

Empty Shells and Broken Stones

Lisa Gaines

A child, scarcely more than three or four, stands alone in cooling sand. In spite of the December chill, she's dressed in a sleeveless pinafore, the weary fabric tangled around her knees by the relentless wind. She holds something in her hands – a bouquet of tattered stalks and withered blooms – and gazes out across the Pacific.

There is no such thing as silence at the place where earth and sea meet. Wind and water bombard the ear in chaotic symphony, waves gallop along the shore in a riot of white-crested foam, and a seagull's forlorn lament hovers above the din before being shattered by the wind into bits of forgotten memory. The gull's breast glows lily white beneath gun-metal gray wings as it rises from the sand to hover overhead like a reluctant kite battling its earthly tether.

I walk closer. There's something familiar about the child. Perhaps it's simply the way the wind tosses her hair into damp curls. Perhaps it's the way she stares at the sea.

Or simply the fact she – like I – am alone.

No houses adorn the crumbling cliffs thrust upward from the sand. No parents huddle in loving embrace. No siblings lost in a sand-castle world.

At that moment we are the only two people on earth.

Thin clouds – indestructible as spider's silk – sweep across the winter sky. Sea spray clings to my upper lip, the moisture salty as tears upon my tongue. I wrap thin arms across my chest and hug the emptiness within.

So vulnerable.

I want to protect this child from the violence of the world outside our little piece of space and time. To pull her close within my protective embrace. Fill my soul with her softness and innocence. Heal the ragged hole left behind by the death of my baby.

But my feet sink deep in the wet sand, anchoring me to my own misery.

Broken stones.

She turns and our eyes meet and suddenly I'm aware of the line running between us: Thousands of dead baby crabs vomited onto the shore in a band of white underbellies. An undulating parade of forgotten souls. Threshold between her world and mine.

Broken shells.

I stand barefoot in the waves.

She stands barefoot in the wind-tossed sand.

And suddenly the threshold becomes unbreachable – a wall neither of us can climb.

Broken lives.

She turns and runs like a frightened fawn toward a cottage I hadn't noticed before. The weathered wood – snug against the rugged cliff base – has an almost ephemeral air and there's something not quite right about the way the entire building slants to the left.

I frown.

Curious little house.

Curious place for a house to be.

Water rushes across my feet, caresses my ankles, tickles sand from between my toes. I glance out at the growing waves. Move hastily as another surge threatens the hem of my turned-up jeans.

When I look up – the child is gone.

Chills skitter across my skin as the wind stretches its icy fingers down the back of my neck. I raise my sweatshirt hood, pull it snug beneath my chin. Sound is muffled now, roaring breakers mumbling at a distance. For a moment I think I hear a baby's cry, but it's only the same lonely gull, circling overhead.

I came here to heal, I remind myself. Not become wrapped up in other people's hopeless lives.

Isn't there always hope?

The rich stench of stranded kelp and rotting baby crabs stings my nose while wind whispers of the coming storm and whips my hair into frizzy tangles.

There is no hope. Not any longer. Not since my baby was torn from my arms and murdered by the same man who planted her seed within me.

I study the house a moment longer, looking for movement, some sign of life. There should be a woman peering out at me – an indignant mother looking to see who has frightened her child.

But the house remains dark. An island of silence in the midst of a burgeoning storm.

Salt spray – driven sharp by the wind – needles my face and bare ankles. I stifle another shudder and continue my walk. Long strides carry me down the beach away from the brooding

house.

Abandoned.

The thought pierces my mind like a sharp blade, reaching down and stabbing into my heart. For a moment that heart stops. Time stops as well.

I try to convince myself the house isn't abandoned. The little girl lives there and so do her parents. I force my feet to move, further and further from the house until I can no longer feel the empty windows like hollow eyes piercing my back with their stare.