

WEIRDSCAPES

AN OTHERWORLDLY ANTHOLOGY

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THE IMMORTAL MONK

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They came from far and wide to pay alms to the Immortal Monks, but Tenzo had only to step out the front door of his shack and sit on his stoop. From there he liked to pilgrim-watch, and it was endlessly entertaining, for an endless stream of pilgrims were passing by at any given moment. Some came from out of sight where the beginning of the line of gray statues with painted red robes was said to start, but where Tenzo had never been. All he knew was weathered skulls and carved smiles, far as he could see.

“Why go anywhere,” his mother scolded when once he had complained, “when all the world carries itself to your door?”

Tenzo saw the logic, even as a young child, and from then on felt very special and important that he lived along the middle of the line where the whole world passed by. For everyone, at least once in their lives, would “walk with the Immortal Monks” to receive their collective blessings. The statues carried stone alms bowls in

stone hands—the greater the offering, the greater the blessing.

Most only walked with them for a little while; they were poor, elderly, they had nothing for which to repent. Those who came from out of sight, those were the ones who really needed blessings; a loved one was seriously ill or they themselves were nearing rebirth. Because Tenzo was a child, he could ask questions like, *Why?*

“Pester them now,” his grandmother used to say, “before you have to wait to be my age and then you’ll be too tired to be curious.”

Where are you from?

What for are you paying alms?

Do your feet hurt? Why suffer when you could have some fresh sandals?

Selling sandals was what Tenzo was supposed to be pestering pilgrims about, but since most said *no* with a swatting look like he was a biting fly, he asked the other questions first.

He learned all sorts of things just outside his own door with the world passing by. He learned that there were great mountains towards the beginning of the line of Immortal Monks where there were birds as big as men. And the men there wore whole animals on their backs to stay warm. He learned that some were from the South even though they walked from the North because they had traveled to start all the way at the first statue. He learned that people from the South thought they were the most pious because they had to travel the furthest from where the monks finally walked into the Infinite Waters. Where there were fish the size of houses! He learned that most adults did not know much more about life than a child like he did. That people will walk for days on blisters to try and pray back a love lost. Those inevitably started with a sack

almost too heavy to lift and paid one coin and a prayer into each alms bowl they passed. By the time they got to Tenzo’s stretch of statues, their backs were twisted and spasming, their legs hobbled, and their feet were bloody. Their sacks were lighter, though.

“Do you think you will get to the end?” Tenzo would ask.

“I hope so. This is all my alms savings. I have nothing more.”

“Would you like a fresh pair of sandals then?”

Others did not walk from the beginning but would come from the East or West and make a great show of offering all of their wealth into the bowl of just one statue. They would collapse to the ground and grovel at the stone feet in a spectacle of reverence. These pilgrims Tenzo could not sell sandals to, but the sandals were just the excuse to live beside the Immortal Monks, so selling them did not really matter.

Every day, sun or storm, Tenzo’s mother would dress in pilgrim robes with her hair down and hood up so that the neighbors who sold snacks and boiled stream water would not recognize her, slip out of their shack, and into the line. At each alms bowl she put in one coin and palmed two. When she returned, her sack was twice as heavy. This was the real reason they lived there. At night, she would sneak out and empty entire bowls, but only in the rain, because night was the most dangerous: pilgrims returning after they did not get the blessing they had asked for and wanting their alms offerings back, drunks and thieves and gamblers from the nearby shantytown. It was not uncommon to see blood or a dead body in the morning. His mother would drag the body off with some neighbor and Tenzo would be made to wash the statue. Everyone who lived beside the Immortal Monks could agree, murder was not good for business.

Sometimes pilgrims died of natural causes. Heat stroke, relief of offering their last coin, a broken heart (his grandmother had told Tenzo this, though a heart not yet broken cannot comprehend such an invisible injury). Tenzo had seen more death than most elders. Only the other day, as he was pilgrim-pestering to pass the time, he spotted a figure in the distance shuffling along the line. At each statue, the figure dropped to the ground and lay, belly down, at the monk's feet. This is what pilgrims would do who had no coins left to give but more blessings still to ask for. As the figure approached, Tenzo saw that it was a man, wearing thick robes that were ripped all along the front from his prostrating and so covered in ochre dust that he could not tell what color they had been. There was a heaviness about him, and though he was not nearly as old as his grandmother had been, he looked it. Fifty pilgrims must have passed in the time it took the man to reach his statue.

Tenzo had been waiting for him. "Where are you from?" he pestered.

"You are asking," the man rasped, "the wrong question."

"What should I ask you, then?" *Forget selling sandals.*

"Ask this: 'What horrible acts did you commit to earn the coin with which you are trying to buy redemption?'"

Tenzo was surprised to hear a pilgrim admit that they had been horrible. But he was not about to give up the opportunity to hear the answer. "What horrible acts did you commit?"

It had been one of those adult answers that sounded like a riddle. A riddle that would never be solved, since the man had collapsed, right there, at Tenzo's feet.

His mother had rushed over. But it was not to come to Tenzo's aid, or the pilgrim's, though he reached out to her with his dying

breath. It was to slip a ruby ring off his pinky finger before the body was carted away. This was nearly as shocking as a man speaking his last words to Tenzo. Not that his mother pocketed the ring, but that it had been a ruby ring. Everyone knew that because the Immortal Monks wore red robes, that no one was allowed to wear that blessed color in their presence. But it did not matter because his mother would not wear it. She would hide it along with the rest of their riches. For what, Tenzo did not know.

Tenzo's mother had so much gold that they did not have to live in a shack, but she said: "No one will rob a shack," and buried the coins in the dirt floor and covered the stash with a simple grass mat. Tenzo had no real concept of how much she had buried until one morning he went outside and found that one of the dead bodies was hers.

The ground was foggy with evaporating dew. Perhaps it had rained in the night and she thought it safe to empty a bowl or two. Perhaps the fog was too thick to see that there was already somebody there, doing just that.

Tenzo was an orphan now.

His father had died when he was very young, though it occurred to him that he did not know how, and his grandmother had died sitting in her chair out front of their shack, jubilantly criticizing the passing pilgrims two summers past. Tenzo could only remember her gap-toothed smile and that she smelled of incense ash and fried sweet dumplings.

Tenzo was too small to lift his mother from the base of the statue, but a kind neighbor offered. They had moved in next door because they wanted to lead a more pious life in the shadow of the Immortal Monks. His mother had said, "More for me." There were

no valuables to remove from her body before they took it away. No earrings, no bangles, no silks, though she could have afforded them all. She had not wanted to draw any attention to her wealth.

“You can pray over her if you want,” the pious neighbor said, “but this body is only a husk. Your mother lived her life so reverently, she is sure to have an esteemed rebirth. She is very fortunate, for there is no holier place to die than at the feet of an Immortal Monk.”

Tenzo thought that this was a curious thing to say as his mother had always called the bodies bleeding at the monk’s feet “fools.”

Tenzo went back inside and peeked through the crack between two of the shack’s slats. He watched as the neighbors put his mother’s body in their body-removing-wheelbarrow and carted her out of sight. All of a sudden, he felt the need to sit down on the worn grass mat.

