

## **Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest Shortlisted Entry**

**Goby, Phuket Sea Gypsy by Frank Visakay, Thailand**

The black bill flashed in the moonlight, a sharp spear poking through the nylon mesh. Goby gasped in surprise, the net slipping from his hands, its cache sinking back into the sea. The boat rocked from the release of the weight and the boy caught a glimpse of the huge Marlin thrashing in the darkness of the water. A cool breeze rippled the surface of the ocean bringing with it the clean smell of approaching rain, warning that he had to reach the safety of shore soon. He braced his foot against the slick wood of the bow and tugged on the ropes that were wrapped around the net like the drawstrings on a purse. Pushing back with his legs he slowly heaved up the heavy weight. The sea water ran down his arms and onto his small frame adding to the few inches already on the wood planks of the deck. It didn't matter; he only wore a pair of tattered shorts and was soaking wet. It was three in the morning with a storm coming and dozens of fish lying along the bottom of the boat; his only light shining from a meter-long fluorescent tube nailed upright to a pole and attached to a car battery. The brightness attracting fish and squid which the boy netted but this time his catch was much too heavy to be pulled into the boat.

He pulled forcefully on the nylon web; he had to get back to the protection of the harbor as soon as possible. When the mesh came into view Goby released his grip on the ropes and grabbed the top of the net tugging again, forcing the nylon webbing onto the oarlock, holding it in place alongside the small boat, not about to lose this gift from heaven. He could see the massive fish slowly turning with the movement of the net, tumbling in slow motion and thought of the immense amount of money a fish this large would bring for his family. He secured the netting to the boat as best he could; the waves growing larger now, slamming him against the sides of the hull. He had to start the engine and get out of there. A rain drop as heavy as a ten baht coin splattered on his small shoulder. It was like getting hit with a stone, and then another one and one more and then many huge liquid bullets plummeting from a thousand feet high smashing into him.

Goby said a prayer to the sea gods to let him keep the fish, to let him return to the safety of the shore; the spiky sail of the Marlin providentially snarled in the net, holding on as if it wanted to come with him. Goby had to bring the fish home; his family desperately needed money – money for cooking oil and rice, money to survive.

A sudden squall of wind and rain smashed into the boat, knocking Goby off his feet as waves, mountains of water tossed the boat aside. He crawled to the stern and pulled on the cord of the small outboard engine. It coughed and sputtered as the boat was flung sideways in the trough of the strong sea. Goby pulled the cord again with all his might and the twenty-five horse power motor burst to life.

Goby struggled against the rudder turning the boat towards land as another wave crashed over him, half filling the boat with the now ice cold water. He had all he could do to hold onto the helm, trying to keep the craft heading towards shore as the surging ocean, paying scant attention to him or the small motor, propelled the boat and his cargo forward. With the ferocious power of gale force winds he was moving faster now than he ever had in his life and the net with his valuable cache still dragging alongside the boat. Goby steering dead ahead towards darkness and the very end of Rawai beach, holding on to the tiller for dear life, trying to keep the craft on course, the howl of the storm filling his ears, the rain mercilessly pounding down on him so thick it was as if someone had overturned a giant bathtub in the sky. The net catching on a reef, the boat shuddering to a dead stop, slamming the boy head first tumbling along the deck. The net ripping open, releasing its catch and the boat freed of its burden shooting forward like a rocket on Chinese New Year, flinging Goby back to the stern, grasping and fumbling at the engine's handle; struggling up, peering into the darkness, battered and dazed seeing nothing but a waterfall of rain blotting out even the night sky. The craft flew over the sea, smashing across the waves, frantically skipping along the top of the ocean like a meth crazed gecko.

After twenty minutes of sheer terror, the storm eased and he could make out the shape of Phuket Island, off to the left the twinkling lights in the town of Kata, the Boathouse Hotel visible in the distance.

Goby finally edged his tiny boat in between the long tails already moored safely close to shore. He threw the stern anchor overboard and the one in the bow to keep the boat straight. The anchors were only cement blocks and he was lucky to have them due to the fact that a row of shop houses were being built down the road and that he had lugged the weights back in the middle of the night. He had to make a few trips and was stopped only once by the night watchman who was Burmese and figured that since the kid dropped his load he was under no obligation to chase him. This was a few days after he had liberated the small dinghy which had been tied to the stern of a large schooner that had been sitting in the lagoon during the King's Cup Regatta. His father had given him no choice by taking their only boat and means of livelihood.

