself that the others better fight back or his day would be spoiled.

She floated down past his line of sight as he held the guide line and breathed the air from the conch shell. At first, he thought she had dived in to meet him. But gradually a cold fear crept into him that she'd fallen overboard, because she started drifting away from him. He risked running out of breath and having to surface too quickly by letting go of the line, allowing the conch shell to fall from his hand, and swimming as quickly as he could toward her. The heart went out of him when he saw she was dead and mutilated. He kept looking for sharks but saw none as he kicked to the surface with his hands under her arms. He was out of breath and about to black out when his head broke through to the surface under her back. Stealthily, he kept her above him as a shield, in case her attackers were not from under the sea and were waiting for him, too. He floated that way for some time, waiting, anticipating, fearing. But nothing approached from below and no one came from above. At the same time that he felt guilty to be hiding beneath her from anyone from above, he felt it more likely he would be needed to kick out at some undersea predator who had taken her life and was circling to return. Such were the ways of the sea. He knew them all too well.

After an hour's time, neither attack happened and he was convinced her assailant had come from above. He filled his lungs, knowing he had left enough time to rest between dives. He gracefully drew her below so it would look as if she had naturally floated to the surface and then was sinking again. Under the surface he spun them around and swam powerfully for the caverns he had been working. He set her tenderly on a ledge in the cavern up above the water's reach, took in some deep breaths, and then swam back out to retrieve the conch shell from where it hit the sea floor, and returned to sit beside her, keeping vigil, and thinking of what to do next. He thought of what fate had done this to her. She still had on her sarong, so he imagined the attack was not a forced violation of her maidenhood. What else of value was there? He could only think it was the pearls on his outrigger. He convinced himself he had to act as if that was the reason for this horrible thing. Otherwise, he would be too easily distracted and fatally vulnerable.

Hu Ling was amazed the body resurfaced. He chided himself for his anger, thinking it caused him to make the wound too shallow to bring her down. He was relieved when he saw the sea reclaim her after an hour, especially since the slack tides seemed too weak to carry her away. As evening approached, he postponed preparing his dinner in order to maintain his vigil. He began to think that no one was there except the woman. But he could not figure why she would use two boats if that were the case.

Kissing the swollen, cold lips of his love and bidding her farewell with the promise to return, the young man swam out of the cave and easily captured the prickly blowfish he otherwise would have worked studiously to avoid if he were seeking pearls. He placed the fish in his pearl sack, which he had lined back in the cave with stones and seaweed to prevent the stingers from poking through, and to retain some of the seawater. He used the conch shell and made his way to the surface, breaking through at the beginning of dusk.

He stood in his outrigger, not trying to hide his presence. He showed no signs of his grief and gave no hint that he knew what had happened to his love. He made an effort to appear to scan the surface water as if looking for her. He untied the dugout and started to row in circular patterns as if searching for her. With each of his calculated sweeps of the circle, it became more possible for him to perceive the route her assailant would use to attack the outrigger a second time. He did not have long to wait. And once he saw the masts on the horizon he turned back to the outrigger, feigning exhaustion and despair. He certainly wanted to be aboard his boat when the attack came, among his crude defenses.

Hu Ling felt vindicated. His waiting from a distance had paid off. So had using his plundered spyglass, even in the diminishing light. The pearl sack the young man had tossed aboard the outrigger looked much bigger than those Hu Ling had stolen earlier in the afternoon. Now, if only this man was a valiant warrior would the pirate's day be made. A day to meet and thank the gods, if only he still believed in them. He set his sail for speed, to beat his prey back to the outrigger; convinced surprise would still be on his side if the man were as hospitable as the woman. The winds were not so favorable though, so he slowed to bide his time and approached with sails down.

The man was asleep as the woman had been. But his sleep appeared fitful as Hu Ling strode onto the canoe and then up onto the outrigger. The man awoke. He was young like she had been. As he stood up his eyes darted to the pearl sack on the deck. Hu Ling drew his curved blade, which he had cleaned with sea water. He motioned with it toward the sack. The man appeared brave and cautious. Hu Ling hoped for a good fight. He wanted to look into the eyes of a warrior dying before the night was upon him.

