

he might himself be accused. Sons abandon their sick parents, lest they be charged with murder. Houses catch fire and burn down, but neighbours don't help for fear they might be accused of arson. Children drown before people's eyes, but no one comes to their rescue lest they be accused of drowning them. All human relations are breaking down. Your man has destroyed almost half of our civilized life. If he stays around longer, he is bound to destroy the remaining half. Please call him back immediately to your own Ram Rajya.'

STEALING THE SEA

ASIF ASLAM FARRUKHI

(Translated by Syed Saeed Naqvi from the Urdu original 'Samandar ki Chori')

There was still time. The first hesitant, nascent ray of light hanging between the earth and sky had not yet emerged. It wasn't dawn yet, and the city along the oceanside was still asleep. Even before the night's darkness unfolded, it was suspected that it had happened. Rows of two- and three-storey apartment blocks, once engulfed in grey shadows, the two-lane road separating the apartments from the vastly spread bluish white sea on the other side. But now there was nothing. There was only a huge crater where the sea used to be. Flat land was marred by a fractured surface, devoid of any bushes or tyre marks, like land that had been submerged for the longest time. The sea, which once lay prone, stretching its feet on to the land, had suddenly disappeared.

The rest of the scene remained unchanged. Unless one paid really close attention, it could be missed. The day started at its usual slow pace and, at first, the absence of the sea was not noticed. That's probably why no one said anything. Some stragglers were returning after a party, while the health-conscious were setting out on their morning jogs. Milkmen were reaching their customers in open trucks, and pedlars brought out their wares on bicycles. Even if the most committed of people had glanced at it, they would have thought it to be hidden amidst the dense morning fog. They would have covered their hands and faces with shawls and scarves, in anticipation of dropping temperatures. If you cover your face while in a hurry to get somewhere, missing the sea is entirely possible.

While the sea disappearing might go unnoticed in the early hours, the spreading daylight would show its absence. But you can hear the absence even before you see it. The most noticeable thing was utter silence; a deep

silence with its own distinct voice – such complete silence that even a pin drop could cause a fluttering in the chest; a fear that what has happened should not have happened. Yes, then it will be realized that the absence of the noisy waves is causing the silence.

The waves usually formed a crest, noisily slapping together and forming sounds like *chup... chup... chup... chup*. Advancing waves rose and spread, merging with the sand, sometimes quietly and at other times noisily, for thousands of years, like a ticking clock measuring time. They had once licked the city wall with salt, drenching it with wet air. They were not there now, replaced instead by silence – complete, deep silence.

Where did the sea go? It is not something that can disappear overnight. It was there the previous night. An occasional swimmer had been tossed in the waves. Some were seen running on the wet sand alongside it. Then, what had happened? It could not just evaporate. It is a sea, for God's sake! Passers-by were beginning to stop, chattering excitedly in small groups.

'The sea has been stolen,' someone exclaimed, his voice trembling. The dire news started to spread.

A flock of wild pigeons landed on the empty lot between the apartments. People afflicted with sickness spread barley there, hoping the voiceless birds would offer prayers for their health. A dog was sitting quietly with his legs and tail folded inwards. The blue sky had deepened in hue. The sea was not where it should have been. A man stopped and looked at the horizon. Although there was no sunshine, he still shaded his eyes with his hand, concentrating hard, but unable to see anything. The view remained unclear, despite his efforts. People did not immediately surround him. They must have thought he was using tricks to fool others. Stand in a busy street, point to the clear blue sky, use your hand to cover your eyes and mumble something. A crowd will be attracted in no time. Everyone will try to see what you pretended to see, although there was in fact nothing there. How can you see anything when there is nothing? When a crowd gathers around, you wash your hands of it and move on as if nothing had happened. But that man stood there, joined by another, and then another. No one could see the sea.

One of the onlookers called out, 'Where is the sea?'

Nobody answered him.

'Where is the sea?' he asked again.

Hardly anyone could have answered this question. Really, what could anyone say? Where could the sea have vanished to?

'It must be here somewhere; you probably need to look around a bit more attentively.'

'Look beyond the fog.' But it could not be found. People started to gossip.

