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Things we found when the water went down

Tegan Swanson
Iowa State University

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Things we found when the water went down: a novel in artifacts

by

Tegan Nia Swanson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing & Environment

Program of Study Committee:

K.L. Cook, Major Professor
   Brianna Burke
   John Downing
   David Zimmerman

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2014

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In order to add texture and realistic detail to these stories, I have conducted general research regarding cartography, climatology, ecology, folklore, geography, history, hydro-geology, linguistics, and psychology as related to the characters and locations depicted in the text. All artifacts provided throughout are of my own creation, save the reproduction of the “Hydrographic map of Lake Mendota, Dane Co., WI” commissioned by Leonard Sewall Smith of the Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey in 1906. Found imagery has been used or manipulated with consideration for copyright. Despite all background research, this thesis is a work of fiction. All characters, events, places, and incidents—even those based on reality—are either the product of my imagination or are used fictitiously.

- Tegan Nia Swanson
299.10 Hydracy | ˈhɪdrəsē

An inherited psychological condition that causes women to experience debilitating pain, confusion, and/or depression when removed from the presence of large bodies of water. Symptoms may include: nausea, headaches, abnormal flux in mood, and moderate to severe auditory, visual, or tactile-sensory hallucinations. Some patients will experience fits of hydratic psychosis – dissociative attacks that cause them to seek water without regard to their surroundings, bodily safety, or health. Extreme cases will exhibit suicidal tendencies, usually manifesting in attempts at self-drowning. May present first after intensive shift from high to low/low to high water exposure, such as after swimming or traveling by boat. Effective treatment has yet to be determined, and patients often self-medicate with drugs or alcohol.

See also: addiction, bipolar I and bipolar II disorder, borderline personality disorder, environmental or osmotic depression, major depressive disorder, Micronesian salt rot, and post traumatic stress disorder.

- Submitted for inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 6th Edition
CHAPTER 1

BIOLOGICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS
THINGS WE FOUND WHEN the WATER WENT DOWN

Causation, symptoms and impacts of hydracy:
comorbid water-related addictions, eco-emotional traumas,
and manic depressive or psycho-schizoid response
in women of related and unrelated descent.

by

Emalene A. Bailey

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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in CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, ETHNOGRAPHY and ECO-PSYCHOLOGY

Co-Majors: Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography & Eco-psychology

Program of Study Committee:

Jane W. Bryler, Co-Major Professor
Dencil Oppenheimer, Co-Major Professor
Ai Xi Sheng
Reina de Souza
F.H. Washington

University of Wisconsin

Madison, Wisconsin

2014

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1 June 2011

Dear Emalene Bailey:

On behalf of the staff at Mendota Mental Health Institute, please accept my condolences for the loss of your mother. Retta was an exceptionally bright woman, and I was very fond of working with her. The items in this package are the personal effects in hospital possession at the time of her unfortunate death, things she indicated sent to you in case of her passing. They are itemized below for your convenience. My apologies for taking ten years to deliver them to you. Remodeling efforts after the flood took longer than expected, and a vast quantity of patients’ belongings have been in storage in the interim. We’ve only just now sorted everything out. My office phone is 608.301.1893, and you may write me via email at sdbell@mmhi.gov. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Regards,

Dr. Susana Bell

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RE: FOUND OBJECTS
- personal photos (5)
- art works (3)
- 1975 Classic-12 Smith Corona typewriter
- 1 set acrylic paints
- 4 black ink pens
- postage (various)
- personal journals (3)
- 1906 map of Lake Mendota
WHEN I WAS NINE MONTHS OLD, my mother – twenty and deep in the downslope of her first post-partum manic attack – took me from my crib and walked, barefoot, more than a mile from our house to a hot air balloon festival launch at Tenney Park. She later claimed that I was awake and crying, that the only thing she could think to calm me down was to take me outside, and that when she started moving all I wanted was to be near the lake, but my father says it was four in the morning, and that I have always been a heavy sleeper. He says he woke up cold in an empty bed, beside an empty crib. That the front door was wide open. He says he would have heard me cry.

My father did not find us until just before dark that night. He says he went to all my mother’s favorite places: the Yahara River bridge in the middle of the park; the back balcony rows of the student union theatre; every café and bookstore along the State Street stretch. He biked all the way out to the Picnic Point peninsula, where she used to go and set her feet in the water, but we were not there either. He was on the way to the police station to file a report when he saw us sitting on a bench beside the Capitol building.

“She looked at me as if I were late for something,” he says. “Like, what took you so long? I was so happy that I’d found you, I couldn’t even bring myself to yell.” He says when he asked her where we’d been all day, she refused to tell him. The only evidence remaining of our flight is a pair of photographs, both stamped with the copyright of the City of Madison, Parks Division: Tenney-Lapham Sunrise Tour, Fall 1983. In the first, my mother is half in, half out of the basket of a blue and yellow balloon, her jet black hair falling across
her face as she leans forward to take me from the arms of a stranger. The skyline is just growing visible behind her, and the ground beneath the basket is a blanket of browning fallen leaves. I am wearing a pink, short-sleeve onesie and a single purple sock. In the second photograph, we are aloft. All that is visible of my mother is her mouth. The rest of the frame is my bald head, my pudgy baby hands grasping at an ocean of air.

It would not be the last time she swept me along with her like a buoy in a motor’s wake. When I was six and she was pregnant with my brother Ollie, she took me out on the thin December ice of Lake Mendota to make angels in a snowstorm. When I was nine, she insisted on renting a canoe from the student union and paddled us beyond the peninsula and out of sight from the Isthmus shore. At the time, I felt like we were the explorers I read about in books, a crew of cartographers mapping some undiscovered land, but that August it was more than a hundred degrees outside, and she forgot the bottled water. Halfway back across the lake, Ollie got faint from heat stroke and slumped over in the canoe’s belly, and I had to carry him home on my shoulders.

A few weeks afterward, my father says she lost her license for reckless speeding. He says he took her keys, that she promised not to take the car anywhere without him, and he still thinks she kept her word. I never told him she woke me up and drove us forty miles to watch a meteor shower from the gorge at Devil’s Lake. Just us girls tonight, she whispered as we crept like thieves away from our own house.

Twenty years later, after my mother had been gone for some time and I was in the midst of research for the eco-psychology doctoral program, I lived in a cooperative along the lake with a woman named Dagberta. The first date I ever had with her wasn’t even a date, but that’s how I think of it now, mostly because she almost kissed me after and isn’t that
what makes it so? A sweet pain in the groin that comes from having someone swing so near to touching you, the blurred heat at the close when one says, well that was nice, and the other says, wasn’t it? And then both of you just want to screw? But girls are too shy sometimes, so we didn’t. I still don’t know if she ever thought of it like that.

It was one of those wet-cold February nights and I was at work in a little bookstore on State Street, organizing receipts behind the counter, when she rushed in all flushed red from the winter wind.

