

## Coastal People

Coastal people don't always live by the sea. They frequent it, and when they do, they like to occupy their hands. A book, a cigarette, both, or maybe the hand of another. I don't smoke, so I choose the book or the hand. I don't mind having one in either palm. That weight balances me. The book should be beach-fit. Already tattered, yellow from the cigarette smoke of someone, and written by a never-heard-or-seen-before author. A careful ghost who bears a name. Now, the hand should feel comfortable while it rests in yours. You don't need to have known the person for long—names are still not required as trips to the coast can arouse peculiar instances of spontaneity. However, you should feel safety by their grip. Enough to reciprocate it when waves crash toward you. The golden rule. Squeeze hands when waves crash. Don't worry about the book getting wet.

The author of the book should be of no distraction to those who walk by you. The book is merely a buffer between you and that crashing sea you sit before. 'Ocean' isn't a word in the vocabulary of coastal people, but 'sea' is abused. The sea is a literary place, much more than the coast, which is why coastal writers have appropriated its nature in their musings. The distinction between the sea and the coast is the line between. It is approaching imaginary, but at some point the sea becomes the coast. Wherever that line lives, however thin, that's where writers perch themselves. A step behind, that's where the rest of the coastal people reside. The writers think they have the best view of the sea because they're the closest. They think the salt spray makes their words have an edge. Usually, the sea erodes the truths they try to profess. The smart ones retreat into the ambiguity and hideaways of poetry. The smartest ones don't write at all; they sit above the perched writers, up on the tops of sand banks, nestled on cliff sides, or sat with their legs swinging from side to side on docks.

The sea isn't always in a rush to crash. The dock is where coastal people go when the sea refuses to be aroused by the moon. It's sacred. Worship there happens with the homely flick of a rod. Maybe fishing line bridges the coastal people to the sea, almost thin enough to be imaginary. But when it yanks, there's no denying that the line is there. Coastal people enjoy fishing to pair with their smoking, reading of ghosts, and holding hands. In the midst of these coastal rituals, their landlocked counterparts live differently tempered lives. *Truly landlocked people know they are*, Toni Morrison says, calling the sea 'ocean,' because they've never seen first-hand how inappropriate that word is to describe what's there underneath the swinging feet at the dock. I'd be troubled to trust the words of a coastal person describing their surroundings in a landlocked setting. But I'd smile at the eloquence of the coastal writer asking the landlocked one what they preferred to be called.