

Fire, Milk, and the Ocean

Ben Bowers

The man who saw Nepal spoke
of the thunderous booms of the avalanches,
how the snow and rock consumed
entire villages and of the guide who kept
them safe. His guide had witnessed
a great many things, and he recounted
just a few for the man on their journey –
like the story about the young, grey goat,
who free to roam the farm, welcomed
himself into the kitchen, allured by the sickly
sweet scent of the milk boiling on the stove.

The goat began to drink, taking in the hot,
steaming liquid, before crying out so loud
you would swear it was another avalanche.
And then the goat resumed, taking pauses
only long enough to cry out to the heavens,
before lapping up the milk from the pot
once more. A few days later, the grey
goat lay dead outside the house. The doctors
say the cause of death was internal burns.

The woman told us of her tales at sea,
navigating the sapphire blue waters
with just the guidance of a sextant
and the stars. She spoke of the fish
that could leap from the water and fly
forever, and of the ship she longed
to run to and stow aboard, to be reunited
with the sea once more. She saw many islands
in her time adrift, many were barren, no more
than a place for coconuts to wash up and rot.
But on one forgotten speck of the map,

there were children playing soccer,
who swarmed the woman and asked her
to join, in a language she had never heard
before. She played with them and learned

to speak their tongue, only to learn on the night
she left that they could all speak fluent English.
The children told her goodbye after they
danced at the feast, just as generations
of their ancestors had, to wish good luck
and fair winds to wayward travelers,
in a way that transcended words.

Tired of playing cards in the cabin,
the rest of the group soon returned
to gather in the warmth of the campfire.
I took the opportunity to slip away –
One day I hope I will feel as though I can
return to that campfire, listen to their stories,
wait for the conversation to lull,
and then bowl over the group with
some spectacle I had experienced.
But for now, I just go to sleep,
hoping to dream that I am a sailor.
Instead, waking up in a cold sweat,
with a goat's cry ringing in my ears.