“Lena, baby,” Dagberta said. “You’ve been on my mind since breakfast.”

Then we talked about things I can’t remember now, probably how cold our house had become when the ice storm knocked out the power, or maybe it was the union protests, her girlfriend, even, but just when I thought she was leaving she said, “Can I buy you dinner?”

At the time, we had been living across the hall from each other on the second floor of the co-op for six months or so. We saw each other in the hallways or at the long mirror in the bathroom, at house dinners and the dance parties she threw in the ballroom, but she was rarely around for anything else, and we both had plenty of other people to keep us occupied. We were friendly, but not friends. I knew she had a reputation for making plans and breaking them, so when she didn’t show I wasn’t surprised and I just locked up the store and started walking. But she always seemed to know the order of the world before me, and halfway home, Dagberta pulled up in her remodeled ’82 Pinto.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “Still hungry?”

I was, and it was cold, and she seemed so sincere I let it slide, it was only a few minutes, what’s the harm? I got in.

“Do you mind stopping for a second?” she asked, one hand on my thigh. “I need to run a package across town.”
Two hours, three bowls, and 60 mg of Adderall later, the car wouldn't start, so we walked to the Jenny Street market and bought anything and everything we wanted – deviled eggs, avocados, sashimi, samosas – and when it was time to pay she pushed my money away, pulled a rubber band roll from her pocket and gave it to the clerk.

“Cash is better,” she said. “Everybody can follow a card.”

Then she took me by the hand and led me to a bus stop, where we sat and passed a bottle of shitty red back and forth in its paper bag, eating from our laps and inching closer together under the Plexiglas. I could see her mind was alive from the amphetamines, and she started talking about the sky.

“Couldn’t it be possible for people to fly?” she asked. “I thought I could once, and not in that hippie-shit kind of way but really, like if I took enough time I could reassemble the magnetic pulse of my self, you know? You think I’m crazy, I’m not crazy.”

I said I didn’t think she was and I meant it, at least not in the bat-shit sort of way, just the kind where I didn’t quite understand how she’d got from where she’d started to where she’d ended up.

“Sometimes I lie,” she said.

“Sure,” I said, “Me too.”

“I want to be a pilot. I’m gonna buy a plane when I get the money. I’ll take you anywhere you want, where do you want to go?”

“I’ve never seen the mountains,” I said. “Montana. My mother always told me stories.”

Her eyes got real bright, the way they did sometimes when she saw a thing she really wanted.

“Let’s go,” she said. “We’ll leave tomorrow night.”
She leaned so close I could smell the wine in her mouth, and for a moment I thought of night hikes and coyotes and her, naked in my sleeping sack, but even then I could recognize her game was short, that everything she said had an expiration date not much longer than the day – I’d had plenty of experience with women like that. By the next morning, she’d made other plans with other friends, and that was the last I saw of her for a while.

When Dagberta really started flirting with me, I didn’t know how to be comfortable with the attention. Everyone knew she was sleeping with another girl, but she’d tell me I was beautiful in the middle of house meetings, or slide her arm around me when a bunch of us were talking in the hall. I’d only ever slept with men before, but I found myself nervous to be near her, afraid she’d kiss me and find out I didn’t know what to do with her mouth. On the first of March, I found an invitation beneath my door, my name in neat type-written text across the front. 7 pm. Old movies in the ballroom, it said inside. Bring a snack to share. Please? You’re the only one I really want to come.

I pretended to be busy at work until a little after 8, thinking I could skip all the awkward small talk, that she would hardly notice me among many, but when I came home and walked into the ballroom, Dagberta stood right up from the middle of a crowd and hugged me hard.

“Where’ve you been?” she asked like she’d been waiting.

“ Took longer than I expected,” I said.

“Have a drink,” she said. “Then sit by me?”

By the end of Harold and Maude everyone else had gone upstairs to bed, and thinking maybe I was overstayng my welcome, misreading the signs, I stood up to leave.
“It’s not that late,” she said. “Just stay a little longer?”

We found a portable planetarium projector in a box and let it flare across the ceiling, then she took my hand and we lay on our backs on the cold stone floor, pointing at the Pleiades and telling stories, barely touching until almost three. The wind howled across the frozen lake behind the house and Dagberta giggled like a child as the windows shuddered in their frames. She curled one hand inside of mine and pressed her body close. She said we were going on a road-trip, that it was a game, but the longer we talked, the more she told me. About all the terrible things that men can do to a child. How many months it had been since her mother started ignoring her calls. What her brothers prayed for when they worried for her soul. She said her ex used to call her a lighthouse because she’d shined all over her once, and even after Dagberta had long since left to shine it elsewhere, the other girl felt like some fog-lost boat in a storm, waiting and waiting for her to swing back the other way.

“People will show you who they are,” she said. “You better believe them when they do it.”

“So who are you?” I asked. “Where’d you come from?”

“I’m an asshole,” she said.

I told her I didn’t think so and she wrapped herself around me, and it was not until then that I realized I scared her just as much. That there was a girl-child in her, a vulnerable mess of her own I’d not noticed while she was busy acting the big man in bars and every other public place, in front of all the people she wanted to please. She was still charisma embodied, bravado, all balls that weren’t born of her body, but alone in the dark hours of that early morning, she was quiet and small, a raw heart pulsing beside me. I got that - everybody just wants to be loved. Some people wait for the coast guard, but I have a tendency to swim toward any light on the shore, and neither ever grows any closer.
As I got older, I learned to recognize my mother’s patterns like a weather map. She had heat waves of happiness and cool fronts that left her quiet and pensive on the couch, but in the end she always pooled on the wrong side of a low pressure system. Like humidity before a storm, she’d gather all the liquor and fight she could find, and I knew we only had to wait until she burst without warning. My father was usually good at keeping us away when they fought, but sometimes there was nothing he could do. On New Year’s Eve night in 1999, I think they were supposed to have gone out, a costume party, because I remember my mother wearing an astronaut suit she’d made from an old winter coat and a pair of black galoshes. Just as they were getting ready to leave, Ollie started puking. Twenty minutes later, we were both heaving into mixing bowls from our beds, my father rushing back and forth between us with wet washcloths and seltzer water. He stayed home. My mother left us, taking both her disappointment and a bottle of corner store champagne to the tavern on Ohio Avenue.

Although my mother always said she wanted to be an artist – a writer or a painter, someone who told stories for a living – the only job she ever kept for more than a few weeks was as a bartender at that bar. Inevitably she’d drink too much or fall into another manic episode, and the manager would have to take her off the schedule. He liked her, though, and my father says he always let her come back when she felt better. People in Madison claim it’s haunted by a World War II vet who’d hung himself from the fire escape, but it still feels like home to me because it’s one of the few places she ever seemed happy. She liked it because the patrons left her alone and she could spend her whole shift scribbling poems on the backs of cheap paper napkins, and I walked there after school to wait behind the bar with her while she served. She let me choose any music I wanted from the jukebox – usually Junior
Kimbrough or Robert Johnson, the kind she played for us on a steel guitar she’d stolen from a foster shelter as a teenager – and sometimes she let me sneak sips of the whiskey she’d poured herself in an old pickle jar.

