

The Shipwrecked Sailor

By Maggie Geoga

For the past few months, I have been reading a 4000-year-old story called the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, translating small pieces every week from the original Middle Egyptian to English. My progress has been very slow, which gives me a lot of time to think about this story between translations. As you might have guessed, it's about a sailor who was shipwrecked one day when a storm arose before his ship could make it back to land. The sailor was the only survivor and washed up on an island. After he was ashore, he suddenly heard the sound of thunder as the trees shook and the ground quaked. An enormous serpent came out from the trees and asked the sailor how he had gotten there. The terrified sailor told him about the shipwreck, and the serpent consoled him by telling his own painful story: he had once lived on the island with 75 other serpents, all his siblings and children. One day while he was away, a star fell, and they all perished, leaving the serpent, like the sailor, the sole survivor. After his story, the serpent told the sailor that soon a ship would come to take him home. His prediction came true, and the sailor made it home safe and sound, with plenty of valuable goods from the island as gifts from the serpent.

Only one copy of this ancient Egyptian story survives today. The way it's written suggests that it was spoken, that it was a much-loved story told around campfires or by parents tucking their children into bed. This seemed very strange to me at first because I couldn't figure out the moral of the story. Even the narrative itself confused me because it seems to contain almost no struggle: a sailor's ship capsizes, but then a wave carries him to an island of extraordinary abundance. For a second or two he is afraid of the giant serpent, but then it ends up sending him home with lots of presents. Was that really it?

I was disappointed to be so confused by this story. I felt that I should have understood easily because I have felt a powerful connection with ancient Egypt ever since I was a child. It's

an obsession that I never outgrew. At 11 I was doodling nonsensical hieroglyphs in my middle-school notebooks, and now at 21 I have learned enough Egyptian grammar to be able to translate stories like the Shipwrecked Sailor myself. For the past two summers I have worked in the museums I visited as a child, doing inventory and research on Egyptian objects. Last summer I grabbed a mummy's detached legs to keep them from falling off the gurney. I have held items from King Tut's tomb, I have measured my own finger in a 4500-year-old fingerprint left in the clay of a jar, and yet I still crave more. The wonder I feel when I see and hold the things these people left behind is not enough. I study ancient Egypt not because I want to know how the pyramids were built, but because I want to strengthen the inexplicable connection I feel with the people who moved the stones.

After discussing the various interpretations of the Shipwrecked Sailor in Egyptian class, I have decided that the point of the story, at least for me, is quite personal: it gives me a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of ancient Egyptians. When the serpent tells the sailor of the death of his family, his description is heart wrenching. He tells the sailor about "a little daughter brought to him through prayer" who perished with the rest. He says, "Then I died for them when I found them as a single heap of corpses." Then he urges the sailor to hug his children and kiss his wife when he gets home because it is better than anything.

It amazes me to find such a powerful description of grief coming from a culture that many people perceive as death-obsessed, not to mention such a human sentiment coming from a magical 45-foot-long snake. Though this particular example is rather morbid, the snake's emotions remain powerful even 4000 years later. The Egyptians' stories sometimes seem foreign and obscure, even to people who have studied their culture for years, but I find that they also contain the greatest reflection of the Egyptians' humanity. Their stories allow me to be certain that even though they lived so long ago, they were just like me.

When I graduate this spring, I plan to move back home to Chicago and work for a year at the same museum where I grabbed a mummy. Then I plan to earn a PhD in Egyptology and become an Egyptologist. I can't really articulate all the reasons I am so sure that this is what I want to do, but when I read the serpent's story, I feel more strongly than ever that personal connection, in spite of the thousands of years between the ancient Egyptians and me. I know that I will never get tired of that sense of wonder.