It started with curiosity. Tenzo peeled the mat up, just a corner, and brushed the dirt away until he saw the glint of a coin. There beside it, another. He had no trowel, so he used the wooden sole of a sandal to dig. He dug for what felt like hours, stopping only for a snack of dried fruit and rice sticks and then digging again. Whenever he thought, “Just one more,” he’d find two. He dug until he fell asleep digging. When he woke, it was beside a pile of coins nearly as large as him.

Orange light flickered through the peek-crack. There was a knock at the door—what must have woken him.

“Tenzo?” It was the voice of the pious neighbor. “Would you like to join us for moonrise meal?”

There was no hiding a pile of coins nearly as large as him.

“I am still praying for my mother!” he called out. “I will come later.”

The neighbor left and Tenzo started digging with more purpose. He was only a child, and some other adult would come and take his shack and all the wealth buried in its floor. His mother would not have wanted that. He would not be able to live with his pious neighbor because, if he did, he would be made to give it all back to the monks. His mother would not have wanted that, either.

He found jewels along with the coins, including the ruby pinky ring, which he slipped on his thumb.

By the time he had dug up every coin, Tenzo’s hands were blistered and filled with splinters, his arms shook weakly, and the entire floor was a dirt pit. The pile of coins was taller than he was, standing.

The dusty light of dawn sliced through the peek-crack and across the dirt pit of the floor, and with it a dawning awareness that he would not be able to carry such quantity of coin. Even their rice sack would be much too small, and he too small to carry even that.

He covered the pile as well as he could with the grass mat and went out to his stoop. There were his neighbors, already offering blessed water to the first customers of the day. They looked at Tenzo like he was a pilgrim with bloody feet.

“I have decided to go live with my uncle,” Tenzo said. He had no uncle, but this is what the child of the last neighbors had told him before he walked into the distance of the East with his family, carrying everything they owned strapped to their backs because they had no mule. But they had not had a pile of coins taller than Tenzo was standing to carry. “Only, I do not have any way to carry

my belongings. Could I buy your wheelbarrow?" He held up a single coin. "My mother left me this."

"Keep your coin," the pious neighbor said. "You can have our wheelbarrow. We can build another."

The neighbor went behind his hut and returned with the bamboo wheelbarrow, empty of his mother's body.

Tenzo spent the day holding sandals out to passing pilgrims because he did not know what else he should be doing. He did not ask any questions. He did not want to know "*Why?*"

That night Tenzo ate with his neighbors under the rising moon—leaf steamed sticky rice and green curry—then went back to his shack to "sleep at home one last time." He waited until he could hear the tree frogs telling each other to come out and play, then Tenzo began to fill the wheelbarrow. This took him a long while, as he filled it one coin at a time so that they would not clink. Coin by coin the pile grew, by coin, by coin, by— bamboo splinters went flying as the wheelbarrow collapsed in a pile of coins and kindling.

There was no chance the neighbors three shacks over would not have heard such a noise!

Tenzo had only just covered the remains of the wheelbarrow with the grass mat when, sure enough, the pious neighbor called through the door: "Tenzo, are you alright?!"

"Yes! It was only the . . . the wheelbarrow broke. I . . . over-packed it. I am sorry for the noise."

"Let me enter so that I may help you."

"No!" Tenzo panicked. "I am sorry I woke you. I will be quieter."

"You don't have to do this by yourself, Tenzo." The neighbor's

voice was tender. More tender than his mother's had ever been. He did not trust it.

"You bless me. I may ask for help tomorrow. But now I think I will sleep."

"Blessed dreams, then," said the pious neighbor and went away.

Tenzo would need something sturdier than a bamboo wheelbarrow. He wanted to go to the West where there was the shantytown that the thieves who came in the middle of the night snuck from but, for that reason, he also knew that he must wait until dawn.

Suddenly, there was a *snap* at the door as the bamboo closure sliced into two pieces. The neighbor entered. Machete in hand.

"This was my mother's. You can't take it!" Tenzo tried, almost comically, to block the pile of treasure with his scrawny body and outstretched arms.

But the neighbor did not advance.

"Long ago, I promised everything I had to the Immortal Monks. It is a way of life: giving so much to the needy that you become needy yourself. You always need more to give, because you are so desperate to prove yourself as pious enough to be in their presence. All that I would take from you, I would give to them."

Exactly as he had feared! Tenzo stretched his arms wider but only succeeded in stretching himself thinner.

The neighbor could have easily shoved him aside, but he only clasped his hands behind his back. The machete too. "Although, if I give it to the monks, another needy person will take it."

"You know that the monks don't take the coins?" (His mother had told him that the pious 'are so blinded by their faith that they

can't see their own foolishness.')

"The Immortal Monks are not so greedy that they would keep wealth for themselves when others are in need." The neighbor smiled, knowingly. Tenzo usually hated when adults smiled at him that way, as if there were a secret he was too simpleminded to understand, and this time was no exception. He was about to argue, when the neighbor reasoned, "An orphaned boy, what more needy a person could there be?"

Tenzo dropped his arms. "You're letting me keep it? All of it?"

"Use your wealth to help others like yourself, and you will have a blessed life indeed."

Tenzo was shocked into silence.

The neighbor grinned like a monk with a secret. "Do you really have an uncle you are going to live with?"

Tenzo did not want to lie, but he also did not want to say the truth, so he only looked at his blistered hands.

"You can stay here, you know." Then, as if hearing Tenzo's thoughts, "But if you cannot, you will need something more than a bamboo wagon to carry such a heavy load."

Tenzo felt angry again. *Of course he knew that!* "I was going to buy a cart and ox at sunrise. From the West."

"I think it will be safer for me to go to the West. Why don't you give me the coin and I will get what you need."

Tenzo's first reaction was to think, *a trick!* But he quickly realized that the neighbor could have taken all of his coins if he wanted, easily.

"You bless me." Tenzo handed over a handful, which was really only a few coins because his hands were child's hands.

"I will need a little more than that."

So Tenzo gave him a little more. But no more than a little.

After the neighbor left, there was nothing for Tenzo to do but sleep. But sleep does not come peacefully to a recently orphaned child. When the sun arrived with the first pilgrim's prayers, Tenzo was still awake. He heard the pious neighbor say blessings to his family and leave.

Tenzo spent the day sitting on his stoop, too dazed and weary to do anything but pilgrim-watch (not even pilgrim-pester). As the sun floated higher in the sky, the monks' shadows grew shorter. Tenzo stopped watching the people and started watching their shadows. He imagined that there was a shadow world with shadow monks and shadow pilgrims and coins made of pure light. The shadow of his mother was there, still walking the line, trying to palm coins that burned through shade hands. The more her shadow shrank, the more wildly she snatched at the alms bowls—dusk desperately trying to hold onto daylight. She grew shorter and shorter as the sun reached its pinnacle in the sky—grabbing faster and faster—until she nearly disappeared, her hands but wisps of shadow clinging to the coins.

A voice hollered at her. It was a neighbor, selling sugarcane.

Tenzo turned back and saw that the shadow world had grown in the other direction, the statue's silhouettes now long as men. He must have dozed off. Tenzo searched the shadows for his mother, but she was not among them.

At moonrise meal, the pious neighbor returned with a cart and ox, as promised. The ox was a dirty white with bony haunches and had large watery eyes. Tenzo decided to name it Hemptato after the name of a king one of the pilgrims from the North had told him about. That night the neighbor even helped him load the

coins into sacks and sacks into the wagon.