My room was on the second floor just above the front door landing of our house, and my mother was so drunk when she came home on New Year’s night that she woke me up. I came down the stairs and saw her weaving back and forth across the middle of our living room, arms held out to catch her balance against the couch, the kitchen table, a lamp that did not hold her up and broke against our hardwood floor. She was singing *Kind-hearted Woman* with so much breath her face was bright red, and there was mascara smeared across her cheeks. When I moved closer I could see her shiver – most of her astronaut costume was missing. My father stood with his back to me at the base of the stairs, but he turned around when he heard me behind him.

“Go back to bed, Lena,” he said, and then looked toward my mother. “Think you’ve had enough?”

“Iss a new millennium,” she slurred. “Fresh start.”

She reached out for his hands and tried to dance, but when he wouldn’t let her kiss him, her mouth turned mean.

“Why d’you always hafto keep me down, huh? Like weights in my moon – ” she said and kicked one of her galoshes at him. “ – boots. You’re always jus’ pullin’ me down.”

“One of us has to,” he said. He ducked out from under her arms and grabbed a blanket from the hall closet. He tried to give it to her, to guide her toward the couch, but she wouldn’t go.

“Fuck you,” she hissed at him. “Im’a sleep wherever I want.” There was a dirty saucer on the foyer table beside them and she picked it up and threw it. Soon, the space he
made between them was filled with a volley of flying things: books, a coffee mug, the television remote control. She flipped him off and pulled the wedding ring from her left hand in one motion. All I heard before I’d slammed my door was the sound of metal striking.

Dagberta was always best with spontaneity, and I admit it was romantic for a while – she would show up at the bookstore with a slice of pie, and somehow talk me into going down the block for a whiskey at the old Greek diner. She’d pick me up and drive out into the country just to fuck by the river, then drive me back into town and say she had to run, that she was late for a very important meeting, with her dealer, with a friend. She woke me up early and kept me up late, sliding into or out of my bed without warning. Her bedroom was just across the hall, and I stopped making plans because I half-wanted her to break them anyway. I’d leave my phone on my closet floor while I slept in her room for days, ignoring everyone else in the world just to fall off the map with her. When we came back from a weekend at the Potawatomi casino, there were three missed messages from my boss and one from my brother.

“You seem strange,” Ollie said when I called back and told him what we’d done. “Aren’t you tired?”

“I guess so,” I said.

“At least you’re never bored,” he said, but the way he sighed afterward made it sound like maybe being something stable might not be such a bad thing.

The purging of rules and boundaries that came with her every impulse was something I’d not done since I was young, when my mother would pull me and Ollie out of school or keep us up ‘til midnight to perform bed-sheet plays in the living room. Yet, as much as I enjoyed the thrill of skipping work to fuck Dagberta on the attic balcony, the
fluidity of time in a day while I followed her from one bar to another, eating and dancing to
the jukebox as she showed me off to her pool hall friends, a part of me knew I couldn’t keep
up with her forever.

By late spring I realized it wasn’t spontaneity or impulse that made her such a ball of
energy, but more that she was constantly reaching for a high that got harder and harder to
achieve. I’d never done many drugs beyond a little bit of weed, but she ate everything, alone
and in combination, one right after another. Whether it was Adderall and bourbon or stolen
psychotropics and cigarettes, her hangovers weighed heavy on my body. I brought her ginger
tea and tried to be angry, let her sleep in my lap and said it was the last time I’d let it happen,
but she’d rehydrate, claim sober honesty, claim change. I worried after her, asked her to slow
down, stopped accepting drinks when she offered, but I was too timid to demand anything
real. Too hooked to risk pushing her away for good.

I’m sorry I did not extract myself sooner. I knew better, and to her credit, Dagberta
had tried to warn me off from the beginning. It’s not her fault I didn’t believe her when she
told me what she thought she was, but I saw all that hurt and warm-hearted soft on the
other side of her, and every time I thought to myself, this one’s not all bad. When she turned
into an angry drunk just like my mother, I admit I did not handle it well. For a while, I tried
to out-yell her, to fight my way out of everything, but her logic was illogical and impossible
to argue. I’d ignore her calls for a few days, but then we’d see each other moving in and out
of our rooms across the hall and we could not help but come together. We fucked and
fought like cats, making up just long enough to drive each other crazy all over again. I tried
not to bite back, but sometimes I did and I’m sorry for that. I feel bad now, not for myself
or her but for our housemates, the ones caught between our every minor war.
Whenever my mother was mired in a streak of unbreakable sadness, my father moved around her like she were mica and he had rock hammers for hands. Our whole house buzzed with the white noise of light bulbs and outdated appliances, and my brother spent most of his time being missing. I just watched them both ebb inward from their skins, and I used to hate her for pulling us all toward a mess I’d watched her make, but when I first broke up with Dagberta, I began to understand how easy it had been for my mother to find a hole, to drink until she couldn’t tell the difference, to curl herself far down enough so we had to let her stay there.

I met Dagberta at the Ohio one night after we’d been fighting. She was coming off a week-long Percocet-and-bourbon bender, and I was pissed at her for everything; for driving drunk, for being rude, for showing me the ugly side of myself. We both said things that made our mouths turn nasty. We both said things we didn’t want to mean. Her ex was there, and she spent the rest of the night flirting with her right in front of me. She left with the other girl and I walked home, and somehow found myself in the backyard of the co-op, staring out over Mendota with a stack of mismatched ceramic plates in my arms. The lake had just begun to thaw, and there were patches of black water spotting the surface of the ice. I slung the plates toward those holes, each time waiting for the sound of splinters, each time hoping to break the ice open further, throwing plate after plate to cut a path until I reached the shore.

The next morning I woke up and her door was locked, so I asked around. A few housemates of ours told me she had started sleeping with her ex again, maybe even someone new, a younger girl who knew none of us, who had no history with her. A week went by and then another, and still her door stayed locked. I spent most of those days wasted, on my way back and forth from one hangover to another. I drank whiskey so I could feel my skin again,
and I barely ate so I could feel hollow. I stopped going to class or showing up for lab meetings, and I could never sleep, ears perked for the sound of her door opening across the hall, body tensed for the shift of weight as she snuck into my bed. I lost three pounds, then seven. I felt delirious, as if I were shaking some kind of ugly drug. I did not speak except to answer, and I left the co-op only to drift back and forth from my job at the bookstore. I swam in the fury of loss.