The man whose voice was heard in the beginning so distinctively wavered. 'Why can't I see it? What is wrong?'

'You could only see it if it was there,' someone snapped back.

'Is it possible? Just like that... suddenly... the whole sea?' Many voices sounded astonished.

'Yes, overnight, the whole sea' some voices chimed in unison.

'But this cannot be!' Someone was in complete denial.

'But it has happened,' someone else corrected him.

'This is a definite sign of a bigger calamity,' another voice was clearly heard saying. 'Could be due to an oil spill, an ecological disaster, a local effect, a nuclear holocaust....' he left it incomplete. People stared at him, a bald, bespectacled man. Some considered his arguments likely. That is possibly what happened.

'Iran, Israel, so the sea has parted here.'

'This was going to happen someday,' one onlooker was busy convincing others.

'But how so suddenly?'

'I was watching BBC news all night. There was nothing on it.' One man was not buying the story.

'How long would it have taken?' Someone shrugged his shoulders.

'A millisecond... destruction can spread far and wide.' He sounded smug, showing off his superior knowledge. He did not sound defeated.

The crowd failed to catch it. They were standing in a group, looking towards where the sea used to be, then glancing at each other, suspicious, inquisitive, trying to figure out what the next man was thinking, what he was feeling. That was not too difficult to determine. Everyone was looking in the same direction and commenting. Some kept asking questions. Seeing the gathering, passers-by would come to join the crowd. Unable to find the sea, each would freeze and look around as though it might just be displaced and could be found if searched for. 'What happened? What is going on?' Newcomers would restart the conversation.

'Nothing! Nothing has happened. What is there to happen?' The man with the glasses who predicted worldwide destruction was getting tired of repeating himself. 'Something happened, over there, not sure what...' If pushed, he would point to the area where the sea should have been.

'Something has gone wrong,' someone from the crowd explained to the best of his understanding. The follow-up questions of 'how' and 'when' were only met with incomprehensible sounds, showing ignorance.

The man who was using his hand to shade his eyes turned, shaking his head. His shirt was fluttering in the wind. At his suggestion, the man who had shrugged his shoulders climbed on to a wall which stretched along the road. 'There is nothing there,' he said, confirming the obvious fact that everyone already knew. He was right, there was nothing there. No sand, no bushes, no stones. Flat, barren land stretched as far as the eye could see. So surprisingly bare that the same questions came back hauntingly – what had happened and how? Such a vast sea! Where did it go? It could not just disappear into thin air! It was not a child playing hide-and-seek. People saw it last night; it was as it should have been.

'What happened to the sea?' an older man could not resist asking the question that was disturbing everyone. His shalwar and kameez were crumpled. His beard was unkempt. He began to blurt out questions rapidly: 'Where did it go? What happened?' he asked. The man, who had climbed the wall with the help of the bespectacled man, took a few steps along the wall and began to answer from up there, even though the question was not even directed at him. 'The sea has been stolen,' he informed them, drawing attention to the board hanging on the upper portion of the wall.

Even when the sea had been there, during the day, it used to be silent. People visiting the seaside would bid farewell in the morning. The probing sunlight and its heat caused discomfort to the people who came to picnic. They preferred coming in the evening, when the site would become crowded again. Then it would come alive. A fun-loving crowd had once gathered because of the sea. Now, people had gathered in small groups, talking in hushed voices as if someone had died in the neighbourhood. They congregated as if to condole the loss of the sea.

By now, everyone knew. Except for an occasional newcomer, they were no longer asking what and where, but rather how and when.

No one had an answer. Except that the sea had gone.

'God knows how and when!' The crowd kept growing but the newcomers were doing exactly what the first few did: exchanging questions about what had happened. By now, you could identify a person by the questions he asked. People were commenting based on where they came from and who they were. These comments were now being relayed far and wide. A young man had placed a camera on a tripod in a small clearing, inviting people to record their comments. He must have been a local representative of some foreign news channel. Whomever came to him, the young man positioned them in such a way that the empty land was in the background, where the sea had been replaced by bare land. The camera would freeze the scene into a still frame with added voice-over commentary.