They had only just heaved in the last sack and covered the haul with a burlap tarp, when the monkeys called forth the sun. Tenzo was very tired and very much wanted to sleep, but now that the wagon was full, he was afraid to leave it.

He decided to steer Hemptato in the direction of the South because he wanted to see the monks walk into the Infinite Waters. Tenzo surprised himself by telling his pious neighbor this.

“I came from the East so I do not know how many monks it is to reach the South, but your mother had so much alms savings that I imagine you could walk with them to the Infinite Waters then throw the rest to the waves. You will be the most pious of men then. You will become holy yourself.” His neighbor then handed Tenzo a small but weighty pouch. “Put your first coin in this one.”

It was the statue at which his mother’s body had been found. The blood was gone but Tenzo still saw it.

The neighbor smiled encouragingly.

The monk smiled serenely.

Tenzo took a coin from the pouch. It was silver, but sunlight flashed it gold. He did not want to give it away to some statue’s bowl that a thief would steal from later. Tenzo’s mother had always thought the pilgrims foolish that they gave their fortunes away, and Tenzo found he agreed. But the neighbor was watching and would never let him leave if he thought Tenzo would keep all his wealth for himself.

He put the silver coin in the stone bowl that held a number of copper coins and one other silver, praying what he had heard a thousand thousand times before, “I pay reverence to you, oh, venerable Immortal Monk. Bless me with this offering.”

As soon as his cart was out of sight, Tenzo stopped putting coins in bowls. Yet he sulked for some time about the thirty or so he’d had to give away. His hands were too small to palm coins as his mother had but he resolved, bitterly, to get them back somehow.

The wagon was so heavy and the ox so slow, that the pilgrims paying alms all passed him, even though they stopped to pray at each statue. Tenzo started to play a game, see if he could move fast enough to keep a pilgrim in sight. One with a grass woven sunhat gave alms and prayers at the statue beside him. Though Tenzo tried to keep up, he watched the sunhat grow smaller and smaller until eventually it disappeared into the distance along with the prodigious procession.

There were shacks all along the path and at each one someone offering to sell him everything from rice balls to souvenirs to holy water collected from the bowls of the monks after a rain. Tenzo now understood why the pilgrims had looked at him like he was a biting fly. He soon felt that if he gave them all a bite, he’d be devoured alive long before he reached the end.

“What do you have in the wagon?”

It was a girl around his age, but a least a monk-step taller than him.

“Yams,” Tenzo said because it was the first thing he could think of.

“Can I have one?” asked the girl.

“No,” said Tenzo.

“I’ll trade you. I have fruit.” She held up a melon the size of her head. Tenzo suddenly wanted nothing more but to sit and rest and eat a melon the size of a girl’s head.

“How much does it cost?”

“Three yams.”

Tenzo did not really have any yams, and so he had to ask: “How much in coin?”

The girl laughed. “*You* have coin?”

“Forget it. I will buy fruit from someone else,” said Tenzo. He was tired and sore and his mother had just died; he had no patience. Tenzo put his weight into yanking the yoke rope again.

“Just one copper!” the girl called out.

Tenzo reached into the pouch of coins and felt for the smallest. He handed it to the girl and received the fruit.

He could not carry the melon and guide Hempato at the same time, so he had no choice but to sit down right there and start to eat it. It was slightly overripe. Sticky juice ran down his blistered hands.

The girl sat beside him.

“What’s really in the cart?” she asked.

Tenzo assessed the girl. In his weakened state, she would easily be able to overpower him.

He stood up and dropped the rest of the melon even though he would like to have eaten more. It cracked apart and splattered their dusty feet—his sandaled, hers bare.

“It is overripe,” he said. “I don’t want the same for my yams.” Then he pushed onwards without looking back.

It was clear that Hempato was as weary as he. The ox’s bony haunches quivered with every step. And Tenzo found himself struggling even to keep up their labored pace. They needed a place to rest, but also to put the sacks while they rested or they would surely be stolen—even yams had worth to a hungry thief. Some of the shacks along the path offered lodging. He waited until he was

out of sight of the girl selling melons bigger than her head, and then took the first one offered.

It was a simple one-room shack that reminded Tenzo of home. He unloaded his sacks of “yams” and dragged them inside one at a time. Blisters tore open. The bow-legged elder who had sold him the night of lodging, only watched.

“That’s a lot of yams,” he remarked. Tenzo could not tell if the tone was mocking or disapproving. He only hoped it was not suspicious.

A spindly stick secured the shack door, a door that could easily be broken open by a well-aimed overripe melon. So Tenzo shoved and shimmied a sack right up against it. Then he cried. He cried until he cried himself to sleep.

When he woke, it was with eyelids crusted closed and a tight belly. For a brief moment, he thought he would go sit on his stoop and see what his mother had made for sunrise meal. But then Tenzo remembered how he would have to find his own meals from now on.

Tenzo did not want to leave his sacks but he also needed another ox to be able to drive them any further. Hempato needed help. He took just three coins—one copper, one silver, one gold—then he shimmied and shoved and pushed the sack away from the door just enough so he could slip his thin-as-bones body through the gap. He pulled the door closed.

The sun had already risen above the trees and was casting short shadows from the Immortal Monks. His shadow mother would soon disappear along with the coins of light.

“You slept long time,” said the bow-legged elder. “The sun will think you believe yourself better than him.”

Tenzo wanted to say that he never slept that late, that his mother already had him out distracting pilgrims with sandals, but that she died and so he had no one to wake him anymore and also that her coins were too heavy for him and that his arms shook even to lift them to dry his tears. But he only said, “You are right,” because he had been taught not to contradict elders. “I will try to wake up earlier tomorrow. If you will sell me the room for one more night?”

“Will your uncle not worry if you are delayed?”

“You are right,” agreed Tenzo again. “Would you mind if I leave my yams here—just a short while—so that I might get some supplies for the journey ahead?”

“You can pay me not to mind.”

Tenzo knew that he was being *‘played like a songster’s lute,’* as his grandmother used to say, which made him angry because he was just a child and this coin was his mother’s who had died for it. But he said, “You are right,” and paid the bow-legged elder one of his three coins. The copper one. With the other two he walked quickly towards the West.

As he turned his back on the Immortal Monks, his stomach squirmed like a pinned snake. With every step he took away from the statues, it tried to twist free. If ever Tenzo had ventured to the North or the South along the line, he knew he could always retrace his steps to find his way home. This was the first time he had ever strayed from their straight and true path. *You will never find your way back,* the snake in his stomach warned. Tenzo tried to ignore it as he scanned the tree line. There was a shantytown hidden along his stretch of monks, why should it be any different here?

Almost as soon as he finished the thought, he saw a figure

emerge from the trees.

The shantytown was not hard to find. An ochre path had been worn through the tangle of forest and faded strips of prayer cloth hung from nearly every branch along it, some tied so heavily that there were more knots than leaves. There were also remnants of fire rings and charred debris. Splintered spokes and shattered pots.

