Autobiography of My Hungers

González, Rigoberto

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The ocean along the coast of Brazil was deceptively calm. And since it was clear and still as a swimming pool I decided to swim laps, moving back and forth in the warm water. The exercise was so effortless, so smooth, that when I lifted my head from the surface again I discovered that all that time I had been floating away. I was lost in the open sea.

Suddenly the sky darkened. Suddenly the ocean grew opaque, and when I swallowed a mouthful of water in my immediate panic it felt as if I had inhaled mud.

Death by drowning, I imagined, was going to hurt. I saw my body filling up with water and swelling up like a weather balloon, except that instead of a buoy my body would harden into lead and sink to the ocean floor.

I surrendered to my fate, letting the tide carry me off like litter, the drowned rat in the sewage pipe flushed out. And in that stillness was the laughter of children playing on the beach. How they had chuckled at my swimming trunks, baggy and bulky. How they had stayed close to their mother, a large and beautiful woman in pink, like a majestic creature of the sea. How I had envied that safety, myself motherless for decades, roaming the earth unnoticed and unseen.

Or so I thought, until the miracle. Somehow I drifted like wood back to the shore. When my toes touched the sand I
began to cry, returning to the ocean the salt that I had swallowed. I wasn’t sure which mother had taken me in: my own, the one in pink, or Yemanjá, the great goddess of the ocean. Or maybe all three were one and the same.