

# **Belly Grumbling**

by Keeley Young

{ *sweep sweep* }

“Want another, you old drunk?” The man behind the bar speaks, which comes out more as a grumble than anything else. He stares at greyed out hairs, waiting for a response. The *old drunk* – gee he’s heard that before, original and classy – tips up his head, grinning with yellowed teeth.

“Another,” he mutters, the clothes on his body getting tighter with every pint, and every day. Everything getting tighter, with age, with fat. The old man has been staring at his hands, trying to read the creases in them. It’s something an older woman, older still, used to do when he’d been younger – when he’d seen her, when she had shown her face. This line means jack, he thinks to himself, tracing over it. The line branches off and disappears round past his thumb, and he tires of bothering. His eyes are squinting at nothing.

There’s a soft tap on his shoulder. It’s the fair-haired girl, Svey, who has worked here for the past few years. “Move your feet for me a little, Buru,” she says, pushing the broom around, careful with it, even without looking.

“Don’t talk to him, girl, you know better,” Hog, the barman, snaps, glaring her down, but she doesn’t seem to notice. Her attention stays on the older man – the one she knows by name, by now. He’s old Buru, you know him. Old man of the tide. The broomgirl smiles sheepishly as he lifts his tin-man legs.

“Couldn’t you wait till we’ve thrown him out onto the pavement, anyhow?” the barman says, sighing, “Are you thick, girl?”

Buru takes another gulp of the drink – rum, again, like every night in here. Ale of the seas, ale of pirate scum and piss-poor cheap. Here, anyway, in such a seaside town as this one, where everyone’s neighbour is a sailor. The girl is frozen. Her head is dipped, her eyes trained down on her bare feet, calloused on the soles, brushed in a layer of soot and dirt, dried mud too.

She’s a nobody.

Her boss waves his fat hand at her, shooing her into the shadows of the tavern. The broom sags at her feet, its dirty bristles tickling the back of her ankles, but there is not a sound more from her. She sets the broom up against the wall, in the corner, and turns from every droplet of light, every pool of it, till all she sees is cracks, darkness, and the back of her eyelids.

“You better move along sometime, you oaf,” the barman says. “Even if your coin feeds my children.”

Buru sits there in silence until he finishes off his drink. Then words pour out like the rum he drinks, a forward flow, slithering and slippery. “I’ll get off my butt, okay,” he whispers, grinning. “Then I’ll see you next time, Hog, as always.” Buru shoves himself off the stool, nodding back at the barmaid. He pays from a fabric bag, patchy, one string from falling apart, and glances back over at the broomgirl in the corner. She stands there as if awaiting a spanking, but Hog moves not to touch her, not to yell or scream at her. Buru glances over one last time, hoping the girl would turn back and see him too, so they could exchange anything – a silent goodnight, perhaps. The broomgirl continues her repentance, silent as the halted dormouse, caught in some scavenger’s quest for cheese.

The moon is pale, but not as pale as Buru.

He stumbles back to the villa by the sea, recounting lost memories with each burp, then forgetting them all over again. The seaside is quiet, hushed without the rush of waves leading inward, or charging. The door, with its built-in lock, that jutting-out piece of wood that always jams, takes more of a heave-ho tonight, when he's drunker still than the sailors with nothing new to report. Buru barges inside, knocking over something by the door – an empty bottle, a satchel, some relic from some past he has – and makes his way for the bedroom. End the day, pray you ain't perceived in some piteous way, wake up tomorrow with a ringing in your ear. Out to stare at the sun.

Buru falls asleep, heavy, and the curtains draw back, another dream or nightmare about to commence.

He's shaven off many, many years, disrobed, found something else to wear hidden in an old trunk. There he is again, old Buru, younger now. Not a fleck of water in sight, somewhere far off from Mivigge. Boots are muddy again. Buru is staring up through the canopies again.

"Aye, Buru," comes a voice from the thick. "See anything up there?" In this direction and that, dense wood. The points of pines and averacks jab out into the skies, attempting to outdo each other. Buru, with limber limbs, is a kid again, vaulting up trees and searching for treasures with keen eyes – back then would it have been shiny things, right now would it have been water, shelter, or something else entirely? Buru had grown up a bird. Peeking out from a tree branch, clinging to it with all the muscles in his body, he saw...nothing. Nothing but woodland.