The smaller man, barefoot and dressed only in a sarong, reluctantly handed the treasure forward toward the taller, more colorfully dressed and high-booted pirate. He kept one eye on the pirate's hand and the other on the blade. Hu Ling grasped the sack with his free hand. And as he did, the islander took two steps back. He knew where he was in his own boat and did not have to take his eyes off the blade to be certain of where he was going. Hu Ling transferred the sack so it hung by its strings on his two smallest fingers of the hand that also held the sword. His palm, thumb, and three larger fingers still gripped

the blade, in case the islander tried to rush him. This would be the critical moment both men knew Hu Ling would be vulnerable to a charge. So, the pirate raised the blade to his mouth and gripped it in his teeth—giving him two available hands for the bag and a fight. He extended his freed hand, pried open the stringed closure and reached into the sack to feel around for the pearls.

At least five of the poison-tipped quills of the dying blowfish pierced Hu Ling's hand as he rummaged around to find pearls among the rocks and seaweed and provoked the fish's last puffed-up defense. Hu Ling's eyes exploded in rage and pain and he let go of the sack. His hand jerked to the hilt of the blade as he cried out. It flipped the blade in his twisting lips, so that its honed edge sliced his tongue and cut into the corners of his mouth. The islander had seen all he needed to see. He knew his lover had been avenged. He jumped across the outrigger and boarded the pirate's boat to reclaim his pearls. The young man no longer cared if the narrowed-eyed, screaming murderer came after him; though he knew in his heart that wasn't going to happen.

x

Hu Ling fell back in shock. He tasted the coppery choking flavor of his own blood for the first time in his life. He spit and spit to get rid of it, but his tongue bled profusely. Cursing, he slashed open the sack that had fallen at his feet and saw, amid the rocks and the seaweed, the carcass of the dead fish. No pearls. There were no pearls. First, he felt cheated. That he had misunderstood part of the diver's trade. But it came to him as his eyes watered and his throat tightened. The bronzed and barefoot little man had known. Why else would he now be across in Hu Ling's boat throwing items around. He was searching for his pearls. Of course. And he would find them drying on the rich black velvet cloth Hu Ling had set them out upon in the sun after washing them with his precious fresh water, to purge them of this islander's contact. How could this unarmed little man be so brazen to board his vessel? What did he know to make him so courageous?

Hu Ling's feet would not move. He couldn't understand at first. He scanned the horizon as every wounded prey of the wild does, searching for its unknown attacker; furtive in vulnerability in case others are on their way in for the kill. As he turned to his vessel, the islander stood, lashing the bags of pearls back on to the waistline cord of his sarong. He stared straight into Hu Ling's eyes. He did not have the look of revenge. He did not wear the pathological sneer Hu Ling knew was his own victims' last sight on earth. Instead, he looked pained. He shook his head slightly from side to side. Then he stepped overboard, feet first into the water, to reclaim his love. He knew he would have nothing to fear from this dispirited wanderer when he resurfaced in an hour.



But fear was all that Hu Ling seemed to know now. It was something he had not sensed in a long time; but felt in the pit of his stomach now. And he was glad of the feeling. Because he could not feel anything much lower than that. His feet were numb and still not responding to his demand that they get him off this outrigger and back onto his boat. His legs were no better. Hu Ling had heard of islanders with poison darts in their blowguns throughout the South Pacific. He knew the blowgun wounds were fatal. But he had never heard of a poisonous fish. He just wanted to get back aboard his ship.