'This city needs open areas and picnic resorts badly,' an older man was saying. He was wearing a jacket over a V-neck shirt, and spoke in precise English. He looked like a retired bureaucrat who had championed development issues ever since his retirement. 'Land grabbing belongs to the mafia here. They have long arms. Money and politics are controlled by them. It is sad that even the state accepts this land grabbing. With no opposition, the oppression continues, swallowing all of the resources. But the sea belonged to the whole city; it did not belong to a particular class only.'

'We will carry out a candlelight vigil in its memory. We will do a peace march.' A woman swayed, her hair flowing behind her as she spoke excitedly. Her nails were polished and her lipstick had left a stain on her teeth. She was wearing a cotton dress, both her wrists adorned with metal bangles.

A young man in a colourful T-shirt and with sunglasses perched on his head spoke out: 'This is more than a fun place. Hundreds of thousands of people earn their living from it. Where will these fishermen go? They once lived in shanty towns along the sea coast. The government should arrange alternate accommodation for them.' His voice rose as he made demands far greater than the immediate need.

'This is murdering our ecosystem. The natural mangrove preserves will disappear and all of the wildlife with it. There is a very fine ecological balance between them and humans. If one goes, the other will not survive either.'

One of the activists made a victory sign in front of the camera. The space between his fingers was filled by the barren land, the picture was shaky due to his amateur photography.

'You all should organize. We should join hands,' the activist told the ethnic youth, who told the lady representing the NGO, 'We should do a peace march from Chundrigar Road to the Press Club.'

'The first thing is to file an FIR,' a man with a rather deep voice, wearing a black jacket, said. He was possibly – or rather, definitely – a lawyer. His voice silenced the crowd. Yes, this was very important, why had no one mentioned it before?

'We should determine the extent of the loss first,' an elderly lady with white hair and a well-groomed face spoke up. Her voice had a cutting quality to it. Might she have been a teacher? She did not hear the lawyer, nor the silence that followed; it's possible she was hard of hearing. She made her suggestion with an intensity that was possibly her norm. 'Let us first find out if the sea has vanished only from here or from other places as well, like Ibrahim Hyderi, Korangi and, most important of all, Keamari. The real issue will be Keamari. Has anyone contacted the people there? Confirmed anything?'

No one answered her questions.

'It is very important to submit the FIR to the police. It puts things on the record,' the lawyer reminded the crowd.

'Even if it is recorded, we are being squeezed,' the ethnic youth exclaimed angrily.

'Can everyone at least agree to a decision? Marching together and presenting unity is very powerful!' The lawyer's voice was impassioned.

'But to which precinct? Although the area belongs to the Darakshan precinct, we should report to the Jackson precinct.'

'Not with the police, we should file the report to the port authorities.'

'You probably mean the coast guard. They will do nothing. They have no interest in anything except smuggled liquor,' a voice rose and disappeared in the crowd.

'We should go to someone...'

'Police report...'

'FIR...'

Several voices were now being raised simultaneously, drowning out and interrupting each other.

'But who should we report against?' The voice who made this enquiry could not be identified.

'Who is responsible? Someone has to be held responsible!' The voice was not trying to hide itself in the crowd. It belonged to the distinguished woman who was probably a teacher.

'But who should be the plaintiff? Who suffered the loss? Who owned the sea? Who had a claim on it?' It could not be determined immediately if this voice belonged to the ethnic youth, the activist or perhaps to someone entirely different. But this silenced the crowd again, as if the person had said something no one had thought of so far. They all started to talk at the same time, to each other, among themselves, to the person in front, on the side, to the man standing beyond two men, then to the man next to him. The crowd split into smaller groups, but stayed there. They kept discussing the city and the sea.

People kept bringing up their memories of the sea. Like that girl who kept mumbling in a monotone, 'Father would take us to the seaside for visits when I was little. We would take a bus to Clifton. We would start preparing early in the morning. Mother would pack two or three different kinds of food in a bundle and then put it in a wicker basket. I always rode camels at Clifton. The first time I rode, I screamed when the camel stood up. The *mahout* was leading the camel in front, alongside the crystal-clear sea, holding the reins. I would walk holding my fathers' finger. He would buy me a necklace and earrings made of seashells. Water would fill his footsteps on the wet sand along the sea. Father died, but the sea was still there. I wondered if someday I could hold the hand of the sea and trace my father's footprints, to see how much water filled in them. What will I do now that the sea is no more? Oh, dear father...' The girl's monotonous voice broke and she started crying, with a flat, lifeless sob.