“Buru! Come down from there if you’re just wasting time,” the voice calls out again, growing restless. He was told to search for any signs someone could be following – smoke trails, clearings – but search for water too, while he was at it. A couple of the others moan of dry throats every few hours.

He starts to hurry back down the tree, bumping into other branches, scraping his elbows. His eyes greet the man who had been calling out to him – taller, but more rounded than he is, with a cherry-red beard. He frowns at Buru and turns away, burying his head in a map. “They could still be out there, chap, but thanks for checking,” he mutters, finished with whatever one-sided conversation had just occurred. Buru turns back to the averack tree, nothing but curiosity left in his eyes.

He’d thought back then – in the real time of things – that if they were behind, they were keeping it concealed. They were hiding themselves in plain sight, maybe.

He had been right, then.

In days when his mind wasn’t muddled up by the drink.

Buru forges on, meeting back up with some of the others in the union. Men fresher-faced than him, none too far out from those kid years of climbing trees in the wood and the mother-yelling that followed. Those times she thought a troll gobbled you up.

Buru takes another deep breath, taking another step in the dirt.

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He wakes to the sound of a twig snapping. Another day by the seaside, he thinks, imagining first his toes in the sand and then picking each grain from his skin, as water

sticks it to him. Buru begins every morning the same: he thanks his body for keeping him alive, moves every limb out of bed, and leaves the bungalow. He could choose to be some hermit but there is something that stirs him to wait for the locals to snicker. Town drunk. Old fool. Hurl yourself into the tides! Sacrifice yourself to Xe!

There are a few of his neighbours out on the docks now, waving off their sons for that great sacrifice. The ocean is welcoming, see it wave to you, back and forth. It may swallow you whole if you are not careful of swirling storms. Buru moves up to the pavement, off the beach, watching more closely the faces of those setting off from home. Faces of the grandest juxtaposition; misery and joy, saying their mournful goodbyes but thinking of those high seas, those treasures to be found off the shoreline, hidden in chests. He knows their faces, their emotions. In the treasure chest of his past, that was once him, setting off. The last he saw of mother, father, baby sister. Oh, you are old now, Buru. You are beyond that. Come down and turn away, you make yourself snicker.

He sees the tavern door open, swing on hinges, and there she is, the orphaned broomgirl.

“Hey mister Buru,” she calls out, glancing around to see if someone notices her, if someone cares. “Where are you headed? I’ve got only a little sweeping left.” Her face is pale. The broom whips at her shins, gusted by the breeze. She does not seem to notice, or care. She’s watching as he nears, closer and closer.

They talk whenever he comes to the tavern, whenever the barman is not perched with eyes upon her, ready to strike out. The tavern is her coin, her roof, her mother and father. Svey whacks the broom head against the cobblestone pavement, dust whirling in its own hurricane around her. Buru stops, but faces away, staring out at the sea.

“The weather could be nicer,” he says to the girl, his eyes trained on the lapping sea.

She smiles, her eyes keeping in pace with the men, women and children now moving away from the docks. The parents’ faces are sullen. Their children continue playing, laughing, cheering for those that face a bold, new adventure – unaware the seas are not always our friend. Buru remembers his sister’s face when he left. The biggest smile.

“I think it’s the right weather for the day,” she whispers, fiddling with the broom to appear busy.

“Most of them boys will come back changed,” he says. “For the worse.”

“I notice,” she whispers. “They lose their smiles.”

Svey and Buru stand there for a moment, watching water meet sand. They watch the locals return to their homes, to their duties, and seaside Mivigge retreats to the way it was yesterday, and the day before. The broomgirl shoves open the tavern door and glances inside once more. She notes that there is more sweeping to be done, as Hog dances around every table, checking underneath every stool.

She whispers a goodbye to Buru and heads inside, forgetting the shore; the sea. Buru watches a lidgull perch upon a post down by the docks, surveying the ocean for food – some species of fish not in someone else’s belly. He smirks, a very brief smirk, before setting off for the marketplace.

