

Except for the Sea

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

Night darkens on the beach. The woman, alone, listens in the black.

Sea sounds smack the shore then break on rocks. The air is full of spray.

Her family just left. She's festered her whole life in a rage, and leaves wounds with words. She remembers everybody in their flaws but forgets it all with the crunching sound through water. Footsteps trudge over shells.

A veiled lady rises out of the sea then stands still, shivering for a moment. As if reaching to embrace someone, she presses forward with both arms into the darkness.

The woman swallows hard and shifts in the sand to sit on her heels, hoping the veiled lady will not see her or hear her tears. She looks down the quiet miles of sand. There's nothing to cry about. It's dark. Very dark. The air is alive with echoes from her past.

The veiled lady stumbles on a shell then shakes water from the silk veil wrapped around her hair. She stands and hums softly.

The woman stays silent on the beach, still in a squat. Behind her, the veiled lady steps closer, her long hair brushing the back of the woman's neck. In a series of quick prances, the veiled lady leaps in large circles, dancing around the woman. She returns to the woman's side, leans over and strokes hair from her eyes.

The woman gulps mouthfuls of ocean air. The only sound, her own breathing. Stillness, silence everywhere. Except for the sea and the splash of footsteps. The veiled lady gives herself back to the waters.

Beneath the warm moon the woman rises from the beach to a kneel,
knees dug deep in the sand.

The veiled lady melts into the distance, full round waves rolling
against her thighs, then waist and shoulders. Just as the sea reaches
her face, she turns. Smiles.

The woman on the beach stands erect in the night air, turns her face
to the mountain and walks into the water's trail of foam left by the
veiled lady. Caught between earth and water, the woman peers over
the edge, closes her eyes and spreads her arms to a rising sky. Her
old stories washed ashore, she waits for the sea.