I hadn’t seen Dagberta in almost a month when she woke me up one still-dark morning, a summer thunder breeze coming through my curtains. She said she wanted to show me what all the blue-collar cowboys at the Ohio called big sky, to feel the so-close-to-us-sun in her bones, the ones dead tired from working too late and resting too little. That she wanted to sleep by me on warm red earth in nothing but our skins.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” Dagberta said. “I miss you. I haven’t had a drink in days.”

It’s embarrassing to confess I wanted to believe her, more so to admit I knew nothing had changed. Even though all my friends and her friends, her supply man and my boss all said she was trouble – stay out of it, no good can come of a girl like her – there was something inexplicable in me that needed to be near the danger of her. So I grabbed a bag and followed her out into the gravel drive.

“What the hell,” I said. “Where’re we headed?”

“Do you still want to go to Montana?”

She pointed at the heat lightning as it cracked above my head and told me we were going west until both the stars and the sun had each shown their new faces once, all that light in the sky rising and falling on the windshield above us. The engine in her ’82 Pinto was still rumbling, so I got in. We drove and drove, taking every beaten path, every dusty fork, all
the railroad bridges and dry creek crossings and unmarked byways we could find. Whenever we saw signs for roadside attractions or free sweet corn, we’d slow. We wanted to be curious. We tried everything to pretend we could still be happy. But as the day wore on, she started to get short with me, and after years of listening for the same shift in my mother, I could tell she needed a drink.

I’m not the lucky kind, and when people ask what’s the best luck you ever had? I usually say that night when Dagberta’s axle snapped in half on Highway 20 a few yards out from a town called Valentine, Nebraska. Then they usually say you’ve had shitty luck, to which I say maybe, but I don’t actually agree with them at all. A mile more or less on either side and we’d both have died under those bowl-blue plateau skies. Maybe we’d have been hit head on by fourteen tons of stripped-and-tied jack pine, a truck that wouldn’t have seen us coming round the guardrail corners. Or maybe we’d have jumped one of those guardrails ourselves and ended up jumbled into a pile of snapped necks and arms and ribs on sloped dry stone. It was just after dusk, so there were probably deer in the hills, woozy with sleep, all twitching limbs and flight instinct. Hell, for all I know, there could’ve been a mud slide, an earthquake, a hole in the road just the size of her little car, waiting to swallow us up right outside of town. Instead there was a sign lit up electric above a bar, a beacon that said Everybody’s Home at the Ohio. She looked at me and pointed at the sign.

“What fuckin’ luck,” she said.

I knew drinking together would lead nowhere nice, that she’d get more and more cruel by the minute until she got a sip, but I pulled off the road anyway. Instead of halfway up a mountain or in the middle of the high plains with no one and nowhere to go for miles on either side, the car threw its axle at seven and slowing, my hand already on the shift to shove it into park.
“I guess we’re stuck for awhile,” she said.

The sandwich board outside the bar said *Free Bluegrass Tonite*, so we walked in and she ordered a round. One for everybody there, two for herself – both neat and Basil Hayden’s, a classy bourbon served in dirty mason high balls, and for a moment after she threw them down it seemed like things would finally be better, just like things always seemed, just like I knew they never really would. All the old ranchers in their Carhartt’s were playing fiddles and banjos, all their wives dancing with butter-churn drums, and I was afraid they’d run us out of town if anybody caught us too close together, but one of them winked and said, “Well aren’t you girls gonna dance?” so Dagberta led me by the hand into the middle and we reeled until our limbs were sore.

A pair of gray-backs watched us flirt from halfway across the room, my hips inside hers, both our hair too short for their town, but they didn’t say a word until they’d seen her kick my ass at eight-ball. The one of them offered to play us twosome for another round of doubles, and so even though she always told me I was a shitty table partner, Dagberta pushed in the quarters and we played. The break was good and the first few sinks were clean, but every time I lined up for a shot, the guy with a gut would slide his hands a little too far down my side, claiming he was going to teach me how to hit *the sweet of the pocket with a spinner*, that all I needed was to learn *how to handle a longer pole*. Her cheeks rose like bar cherries and she lost the game on purpose, hardly slowing to shake their outstretched hands on her way out the front door.

She was fast, halfway down the highway by the time I found her spitting gravel up from underneath her feet. The town was so tiny the only lights on the road were the reflected glimmers of highway paint against headlight, and the dark spread out around us like a mouth. She kept walking even after I called her name, and so I ran to catch up.
“Hey,” I said and grabbed her arm. I was ready to ask her what was wrong, if I could make her feel better, but then she started yelling.

“You’re a child,” she screamed, so close to my face I could smell the bourbon on her breath. “Can’t you see they just wanted to fuck you? To prove they were more man than me?”

She was all staccato beats, all loud heat, the air between us reeking of booze. She backed me into a cow fence by the ditch and slammed her hand against the board, yelling me down into the ground until I was plastered to the dirt like struck possum. I stared out over the pitch-black prairie, looking for any quiet shape I could find to hold onto, but even the stars were dim. The grasses heaved and swayed in the wind and my ears filled with the sound of water, so strange and clear out in the middle of all that great, dry plain. The moan of a train came up low and rumbling and I followed that sound away from her, toward a shore I had forgotten how to find. Like that far-off engine, Dagberta slowed and finally quieted, but I stayed down, twisting myself into the earth to get away. I flinched as she reached to lift me up, and when she laughed instead of crying – one hard, mean bark – I knew then that we were done.

I stood up and walked ahead of her for what seemed like miles in the dark, and by the time the glow of the Ohio came up on the horizon, she was stilled in her body and already shame-faced, following behind me like a beaten dog. I called both motels in town before we found an open room, but I wouldn’t lift my eyes to meet hers when the clerk asked two beds or one? and I kept my lips tight against my teeth while we climbed three flights of smoke-stained stone. The room was made of pale blue cinder block, one wall of cold glass overlooking an empty parking lot. As I closed the bathroom door behind me I saw a flash of white as she stripped the t-shirt from her body, the flash of skin she showed to try and catch
my eye, but I was not interested in making up or speaking. I sat on the toilet for forty minutes, waiting until I could hear her snore above the blare of the television.

I finally came out, and found her curled around a pillow, one arm stretched and waiting for me to slide in beside her. I sat down on the edge of the mattress and I lay my body beside her, felt the heat of her belly against my back. But I could no longer keep still, and so I left her in the bed alone and slept in the bathtub until the sun came up, then I rented a car and drove home without Dagberta. Beneath the heavy gray clouds of another summer thunderstorm, the yellow heads of the big bluestem grass were still.

