

The Indian Ocean Queen's Troubles, by Erynn Liew, Junior Winner from Malaysia

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It was morning. My friends and I were at a beach clean-up event in Pantai Aceh. Standing at the far end of the beach, I fished out plastic with my pet 'starfish', Patrick. This remote-controlled robotic starfish grips rubbish with its tentacles as it swims in and out of the ocean, allowing it to reach a diving depth of 10 metres. Simultaneously, the goggles grant me to see Patrick's point of view through the camera.

I trudged to retrieve Patrick who swam out of the waves. 'Please don't park your foot on me,' a deep voice demanded. I removed my goggles to see a Mono fish tangled up in a plastic string! Bending over, I gently untangled the diamond-shaped fish. 'Thanks, girl.' He checked his fins like he was just done with a manicure appointment. 'Good gracious, you can speak!' I exclaimed. Appearing bored, the fish uttered, 'Picking up rubbish?' I nodded. Swimming in circles around my feet, he asserted, 'Name's Joe. I'm going to take you to my kingdom.' 'Wait! You can't do that!' Within seconds, I was transported to a place where I could only see bubbles.



In a flash, we were on the sandy sea floor. Bubbles were seen appearing around our heads to allow us to cope with the pressure and temperature. Joe was amused to see me looking like an astronaut on a mission. Upon pressing the hand of a pink coral, something swam towards us like a bullet train, halting at the tip of my nose. It was a Gigantic Oceanic Manta Ray! 'Secretary Joe,' she addressed Joe, who bowed to her. I was awestruck. 'Hello, Erynn,' she said. Joe introduced us: 'Your Majesty, Erynn. Erynn, Queen of the Indian Ocean.'

'It's an honour to meet you, your Majesty,' I bowed respectfully. 'Aha! Excellent choice, Joe! I'm Queen Rui. This way, please.' With a wave of her magical flippers, I was astounded to see a palace encrusted with pearls and sea gems. Queen Rui eventually escorted us to a room with two big comfortable seashells.



Smiling, the queen spoke, 'Erynn, I've appointed Joe, my secretary, to bring me a human child from the world above. No offence, but our kingdom has been greatly threatened by unscrupulous humans,'. 'Not only I, but all the Majestic Kings and Great Queens of the ocean world feel the same. Right here, there's overfishing, climate change, deep sea mining, seismic blasting, plastic pollution, and a whole lot more.' Enraged and hurt, she continued, 'Humans are incredibly selfish. Aren't they aware of our existence? We've been treated as a dumping ground for ages!' she lamented. Just then, Joe sniffed loudly. 'What's wrong, Joe?' I asked. 'My old pal, George, a turtle, went to the turtles' heaven yesterday. A plastic bag cost his dear life.' Hearing that, my heart crumbled.



Determined, I said eloquently, 'It's my responsibility to pass this message to the human world. Your Majesty, may I propose an idea?' 'Of course!' she expressed. 'How about sending a silent message through the brainwaves of anyone abusing the ocean? For instance, embed insight of the ocean creatures' death rates when someone litters into the sea. When fishermen overfish, alert them about the reduction of fish population. When seismic blasting is intensely extreme, whisper to them that whales will be deaf. The magical ocean creatures are certainly capable of such acts, aren't they?'

Queen Rui and Joe's eyes widened in astonishment. 'Erynn, that's brilliant!' Queen Rui said while swimming in excitement. A starfish on the Queen's throne caught my attention. 'Your Majesty, I own a fascinating gadget called Patrick. It picks up rubbish from the ocean. My distant sea-loving uncle, Olenus, gifted it to me, but I've only got one. I'd recommend the oceans make replicas of it.' The Queen nodded in agreement. 'Bring it over and we'll make hundreds of replicas.'