Once, when the sea had still been there, a child lost a balloon. It blew over the sea with its long tail of thread trailing behind – an orange-red spot on the dusky, clouded sky, getting smaller and smaller. Then, it disappeared completely.

'We once had a poetry session at the beach,' one of the young men said. Nobody identified him as ethnic, though; but from his clothing and his speech, he was as ethnic as the other youth. 'I was in college those days. It lasted all night, it was fun. Then my brother Jamil pestered me every day, "Let us go to the sea, let us go to the sea." So, I seated him on

the back of my bike and brought him here on a moonlit night. He jumped off the bike and stepped on to this wall. Facing the sea, he started talking loudly, "O sea, it has been so long. O sea, you have not spoken to me or heard my poetry." And he started reciting his poems. The sea had no escape. I am sure the waves tossed their heads in protest. Police stopped us on the way back. "He is not drunk, he is just like this," I explained to the cops. "He is like *this*?" they looked at us suspiciously. "Yes, he is like this and he gets worse closer to the sea," I assured them. "Okay, then take him away." They let us go.

"Where will I take him now? Who will he recite his poetry to, O sea?" He kept on for some time, but his voice was drowned out by other similar voices. Then the crowd started to disperse. Perhaps the police had started to disperse them. The media was covering the crowd and the conversation live. A man with long, tangled hair and his shirt untucked was taking pictures with a camera. He was trying to get a foothold in front of the board, and the police were trying to prevent him from doing so.

The board was nailed high on the wall. The nails were not rusted. Shining in the morning sun, the board had the name of a construction company in bold letters, with a monogram under it. An orange sun was depicted, with words promising a better future for every family, written in blue, just like the sea itself.

The crowd suddenly turned from the cameraman and the police holding him, as a noisy group of bikers had arrived. They had their silencers off so that when they raced their bikes the noise drowned out every other sound. When the engines finally stopped and the noise quietened, no one noticed that there weren't really that many of them. The one leading in the front had a bandana on his forehead.

"What did you do to the sea?" He pointed his finger at the bureaucrat who had been talking about eco-friendly development.

Frightened, the bureaucrat stepped back.

"You think you can stop us by hiding the sea? If the sea disappears, we will find a new place to celebrate New Year's Eve!" The young man was screaming angrily and others were nodding in agreement.

"That's what I think as well," the bureaucrat heaved a sigh of relief. "The seaside is the largest of picnic areas. With its open space, all those barriers that these fundamentalists want to impose on the youth will be broken." He started a long tirade.

"Shut up. Stop this nonsense," one of the biker's voices cut him off. The bureaucrat was too afraid to speak.

"You people did this. You do whatever in big hotels...." this biker's voice was on edge.

"Did the mullahs steal the sea to stop New Year celebrations?" the earlier biker said.

"These mullahs are very creative." The crowd was watching this encounter keenly. The elegant lady who was possibly a teacher decided to give her opinion. "Oh, these maulvis and fundos – they are killjoys; they have stolen the sea." The retired bureaucrat nodded in agreement.

Suddenly, a fracas broke out:

"The rights of city dwellers are constantly being violated."

"If it is up to them, they will confiscate the whole city."

"As if the East India Company has caught a golden hen."

"After selling every piece of available land, they are after the sea."

"For sure these people are responsible; they never let the civic institutions work."

"The city government is trying its best..."

"Doing what? They are pulling wool over our eyes. They are stealing our resources for their own interests."

Arguments intensified; noise levels increased. The volume of sound was rising and ebbing just like the waves of the sea used to.

"A lasting gift from the city fathers," the writing on the board was glimmering. Under these words was a picture, a lit-up skyline with electrified colours shining through the dark shadows of skyscrapers. The painter had shown imaginary mountains and palm trees, but there was no sea in the picture.