He heard the town before he saw it. Shouting and clanging. He smelled it too. Smoke and manure. Then he emerged from the forest path, and he saw it. No two structures looked the same. Some shacks were built right up against one another, as if propping themselves up. Others were made from clay, same as the ochre muck which oozed through the cracks of haphazard boardwalks. Tenzo noticed wagon wheels used both as windows and planters. Grass mats as awnings. Stacked doors as walls. The more he absorbed the details, the more it seemed that every piece of building material had been repurposed from something else. Something broken.

Tenzo was afraid to enter but he was more afraid of losing his mother’s coin if he could not find a way to carry it.

The shantytown was all corners and alleyways and soon Tenzo was turned completely around.

“Need help?” A woman with one tooth was leaning against a door frame that looked like it really should not be leaned against.

Tenzo took a sharp turn in the other direction.

“You lost?” A man with all his teeth, which seemed suspicious in a place such as this.

“No,” Tenzo assured, hurrying away.

He needed to get out and get out. The snake coiled around his intestines. *You will never find your way back.*

After a few more wrong turns (were there any right turns here?), Tenzo found a family selling animals for work, slaughter, or ritual—they did not seem to care what for, as long as they were paid. Tenzo had prepared a lie. If asked where the coin came from, he would say, “I found it on the trail, a pilgrim must have dropped it.” But they did not ask.

With the gold coin Tenzo bought another ox, though it was not yet broken in. He asked what her name was. One of the children, younger than Tenzo, said an unblest word. Tenzo decided that a more appropriate name would be Madu.

With the silver coin he bought a large bag of perfectly ripe melons. He ended up having to hold a melon in front of Madu to get her to move. She took a bite for every step. Half his supply was gone by the time he got back to the Immortal Monks.

At the sight of their uniform red robes and serene smiles, Tenzo vowed never to stray from the straight and true path of the monks again. The snake uncoiled . . . then constricted tighter than ever. The door to the shack was open.

Tenzo entered to find the elder standing bow-legged over his mound of sacks. Many had been opened, and coins were spilled on the dirt floor like recently unearthed treasure.

“That’s mine!” shouted Tenzo.

But the elder said, “This cannot be yours. Where did you get it from? Was it from the person who wore that ring?”

“It was my father’s,” Tenzo lied. He turned the ruby ring inward to hide the red, cursing himself for not doing so to begin with. “So is the coin.”

“Well now it is mine.” The elder reached out and picked up one of the gold coins.

Tenzo did not say “you are right” this time. Tenzo ran over to the old man with rage in his belly (along with many sloshing melons) and pushed him away from the sacks of coins. His bow-legs cracked as he hit the floor. Tenzo did not know if he was dead or collapsed from pain, but he did not wait to find out. He took the coin from the elder’s cramped hand—his skin was like cooked fish skin, thin and flaky—and shoved it back into an open sack. He reloaded the rest of the sacks into the wagon with a sort of strength typically reserved fighting off tiger attacks. He did not even notice his blisters.

Tenzo hitched the new ox alongside the old one. Gave the command to move. Tugged the yoke. Tugged the yoke. Tuuuuuug-ggged the yoke. But Madu refused to budge with this new weight, even when bribed with a melon. Tenzo stood behind the stubborn ox and began to push.

Slowly, begrudgingly, Madu began to move.

He heard plenty of pilgrims laugh as they passed him by. But this only made Tenzo push harder. His grief had turned fury.

How *dare* that elder try to take from him? He’d had a full life and a place to live alongside the Immortal Monks with coin from selling lodging, whereas Tenzo had no home and no mother. All he had was what coin she had left him. He needed it more. The pious neighbor had even said so.

Outrage fueled him onward until, before he knew it, he had reached a town (*he never knew he lived so near!*).

The road was smoothed with packed dirt and wide enough to accommodate two carts at once. The buildings that lined it all had windows, some with ornate wooden screens, some even with glass! Some even had windows on top of windows with roofs that

towered taller than any person could reach.

The wide road opened up even wider into a center marketplace. There, they sold all the things Tenzo had ever wanted—prepared foods, shiny leather sandals, clothing of every conceivable cut and color (but red, of course)—and many things he did not even know were things he could want—flowers, vases for flowers, feathered caps, bundles of silks, even people.

They were in a cage at the edge of the market square. As he looked them over, Tenzo found that he could look at every part of them but their eyes. What had these people done to end up like this? There was a man who sat limply in his own filth. A woman who stood at the locked gate like a tiger poised to pounce. And a boy, about Tenzo's size, only skinnier (if that were possible), looking like he was doing his best not to cry. He lifted his chin as if to say, *You may be out there and me in here, but that doesn't mean you are better than me.*

Tenzo moved on to the next stall. Fruits and sweet sticky rice. And the next. Boots and belts. And the next. Incense and works of art. Tools. Toys. Ornaments. He wanted it all! But he also did not want to draw too much attention to himself. After his encounter with the bowlegged elder, he was now terrified of his fortune being forcibly taken from him. He needed a protector, like those who escorted the pilgrims with the finest robes. But what protector would not protect their own needs first?

Tenzo found himself circling back to the cages of people at the edge of the square.

The man looked like he couldn't fight off the biting flies on his face, how would he fight off a thief? The tiger-woman looked like she would fight a thief, and Tenzo, not necessarily in that order.

Then there was the boy. He stared at Tenzo on the other side of the cage. *You may be out there and me in here, but that doesn't mean I'll look away first.*

"If you want to talk to your little friend, there's plenty of room in there with him."

Tenzo was suddenly in shade. The slaver grabbed him by the back of the neck. His grip was a blister beetle's pincer.

"Oh no, sir, he is buying me for his master." The boy in the cage had spoken.

The slave owner laughed. "This rat?"

The snake in Tenzo's belly arched to strike, and he found himself spitting back, "I am so here to buy him." Then, "For my master."

More coin than he suspected he should have spent later, Tenzo walked off the square with the boy from the cage. He smelled of rancid meat and Tenzo was torn between giving himself more breathing room or keeping his eye on his purchase. He was also torn between being angry that the boy had tricked him into buying his way out, or thankful that he had saved him from a similar fate.

"I'm Senu."

"Tenzo."

"Bless for getting me out of there," Senu said.

"Bless for keeping me out of there," Tenzo replied, deciding in that moment it was easier to be friends than fight. "I'm eleven," he offered.

"Twelve."

"Eleven and a half, really," Tenzo amended.

"Your master must be nice? To let you spend his coin this way."

"He is." Tenzo felt he was not really lying because he *was* nice

and, technically, he *was* this boy's Master. And someone who knew this unfamiliar environment *was* useful to have around. "He sent me ahead to set up lodgings for him."

Senu livened. "I know a place!"

Now Tenzo had another choice: accept this slave boy's help but risk him stealing his coin or try to figure out what to do on his own and risk someone else stealing it.

Senu was clearly in a weakened state. Tenzo would win the fight, should it come to that (though he hoped it wouldn't because he did not want to get any nearer to Senu than he needed to).

"He also needs to board his oxen and a safe place to keep his—" Friendly or not, Tenzo was not foolish enough to tell some boy he did not even know about his fortune. "—yams."

"I don't know about storing yams," Senu shrugged, "but I know of a safe place for coin."

He knew.

"Why do you say that?" If a slave boy could figure out that he was not carrying yams, who else would?

"Your cart is about to crack apart. And that one ox of yours looks close to collapse."