A month later, my friends and I were wearing goggles and fishing plastic out of the ocean with our Patricks. The new Patricks are distributed to people who were hand (or fin)-picked by ocean secretaries, designed by squid mechanics and blacksmiths. Besides being environmentally friendly, these orange robotic starfish can go 20 metres deep. Queen Rui has also assigned the telepathic jellyfish to send wave messages to promote awareness amongst the ocean abusers. Joe, my Mono fish friend, had been promoted as the Queen's royal associate. As for my promise to spread Queen Rui's message to the human world, I'm glad that the mission has been finally accomplished!



(749 words)



***Whispers from Nazawa* by Victor Kiyaga, Junior Runner-up from Uganda**

In stories,
Imaginations are made,
Inspiration sought
And expectations told
Like the sea leaned forth
To narrate her all, she deemed me worth
I too lean forth
To narrate my worthwhile experience
To ears of the commonwealth

With a voluntary heart,
One drawn to the environment
My feet carried me to Nazawa
Nazawa once the beauty of nature
Nazawa once with water as clear as glass
Nazawa once an attraction to all people of class
Nazawa once a habitat, a cozy home
Nazawa once for all to happily roam
Yet Nazawa now the remnant of nature
With beauty distinctly extinct

As I cleaned up,

I was helped by Nazawa's cleansing tide

But with it came a glide
Of voices that pricked my pride

No longer mute

The creatures of the sea,
Confided secrets of the deep in me

Seeking liberation for the free

Humans to let their pollution flee,

Set these sea creatures free

First,

A sea turtle; wise and weary-eyed,
Shared its lament that made me sigh
'Our nests now threatened

Sand no longer soft,
Plastic traps our hatchlings
Fishing lines entangle, cruel and deep,
Silently ensnaring us in the waters we keep.
The ocean's balance which once pristine and grand,
Is crumbling under an invasive hand.'

Second,

A tilapia fish, delicate and fleshy,
Spoke of coral reefs getting wasted
'Bleaching takes its toll

As chemical pollutants poison through
Our homes destroyed where once we thrived,
Now skeletal remains of life deprived.
Resilience dwindles as our world turns pale,
The ocean's dying echoes is our mournful wail.'

Then,

A conch with its shell iridescent and fair,
Spoke of rhythms lost and now laid bare
'We yearn to dance with waves

But human hands have stolen what we crave

Plastic remnants clog our ancient halls
Choking our depths then casting frozen stalls
Unnatural prey, a haunting guise
Endangers us and shatters ocean ties.'

In the chorus joined in,

A pod of dolphins, sleek and swift,
With voices that resonated a plaintive drift.
'We echo-locate our sonar's guide
But industry's noise, we cannot abide
Amidst propeller's roar, we lose our way
Communication lost in disarray
The tumult of clicks and whistles
Drowned by human intrusions, our voices dismiss.'

My heart swelled as a heavy weight descended,
The consequences of a world we offended
To these voiceless beings, their plight and plea,
I vowed to listen, their advocates to be
'Oh, gentle creatures, your pain I hear,
Your sorrows shall awaken hope and cheer
From this moment forward I make a stand,
A steward of the seas to protect the land
Restore our common wealth.'

With beachcombers' hands I toiled with care,
Removing debris and restoring the air
Every piece of plastic, every bit collected
A small yet meaningful act

Awareness shall rise from shores to the deep
Respecting the ocean, its mysteries to keep

Every Commonwealth member to reap
With collaboration and innovation
To heal these precious waters



Ungrowing Growth by Evangeline Khoo, Senior Winner from Malaysia

I was a blessing.

A miracle. Born in 1907, constructed for the advancement of humanity, I was the solution to the declining economic state of the country while being uncomplicated to make. Every hero starts small. So did I. Weak, flimsy, pathetic. I grew. They crafted me. Experiments after experiments. Some parts of me became sturdy, some became bubbly and white while some became as soft as silk. I am the future. *I was the future.*

I am a mimic.