There were cement umbrellas along the opposite side of the road. These were now empty, broken in disarray, looking like an eyesore. People used to sit in their shade to gaze at the sea. But who would want to gaze at miles of empty sand now? Peanut vendors, bean and *pappadam* vendors, when tired of walking around, would rest there. A gazebo, set aside in the shade, was reserved for masseurs. Some ignorant souls, not knowing better, would rest there. Masseurs would offer to massage them so many times that they would either agree to it or move away. Either way, the place would be vacated for the next potential customer. There were also benches and iron chairs, all vacant, scattered around the umbrellas.

Nobody tried to occupy these chairs now. There was no water to be seen in front of them, just flat land. But if they could develop a habit of looking at the sand intently, it would also appear to move and shake.

Some of the seaside visitors, joggers and yoga practitioners did complain. Some wrote letters to the editors of English language newspapers. But their complaints proved mere breakfast fodder. These people could still practice their habits. They only needed some space. That was still there, even more than before. Unrest was also noticed among the youth since the sea had disappeared. This was neither discussed on television talk shows, nor were letters seen in newspapers. It was a vague sort of discontent, hard to describe, difficult even to sense, as if someone used to showering twice a day was deprived of a shower for days, or as if a sweet tooth was being deprived of sweets. An unease, like an abstinence or withdrawal, causing sore limbs and an aching body. A young man complained that since the sea disappeared, it felt very cold. 'As if you wrapped the sea around you before,' an elder admonished.

The young man did not reply. The sea used to absorb a lot. The Hawke's Bay and Sandspit huts were not for family picnics only. A beach hut could be obtained by bribing the caretaker. This provided a private space, with freedom to spend time with friends after long drives over the weekends. The sea would provide a perfect outlet. Even if a hut were not available, things could happen behind the dunes, in a parked car. This could also happen in a car parked in open sand – not that the youth would not have considered that. But nobody said anything. The huts were still there, floodlights still on, the warning written on the wall still readable: 'Swimming is not allowed in the month of September as high tides can be dangerous.' The sea had disappeared, but the wall bearing the warning was still there.

A procession was taking place in front of the Press Club. Since processions are very common here, it was initially ignored. There appeared nothing special about it: no placards, no banners, no media coverage. A few women shouting slogans, which were not even synchronized. They wore long kameezes and flapping trousers. Many had wrapped discoloured, dirty sheets around themselves. Many wore wide metallic bracelets and bangles. They all arrived in a bus from some shanty town. They appeared anxious, eager to go back. Many had small children with them, with runny noses and screaming cries. The children's cries were merged with the women's

slogans as if they were a part of them. 'Prawns... fish... prawns... fish...' this much was heard distinctly, since it was said loud and clear. The rest was muffled. 'These are fishery workers,' someone standing outside the Press Club informed his colleagues. 'Their livelihood is tied to the sea. They are asking the government to arrange for an alternative source of income.'

'Prawns... fish...' the women raised their fists with the slogan. It was not noticed from the distance that their hands were dirty, blackened and calloused. The sea thundered in their voices.

A similar crowd gathered there another day. This time, there were men with the women as well. They had dark skin, and spoke in some unfamiliar language. There was no mention of prawns or fish in their slogans. In fact, there were no slogans at all. Someone among them must have brought a drum as well. He started beating it in a slow rhythm, growing faster, faster, and suddenly breaking into a mad frenzy. The dark-complexioned old woman at the front of the procession mumbled something and started swaying in place. She kept swaying and mumbling. Her swaying was matching the drum beat. Suddenly, as if electrified, she raised both her hands in the air and started spinning in a craze. 'More sir, more sir,' she shouted, before collapsing on the road. The procession carried on.

'Why are these people making so much noise?' a man complained to his colleagues outside the Press Club. 'What heavenly catastrophe have they suffered? If there was a chance of any gain, or if land was being allotted, the same people would be the first to be there, using deprivation and poverty as their excuse.' His partner's answer could not be heard in this noise. The procession was now dispersing and the attendees were helping the old woman off the road.