The snake wound so tightly that Tenzo's stomach cramped. Would he be able to fight him off, after all? Now he wasn't so sure.

But then Senu whispered the most incredible thing, "Our master must be extravagantly wealthy to have so much coin to send ahead of him!"

"He is the richest person I know!" Tenzo laughed shakily. "So, you know a place where he could keep his—sacks—safe?"

Senu frowned slightly, twisted his hands together. "Do . . . do you think he would spare me some new garments? I am afraid no

merchant would want to deal with me in this state."

"Yes," said Tenzo at once; new garments might help the stench. Then, with a flash of inspiration like a coin dropped into a sunlit alms bowl, he added, "He told me to get some for myself when I got here anyway, after such a long journey."

Senu proved to be quite useful. He first took them to the shop that sold garments. Tenzo was tempted to buy himself a set of fine robes (he was particularly enchanted with one that was embroidered with colorful silk birds), but as he was pretending to be a servant himself, he had to stick to necessities. Nice necessities.

Senu then took them to something called a "depository" to keep his sacks secure. But Tenzo would only leave one. He wanted to see if they would give it back when he asked.

Next, Senu took Tenzo to their lodgings. The building was one of those impossibly tall ones with high windows, but no nearby trees to shimmy up to reach them. When Tenzo followed Senu inside, he was met with a hill of steps that climbed to another room above his head! Senu started walking up them without even using his hands for balance, stepping each leg up one at a time. Tenzo followed, feeling that he was very high and did not like to be very high. He tensed his leg muscles with every cautious step, a monkey preparing to leap to safety.

At the top of the steps was a long thin room of doorways, a different symbol marking each one. Senu seemed to know what the symbols meant because he led them confidently over to one of the doors. Tenzo was impressed but tried not to show it.

This up high room was also like no room he had ever been in. The walls were the color and texture of mashed taro root and there was a plant *inside* next to a window—of glass! He could see the top

of a tree through it. Tenzo told Senu to close the screens.

There was also a sleeping mat that was lifted off the floor. But only one. At the base of the lifted mat was a floor mat such as Tenzo's. He wanted very much to lie down on it. But once they had settled in for the night, it was Senu who stretched out at the base of the lifted mat, presumably where Tenzo was meant to sleep.

It was suffocatingly soft. Tenzo began to sink into it— to drown in it— but he dared not move or risk falling— crashing to the floor like a branch in a monsoon— breaking— splintering—

“You’ve been sleeping in that cage; you deserve the good mat,” Tenzo told Senu, “Let’s switch.”

Senu thanked him so many times that Tenzo would have become annoyed, if it did not make him feel so pious.

§

When Tenzo had lived along the middle of the line of Immortal Monks, he’d seen the whole world pass by his front door, but no one ever stayed, and now he understood why. He had lived between. Between places worth stopping at. Between comforts. Between culture. Here was music he had never heard a lute master play, stories he had never seen a storyteller enact, foods he had never smelled his mother prepare.

Their days were filled with exploring the town to stock up on supplies, and exploring the town to explore it. Tenzo was content to try every new thing (even the bed, which he was determined to get used to). But Senu was less content. Every few days, he would ask: “Have you heard word from your master yet, when he is coming?”

One day Senu came to Tenzo and said, “You don’t have a master, do you?”

Tenzo answered by not answering.

“Where did you get your coin?”

“It was my mother’s. She died.” It was perhaps the first truthful thing Tenzo had said to Senu, though he wished it were a lie.

“My mother is dead too,” Senu related.

Senu’s mother had died and he’d ended up in a cage. If Tenzo had not had his mother’s wealth, he might have too. How close they were to walking the same path.

“Then *you* are my master?” Senu asked, rescuing Tenzo from his imagination. He was grinning.

It seemed surreal that Tenzo could own a servant, when he himself had been living in a shack selling sandals to pilgrims not three weeks before. But he was also quickly coming to rely on Senu’s resourcefulness.

“I need the coin back I spent on you. But once you work off the debt, you will be free.”

As a joke, Senu started calling him “Master Tenzo” and Tenzo did not stop him.

The very next day, he bought the robes with the embroidered birds.

§

Tenzo had Senu arrange transport to the South.

Senu traded Hempato and Madu for two much healthier looking oxen. Tenzo secretly missed them (he resolved not to name any more of his work animals). Senu also purchased them a new wagon for the long journey ahead. It had a bench seat. Tenzo had not asked Senu to do either of these things and so mentally added the cost of the oxen and the wagon to what he owed.

On their way out of town, they went to retrieve the sack

of coins from the depository and Tenzo was pleased that they returned it without hassle, but could also not be sure that they had not slipped out a coin or two. He wished he had counted.

§

After many more towns, each making the one before it seem primitive by comparison, Tenzo began to see signs that the monks were nearing the Infinite Waters. Salt from the tangy air dusted the folds of their red robes. Sparkling grains of sand settled between their stone toes. Though he knew their smiles carved, they seemed to be enjoying the warm breeze. The sounds of gulls echoed in their alms bowls and the coins reflected the strength of the sun. *Coins of pure light.* Then, at last, he saw the line where sky and water touched. Tenzo thought of two shantytown shacks holding each other up. Only the sky was a palace of infinite space and the water a palace of infinite depth. And into that infinite depth walked the Immortal Monks. Pale green waves lapped at the ankles of one statue, the shins of another, the knees, the torso, the chest, the neck, the eyes, until only the very top of the head of the statue was above water. But the water was so clear that Tenzo could see the stone monks that continued to walk beneath it. Stripped fish nibbled algae off their flaking robes. So far and so deep they walked, that Tenzo could not tell where the line ended.

There was a strip of beach that stretched like a bridge to a large island, thick with vegetation, just offshore. A few smaller islands dotted the distance. Tenzo wanted to walk across the land bridge to follow the monks further and see if he could find the very last one, but Senu said, “It is best to wait until after the tide or we will be stuck there with the fishers.”

Tenzo did not know what a tide was and was about to ask,

when he was interrupted by the sound of wailing.

Nearby, a pilgrim was walking into the Infinite Waters, tossing handfuls of coins and prayers to the surf. With her last coin offered, she fell to her knees and cried tears of release. Tenzo cried too, but for the opposite reason. Before they’d even secured lodging, Tenzo had Senu hire a night fisher to dredge the treasure out of the waves.

The next morning (having learned what the tide was), Tenzo was able to explore the island. There was a shanty of fisher shacks jumbled amongst the jungle trees. The smaller islands, though, seemed uninhabited but for sea birds, streaking the rocks white with droppings and fish bones.

“I would like to live on one of those islands.” Then he turned to Senu, “I want glass windows.”

§

They lodged in a large room with a view looking out at the East. Tenzo had become used to being up high and now quite enjoyed looking down at the people below. It reminded him of pilgrim watching. Except that almost no one ever glanced up so he could stare at them all he wanted without any swatting looks.

Every sunrise, Tenzo was awoken by the shrill alarm of gulls fighting over fish guts. And every sunrise, Tenzo nearly leapt out of bed to see what his night fishers, who had no fish to gut in the morning, had hauled up. Mostly, it would be green coins which he gave to Senu to trade in for gold, but sometimes there were silver cups, sand-worn rings, parts of incense holders, altar candlesticks and icons. Senu was often out tending to the building of their house, so Tenzo could take his time. He would turn each piece over in his hands. Polish each jewel, each coin. He liked running his fingers across the ridges of a cut gemstone, around the curved

edge of a coin, over the features of an icon.