When Dagberta came home a few days later, I was waist-deep in the lake behind the co-op, searching for shards of broken plate with my toes. It hadn’t rained in weeks – the news reports said the water was near record low – and the evidence of my anger had finally become visible, murky forms like bones shrugged up from the Mendota sediment. The window of her room looked out over the lake, and I’m sure she could have seen me. I wonder if she watched me pluck those pieces from the water. I wonder if she wanted to say goodbye. But when I came upstairs, her door was half open, the room behind it empty. She was gone except for the portable planetarium, and a map of Montana crumpled on the floor.

My father says I am just like my mother was when she was young. He says we sound the same when he hears my voice over the phone, that I walk with the same kind of graceful, darting movement. I have traveled like she did and I get sad like she did. Sometimes I get drunk and angry like she did, but he tells me there is one small difference between us.

“You’ve never seemed to leave the ground,” he says.

I am not so sure.
I WAS AT SUNDAY HOUSE for Girls of Dane County for sixty-three days, eight hours, nineteen minutes, and breakfast before I found out the space-time continuum was a real thing. Or, at least, that’s what Jezzie said, but she lied a lot so I didn’t believe her at first. We were down in the basement school room where we went because office staff didn’t trust us to go to regular school, and in the middle of math Jezzie turned around in her chair and wrote on Little Mary’s desk with a pen. Little Mary’s eyes got wide and she sat straight up which she never did so I knew it was business and listened in.

“A door?” Little Mary asked. “Where’s it come out?”

“That house on the east side of the lake,” said Jezzie.

“Boys’ Center?” asked Little Mary. “Or Porch Light?”

“Porch Light,” said Jezzie. “Blue tile in the bathroom.”

“I never been inside,” said Little Mary. “Only the roof and the back door.”

Little Mary stuck her finger in her mouth and licked it and Jezzie laughed and then I laughed and they both looked at me so I stopped. Jezzie turned back to Little Mary and told her how she found the door and how she did it with two boys and that she had a kiss-bruise on her cooter.

“Time the same?” Little Mary whispered. She was sitting in front of me and across from Jezzie, so she didn’t really have to even turn in her desk to ask, which meant she could still pretend like she was paying attention, and that was important because Little Mary had to
graduate from the school in the basement of Sunday House this semester or she’d be too old after and they wouldn’t give her the G.E.D.

“Time? Like watches and shit?” Jezzie hissed.

“Yeah, like watches and s-h-i-t,” said Little Mary. “Is it the same on one side as it is on the other?”

“I s’pose so,” said Jezzie. “I went in, it was dark. I came out, it was still dark.”

“Then it ain’t a space-time continuum,” said Little Mary.

“Smart-ass,” said Jezzie. “Whadda you know about it?”

“Never mind,” said Little Mary.

“Yeah,” said Jezzie. “Never mind ‘cause you crazy.”

“F-u-c-k you,” said Little Mary, and then she stopped whispering and started pretending to pay attention again, although I could tell she was still listening because she didn’t start taking notes.

“You wanna go tonight?” Jezzie asked.

Little Mary nodded her head once and then she pointed at the board and Jezzie turned around and spit on the floor just after Teach called on her because it was obvious she hadn’t been listening, so she just made stuff up.

“Thirty-five,” she said.

“No such thing, Jezebel,” said Teach. “Nice try. Retta, do you have a guess?”

I knew it was nine, but I wanted them to let me come to Porch Light so I didn’t show Jezzie up. I shook my head and Teach whistled out real slow through her nostrils like she’d been running.

“Disappointing,” she said with her suburb accent, pronouncing all the syllables.
Sunday House was right downtown next to the Capitol building and all the restaurants and the YWCA where me and Mama stayed once when we didn’t have any money. All us girls were there for different reasons, like Little Mary, whose whole family were crack-heads and who was not actually little like me but we didn’t tell her that, and who looked like one of those soul girls in the magazines but took antipsychotics which meant she had lots of friends in her head that yell and made her upset. Little Mary knew Jezzie from another placement, and she also let me hang out with them sometimes, but I was careful around Jezzie because when I first got here, I heard she beat on girls just ‘cause they were smaller and she could. She told everybody she was only around until her uncle Henry got put in prison and she could stay in her house again, but I heard the lady from Wisconsin Children’s Services, Ms. Orleans, tell office staff it was hard to find foster homes for older girls, especially ones with history like Jezzie. I didn’t know what history meant or why Jezzie had it, but whatever happened that put us there in the first place, all I knew was nobody wanted to stay at Sunday House forever.

I was supposed to be there until Mama came to get me. She dropped me off and said it was only for the weekend and she’d bring me a sandwich with hot honey dipping sauce when she came back. Weekend came and went and Mama didn’t, so either she got lost on her way or she lied, I couldn’t decide which. Probably she’d have a good reason for lying, but getting lost in our neighborhood usually meant shot or the hoppers took your car or you were high and forgot where you were headed in the first place, so I always hoped it was lied. Ms. Orleans wouldn’t tell me either way. She came to Sunday House once a week for individual therapy and asked lots of questions, mostly about how much food Mama gave me for lunch and whether or not I ever felt threatened. That was a silly question because I knew
she knew anyone who lived south of Park Street had more drugs than money for groceries, and what did threatened even mean besides my life being halfway to caved-in on a daily basis.

After two o’clock bed checks that night, when office staff thought our sleeping meds had kicked in and they could leave us alone until cereal-at-seven, Jezzie sat up, flipped the overhead lamp on, and heaved her bulk over her bunk.

“Little Mary,” she hissed across the room. “Wake your crazy-ass up.”


“Well, we gotta go, I mean, g-o. Like skee-daddle.”

“Alright,” said Little Mary. “Lemme find the pink bra makes my boobs look bigger.”

I watched them walk all the way to the door before I said, “Can I come?” real quiet from below the bunk I shared with Little Mary.

“You?” Jezzie said. “Retta, you ever even kissed anybody?”

I shook my head.

“How old are you?” she asked.


“She’s a baby,” said Jezzie to Little Mary.

“Whatever,” said Little Mary. “Retta can do as she like as long as she tell the po-lice it was her idea. We get caught, you tell them it’s your idea?”

I nodded.

“Girl gets shit,” said Jezzie.

“Tell them we’re on some kind of scavenger hunt,” said Little Mary. “They might believe you’re young enough.”
So they let me along with the provision I not make any sound and if there were any police I distract them so they could run. Jezzie led the way because she was oldest and then Little Mary because she was biggest and then me because I was lookout. I’d never been higher in Sunday House than our floor and we climbed so many stairs I thought maybe my legs were gonna fall off. At each new level there was a window where I could see the moon, its half-circle face shining through the glass at me just like in the song me and Mama used to sing. Every floor we went, I hummed along to myself - up, up a little bit higher – and thought about how next Mama’d always sing oh, dear, the moon is on fire, and then finally when we got to the attic, the moon it went up, she goes up, out of sight.