Goby was Moken, a Sea Gypsy and nine years old. He had gone fishing every night with his father until one evening he was told that he should stay home. Goby, always curious, sat near a tree by his father's long tail boat in the middle of the night. When he saw his father loading on a five gallon plastic jug of water and another plastic container of gasoline, he knew that his father would not be coming back. Goby stepped from the shadow of the tree and walked into the water as his father started the automobile engine that powered the long tail. His father ignored him - as if he weren't there. Goby did not speak but just stared as his father pulled away.

That was the last time he ever saw him. He thought that his father was probably heading towards Krabi to sit around and drink whisky with his friends who made money posing in their stilt houses for the tourists or even further on down towards Malaysia where there were entire communities of his people living on their boats in the ocean.

Goby stood in the water and pulled in his torn net which still held a few small fish and he threw these into a plastic basket along with the others from the bottom of the boat. He lugged his haul a bit at a time stopping every few minutes to rest. He estimated that he had a good fifteen kilos of fish and it was not easy to carry as he only weighed thirty-eight kilos himself. Fourteen shacks stood near the beach, some made of old wood and some built from corrugated zinc. All were on meter-long stilts and none had running water or toilets. His mother was already standing in front of their home where he lived with her and Yaa, his younger sister who had set up a metal table close to the sand of the ocean and the dirt road that ran into a dead end a hundred meters away.

'We worry about you.' His mother ran her hand along his small arm before turning to dump the basket of fish onto the table. She was old and wrinkled and almost as thin as Goby. She had a patterned sarong, tied high on her chest, the same one she wore every day and kept on while bathing in the stream that ran in the back of the shacks.

The fish spilled across the table, sparkling silver snappers, grey groupers, squids of all sizes, gaily colored parrotfish, red cheeked emperors, blue-spotted rock cod, sardines and even a few gobys, small fish with large round heads, not that Goby had a large head but when his mother cut his glistening red-tinged back hair she put a bowl on top of his head to even the cut and it was this that was responsible for his nick-name. Mother, and that's all anyone called her, spread the fish over the top of the slightly rusted table along with some chopped ice. Soon the buyers would come, Thais, ex-pats, even hotels sent their purchasers to the end of Rawai Beach for fresh fish.

Goby turned and ambled towards their shack, head down, thinking of his failure in bringing the enormous fish home. They had only one small room and slept on bamboo mats but when Goby wrapped his thin sheet around him and huddled close to his mother at night it was a cozy oasis, a sanctuary of calm in an unpredictable and difficult world. The kitchen, if you could call it that, was outside in the back. The old woman cooked in a battered steel wok over a wood fire made in-between three large stones. She gathered drift wood and sticks for the fire and at the same time collected morning glory vines, bamboo shoots and fallen coconuts for their dinner.

There were a few mangos on a rough hewn table. Goby examined the fruit, picked the best one and sliced off a large piece. He took down his mother's bottle of Mekong whiskey and poured some into a shot glass. He carefully carried these towards his boat until he came to a large Casuarina tree standing near the dirt pathway. Already nailed to the tree was a small shrine, a wood shelf painted red and on it, a clay jar holding a few flowers. Goby carefully placed the slice of mango and glass of whisky next to the flowers. He stooped low with his hands folded to his head and said a prayer that the sea gods would accept his offering and he gave thanks for his safe return.

Goby shuffled to his boat and the damaged net. He reached in for the spool of nylon and the flat wood stick that he would use to guide the cord through the tear.

He had to stretch up and stand on his toes; the tide was coming in fast and the boat was rising on its moorings. He untied the net from the craft and dragged it onto the beach. The rip was as long as he had expected. He slumped to the sand holding onto the net, depressed and full of sorrow at not being able to bring back the precious prize for his mother and started to run the new nylon through the webbing.

Goby glanced up and saw a long heavy shape half submerged in the water floating towards him, coming nearer, pushed in by the tide and wind. He knew at once what it was and that they would all have plenty to eat and his mother would have a new dress and a shiny cooking pot after they sold the Marlin that had been returned to him by the gods of the sea that were still watching over the existence of the Moken.