The lidgull dives underneath the rush of blue, blue, blue.

Buru is wandering back towards his bungalow home, walking past house and shop after house and shop, keeping his eyes away from the other locals whispering remarks about him.

*Oh – does old Buru ever speak to you in the market? Does old Buru smell of rum to you? Oh – old Buru must never have had children, no one can recall old Buru living anywhere else.* He keeps his market purchases close to his chest, glancing every now and then at flowers growing in windowsills, or pet pigs burrowing themselves in mud. Here and there is a child wailing from a scraped-up knee, or a mother aimlessly staring from her kitchen window. All leading him from one place to there, down by the docks, the sea. And home.

Svey stops him at the beginning of the sands, no broom now, her face slick from ocean water. “Afternoon, mister Buru,” she says, fidgeting with her hands in front of her dirtied clothes. There are tears at the knee, but where is she to get them stitched? *Best be grateful for only tears there.*

“He’s not needing you to sweep now,” Buru replies, more of a statement than anything. The girl smiles and nods, digging her toes into the sand again, wiggling them around.

She and Buru walk for some time, watching out yonder, at ocean and sky and sun. They talk of those sailor boys again – Svey wonders what could be found out there, are there other lands to explore, or is it mere ocean and the boys will dive for treasures, chests and chests of gold.

“If there is much in the beyond,” he whispers, searching for himself once more. “It has yet to be found by me, by my father, or by anyone.”



*And so we give in*, he wants to add, but decides not to. Let the girl dream of bigger things than the heaps of dust which she has swept up.

“Buru,” Svey calls out, her voice changed now. He had been staring at the mark of the horizon, scorning it over in his head, but now his eyes wander to where hers lay. Something has come into view, a lump of a something. Deep black – no, deep purple, blue, green, it is more colours than one. Svey, with a growing curiosity, leaps into a faster pace.

“Is it a treasure, Buru, or is it a creature?” She is bundles of energy; bundles of twigs caught alight. Sand flicks up behind her. “Is it alive, Buru, is it?” On slower feet, sorcer feet, he follows behind. He tries to make out shapes from the mass of whatever lay now upon the sands, not so far from his little bungalow.

“Careful,” he manages to mutter out, but her excitement bests her. Svey leans over the lump, and peers at something awfully familiar – an eye. The eye does not blink, the eye does not flutter awake or asleep. The eye is the eye, all that remains of seeing. Svey pokes it. The eye rolls backward, stutters, and flops around in its socket, and then pinches closed. No more open eye. Svey pokes it again. Nothing. She grunts, and Buru finally approaches the blobbish thing with keen eyes. He recognises it, or he recognises what it must be, from where it rests.

“Stay back,” he cautions, hesitant as he moves to grip her arm, but halts himself. “You have no fear of what this may do to you, Svey.” The girl glances over at him with a frown. *It is dead*, she seems to motion with her eyes, those bulbous irises. Buru inches closer, snapping some bone back in his body – the bone that remembers what else roams this miracle world.

He clears his throat, as if about to lunge into an elaborate story, “Others will fear such a creature,” he begins, careful, running his hand over the scaled skin. “Others will doubt its existence.” He pokes at a few scales, leaping his fingers to and fro, a little man on the side of a gigantic turtle. Have those existed in this land, or will they? Buru shakes his head, circling the creature. Something does not add up to him. There is some other reason a creature from oceans beyond would wash ashore, but at least, and he pauses, mulling over everything in his head, at least the creature is here, safe from wandering eyes. “Imagine if one of the men with their infant children would come upon this creature,” he says, staring at where its eye rolled back and shut tight. “He would hack at the meat till the butcher was buried in it and sail out the bones as some flaming warning.” There is much curiosity in a town as lonesome as Mivigge.

Svey steps backward to take in every dimension of the creature. It is much larger than she is, and yet when she was standing close to it, they had seemed the same height. It would be much stronger than she is, but one of them is alive, the other is not. Perhaps the debate is unnecessary. It is the colour of midnight sky, and a deep purple, too, but when she peered close to its eye, the scales seemed greener, mossier. Its tail is swept up behind it, lapped at with the ocean’s kiss.