Little Mary and Jezzie kept going but I got distracted and stopped to look out over the city. We were so high the statue of Lady Forward was practically pointing at me from on top the Capitol dome. I could barely see the streets around the square and the cars moving around them, back and forth from wherever it was they needed to go. Mama had a blue car and I tried to see if she was somewhere out there but it was too dark to tell and the square was too far down to see any people inside the cars. I picked one and imagined it was her anyway, and I watched it drive all the way until it was gone. Then Little Mary came back and grabbed me by the arm and said we had to go, and we went up in the attic.

The ceiling hatch was cracked with duct-tape over the alarm so night staff wouldn’t hear us escape, and when we came in Jezzie was up on a maintenance ladder with a lit cigarette in her mouth and a mirror in one hand, drawing black lines around her eyes with a pencil. She pointed to the corner, right at the base of the roof where there was a door in the wall. It was wood and peeling blue paint and nothing special but I thought it looked like it could maybe lead straight out into open space, or I guess the space-time continuum, which I was not sure was open or just really long and a circle so it never started or ended anywhere.
“That’s it,” she said.

Little Mary reached up and took the cigarette out of Jezzie’s mouth, took a drag, then passed it to me, but I shook my head and she shrugged and stamped it out on the inside of her arm, next to all the other perfect, shiny circles she’d made before.

“The hell?” said Jezzie.

“What?” said Little Mary, but then she stopped and threw the butt on the floor. She had marks from other things, too, like the compass she stole from math class, or the fork from the cafeteria. I came into the bathroom once like nine days after I came to Sunday House and found her scratching a bunch of tiny lines on the round of her thigh with a paper clip. She was mad that I interrupted and put a paper towel over it but the blood came through bright red so she couldn’t hide it. I asked her how many she’d done and she said as many as she could fit, and then I asked her if it hurt and she said of course like it was a stupid question.

“Right,” said Jezzie. “Let’s go.”

“How’s it work?” Little Mary asked, stepping in and out of the door. “I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

The inside of the door just looked like a closet, not anything special, just junk everywhere like a cardboard box with a bunch of left shoes somebody lost in there. I didn’t understand how it was supposed to take us anyplace other than the dark.

“You gotta think on it,” said Jezzie. “Like using your imagination.”

“But I ain’t never been there,” said Little Mary. “How am I supposed to use my imagination if I don’t know what it looks like?”

“That’s why the imagination,” Jezzie said. “You see shit don’t exist all the time, right?”
“F-u-c-k you,” said Little Mary. “Lemme try again.”

She grabbed me by the hand and pushed me through the door, then Jezzie jumped off the maintenance ladder and shoved her way in with us and Little Mary closed the door behind her. We were all smashed together in the dark and the older girls were giggling and dancing around like they had to pee, and then there was a blink and a sizzle sound, and then all I could see were firework lights until Little Mary opened the door again. Jezzie was first out but we all fell right quick after her and wherever it was outside was a step down so I tripped on my own foot and cracked my knee against a rock on the ground. I’m afraid of blood but I try not to be because Mama says it’s only insides and there’s always more where those come from, the stuff you can’t get back is soul. So I just stood up and looked around and pretended I was fine and nothing hurt.

“The hell?” said Jezzie. “This ain’t Porch Light.”

We were standing in the dirt outside a crumbly, broken-brick shack, all the walls falling halfway off, no roof, no glass in the windows. There was a stone bridge that went up over a stream toward the lake, and a chair tipped sideways in a bush next to me and a bike upside down in the middle of the parking lot. The same half-circle moon was shining away in the sky, but everything else was quieter than it ever was at Sunday House, like somebody put the whole world on mute. The lake was still there, but without the empty booze bottles or the rubbers usually on the banks, and it smelled a whole lot better than it did where Mama and I used to live.

“Y’all broke it,” Jezzie hissed. “Worked just fine last night.”

The dome of the Capitol was all the way on the other side, white and glowing and taller than everything else. I thought it looked like God had come down with a bucket of moon juice and poured it all over, and I turned around to tell Mama because for a second I
forgot she wasn’t there, only Jezzie and Little Mary. Then I didn’t say anything because I knew they didn’t care if it was the same color as the moon. They only cared that we were not at Porch Light getting ready to f-u-c-k.

“We in the middle of the god-damn woods,” said Jezzie. She turned around and got real close to Little Mary’s face and started speaking loud and accidentally spitting like she does when something makes her upset. “Bugs crawlin’ all up on me, plus Retta fell over and now she all muddy, probably gonna get it on my new shirt. Where them boys at, huh?”

“Don’t ask me,” said Little Mary. “You the one made us come here instead.” She poked Jezzie in the arm with her first finger, which made her even madder.

“This my fault?” yelled Jezzie. “I told you the god-damn door went back and forth and back again. I said it gonna come out the same place we come in and it did when you all wasn’t here. How we supposed to get back? Night staff gonna find out we missin’ when they come lookin for us at breakfast, and then they gonna tell Ms. Orleans we ran again. If I get sent to detention because of you – ”

“Shut it,” said Little Mary. Jezzie whirled on her fast as I’d ever seen Jezzie move, probably to say what she thought about being told to shut it, but then Little Mary put her hands on either side of her face and puffed up her cheeks, and then her eyes got so wide I thought she was gonna cry but instead she smiled.

“We in Tenney Park,” she said.

Little Mary started talking about how before they sent her away and put her on a bunch of pills to make her head quiet, her gran-mama used to bring her there to play and how when she was there all the yelling was a little slower and that she could hear people in the real world without having to try so hard. She said having a noisy head was genetic and her gran-mama had it, too, and at the park she didn’t have to pretend because her gran-
mama said it was a gift not everybody got. Then Little Mary stopped and just sort of stared off into the dark like she was looking for something nobody else could see.

“So your gran-mama’s crazy, too?” asked Jezzie. “That why she sleepin’ in a house ain’t even got a roof?”

“That ain’t her house,” said Little Mary. “That’s part of the park. And don’t say crazy.”

“Where she at?” said Jezzie. “You think she’ll take us?”

“Fool,” said Little Mary. “Old lady wouldn’t bring us to get some at Porch Light. Besides, now we gotta get back before they find out we missin’.”

“She got a car?” asked Jezzie.

“Nah,” said Little Mary. “She’s gone gone, like dead.”

“Shit,” said Jezzie.

That shut them up for like a minute, but we all knew someone gone gone, so pretty soon Little Mary and Jezzie started making jokes about how they were thirsty and when we got back to Sunday House they were gonna find another way to Porch Light so they could get some. I went walking up over the bridge instead. I peeked in all the broken windows of the shack and I put the bicycle upright against the falling-down porch, then I climbed up in the tree where the moon was and popped out at the top. For like ten minutes, I just stared out over the lake from way high, but I could tell Little Mary and Jezzie were getting impatient to leave.

“How’d it work last night?” Little Mary asked Jezzie.