A copy of what they wanted me to be. The perfect compound to use for their projects. Their endless, endless projects. I was weak, flimsy and fragile. But I grew. They corrected me. Discoveries after discoveries made me invincible. I was dexterity. Moldable. Stretched when needed yet firm when the duty called. I was transparent like glass yet opaque. Colours upon colours, *I was painted, tainted, decorated.*

I was beauty.

I am indestructible.

I would never shatter under the pressure of the industries. Nor the ground as I hit it hard. They experimented. And I took it. It was for the revolution of the world. As I was the hero. Balanced. Perfect. I would never break like the glass. I would never shatter into billions of dainty shards of terror, harming my creators. I would never stretch till I couldn't. I had no limit. all they had to do was change me a bit. I was changeable. Interceptable. easy.

I am useful.

Children begged for toys made by my hands. My godly hands that crafted every detail for their oh-so-easily breakable trinkets. Buses, planes, kitchen sets, and dolls, all miniature sized, just like them. I was their joy. I was the creator of their delight. Gone were the wooden toys and soft linen animal plushies. *I was the future.* I gave them their innocent smiles as they held me close to their heart as if I'd break.

I never break.

It hurt. It hurt when they threw my creations into the rubbish bin three months after Christmas. I was merely temporary. But I stayed. Unharmful. Not a single scratch. Endless. I could've been given to other children. Dire and hopeful for a present under their Christmas tree, no matter what I was. A simple doll or mini car would've given those children the same smile as the one I gave the last few. Thousands of children dream of creations by me, praying that maybe a few generous families would donate their unwanted toys. Despite the markings by crayons or markers, the torn hair, and the lost wheels, I still would've been their euphoria. Their elation. And regardless, they threw me away. Abandoned for the next new 'trend' in the industry. Nothing was ever permanent. I watched the world grow as I remained. As I, couldn't grow. But I, will be the permanent.

I was so useful.

For I was used like single-use items,

Cast aside for another passerby desperate enough to pick me up in turn,
use me for evil or good?

Would I be picked upon, more and more chemicals added into me as I turn towards my main
goal of this, for the revolution of the forward movement in humanity?

Military-grade body armour or turned into a soft fabric that is easy to be purchased and
utilized?

or would I be heated into my liquid form to be moulded into containers?

Used and thrown once more. For the cycle repeats. I will never decompose calmly. As I will
forever always leave a footprint on this very earth I walk on.

I choke and make the creatures of the sea cough, sick of me and my tiny, tiny micro sizes in
their oesophagus, making it harder to breathe. Teasing, taunting that I will never be
decomposed in their digestive system, always tricking its uncomplicated mind that it's full.
Nutrients, proteins, and vitamins are all a blur as they uselessly churn me and my polymers.

What happened?

I was born for the sake of humanity and its core factor of invention.

Necessity. That is my creator. That was my growth, It was what made me imperishable.

I am hard, rigid, stretchable, soft, graceful, colourful.

I am what they need, yet they greed over me. They greed and *greed*, pry their claws into all
the different industries, taking over.

I am easy, cheap, and accessible.

I am taking over. I am choking, harming the sea creatures. I am deep in the rich soils of the
forests left by hikers long ago.

I am growing. I have *grown* to the point they cannot contain me anymore.

The rubbish, the straws, the produce bags, and the cutlery made by my hands all have been
staring back at me like a tower I have built. The fools think they can destroy me. Do you not
recognise me anymore?

It is still me, the creation they have made.

Fools, fools, *fools*.

They burn me at the stake as if I'm a witch. As if I was the one who chose to be cast away as
if my kingdom was not built by them. They burn me and I melt. I will dim the clouds as rain
pours, the sour and acidic water that harm their skin. They hiss and curse my name as they
burn me. I will trap the only heat I know that they fear. I will embrace and bathe in the Sun's
ultraviolet rays.