“Maybe they did this,” she whispers, retracing her steps back to stand close to it again.

“Who is this *they*, then?”

“The sailors, the men, the ones that end up causing violence in their path, as I hear from stories —”

She cuts herself off, staring out at the sea.

“It may have been.” He dips his head, a sort of bow to the sea beast. She notices him, studying his face again, as she always does. The sunlight catches on him.

He lifts his head again, glancing to the girl. “But the creature may have died on its own, we can never know,” he continues, inching forward to stroke it once more. “For only the mind of a creature remembers what happened to it.”

Some time passes, as the girl and old Buru study the corpse of the beast in thoughts, fresh perspectives and new imaginings. It is sleeping ashore for once – no, it ceased breathing a time ago. It swallowed up death in the guise of the friend, the ocean – no, it collapses down upon something, a deformity, perhaps, hidden underneath. Svey strokes its neck. She neither comforts it nor hurts it, but feels it, for within each moment she forgets the feel of scales. It seems so harmless to her, but the stories from childhood come flooding in with the tide.

“We cannot tell the butcher?” she offers, but even questioning it, she begs him with her eyes that he listen to her words, listen as if she is telling him the creature cannot be torn apart for meat, bone, some crass family dinner where father, mother, son, everyone just bask in the tribute of it. *Holy meat! Mother, father, I’ve never tasted real sea monster before!* She shakes her head in such a sudden snap Buru worries it will topple off and float off, off, off and away.

“We will bury the corpse,” he says, with a tiny smile.

A smile that fades upon thinking. “Do you have a spade in your bungalow, mister Buru?”

“They don’t give you one to shovel dung?” He spits out his words coarsely, but he regrets it right away. He glances to her with sunken eyes.

She coughs. “I don’t shovel dung, mister.” Neither makes eye contact for a moment, staring out at the sea. The imperfection of every lap seems to draw them in, entrancing them, but Buru turns back to the younger girl with a frown on his face.

“Sorry, then, Svey.” She seems to forgive him with a smile. “I’ll go fetch a spade.”

The old man waves back to the girl, retreating to his bungalow by the sea. Svey promises to keep watch of the creature, protect it from what could come crawling down the sands. As she becomes, to his eye, the size of a grain, he watches her final act, once more returning to stroking around the creature’s eye. Considering it. Considering everything.

Buru creaks open the door to his bungalow, entering another world once more. Everything inside is a mirror image of the rundown, shabby outside – handmade, bare, plain, simple. But the way he likes things to be. There is no mess, for there is not much to be made unclean, or tossed around, or left askew, draping down. He rifles through the chest – no spade. Nothing behind this, or that, until he checks the last place he would have imagined checking. There’s a spade underneath the bed. Tucked all the way at the back, a little rusty. But perfect, still. The perfect size for him, for he never grew or shrunk much at all from teenager to old, old man. He smiles to himself, trying to remember what he’d have done with something like this. Dug for treasure, treasure he never found? Planted some garden in some other house, before he found home? One day – dig his own grave?

Buru shakes himself free of those thoughts. The spade tries to sink out of his hands, but he has his grip upon it, and lugs it toward the door, until – freeze. There, it comes back.

He's on another shore, sand lighter than Mivigge, surrounded by almost nothing. No dock, no town, no little bungalow built by the old man of the tide. He isn't old. His legs are trunks, planted firm but sunken in the sand. His hair is the colour of averack trunks, too. Everything about him is natural, like a tree. He has the spade, shoveling back the hissing sand, hissing as it swirls with wind and the early pitter-patter of rain. Strange, for him to remember rain.

It hasn't rained in Mivigge for years.

Briefly he snaps out of the vision – *has Svey experienced rain, true rain?* – before he collapses back in. Little droplets dampen his hair, hair so unusual to remember, to see. Everything in his vision now is like a second world behind his eyelids. The spade digging into soft, wetting sand. The crack of lightning. An echo of thunder. He feels almost...dastardly...peering back at himself. What with such an atmosphere. Something chinks. *Buru, you've hit something.* He flings sand behind him, out of his way, out of his eyes, out, out of here. There's part of that chest. The side, the ornate detailing, a picture of a creature he had never seen before. Not the sea creature from the sands. Not the one Svey guards now.