“I went in the attic, came out that blue-tile bathroom,” Jezzie shrugged. “Then I went in the bathroom, came out the attic.”

“Retta,” said Little Mary. “Let’s go.”
I thought for sure the door was gonna fall off that old shack and leave us there in the park forever, but it didn’t and the blink-sizzle-flash happened again and we came back out the other side in the attic of Sunday House. By then it was almost sun’s-up so Little Mary and Jezzie and I went downstairs to our room and crawled in our beds, and when night staff came to wake us for cereal-at-seven just like always, nobody even noticed we’d been missing but us.

Me and Little Mary and Jezzie went up to the door in the attic every night for like two weeks after, but it was never the same twice in a row. We came out all kinds of weird-o places; a burned-out bodega across the street from Little Mary’s elementary school that she said got torched by the hoppers after the counter girl called the narcos; the Capitol building where Jezzie said her daddy was a janitor; a port-a-potty in the parking lot of Grace Episcopal where Mama and I went for soup dinner on Wednesday nights after her AA meeting. None of us could figure out why we came out any place, but it was fun so we kept going.

We tried one at a time or in pairs, holding hands or not, yelling the address out loud over and over and over. Jezzie still thought if we held our breath and imagined really hard until our eyeballs almost popped out, and then just before they actually did pop out we jumped in and slammed the door, it would do it, but it never did and we stopped trying because it gave everybody a headache and Little Mary almost fainted. We drew pictures. We kept photos in our pockets. During geography one day we even looked up the map coordinates for places we wanted to go, and then we wrote the numbers on our boobs with sharpie markers because Little Mary said boobs were magic and maybe all we needed was a little of that, but we still ended up somewhere else. I thought that one was my fault because I
didn’t really have boobs yet, but Little Mary said it didn’t matter how big they were and that wasn’t the issue.

Then one night she seemed really upset and she asked if we could all try really hard to go back to Tenney Park because there were a lot of voices yelling in her head at the moment and could she please just get some peace and quiet, so we tried and it still didn’t work even though we’d all been there once before and it should have been easy. After that she went to bed without even brushing her teeth which she always does so I knew something was wrong, and first thing the next morning, Little Mary got so mad she started throwing folding chairs out the rec room window. Then she punched an office staff right in the face when he tried to stop her, so we had to spend the rest of the day in our rooms while they took her to Meriter Health to calm down, but I guess that didn’t work either because when Little Mary came back, she never really came back. A man in hospital clothes showed up at Sunday House the next day and gave office staff a filled-up plastic garbage bag that said Little Mary’s name on the front in black letters, and then he brought her in and she sat down in a chair in the corner and stared at the wall and didn’t talk to me or anybody else, even Ms. Orleans, for like a week.

I thought it was probably our fault Little Mary was sad because we hadn’t been able to go where she needed, and when I thought she wasn’t gonna be my friend again I wished that Jezzie never found the door to the space-time continuum, even if it meant I might never find Mama. But after a few weeks, Little Mary got happier and started eating again and talking at free time, and one day she even said something sassy to office staff, so I thought maybe she’d want to go back to the door. She wouldn’t admit it, but I could tell Little Mary was afraid after what happened. I was too, but I kept thinking that maybe we’d show up
where Mama was on accident and then I could just stay put with her, so I still wanted to go. Turns out, all Little Mary wanted was to get by and go live in Chicago with her auntie, but Ms. Orleans told her she had to show everybody she could take care of herself first and that meant not cutting or throwing chairs at people or running away when she was mad. I wrote Little Mary a note and asked if she wanted to go and she wrote back and said no, so I wrote another note that said how come? and she wrote back maybe tomorrow, so I asked again the next day during school. That’s when Little Mary said she wasn’t interested in going places she wasn’t supposed to anymore, and maybe I should shut up.

“You shut up,” I told her, and I raised my hand and asked Teach if I could please be excused and she said I could so I went to the bathroom and cried, but only for a minute. When I came back, Little Mary turned around and drew a smiley face on my desk to say she was sorry. I thought maybe that meant she wanted to go again but it still didn’t, and I didn’t want to go with just Jezzie because sometimes she was mean to me and I thought she might leave me behind as a joke. The older girls in Sunday House were always telling stories about what it was like to be on run, how you could eat whatever you wanted if you could steal it, how it was fun to sneak into the movie theater or ride around on the bus all day, and they all said the best park to sleep in was Tenney because it was warm under the bridge by the lake even in winter. But when Mama came to get me I wouldn’t have to sleep under a bridge or steal anything and she would probably take me to a movie because she’d been gone so long, anyway, so I stayed put and pretended like I didn’t care about the door anymore either.

Ms. Orleans came to see me again when I’d been at Sunday House for eighty-nine days, fourteen hours, eight minutes and lunch, which she brought me from the fried chicken place with the red shingle roof on Fish Hatchery Road. I don’t even like fried chicken
because we had baby chicks in the elementary school I went to before Mama left me at Sunday House, and now eating them when they’re all grown makes me feel bad, but I ate it anyway because it was nice of Ms. Orleans to bring me food when she didn’t have to. We sat in the meeting room with pictures of animals that were supposed to make you feel comfortable but don’t, and we talked about regular stuff like what we were learning in history class – how Christopher Columbus killed all the native folks with blankets – and whether or not I was making friends – maybe Little Mary, who laughed at my jokes even though they were dumb. I told her I was writing stories in my English class and we got to experiment with paints in studio, my favorite period, and she asked if I would let her see them sometime.

When I asked if she’d heard from Mama, Ms. Orleans showed me some photos she brought of men she said were trouble. She asked if I recognized any of them, and one of them looked like a guy that used to leave his pickup outside our apartment building off of Park Street, but I didn’t say. Instead I told her we were reading *A Wrinkle in Time* in English class which wasn’t even true. She smiled and asked me if Sunday House was like the book and I lied again and said yes, but I think she could tell because after that she said she was trying really hard to get me into a group home. I thought this meant the YWCA where I stayed with Mama, so I shut up and smiled about everything, even when she asked me if I had any relatives besides her. I told her I used to have a daddy but not since I was three, and also I used to have an auntie, but she walked into the lake when she was drunk and she died.

Ms. Orleans got quiet and wrote a few things on her yellow notepad without looking me in the eye, so I told her it didn’t matter where I went, because Mama was the only thing I needed, because she loved me a lot and that was enough. Then Ms. Orleans said she had something important to tell me. She said Mama was missing, that her car had been found in
a parking lot by the lake, that the police said she left it behind in a hurry because her coat and an empty bottle were all sitting in the back. Then I stopped listening. Nobody listens when all you're gonna hear was something like that.

That night Jezzie tongued her meds to try and get Little Mary to come with her to the door again. She said she was sick of waiting and they should run, that they were old enough to be on their own. They didn’t need baby shit like Sunday House anymore, she said. She had a bunch of canned tuna from the kitchen and a package of mini-muffins and she knew a guy who could get them both a ride if they showed up when he said.

