

OCEAN STORYTELLING  
**WRITING GRANT**  
2022  
F I N A L I S T S

Finalist – Serag Heiba

The walls of Quseir transcribe a history interwoven with its Red Sea shores. This ancient port of Egypt sits across the sea from the Arabian Peninsula, several days' sailing from Mecca. Here, countless Muslims across centuries boarded dhows and steamers onto the next leg of their pilgrimage. Today, those ships sail motionlessly, trapped in the many murals which decorate this nearly forgotten town.

But one wall tells a different story. A dugong feeds on the seagrass while a fisherman rows out to sea. An orange sun rises in the corner. If you pay close attention, you'll notice the dugong's fluked tail and the bristles texturing its wide snout. Though imposing in size, the mural doesn't betray the dugong's gentle grace. Like the dhow, the dugong is a relic of another time. Only a handful remain along Egypt's Red Sea coast, attracting tourists from around the world but declining frightfully towards extinction. Ali, a young Quseiri enamored with the sea cows, has made it his mission to change this.

Ali recalls the first time he saw a dugong: 'I was 12 or 13, on my father's fishing boat. He'd told me about the mermaids a lot, but I'd never seen one with my own eyes. It was still very dark, but we heard a noise near the boat, as if something had fallen into the water. When I looked over, I saw the [dugong's] tail.'

Here, as in other parts of the world, the dugong is known as a mermaid. A marine mammal like their manatee cousins, they can grow up to three metres in length and often weigh around 300 kilograms. When Ali first saw one, he estimated it was nearly six times his size. 'I couldn't imagine what it looked like beneath the water. I was obsessed.'

Captivated by that first encounter, Ali vowed to find out. It's not easy to spot a dugong; they surface only for a few seconds every 10 minutes to breathe air. But the Red Sea, warm and brilliant with colour, invited him to try anyway. 'So while the other students were walking to school, I would slip away and run towards the beach. I'd tell my friends I was going to find the mermaid!'

The search took longer than expected. Dugongs feed solely on seagrass, and they need to eat lots of it to survive. They may travel dozens of kilometres in a few days in search of food. Ali did not know this, and so he continued his search anyway. He saved up and bought swimming goggles. He could now see further and keep his eyes open for longer in the salty water. He was sure he would catch a glimpse of the animal.

Instead, Ali noticed something else. Beyond the dazzling colours of the corals, the seafloor was suspiciously barren. There was no seagrass. Searching for the victim, Ali had stumbled upon the scene of the crime.

Like other dugong populations around the world, Egypt's Red Sea population is

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quickly – and quietly – disappearing. Coastal development and overfishing is fragmenting their habitats and upsetting the ecological balance in which they thrive. Where once the seafloor was abundant with uninterrupted meadows of seagrass, now only isolated patches remain.

It would take Ali 11 months to spot the dugong again.

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The most recent chapter in Quseir's long history was an Italian phosphate-mining company founded in 1910. It brought to the tiny town railroads, cable cars, streetlights, telegraphs, four European embassies and an onslaught of industrial pollution. The company is now gone, but the environmental damage it left behind is not. This, Ali says, is only part of the problem.

'The dugong has lived here through it all. Quseir is 5,000 years old, alive from the time of the Pharaohs to the Romans and even Napoleon. We live to protect this heritage, but who is living for the dugong?' Ali's concise history sells his hometown short. Quseir was where Hatshepsut's southward expeditions to the Kingdom of Punt departed. Millennia later under the name Myos Hormos, the Romans turned this port into a major hub for trade along the Indian Ocean. Later, Quseir would become the last stop in Africa along a much longer route that took Muslim pilgrims from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to Mecca. Chinese pottery is buried here, as are Indian cloths. Even Napoleon left his mark on Quseir: his forces captured the town's fortress (built centuries earlier by the Ottomans to guard against the Portuguese) and used it to repel two British invasions. This town, tiny and ancient, could reasonably call itself the centre of the world, and the dugong has witnessed it all.

He points to the mural. 'When people come here, they see the art about the ancient Egyptians and the Hajj or they see the empty buildings of the phosphate company, but they don't see the dugong. They go swimming and they see the corals, but they don't see the dugong. I want them to see the dugong.'

Ali no longer goes to school. When the pandemic arrived and the world ground to a halt, he became the student of a new tradition: painting murals. Standing in front of his family home, he points to the painted wall with a smile and asks me, 'What do you think? If you pay close attention, you'll notice its fluked tail and the bristles texturing its wide snout.'

In 1942 the dugong was thought extinct in the Red Sea: 100 years had passed without a sign of them. Then a chance discovery that year reconfirmed their presence. But to Ali, his first encounter with the dugong was not chance. Some mornings he goes out with his father to fish, but he never returns with him. In the warm water of the Red Sea, you can feel the sunlight brushing your back even as you dive into the depths, and so can the dugong, and so can Ali.