The chest is heavy. He strains his arms, yanking, ahoy. It flings itself free, bumping into him, almost crushing his left hand beneath it. The chest is a beauty in his eyes, but to another perhaps purely a scrap of wood containing something. What did it contain?

Buru almost forgot.

He scratches at, claws at, that keyhole or clamps, each grunt beating off each clap of thunder. The rain is heavier now. A lidgull passes overhead. Click. He uses something from his back pocket – the tiny blade – to force open the chest, all that rust having worn it down. He could have been struggling all the while, hours upon hours, bathing in – what season’s rain? That he cannot remember; it dulls to think about day, month, year. Buru forces the chest open, staring down at the treasure, water droplets sinking into it. Was it treasure, Buru, was it? He digs again.

The chest is open in his mind, and there in his bungalow, toppling with things from the past. Nothing from the present, or the future. Not that physical artefacts give much meaning to his present.

The chest. Buru steps outside of his little bungalow, still reminiscing, picturing everything still in that mind of his. The chest was mostly empty. Except for, of course, its treasure. Not coin, not riches, not a map for another journey, nothing of the sort. The chest held a journal. It was protected well enough that it seemed important. Inscribed was an account of the captain’s journey from Bul-al Cove to the O’vai Isle, a place Buru did not recognise. He buried the journal back in the sand, hauled the chest off the beach, and the rest, as they say...

Buru swings the spade, groaning with every click of his frail bones. The sky seems duller.

Svey is hunched over, sand in her face. “Is that you, mister Buru?” She says she can hear footsteps perfectly, and his are weaker, slower, softer. He grumbles, a slight smile

forming on his wrinkled face. He tosses the shovel down onto the sand, glancing back over at the creature from the seas. Strange, how peaceful in death it can seem. The tales of such a creature, he remembers, have it out as such a tyrannical beast, swallowing whole the fleets of the innocent. Sailors.

Svey sets to digging with the spade, heaving sand over her shoulder. “It’s like sweeping, almost,” she whispers, almost lugging a spade’s worth of sand into Buru’s face. He had turned, to check on her. Nothing but determination strikes her face, and the odd grain of sand blown in the wind. He stands near the creature, observing it for a final time.

“Don’t fall in love with it, mister,” she says, the cheekiest grin on her face.

*She must have eyes in the back of her head.*

There’s now a hole big enough for half the creature a few paces away from him. Svey shows no sign of stopping, heaving sand out of her face, out over the lip of the hole. A gaping hole in the world. She pants, staring up as the sun overhead winks back at her. “Soon enough I’ll be trapped down here, mister Buru,” she shouts, wiping the sweat off her forehead. He pokes his head into the hole.

“Oh, have you found the other side of the earth yet?” His voice echoes in the pocket of space, shifting rainfalls of sand down upon the tiny broomgirl. She is becoming more of a speck with each dig of that spade.

Svey shakes her hair of sand, resting the spade over her shoulder. “I’ve found a whole ‘nother civilisation down here, Buru, you wouldn’t believe it.” He laughs her off, but there is concern lingering in his head – how to free the poor girl from her deepening prison? Svey digs again, less and less sand making its way anywhere.

“I think we’ve almost got the room to bury our friend,” he says, quieter. “I’ll fetch a ladder to help you back up.” He takes another step back from the edge, glancing at the corpse. Even without movement, without a notion old man and creature could be ‘friends’, he’s formed some connection between them. As if the creature washed ashore on his beach for him, and for the girl, poor nothing-else-better-to-do Svey. He has nothing else better to do, too. Life is dedicated, now more than ever, to the corpse of all things. A whirl of sand whips back in Svey’s face and she sighs. Buru heads off to the bungalow once more to retrieve a ladder, tucked away under his bed.

