



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'In unruly Gaza, authority goes to the clans', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 18/10/05.

Tags: [disenchantment](#), [private place](#), [water](#)

Writer/s: [Van Waffle](#)

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North of the village at the foot of a mountain is a meadow with two springs. One stream runs east to a brackish lake enclosed by the two arms of the island. The other runs west to join a winding river valley dotted with farmhouses in pastel colours to fend off the long gloom of foggy winter days. Both drain eventually to the ocean, but on opposite sides of the island. At such a divide, one expects to find rugged peaks, but the sources arise only a few paces apart, across a meadow with wild apples. A stone's throw up the slope stands the pale blue house Glen has been renovating. Two acres between the house and the base of the mountain are planted with all the vegetables he needs for himself: peas, beans, potatoes, leeks, onions, beets, cabbages and, when summer is warm enough to ripen them, tomatoes. The lower meadow, where the two streams flow, amounts to thirty acres of arable land. Between the apple trees, Glen slowly establishes a blueberry field, hopefully to replenish the savings he brought with him. Summers he also works fulltime at the gift shop in Port Ansei helping Doris, the first friend he made after coming to the island. But when the tourist season ends in October, she can't afford to keep him on.

Glen remembers the day he arrived. It was August. All the other ferry passengers had seemed happy. A young fisherman, returning from the mainland with his girlfriend, boasted about the money he made working only three months a year. Two travellers from Boston, lesbians, picked up Glen's vibe and perhaps his loneliness. Both schoolteachers, they described their whole summer poking along the coast. Excitedly, they pointed out a shearwater in the bright morning fog. It lifted off the surface and winged alongside, gradually gaining on the ferry and disappearing ahead. Back then Glen had nothing to look forward to. The island had been his last, desperate act of survival.

He had camped a few days in a site at the top of a cliff facing the mainland, keeping his gun close at hand only out of habit. He sat watchfully that first night, but when the full moon rose over a calm ocean and he heard minke whales breach invisibly, his thoughts began to change. The whales reminded him of something he had read when he was deciding where to flee: an article about street elephants, beasts of burden out of work since Thailand put a ban on logging. It was surreal: a four-ton methamphetamine addict, begging on street corners for bananas so its mahout could make a living. Roving gangs of behemoths. It put a different perspective on the dangers of urban America, which Glen had risked everything to escape.

The giants breathed peacefully in their element, spouting seawater. Inhaling acrid, wet air, Glen felt an exchange. Nothing conscious, he didn't believe in that. The whales simply exuded freedom into the dark, and he absorbed it.

Later, fog rose during the final hours of night. A lighthouse

on a nearby point started blasting its foghorn at intervals, deep as recorded whale song. Glen got used to it after a while, yet sleep eluded him so he went to sit by the cliff again. The whales had gone. Silence spread away for miles toward mainland, a 90 minute crossing. Beyond it lay barriers of mountain, miles of rugged land where people lived such simple, incomprehensible lives. If he cast his thoughts far enough, he could still feel the restless city. A familiar force had begun searching for him. He had planned his departure carefully over seven months, keeping his eventual destination secret even from himself. The island had come at the very end, in a newspaper travel article, setting off a light. His great grandmother had come from Port Ansei. Nobody knew that. She was dead; his whole family was dead. So Glen had determined the destination only three days before he left. The structure he abandoned would remain rigid and vindictive, pursuing him inexorably, turning every hair. He guessed his chances of living two months on the island were 50-50.

But sitting that morning in thick fog, a natural curtain terrible and alien to him, he couldn't even see the water lapping softly at the bottom of the cliff below. These invisible sounds were unfamiliar. City nights, he knew and understood. Looking over his shoulder and seeing trees receding into an ethereal grey wall, he thought anyone could approach without him knowing. But as dawn arose, the same obscurity that frightened him would protect him. Sea and mist enveloped his whole life now.

Anyway, no matter whether someone came for him tomorrow, or in three weeks, or never at all, he had arrived at a place where the only time that mattered was this moment. A giant fin slicing the path of moonlight. The burst of a blueberry upon his tongue. The patience of a spider in its web laced with shining droplets.

Now five years have passed and Glen has never stopped wondering when a familiar face might come to the island and unlock his secret. He would keep to his farmhouse, but the savings won't last forever and he can't afford to live without the bit of money he earns working summers in Doris's gift shop. Hiding would make every day barely worth living. The island as a whole no longer feels like hiding. It has become a microcosm. Glen made friends with the swaggering young fishermen, the ferryman and the lesbians from Boston who liked it so much they come back every summer with their kayaks.

In winter there is a strange spectacle. Seals, trapped in the enclosed lake, cross the island on flippers in search of open sea. They come right across the divide in Glen's meadow, sliding down his farm lane and along the main road. They have faces cute and innocent as puppies', but you don't dare approach them; they're vicious as cornered Wolverines.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Van Waffle.*