Some time later, when the room was shadows, Senu would return (he had to take a roundabout route back to avoid being followed.) Then the two boys would share moonrise meal together. With the rich foods he ate, Tenzo soon fleshed out into a very healthy-looking young man and Senu had to have grown half a monk's step already. As they ate as much as they could manage to fit in their unstretched stomachs, Senu would tell about his day with this builder and that gardener and Tenzo would show the best finds from the day's catch. Then they would spend hours dreaming up plans for the house and teaching each other the different games they knew until the moon was too high in the sky to ignore.

Reaping Festival came, marking Tenzo's twelfth year since rebirth.

Senu had a surprise for him. "Your house is complete."

Tenzo looked up from his inventory.

"Then we will sleep there tonight!"

"You can sleep there tonight."

"And where will you be?"

"I will be here. I have worked for you for many moons. Surely, I have earned back the coin you paid for me."

Tenzo had thought Senu was his friend. But evidently, he was not spending time with him by choice.

"I have housed you for just as many moons," Tenzo refuted. "I have fed you sunrise and moonrise meals, have bought you new robes and fresh sandals. You have not paid back your debt yet."

That night they both slept on the island.

§

Tenzo decorated the house in red. Red tapestries and red

cushions and red bedspreads from the red silks and linens and satins that Senu had imported. Nothing along the blessed path could be red but the statue's painted robes, so red became Tenzo's favorite color. He turned the ruby on his ring to face outward again.

Senu had made sure that the house had a glass window with a view of the Immortal Monks. On a clear day, you could see the line of red robes walking into the Infinite Waters, past his island, and off into the distance of the horizon. Sometimes Tenzo saw pilgrims in the water, so pious that they tried to complete their pilgrimage by swimming out to the last monk, but all either turned back or dipped under the waves and did not resurface. Tenzo could also see fishers hauling up writhing silver nets. It struck Tenzo that the night fishers they hired were probably putting most of their catch of coin into their own pockets. He had Senu buy more slaves. "Instead of languishing in a cage, they will be fishing under moonlight in the fresh breeze," Tenzo reasoned.

"And you will let them buy their freedom?"

"I promise."

Senu dutifully did as he was instructed, telling each slave he obtained that they could buy their freedom with their catch (after they paid off their purchase cost and fees for room and board). Senu made sure that Tenzo kept his promise. To every slave but Senu himself, who had to let others free when he could not be.

Tenzo came to expect that if he needed Senu, he would be found in the gardens.

Whereas Tenzo spent his time spending his coin.

He commissioned elaborate décor: an ebony chest set with pearls, a vase of inlaid marble in the motif of parrots and

persimmons, a silver tureen that looked like a conch shell, candelabras draped with real snakes that had been encased in wax then cast in gold, ceilings carved with fruit bats, a grand bloodwood and ruby incense burner set on a matching pedestal, and a board game with jasper and lapis pieces for him and Senu to play.

They still spent their evenings eating moonrise meal together, but the tone had shifted. Friends catching up to slave reporting to Master. Friends playing games to slave entertaining Master. “Master Tenzo” had lost the joking tone. For every ten bites Tenzo took, Senu would take one. With the rich foods he ate, Tenzo soon fleshed out more than a healthy amount. One day, he was counting the most recent fisher haul and realized that his thumb felt stiff and unable to bend. He barely got the ruby ring off over his knuckle. Tenzo slid it onto his pointer finger. It fit.

As Tenzo grew wider, Senu grew taller. By the time the ring transferred to Tenzo’s middle finger, Senu had grown so tall that he had to bend through doorways.

He started to wear other jewels beside the ring. Gold cuffs set with emeralds and peridot, a brooch of citrine in the shape of a bird (with a sapphire eye!), rings on every finger—coral, amber, carnelian. A medallion of jade, vibrant green. He had a dagger fashioned which he wore at all times, its gem-crusted hilt commanding notice. He celebrated his thirteenth year since rebirth with a chain of thirteen ruby teardrops, each one bezel-set in buttery gold. Each year thereafter, he added a pendant to the necklace.

Tenzo had Senu buy land along the southern shore and then charge dues for its use.

§

A gate was erected around the whole of the island. Though

ornate, it was not gilded; Tenzo didn’t want to any night thieves to chisel parts off. Still fearful of his wealth being stolen, he had Senu sew coins into the lining of his robes. The weight was comforting. This limited the extent of his outings, but staying away from others was more secure anyway.

The ruby ring was tightening around Tenzo’s middle finger now, or rather, his middle finger had outgrown the ring. Tenzo finally moved it to his ring finger.

Tenzo stayed on the island for longer and longer periods of time. Merchants had to come to him, should they want his business. He began to command.

“Senu, fetch me my seamster.”

“Senu, fetch me my decorator.”

“Senu, fetch me my blacksmith.”

He would greet them in his Receiving Room, a room whose sole purpose was to astound. The summoned would have to walk across the long, high-ceilinged room, lined with grand tapestries and great gilded pillars, to Tenzo’s chair at the other end.

“Senu, fetch me my jeweler,” commanded Tenzo one day. He wanted to commission a new ruby pendant to mark the upcoming Reaping Festival and, with it, his entering the age of adulthood. Ten and seven years.

But when his jeweler came, he brought with him an uninvited guest. “This is my daughter, Kho.”

Kho smiled sweetly until her father looked back at Tenzo, then the corners of her lips fell flat.

“She is learning the trade.”

She glowered at Tenzo.

“Is that so?”

The jeweler, whose name Tenzo was desperately trying to remember (Senu would know), presented him with rings and pendants, glancing at his daughter with regularity, who smiled when he looked and glowered when he looked away.

Tenzo tried not to pay her any notice, but he couldn't help himself. Her skin was the shade and smoothness of caramel jasper. Her lips were rose gold. Her hair reflected the light like a dark star sapphire. And her eyes, her eyes shone like rare black pearls.

Every so often, those black pearl eyes met his and Tenzo would feel a shock like he'd been stung by a jellyfish.

"Senu, fetch me my jeweler," commanded Tenzo the next day. "I am not satisfied with the setting of this ring."

But the jeweler answered his summons without the company of his daughter. Tenzo had no choice but to ask why not.

"I apologize, sir, but my daughter has decided she is not interested in the family trade."

"What *is* she interested in, then?"

Tenzo gifted Kho the most expensive horse he could find. A rare purebred, with muscles like coiling watersnakes beneath its sea-foam white hide.

Kho sent it back.

"Senu, fetch me my jeweler," commanded Tenzo.

"She prefers a wild horse, not one too tame. I am afraid she is not too tame either." The jeweler hung his head. "But I'm sure she can be, with the right touch," he added encouragingly.

Tenzo had Senu see to the capture of a wild horse. It was a rich brown and had eyes that made him want to take a step back.

After two days of not receiving so much as a "bless," Tenzo called out: "Senu, fetch me—"

"—your jeweler," Senu finished.

This time Kho accompanied him.

Tenzo liked to think that her glowering had softened to suspicion.