He let himself fall to the deck by pushing off against the mast that supported him. He dragged himself by his strong and capable arms, the faithful arms that had not failed him in battle nor storm as he raged his way across these oceans of exile. Exiled for squeezing the life out of his brothers and sisters for an inheritance, and failing at that, had done the same scores of times since, for sport and conquest on the high seas. Soaked to the skin through his silken pants, he dragged himself through the water by grabbing the outriggering hand over hand. It was tedious and slow-going work that sapped his strength. At the side of his vessel, he pulled himself up and over the gunwale and onto the deck. As he did, the metal hook for his sail lines tore a gash across his midsection. It was not deep. It did not gush blood. Just slightly stained his white blouse and made it stick to his skin. "Not deep enough to kill me," Hu Ling told himself. But then it came to him. He couldn't feel any pain from the gash.

He pulled himself across the deck, arm over arm—still they were faithful, but not as strong. He looked into his cabin and saw he could adjust his position as he fell down the stairs if he pushed with his hands just at the right time. He did so, but cut open a nasty flap of skin from his forehead as he hit the floor. Still, he was headed in the direction he wanted to go. He did not know how long he lay there dazed before he forced himself to move on. With only his arms, he pulled himself to his wash station and hoisted himself up against the cabin wall. Jammed that way in the corner, he did not fall. He could lean upright. He fought for his breath, panting from the exertion. He knew he was unsteady on his paralyzed legs and unfeeling midsection, so he moved his arms most deliberately, not to lose balance. He was upright, but he didn't fool himself to act as if he were standing.

He looked back behind himself to the deck above, along the way he'd come. It was ransacked and streaked with his own blood. His pride was hurt. He started to talk to himself. Quietly at first. Trying to control his panic by talking softly to himself, the way no one did when he was a boy. "What if they find my boat adrift, while I'm still sick?" With a voice a little louder to screw up some confidence he answered himself, "I swear to clean it all as soon as I get better." He took in the wretched sight of his torn and bloodied clothing with shame.

He needed to cough. He tasted his own blood and needed to cough it up. When he was dragging himself along, the blood spilled freely from his mouth. Now that he was upright, it was dripping down his throat. But he could not cough. His chest was solid. He

could not feel it. He picked up his hand and beat it against his chest to force himself to cough. But to no avail. And his hand was slow in working. So, he spoke aloud to quell his fear. "I could have taken a sword. I would accept being caught and hanged. But a fish! An unarmed, barefoot diver and a fish!" He held himself in scorn. He felt a twinge in his jaw. His was a nervous, derisive laugh. At the sound, something inside him knew a universal truth. He beheld himself in the mirror above his washstand. He looked right into his own eyes.

Hu Ling heard a soft whistle and slid aside the square cover next to him that opened his viewing port through the side of his boat in the direction from which the sound came. He could barely twist his neck enough so he saw his adversaries in his peripheral vision. There stood the bereaved betrothed on his outrigger, next to the supine corpse of his intended wrapped the full length of her body, up to her neck, in a clean flowery-colored cloth. From the mast of the islander's boat hung several bags of pearls. The pirate and the pearl diver peered into each other's eyes as the outrigger moved out of sight.

Hu Ling turned his neck with great effort and looked in the mirror again. He saw in his eyes that he knew what he had to do. He would push himself down again and drag himself across the floor to the deck. Out there he would take the long, sharp hook for dragging fish aboard. He had fashioned it from his spoils-of-the-night some years before. He would prop it in front of him on the deck and then push off and fall on it in an honorable death.

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He went to push off the wall. It was no good. He couldn't do it. He was too late. There was no feeling left in his arms. He glanced back into the mirror. His chest was tight. He could not breathe. His neck felt as if it were in a choking grip. His sight began to cloud. He stood alone in the corner, unable to move, with no one to comfort him. Just like when he was a child, with several brothers and sisters.

In the flat crepuscular light Hu Ling gazed fixedly into the eyes of a warrior who was dying. He wondered why his next-to-last victim smiled. He could see nothing to make him smile. He wondered to whom she spoke her last whispering word. He tried to shout and curse, but his voice would not work. He could not whisper. He could not even breathe. He saw his eyes tear of their own will. He saw them get wider and wider as he tried to catch his breath. Before they closed, he saw himself unable to gasp for air one last time.