

POLCHATE (JAM) KRAPRAYOON

Selipar

First came the herald and the omen it held.
The fishermen caught the swollen thing
in the brown, hungry water of the Mekong.
They nearly lost their footing
as the boat rocked about, the great fish thrashing
its whiskered snout, its thick head
hammering the cast net.
It fought for hours until they hove onto the deck
that giant—bear-big, gills crisp with blood,
breathing a terrible, alien air.
Took three men to butcher it:
two to hold, the other to pith,
his hands shaking as he pushed
the knife's point into its brain.
The fishermen scanned the catfish,
now limp, its grim lip hung open,
its slug-skin the color of pig iron.
They cut a slit along the belly, from tail to jawbone
and opened it up. Inside was gill, gut,
liver, heart, and—
a lone plastic flip-flop
stowed away in its stomach.

After the herald, came the flood:
a towering wall of flip-flops,
iridescent like soap or an oil slick,
swelling as it approached the coast.
I huddled by the radio
to hear the clacketing of shoes
battering the beaches in Phang Nga,
Manila, Hong Kong, Mombasa, so on.
Their straps caught on branches of mangrove and palm,
on telephone poles and wires.
People, birds, dogs drowned,
their bodies packed with a plastic
that will survive us.
The news had said there'd be more flip-flops
than fish in the oceans,
more flips-flops than stars in the Milky Way.

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We hadn't understood then
that rivers and oceans would not
forget the debris we chucked,
that what we'd thought was sunk
would surface.