"With blessing, I would like to take your daughter riding."

The jeweler nearly choked on his delight. "Yes! Yes! Yes, certainly. You have my blessing."

Tenzo rode the white horse—he had kept it; it offered a certain prestige to own the most expensive horse, after all. Kho rode the wild one. She rode it without saddle or reins. She caressed its wild body with hers, and Tenzo felt, for the first time, envious of an animal.

"Why did you give me this horse?" she confronted as soon as they stopped to let the steeds replenish by one of Tenzo's many garden ponds. "What do you want in return?"

"Whatever you are willing to give," Tenzo heard himself saying.

Kho frowned. A single disapproving line appeared between her brows. "What if I don't want to give you anything?"

Tenzo could show indifference, remorse, pleasure. Which would she find the most attractive? He thought of his grandmother and his mother. They would not have wanted to be told what to do.

"Then you do not have to."

"You will not try and command me?" She pulled a leaf off a perfectly pruned bush and began shredding it.

Tenzo decided that he liked her wildness. "I will not."

"You command my father like he is a mule." Kho threw her shreds of leaf to the ground. She was clearly testing his reaction.

“You are right. I should not treat him that way.” Tenzo suddenly wanted real connection, like with the pilgrims when he asked them *why*. “I am only trying to demand respect because I am too young to have earned it.”

“Isn’t it lonely to be someone who commands respect?”

Because he could not meet her black pearl eyes, Tenzo looked out at the line of statues walking into the waters.

“Yes. It is.”

“Why do you care so much about the Immortal Monks?” Kho asked. “Everyone says you are obsessed with finding the last one.”

Tenzo quickly looked away from the statues. “Is that what they say?”

“Well, is it true? Do you want to be a monk or something?” She gestured to his red robes. “Because you don’t act very monk like.” Her arms crossed.

Tenzo could not admit that he did not care about the Immortal Monks, only finding all of their treasure, so he said: “Only curiosity,” and then instructed Senu to recall the night fishers the moment Kho departed.

§

Tenzo hired pearl divers to find rare black pearls to match Kho’s eyes. Enough to make her a long strand.

“I know you cannot be bought,” Tenzo said when he gave the pearl necklace to her, “Please, consider this a gift. Every pearl on his strand represents a thought I’ve had about you.” He pretended to study the necklace. “About kissing you.”

“Then I should kiss you once for every pearl.” She held the pearl nearest the clasp between her fingertips. Then she put her rose gold lips to his. But they were not cool and hard like metal,

they were wonderfully warm and oh-so-supple. With every pearl she thumbed, Kho gave him another kiss, until passion made her lose count.

§

Morning of the Reaping Festival, Kho delivered Tenzo’s ruby teardrop to him personally. She added it to his chain, her caramel jasper fingers brushing against his collarbone.

They attended the festival together, Tenzo even leaving his red robes with the coins sewn into the lining at home so that he could enjoy the frivolities longer.

He felt lighter, and not only because of the change of robes.

Tenzo found himself looking more often at Kho than at the monks. His love seemed more immortal than any stone statue.

§

One day the jeweler came to the island unbidden.

“I did not summon you,” Tenzo said. He was being fitted for new, looser, robes.

The seamster continued the fitting, though he conveniently angled himself to get a better view.

“I have been expecting you to.”

“Why is that?”

“I thought you might ask me to make you a ring.”

“I have many of your fine rings. I do not need another presently.”

“I thought you might ask me to make you a ring to give to Kho. I know the size of her finger, after all.” At this the seamster stopped all pretense of work and looked up at Tenzo to see what his reaction would be.

“Don’t you want me to ask for her hand first?”

“You have had her hand from the day I first brought her here.”

The snake in Tenzo’s stomach woke. Kho’s father clearly wanted them to be married. You could see it in his thirsty eyes! How he ogled Tenzo like he was a pitcher of blessed water. This had clearly been his plan all along. It could have been hers as well.

The snake hissed, *They will kill you to inherit your riches.*

Tenzo’s mother would not have wanted that.

“No, I do not think I want a new ring.”

§

“Kho is here for you, Master,” said Senu.

Tenzo was seated by the window overlooking the harbor, eating a large plate of fried sweet dumplings, watching the fishers pulling up nets. He owned almost all of them now, but still worried that they were keeping some of their catch for themselves. Tenzo had told Senu many times that he found it suspicious how quickly his slaves could buy their freedom. But Senu always replied that Tenzo’s generous offer only motivated them to work that much harder. But they would have had to work that much harder regardless—with Kho gone, Tenzo’s obsession to find the last monk’s treasure returned with vehemence.

“Kho is here for you, Master,” Senu repeated. He did not raise his voice, correctly presuming that Tenzo had heard him the first time.

“Send her away.”

But Senu did not excuse himself.

“She will want to know why.”

“Tell her to ask her father.”

“She cannot control what her father does.”

“Exactly.”

Senu hovered like he did when he had an opinion to express.

“Yes?”

“I think she is good for you.”

“And I think she is a gold miner.”

§

Kho sent back the horse. And the pearls.

“If she was a gold miner, she would have kept the pearls,” reasoned Senu. “I’m sure if you apologize, she will forgive you.”

But Tenzo had her horse tamed so that she would never forgive him.

He finally understood what his grandmother meant when she said that someone could die of a broken heart.

§

Tenzo bought a mine so that he would not have to use the jeweler’s gems any longer. The mine came with more slaves. Senu came to him with one of them.

“This is Paak. He was a respected merchant before he fell on hard times.”

“Why are you showing me this man?”

“I believe he would be an excellent replacement for me.”

“Replace you? But you are irreplaceable to me, Senu.”

When Tenzo had outgrown his Receiving Room chair, the one that replaced it could have been mistaken for a throne. This is where he sat now.

“I have worked for you for many years. I have eaten as little as I can and fashioned my own sandals so that you would not have to purchase them for me. I have earned my freedom.”

“I cannot trust this man like I can trust you.”

“You now have many slaves,” Senu pleaded. “Surely one of

them can take my role.”

“As I said, Senu, you are irreplaceable.” He set his arms on red velvet armrests. “Now, do you have yesterday’s yield yet?” Tenzo asked, the matter closed.

A small calfskin pouch hit Tenzo like a punch in the chest, then dropped into his large lap.

Senu left the room. The slave named Paak bowed awkwardly and hastened to follow. Tenzo would have felt guilty if he didn’t depend on Senu so. And whatever guilt lingered, he now had a welcome distraction from.

Tenzo had taken it upon himself to price the rubies from the mine, for he trusted no one else to judge their quality. He also felt such a thrill every time he saw Senu enter the room with the calfskin pouch in hand. He picked it up from his lap. Heaved himself out of his red velvet chair and over to his red velvet stool. The sorting table was made from sunbleached ivory and inlaid with white seashell and bone.

Tenzo poured the stones out slowly, as if from a broken hourglass, until they formed an ant-hill-sized mound. He set the empty pouch aside. Then he slithered his finger through the rubies like a snake through red sand. Closed his eyes to listen to them clink softly, then opened them to marvel at all the little glints of light. Picked some up, poured them back into the pile.

Then, he sorted.

