

Fran Alonso

# The Land of the Sea

Translated by Minia Bongiorno García

The sea is a contradictory and bewildering metaphor: beautiful yet caustic, sweet yet harsh; for it symbolizes life, but also death. But much more than a trite literary figure, the sea, with its abrasive epidermis of salt, is an enigmatic water creature that casts nets over the people who inhabit it in order to sweep away their scales of life, taking them away with it and leaving so many wounds open. That is the true sea. The sea with which seamen must measure their strength hand to hand, every day. And in that disproportionate battle, the routine character of an eternal struggle that sprang up many centuries ago — and that will, in all certainty, endure indefinitely, as long as humankind does not ruin its own surroundings— takes form. Today, the immense oil spillage the Prestige is pouring on us covers us with a cloak of desolation.

Throughout all that time, night in night out the sea, like a lonely old man, wrote a flood of legends, tales, tragedies, myths, shipwrecks and beliefs that are alive today in our individual and collective memory. Almost no seaman has any doubt that the sea is the best storyteller he has ever heard. With a deep and provocative voice, a full voice that reveals itself as powerful but also replete with hues, and that knows how to whisper its tales secretly, like a clandestine lover, if it so desires. On occasion, the sea is somewhat perverse telling tales. And sometimes, it plays the fool, it feigns, it deceives and it misrepresents. It is fearsome when it speaks with rage. Terrifying. But nobody tells tales like the sea.

The sea told me one: its own. Not the tale of the sea, but rather the story of O Rapaciño<sup>1</sup>. Apparently, he was a charming seaman. He got his nickname because by the age of nine he had already obtained his own rowboat to go fishing. And by the age of fourteen he was a skipper and he was giving orders to the other men on the boat, almost all of them older than he was. Soon he earned a reputation for being the best skipper for sardine fishing in all of the Rías Baixas during a time when radars did not exist; thus, it was essential to have good intuition and keen eyesight to locate the silvery phosphorescence these fish leave in the sea.

He was the sea. But contrary to the cliché, when I met him in his old age, his face did not look like the face of a seawolf; there was no pipe or white beard, no look of unconditional love for the sea in his eyes. Quite the opposite, the sea made him suffer. It was his torment. Like a shipwrecked boat on the shore, the sea was the nightmare of his old age. He was short, he had no beard and not much hair, and his body was very weather-beaten. His hands were salty. Seawater oozed from under his fingernails, just as it does from all the fishermen and shellfish gatherers that break the frames of Javier Teniente's photographs every single moment.

They called him O Rapaciño. For me, that old man was the sea personified. He was the sea. He had its body, he wore its clothing, he told its salty tales. The sea was he. Nobody could incarnate it better. Now, this monumental document, this living work of art that is Teniente's book, has the power to evoke the figure of that old fisherman, the one responsible for the fact that the sea bitterly and affectionately slapped me on the nape of my neck when I was a child. As if it were a gentle reproach. That fair-eyed and salty look he always had whenever that lost passion awoke in me. O Rapaciño, that was what they called him. And he had a dolphin hidden in each of his

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<sup>1</sup> The diminutive form of *rapaz*, –a young man between the ages of 14 and 17 who is a member of the crew on a fishing boat, or simply a young boy– here *O Rapaciño* is the nickname of the character in question.

irises, that ruddy man. When I was just a boy, he would take me fishing in his rowboat within the bay, or once in a while, almost out to the breakwater rocks: squid, flatfish, brown wrasses, ballan wrasses, codfish, red mullets, and, if we were lucky, breams. And I, that little boy, was happy tampering with the tholepins or bailing water. At that time, he had already retired. But his stories about the sea fascinated me as much as the ones that this book yells out from its silence, because they were stories written in the raw; stories in which the saltpetre, like blood, traced a map of all his wrinkles and the wrinkles of all the seamen he knew. Just like the stories of the sea people that Teniente captured with his camera.

O Rapaciño was my grandfather. I was lucky that he taught me to love the sea, and even to need it; but he also taught me to respect it, and above all, to size it up and fear it. And like any good seaman, he also left me his asthma. The one the sea gave him.

I have heard that the same sea is always different to each eye and in each instant. And this is true. Each one's sea is a personal experience. As far as I am concerned, the sea is a happy onrush of my childhood. But since my memory is intimately bound to the sea, I know full well that the sea experience of the men and women who inhabit this book is not mine. It is, however, my grandfather's. The years have passed, life has changed; and yet, even if it seems a contradiction, the sea is always the same.

The sea was always that enigmatic animal. Enigmatic, scaly and slimy like the seaweed entwined in the hands of the shellfish gatherers. As enigmatic as the basement of my grandparents' home, where each and every secret of the sea was hidden.

There, my childhood elapsed among the shadows formed by the tackle, the fish traps, the net floats and weights, the baskets, the hooks, the squid hooks, and even an ice box made of bricks and tiles in which one had to put two blocks of ice to keep the fish cool.

Yes, my personal and family memory is salty and deeply bound to the memory of Galicia, the land of the sea. Because Galicia is like a great cetacean; like a whale that, after so many years, does not know how to live out of the water and is condemned to wander eternally on a long voyage. Galicia smells salty; it has the eyes of a gannet and the hands of a fishmonger. From the port side to the starboard, from windward to leeward, from stem to stern, the country is intersected by the ocean. The country itself is an infinite ocean that raises the arms of its seamen from the waters at the bottom of the bay to Gran Sol, from Newfoundland to the Indian Ocean, from the Atlantic Ocean to the southern latitudes, always riding the same waves that are different to each eye and in each instant.

This is a book that stimulates my emotions doubly. Because it helps me recall the flavour of my family memory and the collective memory of the people to which I belong. And because it is an exceptional book. Javier Teniente's photographs are laden with humaneness, life, intensity. His sea is deeply human, painful and in pain, beautiful in the form the colors take, magisterial in his command of light. From the shipyards to the phosphorescence of the sardines, from Gran Sol to the offshore albacore fishing, from the shipping companies to the goose-neck barnacle pickers, from the shellfish gathering to the fish market, *Salty hands* covers the whole cycle of the sea, dragging us into its entrails with a well-aimed glance and a timely heavy sea. *Salty hands* is a book at permanent high tide. They are photographs that, inevitably, drown our emotions in salt.