

## Yellow Fish (1988)

By Ambai (India)

Translated from the Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström

High summer. Already the sand feels hot. It will not hold its wetness. Away, to the left of the shrunken sea and spent waves, the sand spreads like a desert. Yet the eye is compelled by the sea alone. Now the white boat has arrived. This is the forerunner. Its appearance is the signal that the fishing boats are returning. It floats ashore like a swan, swaying from side to side. Far from the shore, bright spots begin to move. The fisher women make ready to welcome the boats ashore. Bright colours: blinding indigo, demonic red, profound green, assaulting blue. They stand vibrant against the white boat upon a faded blue and ash grey sea.

Now it is possible to see the other boats. Walking further, quite close to the boats you may see the fish filling the nets. Bodies and hands darkened by the salt wind, the men will spread their nets and start sorting the fish the minute the boats come in. Now the fish splash into plastic troughs, round eyes wide open. The unwanted ones are thrown away. There is a general murmur of tired voices, rising for a split second, then falling.



fishing boats (Mumbai, India)



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born 1944

Black hands. Brown wood of the boats. Between the meshes of the nets, white-bellied fish. Crowding near, the colours of the saris press upon the eyes gently but firmly. Painted troughs. Dry sand. An extraordinary collage of colours, on the shores of the wide-spread sea. A composition that imprints itself on the mind and memory.

A yellow fish is thrown away on the sand.

Of that palest yellow that comes before the withering and falling of leaves. It has black spots. As I stoop to watch, it begins to shudder and leap. The mouth gasps; gasps and closes. It shudders and tosses on the hot sand.

The men carry on sorting their fish quickly and efficiently.

That mouth closes; closes and opens, desperate for water. Like Jalaja's mouth.

Too hasty infant Jalaja. She pushed and bumped her way out into the world. Her name had already been decided. She who rises from the waters. Lotus. Jalaja<sup>1</sup>. They had to put her in an incubator. I stood outside that room constantly, watching her. Her pale red mouth. Her round eyes. Sometimes she would open and close her mouth, as if sucking.

The ashes which Arun brought back from the electric crematorium were in a small urn, a miniature of those huge earthenware jars of Mohenjodaro and Harappa<sup>2</sup>. Its narrow mouth was tied with a piece of cloth.

"Why is the mouth closed?"

"What mouth?"

"The mouth of the urn. Open it."

"Anu. It contains only ashes."

"I want to see. Open it."

"Anu."

"Open its mouth. That mouth..."

Loud racking sobs. The cloth was removed to reveal the urn's tiny mouth.

The ashes were in this very sea.

The sea is at some distance. The yellow fish leaps hopelessly towards it. Its mouth falls open, skyward. Lifted from the hot sand, it falls away from the fingers, heaving and tossing. It falls away again from a leaf with which I try to hold it.

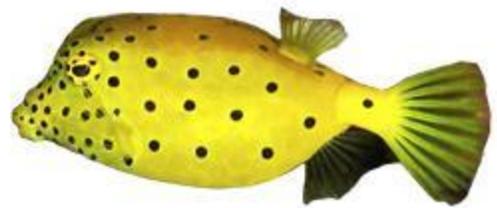
A fisherboy is on his way back from splashing in the waves.

He comes when I summon him in Marathi,

"Ikkade e, come here."

"Will you throw this yellow fish back into the sea?"

A quick snort of laughter. He grabs the fish firmly by its tail and starts running towards the sea. I run after him. He places it on the crest of an incoming wave. For a moment it splutters, helpless, like a drunk who cannot find the way home. Again it opens its mouth to the water, taking it in. Then a swish of the tail fin. An arrogant leap. Once again it swishes its tail and swims forward. You can see its clear yellow for a very long time. Then it merges into the blue-grey-white of the sea.



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<sup>1</sup>one of the many synonyms for *lotus* in Sanskrit (literally, *born of water*)

<sup>2</sup> both ancient Indus Valley archeological sites