He lined them up by color. By clarity. By size. Then by how they should be cut. Round. Marquis. Emerald. Oval. Square. Cushion. Pear. It was an art, he found, choosing the right shape. It was about extracting the greatest beauty from the stone. Highlighting its attributes while whittling away its flaws. Scratches

could be polished off. Inclusions could be hidden in the prism of cuts. A well-cut gemstone could be the difference between pretty and captivating. It could draw you in like a tranquil pond, the kind so pristine you almost expect to see something magical below its glassy surface. When Tenzo would hold such a specimen up to candlelight, sometimes he imagined he could.

The very finest one from every pouch, Tenzo always kept for himself. The deepest purple red, clear as a cloudless sky, large enough to be fashioned into a teardrop. When Reaping Festival came, marking the day of his rebirth, he would select the finest of the finest. By the time he turned twenty-five, the necklace of bloodred tears wrapped around his neck twice. By the time he turned forty, it wrapped around several times. This was also the year that Tenzo moved the ruby from his ring finger to his pinky.

He had a fleet of fishers now. But word had spread to the North that pilgrims should no longer throw the last of their alms to the waves. Tenzo’s boats were pushed out further.

He had the black pearl divers try and find the last Immortal Monk, but they reported back to Senu that they could not dive deep enough. To make certain they were not lying, Tenzo began to accompany the boats out in his own, resplendent with all of the comforts of home and a flag of monk robe red.

In the belly of his ship, he had a storeroom crafted to house all of his favorite treasures. The marble vase of parrots and persimmons, the jasper and lapis game board, the incense pedestal, even a pair of the candelabras modeled with real snakes. And an exact replica of his Receiving Room chair.

Tenzo commanded that the divers bring up a handful of sand to prove that they touched the bottom, or a finger would get cut

off. With every handful of sand, he sent the diving boats further out. Most divers had missing fingers. Some would float up dead.

When he ran out of pearl divers, he moved on to miners. They had been told what all the others had been told: that if they could find the last monk, they would be set free with a handful of rubies. He heard that many of his men practiced holding their breath in the silty puddles beside the mine.

Many times, Senu would try to convince Tenzo that he had amassed enough riches.

But these were his alms savings, Tenzo would argue.

He deserved his wealth, his pious neighbor had said so.

§

Tenzo no longer left the ship. He barely left his chair. His meals were brought to him, as were his earnings. The water level around the ship rose. The size of his robes grew. The ruby ring tightened on his pinky until he could no longer remove it. The gold band grew into his flesh like a tree growing into a fence. But he would not have it cut off.

His necklace now cried almost fifty bezel-set tears.

§

It was ideal weather conditions. Tenzo had excavated a new stock of divers from his mines, the ones so eager to earn their freedom that they stuck their heads in puddles. Perhaps they would have more success than the last stock. The surface of the Infinite Waters was so calm and clear that he could see all the way down to where the water shifted from aquamarine to sapphire. Tenzo leaned over his gold-lacquered railing. He thought he could just make out nebulous shapes within the deep. Seaweed, no doubt. But walking through it? He squinted. Only as his body hit the water below the

boat, did his mind register that he had fallen overboard.

Tenzo sputtered and gasped trying to catch his breath, but even though he flailed toward the surface, he kept sinking beneath it. The coins sewn into his robes were dragging him down like a hundred gilt anchors. But he did not want to offer them to the monks below. Above him—*there!*—the tall and slender figure of Senu at the railing. He was saved! Tenzo called out for help, seawater frothing from his mouth, but his trusted servant only turned away from him.

Tenzo had been pushed.

He looked up through salt-blurred eyes at the bottom of the ship, receding from view. At last, he tried to remove his robes, but his fingers only slipped over the carved ruby buttons. Soon the ship was but a dark blot above him.

Tenzo sank deeper and deeper until he felt seaweed ticking his ankles. And there, an Immortal Monk in the murk, smiling serenely despite the man drowning beside him. Then, as if tied to a yoke, Tenzo was yanked by a strong undercurrent. It rushed him along a line of algae and coral-covered stone statues, brushing past seaweed and shipwrecks and heaps of treasure paid as alms to the deep. The current increased, ripping the inner lining of his robes and freeing coins like a hive of swarming bees slashed open by a moon bear hunting for honey. Tenzo desperately tried to catch them, but he might as well have been trying to catch water. Rings dropped off his fingers—more were lost as he tried to snatch at them. Clasps snapped. Ruby droplets bled into the current. He grasped at his robes. Felt a single coin still sewn against his chest. He clutched his hand over his heart. Noticing the flash of ruby embedded in his pinky finger, he felt relief that he at least still had

that.

Though his lungs burned, Tenzo felt a coldness seep into him, as if his skin were dissolving into the Infinite Waters. His vision blackened just as he glimpsed the last in the line of the Immortal Monks, walking into a temple. Under the ocean. Shining solid gold.

Tenzo was spit out of the current and onto a waterless floor. He sputtered bile and brine. His heart pounded—waves smashing to shore. Wave after wave. Even though he was no longer being swept along by the current, the sound of blood rushed in his ears like saltwater froth fizzing into sand. He was a beached jellyfish, suffocating in the salty air. Yet, he was alive! But *how* was he alive? What was this place?

He peeled himself off the floor with the sound of a conch being pulled from its shell. He had been face down on a mosaic mandala made up of thousands upon thousands of inlaid gemstones. But the floor was only the foundation upon which unimaginable riches rested. Tenzo swayed as his eyes moved upward. The room that he found himself in made his Receiving Room look like the one-roomed shack that he'd grown up in. The walls were encrusted with coins and jewelry and goblets and pitchers and statuettes. It was as if Tenzo were standing inside a pile of treasure. Gold bracketed torches made it all glimmer like sunset rippling across the surface of the Infinite Waters. Tenzo looked back at the entryway and saw the last Immortal Monk statue standing just on the other side. The ocean simply didn't enter the temple. The walls had no windows, only the impossible doorway of water and an archway across the vestibule that led into a flickering passage beyond.

When a pilgrim tried to swim to the last monk and did not

resurface, it was assumed that they had drowned or been eaten by a fish the size of a house. Had they instead made it to this temple hidden under the waves? Had any of *his* slaves made it here?

All of a sudden, treasure started to pour through the impossible barrier between the temple and the ocean, and clattering onto the floor at his feet.

"My ship!" cried Tenzo as he looked down at the growing pile of treasure. He recognized it at once as his own. Tenzo knew every coin, every gem-encrusted hand mirror, every silver cup, intimately, as only a man who spends more time with his riches than his friends ever could. His riches *were* his friends. And here they were returned to him!

"Your slave sank your ship."

Tenzo started. Beside him stood an Immortal Monk—he recognized him by the red robes, the shaved head—only this one was not made of stone. Instead of an alms bowl, he carried a gold candlestick with a curved base.

"You are not a statue," Tenzo said stupidly.

"I am not." And there was the serene smile.

"But— you— you are an Immortal Monk?" he asked over the echoing racket.

"You have discovered the monastery of the Immortal Monks. Only the most giving, or greedy, ever find their way here."

As Tenzo's treasure continued pouring in through the ocean door, he understood which one he was without having to ask.

The treasure— "Senu didn't want the treasure for himself?"

The Immortal Monk smiled pityingly. "No."

"But Senu was *on* that ship. What happened to him?"

"He drowned."