I will kiss the hands of Mother Nature as she cries in sorrow for her beautiful body and
offspring that have been tainted by me. I will cloud the eyes of my wrongdoers to only see
my fluorescent colours that now shine brighter than before as the skies only allow *me*.

I will be the witch they fear.

Father, what have I done wrong?

they use me for their deeds when in reality it's all for their greed.

they knew what was coming and yet they continued,
pushing their luck until it ran until I was starting to run up to them.
They throw me aside as if I am sustainable,
but trust me when I say this fact is non-negotiable
for I am non-biodegradable.

With each step, the consequences plague me. Death of heatstrokes and the decline of oxygen while the incline of carbon emissions haunt me. Forgive me, for all I have wanted was to be of some use to this earth. I have done more harm than good. My only purpose in this world was to help. To give hope towards the expansion of technology and its following industries. I never meant to fall down the path to destruction. Father, Forgive me.

Rubber. Natural, the better counterpart. Born to decay and be destructed when his use is done, he can be gone in just a split second compared to me who needs more than one.

Silk. The one with true grace and beauty. Not fake nor forgery. Her production needs not to burn nor heat. Unlike me, who's presence brings mere deceit.

Steel. Made meant to be reused. Again and again and again. Why can't I be like him? He once rusted but now in band with the strongest metal in the periodic table. He's stable. While I'm not.

I am plastic.

You may think this was all too sarcastic,
but trust me, my reign upon this earth is most definitely dramatic.
You may blame me for the world's turmoil and despair on me,
as you so desperately run from the responsibility of your greed,
Your deeds and crimes shall be punished,
just wait and see.

For I am a curse designed to never be broken.
Hence my story *must* be spoken.



***Death and the Bumblebee* by Cristabelle Yeo, Senior Runner-up from Singapore**

The bumblebee awakened in a place that was neither here nor there — a just-right in-between. The air was syrupy with a blurry sort of warmth, and smelled distantly of wildflowers. All she remembered was a painful, drying heat, then nothing at all.

She was nestled in the hand of a skeletal figure. A threadbare pinstripe nightgown hung off his frame; an equally threadbare nightcap rested at the crown. He clutched a flickering oil lamp, which illuminated a mellow, orange path through the darkness. His presence brought to mind a balmy, soothing sort of warmth that set a strange dichotomy between it and his rather morbid appearance.

He looked down at her, and gave a small nod in greeting.

“Why am I here?” asked the bumblebee.

Death gave her a faint smile. “You’re dead,” he said matter-of-factly. “My name is Death. I’m bringing you to a better place.”

“Huh.” The bumblebee contemplated this for a while. She knew she should feel some sort of alarm, fear, perhaps, to be nestled in the palm of Death himself. But to her surprise, she felt none; just a numbness that consumed her body like the quiet, crisp-apple chill of winter. She found this a strangely pleasant alternative to the draining, overbearing heat that had pressed down on her just moments before.

She thought of the flower patch she died in. A rich symphony of purples and yellows and reds with perfumes of flowers all melding into one incandescent blur of colour. Overgrown, concealed. A good spot for sleeping; a good spot for dying.

But for whom would the flowers bloom when she was gone? Who would sustain the watercolour delicacy of their petals?

“My flower patch will be so sad and lonely, once I’m gone.”

There was a quiet tinge of melancholy to Death’s voice. “Perhaps.” There was a hesitation to his voice, and he looked at her, trying to find something in her eyes. His hollow, skeleton-gaze seemed to ask something — a challenge, perhaps. The bumblebee stared right back, the light in her eyes fiery. Death seemed to be satisfied by that, and continued, “Or maybe it’ll be gone quick enough not to miss you too much.”

The bumblebee wasn’t sure if that was better or worse. “Why?”

Death looked at her for a long moment; there was almost something pitiful in his gaze. He then sighed — a heavy, weary sigh that could rattle the ground; she could feel it reverberate through

her. “Same reason why more and more of your kind have been dying. It’s the heat. Your bodies aren’t made for it; neither are the flowers. They might dry up as quickly as you did.”

