‘The Last Crossing of the Wind Sea’

Entry for the Young Creatives 2021 Young Writer Award

Inspired by *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin

The cold comes from the inside out. It seems to inhabit my bones first, turning them into dark, inert iron and weighing me down in my seat. It seeps slowly from me, and I begin to fancy I am forming my own sea of cold, with waves that ripple outwards to lap against the carriage's birchwood walls. It is fortunate that I am its only occupant, for otherwise my fellow passengers would soon be drowning in my sea, their cheeks ballooning desperately with the last bubbles of warmth they managed to snatch.

I am wearing three fur coats – mink, fox, and wolf. Underneath, a heavy gabardine overcoat, the old-fashioned kind that you see soldiers of the Morning War wearing in children's picture books. Underneath that, a bark-rough fisherman's jersey and two rollneck pullovers. Then all the shirts I packed (flannel, dress, and under) and two more I found abandoned in the overhead compartment (stained, but clearly clean). My head is covered with an enormous lambskin hunter's cap, which I traded a gold tooth for back in Khe Luar, and my face is swaddled in my grandmother's cashmere shawl.

I am still cold.

When we first entered the wastes – the *ta-gar* as the locals call it – I asked the stewardess if we could have the heat turned up every hour she entered the carriage on her rounds. Each time she would smile and say that the central heating was at full capacity. After a day of this nonsense, I became enraged enough that I marched all the way to the front of the train and demanded entrance to the command chamber. The stewardess - similarly frustrated, I now suspect - wrenched open the doors and pointed to the relevant panel.

The dial was turned completely to the right. Next to the mark was a word written in Aphaic script, as all the signage was. It read *mytroi* – maximum. I turned to her, smiled, and walked shamefacedly back to my carriage.

Outside the one window I have left uncovered, the ta-gar yawns on. At first its sheer expanse left me breathless and slightly horrified. Now, four days in, I could almost be bored of it if not for the unrelenting cold it radiates.

According to geographers the ta-gar is a desert, an absence of water stretching endlessly towards the horizon. Its dryness means it is unable to support either life or weather - nothing moves out here, except the wind. Ta-gar means Wind Sea, but can also be translated to the Last Sea, or the Sea of Death. When I first heard the word, it confused me. Why, after all, would you name a desert after a body of water?

But I understand now. The ta-gar is not a desert, it is not an absence of something. It is an ocean – endlessly vast, endlessly empty, endlessly alien. The wind moves ancient dust across the bone-coloured ice in ceaseless, unknowable patterns, and if you don't concentrate hard enough on your own thoughts you can hear it singing.

…

Late that night my alarm clock wakes me, as I have set it to do every half hour to prevent my death of hypothermia. I am now conscious of the deep, aching cold of the carriage, and I shiver violently as I lean over to pull the light-string.

1 o'clock.

I almost shed tears as I leave behind the cocoon of my bedclothes to begin walking up and down the carriage. I am an old man; my convulsing limbs flail and skitter and my back bends under the weight of my clothing.

The dark of the carriage is punctuated by a single beam of silver, which stretches from the window to the tiny icon above the foldout table. The beam flickers, as though the window is an old *kinematograf* projector, and the icon's gilded face flashes intermittently.

The flashes get faster; the saint's face is now winking in a rapid Morse code. In jolts and shudders I make my way to the window, hands outstretched. Nothing is visible in the fog of condensation, but the light continues to pass over my face like a distant search beam. Cold burns my cheek when I put my eye to the little hole I wiped. Again, nothing. I press closer, cheek screaming, and furiously blink away tears.

The darkness lifts and suddenly the great silver ocean of the ta-gar is revealed. But the sea is no longer dead – great arcing shapes rise out of it, like storm-called waves or breaching whales. Dozens, no, hundreds of them, some so close to the rail-lines that they cut out the moon. My eye adjusts to the light's vagaries, and I can discern the remains of masts, rigging, sometimes even steam chimneys.

A row of windows like eyes lines the uptilted bow of one ship, half-sunk in the ice. Great sheets of its hull have peeled away, so that the boat appears to have its jaws open in silent anguish. Another lies on its starboard side, exposed planks whittled by the wind into rib-like points. Frost rimes the edges of the wound.

In the distance, I hear singing.

…

Morning arrives with the usual painful clarity. I wear my body like another overcoat; I curse and exhort it as I would a wilful horse. The window shows nothing but wind and ice, no matter how I scrub at it with a woollen fist.

When the stewardess arrives with breakfast (smoked tea and unleavened bread, sour cream, equally sour jam), I ask her about the ships in the night.

She shrugs and smiles. "*Osche.*" Ruins.

It is only when my last cup of tea has gone cold that I remember osche can also be translated as ‘remains’ or ‘relics’. It implies a forgiveness, an acknowledgement of earthly wrong via spiritual reverence.

Osche is the word used for the bones of martyrs, the mass graves of civilian casualties. The places where unwilling sacrifices were made.