



THE BEST / WORST OF TIME

THE EPOCH OF BELIEF / INCREDULITY

THE SPRING OF HOPE / THE WINTER OF DESPAIR



The night ran deep, the water chilling. I took a moment to rest, delving into my vest for *them*. Honestly, my ability to swim was dwindling.

The relentless waves had been wearing on my body for what felt like hours (perhaps three?). Gradually, it sculpted me into unfamiliar shapes. Humans are more susceptible and adaptable to the environmental pressures than they care to admit. The demarcation between the sea and myself remained faintly discernible. With fingers wrinkled and pallid from soaking, I gingerly rubbed the aged condoms. At this juncture, touch served as both the keenest and the most sluggish informant.

Yet, I desired to **live**. Just as humans could not escape from their physical existence. Nevertheless, if one truly yearned for it, it wasn't entirely unattainable. I was exhausted. This route had been long etched in my mind. Reaching the distant, balmy shore demanded a superhuman resolve.

I sensed my body, along with *them* clasped in my hand, becoming a buoy in the sea.

Memories surged—two gunshots, my village schoolgirls' faces. I inhaled deeply, coughing. Then, I raised my gaze and espied a fishing boat not far away! Later, I departed without a glimpse of the island before dawn. Afterwards, my three children were born in the city, uttering their earliest words, in the urban accent.