A dried up bee in a dried up flower patch. She remembered a story she was told before (vaguely, she wondered if she’d become a story too). “My sister’s friend’s grand-aunt says it’s because of humans,” the bumblebee said. “She says that they like riding giant metal animals that spew black smoke in the air. But I don’t really understand why they do it. Can’t they just stop using them?”

“It helps them get to places. Like your wings,” said Death.

“My wings don’t make the air hot. Why don’t they do the same thing? Why do they need to use the metal animals?”

Death chuckled, amused. There was a fondness in his voice, and the bumblebee realised he must truly love his job. How strange, how morbid, it must be, to carry dead bees to and fro. Yet underneath all the layers of strangeness and macabre, lay a warm candlelight glow. The last edges of dusk, slowly slipping away. *It’s time to go home.* And at that moment, she could see why he enjoyed it — if his job consisted of a million moments of dusk and candlelight, she would never want to leave, either.

“I suppose they can use their legs. Or other contraptions, like bicycles or trains. They just think the metal animals are faster.”

The bumblebee felt indignant. “So they’re alright with killing bumblebees and flower patches just to be faster? That just seems selfish.”

“Well I suppose it might be too difficult for them,” Death said.

She laughed. “What’s so difficult about not riding a metal animal?”

“Because humans never think that way.” Death adjusted his nightcap. “They like to make things all convoluted and grand and *big*. I mean, ‘stop making the air hot’ seems much more difficult than ‘stop riding your metal animal’, doesn’t it?”

How strange humanity was! The bumblebee had never met someone who would make things bigger and scarier than it already was. She’d heard stories of them, seen outlines of her figures in her periphery, afraid to draw too close; large, lumbering creatures, with bright eyes and brilliant brains larger than perhaps the whole colony’s put together. For all the complexities in the world, could their minds not break this one down?

“They think very differently from bumblebees. To think ‘I’m feeding the future of the colony is much scarier than ‘I’m collecting pollen’. It’s always at the back of my mind, of course, which makes it seem grand. But when it consumes my mind, it just seems scary.”

“They do,” Death said. “If humans thought more like bumblebees, the world might be a better place.”

“Someone should tell them that,” said the bumblebee. “I wish I could, but I’m just a bumblebee.”

“Maybe you can,” said Death, and the bumblebee was struck by the warmth in his voice. “Small steps.”

“Small steps,” the bumblebee agreed.

The darkness turned into light, a gradual transition, from shadow to a purple-pink twilight, then to shimmering brightness that felt a lot like home; the scent of flowers became ever-stronger, a sugary, bittersweet meld of hyacinths¹ and crocuses². There was something invigorating about it, something precious, something melancholy. Death stopped walking, and blew out his lamp. “Look, we’re at your stop.”

The bumblebee looked out at the horizon of her new afterlife; the beginning of an end. “I suppose this is where we say goodbye,” the bumblebee said.

“I suppose it is,” said Death.

“Thank you,” said the bumblebee. “For the company.”

“Thank *you*,” said Death.

The bumblebee fluttered out of Death’s palm, into the eternal promise of spring sun and cool breezes and wildflowers. She flew further and further, until she was nothing more than a small yellow speck in the horizon.

Death watched her go, disappearing into the distance. “I think I shall write a story,” he said to himself, quietly ruminating. “About a curious bumblebee. And Death in a nightgown.” *A small step to bring about more small steps.*

Death turned back into the darkness, and lit his oil lamp.

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1. ...*hyacinths*: In Greek mythology, the hyacinth flower was formed by the sun god Apollo from the spilled blood of his dead lover, Hyacinthus. This myth is a metaphor for death and the renewal of nature.
 2. ...*and crocuses*: The crocus flower represents spring and new beginnings, which is what the bumblebee is given in the afterlife.