'May our leader's mausoleum last. That is the real identity of this city,' the first man's voice was heard again. 'That is the icon shown every time on the television teleprompter. There are other cities as well. What is the big deal if the sea disappeared? Nothing, nothing at all...' The procession dispersed in no time. Its attendees mingled among the crowd on the road.

Some practical difficulties started showing up as well. The urban legend of the Nettijetti Bridge, as the place where people went to commit suicide, was already losing ground as people had adopted other means. Rather, sand from the seabed started gathering in its rail tracks. The first to go were

the people who came there to feed the fish in the hope of divine goodwill. Then the men with small coin towers and tablets of dough in old empty oil canisters went. The people who bought these tablets to throw into the sea to feed the fish disappeared as well.

The day a traditional procession of mourning floats came out, the administrators were faced with the dilemma of where to drown these floats. The sea was gone. This question was pondered over by the religious scholars of the city, but they could not come to a decision. The old custom of sailing a wish list to the Imam-in-Hiding also suffered a setback. People used to float their lists from the Netijetti Bridge to reach the saviour Imam. They were not willing to risk writing their wishes on sand. Their questions remained unanswered because there was no sea now. If there were no questions, who would answer them? Now that the sea was gone, there was land, more land and crows. There were many crows, coming from everywhere, cawing noisily. The sky was a big tent over the city and the crows the pegs keeping the tent in place. However, the crows were not able to brave the wind. The sky moved, came lower with the wind and rose again with the crows. The sky was swollen, like old cotton soaked in water, dripping, dripping sea. Only drops were left, but no sea.

One day, a man came to the place people were gathering, to describe his dream about the sea. 'I saw...I saw...green-blue water beside the sparkling sand, spread deep and wide – as far as the eye could see. White foam tossing with the waves, ebbing when they fell; white foam flowing to the sand, where the water receded. A stretch of sand is left behind, brilliant, as it just rose from the bottom of the sea. I wish I could stand on the sand, drenching my feet, as I used to do when I went to the seaside for family picnics. A mahout was inviting visitors for camel rides. I shook my head to say no and that woke me up. There was no sea and I was in my bed.' When he had described his dream, others started talking as well: Clifton... Paradise Point...the beach dunes...water splashing around the dunes... Hawke's Bay...huts...Sandspit...pristine sand...galloping water receding after washing the sand. They were all speaking at the same time, narrating their stories. Another man thought he could see that the sea was there again: dirty water, littered sand, empty juice boxes, plastic bags, orange peels, crumpled boxes used and thrown away. A large crowd gathered in front of the receding waves, eager to enjoy themselves. Their voices rose above the waves, echoing. The wall in front of them, the unfinished skeleton of

the building appeared, squeezing the sea in its hands, shrinking it. A black oil slick floating on muddy water was stuck and failed to recede with the tide. The smell of dead fish was getting worse, till it was suffocating. One would turn away from the sea in an effort not to throw up.

That evening was humid. The city dwellers were getting used to the sea's absence, as they were once used to living in its presence. The sea breeze did not blow despite the day's heat. It would have, if there had been a sea. Humidity had engulfed the city as if someone had inverted a hot, sticky glass jar over it. By the evening, the smell was spreading all over the city. Fish and octopuses were seen strewn on the footpath. Seabirds sat on the electric poles with puffed wings, tired of flying like drenched crows in the rain.

Imported, used clothing from abroad became cheaper. The price of eggs shot up. There was hardly any traffic in Clifton now. The young massage boys and the girls standing under the poles became numerous. A fast-food multinational selling burgers announced a new deal. A new entrée of fast food in the sand city. Large new advertisements appeared in the media the next day, showing receding water, and a twinkling city rising from the sand, sandwiched in a burger. 'You take a bite too, please. Other cities, please contact your local dealers.'

'Remember, this golden offer is for a limited time only.'

On a similar dusty morning, before the light, the people of the sea will see that the city has been stolen.

By then, their story would have been lost in other stories. Dust to dust and water to water.

Where will anybody be then, and where will the sea be?

There is a footprint on the beach along the sea; water is filling in it and beside it, a camel owner is crying.