



Shift work

*Some transformations are seismic, others subtle.
Here, three writers explore the terrain of change*

illustrations *Monika Stachowiak*

Some of us take to change like ducks to water – natural nomads, moving from A to Z quite seamlessly, while others cannot help but fight it: forever swimming against the inevitable tide. In these three very different stories, the concept of change is held up to the light – in a culture that prizes economic progress and personal success above all else, what has change come to signify? For one writer, the sudden dissolution of a career and a marriage creates newly fallow ground that's fertile with possibility, truth and hope. Another writer ponders the 'politics of distraction' which, in this topsy-turvy world of

ours, somehow places more significance on a woman's bodyweight than her mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. For another, change is both comfort and fear: the familiarity of returning home to the mesmeric tides of the Andaman Sea, clouded by the effects of global warming. Through all of these stories, then, runs an insistent whisper... "the only constant in life is change". Sometimes, in surrendering, we find our solution; at other times, we must muster the courage to Be the Change. Perhaps, in the words of Niebuhr's 'Serenity Prayer', it's just about having the wisdom to know the difference. →



A sea change

Holding on, and letting go

words **Siddharth Dasgupta**

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Blue is never just blue. Staring into the heart of the Andaman Sea, as I have done with nautical precision over the years, I understand this with startling clearness. The moods of the weather might have shifted, shoals of fish could have come rushing in, a collection of billowing clouds and a surge of tides might have gathered, and what was once pure blue now lies transformed – into the compelling textures of a dark teal, into a mien of grey that hints at coming storms and other such provocations.

Half of me is the ocean. Owing to my mother, the Andaman Islands – an Indian Union Territory flung far off the mainland into the yawning endlessness of the Bay of Bengal and the more intimate behaviours of the Andaman Sea – have as much claim to being ‘home’ as anything I’ve known. Within this Indian archipelago, more than 550 islands, some no larger than specks on a map, a large number uninhabited, conjure up a feast of tropical sensory treasures.

I fly over every year, or every other year, to indulge in the fine art of doing nothing. From the capital, Port Blair, an assortment of coastal island addresses lie within grasp, with water being the uniting lingua. I’ve been gazing at this sea for so many years now, it would seem that I know its diagram by heart. But to gaze at the sea is to gaze at the very nature of change.

The waters of the Andaman Sea are a narrative of holding on, and without a hint of contradiction, letting go. Within their currencies lie the fragments of a world in flux. The change so inherent to this quarter of maritime existence is manifold: social change, geopolitical change, ecological change, human change, and most heartbreakingly, climate change.

To have beheld the Andaman Sea after the devastation of the 2004 tsunami was to have borne witness to the wreckage of human life – homes, stories, legacies, all washed away in the tremors of one discordant note. To have perceived it a few years down the line was to have witnessed the powers of resurgence, of the water knowing how to heal itself. Climate change becomes a living, breathing companion when you step into the water, and find it warmer. Equally, the water sends you a note of assurance, cool and shimmering after a brief passage of time and entirely unaffected in places.

I’m reminded of something the American poet and journalist Walt Whitman once wrote in his poem ‘Miracles’: “To me the sea is a continual miracle/The fishes that swim – the rocks – the motion of the waves – the ships with men in them/What stranger miracles are there?” A crucial ingredient in this miracle has always been the notion of change, the fact that things were, and now aren’t; the fact that what once was there is now here, glistening under the newfound seductions of a full moon.

Across this chronicle of existence and fluctuation, what’s changed most is me. My eyes first met this sea as a young child, when the dapple was nothing more than a shiny toy to be caught and played with. In early adolescence, the water held a mirror to my empire of moodiness, often playing along. Early manhood brought with it the longitudes of yearning, to be rinsed and roused within the frequencies of the tides. As a writer, now in my late 30s, the Andaman Sea has settled into being a caravanserai of the things that hold a special place in my life: compassion, desire, togetherness, poetry, and yes, perspective.

I’ve changed physically, of course. What these eyes see now when they stare into these waters is a man who’s seen and felt much, and hopes to see and feel much across the voyages to come. Flecks of grey accent the hair and some of the beard. There are the scars of life, of course, themselves rehabilitated into badges of pride at being

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patient with things, before overcoming them. I see love, scattered across cities and written letters. I see family, warmth being the identifying motif here. I see disquiet over a world ravaged by the plague of the mysterious and other manmade plagues. But I see hope too, as stoic as the lighthouses freckled across these islands.

I’m reminded of more words; recollecting them only vaguely, I look them up for precision. Jacques Cousteau once said: “Sometimes we are lucky enough to know that our lives have been changed, to discard the old, embrace the new, and run headlong down an immutable course.”

While I’ve long held admiration for the French voyager, conservationist and writer, I’m afraid he got things slightly wrong in this instance. Luck has nothing to do with it. All you need is the sea. ♦