The hole is deep, wide, an abyss of a grave, but only from the lip, where Buru stands with the ladder. It’s a flimsy thing that to him does not seem long enough, as if it will fall straight down, maybe knock the poor girl unconscious. But it manages the job, and up she climbs. Rung by rung.

“How’d I do that, mister?” She mumbles, staring down at the gaping eyesore in the sands. From a distance it is nothing more than a lip. For a second, they stare into its depth. Nothing stares back. The creature seems to grumble at them, almost forgotten about. Buru snaps out of it and turns back to the sea-thing.

At first it doesn’t budge. “It’s too heavy, we should have known,” she grumbles, talking over the whipping wind now. Its scales are slippery under dry human hands. She shoves it again. Buru heaves with what remains of his might, an old drunkard losing sight of youthful days with every round of the sun and moon. He grunts and the creature seems to grunt back, in death. A guttural sigh in rigor mortis. But after several false starts, the creature moves, gliding across the sands towards its final resting place.



Svey begins to ache, moaning under her breath. Her feet dig into the sand and shove through it. By some miracle the creature seems to be moving, easing its way toward the hole. Buru forces each muscle in his body to work miracles, heave-hoing. The sky above him is swirling, applauding, almost, as the head of the creature flops into the hole. No other way to shove the thing. Buru and Svey grow weary, but keep pushing, and pushing, and pushing.

With a great thump, the creature bellies out into the deep below, tumbling, sort of flipping itself round as the sun becomes a smaller and smaller dot high above. With a grumble, the stomach of the creature shakes, and both eyes flutter open. It's a strange goodbye as the creature seems both dead and alive, in last breaths, in the soul of the sea-thing floating off into some other life, beyond seaside Mivigge. Buru and Svey smile down upon the creature, dropping their heads.

“Go easy, sweet thing,” she mumbles, shoveling sand upon the creature.

Buru sighs, heavy. “May you find the beauty in life beyond.”

Svey shovels another load of sand down into the depths. Waves lap at their feet. A lidgull is circling overhead, hungered. Another spade of sand.

The docks seem quieter now with no one lingering around them. Buru and Svey continue up the dune, the shorter one with the spade slung over her shoulder. She's smirking until she sees that tavern, with every board of wood familiar, every windowpane the same as the cracked, beat-up ones that haunt her sleep. The sound of cheering erupts out of it, but for once Buru is repulsed by the sight of those dull boards, that creaky door. He can hear the creaks in his head, having become intimate with the place. He shrugs off

the idea of pouring another drink down his throat, but maybe just for the night.

Tomorrow, and then tomorrow's tomorrow, the call of rum will be his siren's song.

That could have been what washed ashore, he thinks to himself, glancing once more back out to sea, and to the soothing chill of water lapping at sand and shore. A siren. Buru keeps up from grainy sand to cobbled pavement, passing the tavern by. He glances over at the girl, who wears her thoughts on her face, unable to hide them beneath her brows or flush of her cheeks. Svey takes another breath. She swings the spade down, almost clinking it against the greyed road.

"After today, I go back to a place with a roof," she whispers, chinking a paver with the spade, "but all that wood has rotted, you have to notice." She bites her lip, but instantly regrets it, wiping at her face with the fabric of her rags. They're rags, after all. They're scraps of nothing. It's as if she wipes half of her excitement and wonder off her face; rags that drain out personality. Buru catches himself staring at her face, searching for whether the creature has slipped from her mind...just like that.

She pauses suddenly, raising the spade high in the air. Her eyes bulge. "I spent all of my day digging on the shore, mister, there goes my pay for a week and a bit," she splutters out, tightening her grip on the spade. She starts to lower it down, as if to strike the cobblestone, tear up half the road in the bitterness. A crack in her step soothes her down, and she glances at Buru, a muffled sigh slipping from his lips. She fidgets with her hands.

"You were fighting off a formidable foe..." Buru surprises himself, his words certain, bold, every note pitch perfect. Her grip loosens on the spade.

“I did nothing,” she murmurs, staring up at him. But it slides into place, his new way of thinking – her way of thinking, he’s started to believe. Create a story, to make yourself feel bigger. “You were the hero, mister Buru,” she continues now, searching his eyes, “I hear the stories you sometimes mumble to yourself, in the tavern. Everyone else thinks you are a nut, mister, but it has just been years since you had the chance to prove yourself.”

“You are yet to prove yourself, Svey,” he whispers, with a smile.

{ *pitter patter... but not of rain* }

“A sea monster? In Mivigge?” A crowd has gathered around them in the heart of the village. All have come to gawk at old man and broomgirl, with the dirtied spade swung over her shoulder. The butcher, with blood dripping from his hair, is tickled with some lust, some fervor. The children leap around, some pretending to be dangerous, deadly beasts, others pretending to be helpless victims, screaming under the snapping jaws of such a formidable creature. “How did you slay such a beast? Why does the old man not crumble to his knees, why does he not suffer from a missing limb?” The crowd is antsy, inching forward, and forward, wanting to know the spectacular end to such a tale.

Svey glances over at the old man; Buru glances to the girl, watching her eyes light up with the thrill of...the thrill of lying, true, but the thrill of brandishing the day as a spectacle. The thrill of seeing each other carving out of muddied sand the tale of the great Buru and the slain sea thing.

“You should have seen him,” the girl addresses the crowd, her eyes wide. “The thing...it never stood a chance, but nothing arriving in this town ever does...” A little

town enthusiasm never hurt nobody, she thinks, watching their eyes linger on her, and on the old man beside her. His age fades off his face with every syllable. The wrinkles hide beneath his grin and the crow's feet toddle off edges, hiding in the cracks of the pavement or scuttling toward the oceanside.

“But he's old and weak!” whispers out the daughter of the baker.

“He's a flailing drunkard!” shouts Hog, cross-armed, making his way over from the tavern. He's glaring down his broomgirl, what is she doing now, spinning tall tales and spending time with that old oaf, the crazed fellow. She doesn't notice him – not yet. Her eyes are sparkling with whatever floods a grey plain: downpour, blooming flowers, saplings that promise things like green leaves and trees to touch the sky. Buru's ears are perked up.

“He couldn't slay a beast even if that shack of his was burning down,” one of the husbands says, too old for sailing now, wiping a smudge of something bleak off his forehead. Yet nothing dulls in her eyes. The broomgirl is so committed to spinning this story destined by the gods. Chimes sound in her head, little bells, and her teeth sparkle, peeking out from the draped lips that usually hide them.

Svey glances at Buru, grinning. “You always see the man who has lost his way,” she utters, now searching in the crowd for the faces not scorned by distaste. “You never stop to ask the man what his story is – so how are you to know what he is capable of?” The children stop in their tracks, staring up at the old man, suddenly hypnotized by him...all from a few words, all from her delivery, her enticement. She breathes, eyeing the barman out there in the crowd, snickering. She grips tight to the spade, narrowing her eyes. But then a pause. She smiles at him, lowering the spade down in front of her. The crowd is no

more paying attention to the broomgirl – they rush forward, bombarding the old, old man. *Tell us stories, old Buru.*

[ The Tale of a Victory, *in the form of a dream* ]

Cough. The seas have been rocky, tossing some of the men overboard every few hours or so, or spitting up its phlegm on sailors with each wave. Vangel has some plague, then. Cough cough.

Buru is drifting between consciousness, and dreamland, aboard that old hunk of a ship – the Charybdis. He gulps for clean air in bed. He smells home in the dream, the seaside of Mivigge; that smell of rum stained on his clothes.

The ship almost drifts, almost wafts for the soul of song, there another siren, another sign to panic and think life is bargained to be horrendous, to be miserable. Days leave him with nightmares. But there is always waking.

Buru pictures the girl up there, Svey, sitting upon a salt-licked rock, smiling down at him. Welcoming him, instead.

The island is a coast, truly, and a familiar one at that. The sand wrinkles his feet, the sea air swirls around his head and wizens him. The shore is enough to cure Vangel's coughing. He cheers, the miserable fellow, hours ago heaving up mussels into a silver bucket with a hole in it. Sailors smell for more than salt again. Buru, old, old Buru, you've steered everyone home. The journey can end.