“But it has to be tonight,” said Jezzie.

“How you even gonna find him?” asked Little Mary.

“I figured it out,” she said. “We can go wherever we want. No more shithole bodegas.”

“Like what?” Little Mary whispered from the bunk above me. “You find a tee-vee palace?”

“No tee-vee,” said Jezzie.

“Damn,” said Little Mary. “How ‘bout a pool?”

“Nope,” said Jezzie. “It’s snow-time in the door-world anyway, same as here. Too cold for swims.”

“Well, what the f-u-c-k,” said Little Mary. “Why you even tell me about it?”

“Better than here,” Jezzie hissed at her. “How long you gonna wait?”

But Little Mary didn’t say anything else and then the bed frame creaked above me so I knew she rolled over and that meant she was gonna ignore Jezzie if she tried to ask her
again. Little Mary had been in and out of placement since her mama blew up their Buick
with a port-a-lab in a two liter soda bottle, so she could pretty much ignore everything.

“You think your auntie’s really gonna come get your crazy ass, drive all the way here
from Chicago?” hissed Jezzie.

Then she got up and closed the door and the light blinked out behind her. I lay there
for three minutes and fifteen seconds being afraid-but-not before I decided to sneak out by
myself and go all the way up to the attic after her. I started out into the hallway, but Little
Mary turned over and she got light on her face, so she woke up and scared the crap outta me.

“Retta,” she said. “Where you goin?”

“Nowhere,” I said. “Bathroom.”

“Liar,” she said. “You gonna find Jezzie.”

“No,” I said.

“No?” she said, sarcastic the way Mama used to when she knew better. “You ain’t
goin’ to the door?”

“No,” I said again. “I hafta pee.”

“Well shoo then,” said Little Mary. “I don’t want this whole room stankin’ like piss.”

Then she shut her eyes and the sound of Little Mary’s sleep-breathing started up again.

On my way up the stairwell to the attic, where the door was and Jezzie probably was
too, the moon went up, she goes up, up she goes again, except it was full and when I stopped at
the sixth floor to look out at the statue of Lady Forward pointing at me out over the cars, it
was so bright it didn’t even matter they were far away; I could tell none of them were blue or
had Mama in them. I stayed and watched through three red lights and eighty-nine cars, all of
them going toward home or away from it. But I was afraid Jezzie might leave without me
because she didn’t even know I was coming, so I ran up the rest of the stairs to the attic, and by the time I got there I was breathing hard and huffing and my face was all sweaty.

When I came in, she turned around like she’d been caught at something bad but then she saw it was me so she just rolled her eyes.

“You run up here?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“Who says you can come?” she said.

“Me,” I said and Jezzie laughed so loud her voice bounced around the attic.

“You says, huh? Damn, lil’ girl, you better watch it.”

“Where you going?” I asked.

“I dunno,” she said. “You tell me.”

“Tenney Park,” I said.

“Little Mary ain’t comin’?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“She gonna rot in this house,” she said. “But we ain’t, right?”

“No,” I said, not understanding why Little Mary was gonna rot anywhere.

“Girl gets shit,” she said and punched me in the shoulder pretty hard but not hard enough to make me think she meant it. That was the closest Jezzie ever came to being my friend and I guess it wasn’t even close, but I still wanted to see where she was going. We went in the door and she shut it and told me to shut up and think about the numbers 3-1-7-B. I wanted to say B wasn’t a number but I didn’t and just thought like she told me to. It was dark for a long time, and then there was the blink and the sizzle sound and my eyes got laser-beamed with firework lights, and then it was dark again and everything smelled like lake which meant we’d come through the space-time continuum. Jezzie opened the door, shoved
past me and jumped out into falling snow. I jumped out behind her and looked around. The bridge was right there in front of us again, and the lake was all frozen and quiet, but I couldn’t see the capitol dome or the statue of Lady Forward because of the weather. Jezzie pointed across the street to a small brown duplex with Christmas lights along the roof, a wreath on the door to the right and a tree lit up inside it. I saw there were three black numbers 3-1-7 on the front between both doors.

“That’s my house,” she said.

“Your mama live there?”

“No,” she said. “That’s just where I wanna live someday.”

I thought that meant she knew the folks or that we were gonna visit them so I started walking across the parking lot, but when Jezzie didn’t come with me I turned around and looked at her standing under the street lamp, next to the shack and all my footprints smashed down in the snow.

“What’re you doing?” I asked.

“Bein’ near,” she said.

“You’re not going inside?”

“No,” she said.

“Oh,” I said. “How come?”

But Jezzie didn’t say. Instead she said I was lucky I didn’t know where my mama was because at least then I could pretend like she was coming back instead of being abandoned. That made me mad, so I said Ms. Orleans told me Mama was gonna come get me tomorrow, which was a lie and Jezzie knew it. She got right up in my face and I thought she was gonna tell me I was wrong or punch me for real or cry or both at the same time, but she didn’t. She just kept staring at her house. After like four minutes I cleared my throat and said f-u-c-k like
Little Mary to try and get her to say something, too, or maybe decide we could go back because it was cold and she was done being near or whatever, but then she took me by the hand and said, let’s go, and started walking toward the lake.

I was anxious about going out on the ice because I’d seen enough cartoons and polar bear shows on the nature channel to know I might be too heavy and then it would crack and I’d fall in and freeze up like a popsicle, but I didn’t want Jezzie to think I was a baby anymore, so I followed her. The ice right next to the shore was shoved up against the dock, rippled and hard, bright white like it had been there forever and maybe the whole world was freezing inch by inch, starting with this one small corner. At first I was real careful and slow, but after a while I could slide along on my shoes without even picking my feet up. As we went farther out from shore, I watched the lake change from white to green to deep dark blue, and I imagined I was floating over all the animals asleep under me, all the lost folks like my auntie who had drowned in it, how maybe this was where Mama ended up too, because sometimes she went in the lake when she was sad, and she had been kind of sad when she dropped me off at Sunday House, and also whenever she was sad she drank too much and did things she wasn’t supposed to or followed folks who didn’t know where they were going. Then I got sad and stopped thinking about anything.

I looked up at Jezzie, who was spinning around in slow circles, and then I looked back toward the shore and her house with the Christmas lights, but we were so far away I couldn’t see them anymore.

“It’s nasty out,” I said. “I’m a go home.”

“Home?” she said. “That ain’t home.”

I started sliding away, but Jezzie didn’t follow me.

“You coming?” I asked.
“Nah,” she said. “Nothin’ I want at Sunday House.”

“So where you gonna go?” I asked and she said no place I needed to know, but if I ever decided I was done pretending everything was fine, I could come find her. Then she told me I wasn’t bad for a little kid and she turned around and kept walking. I watched her go and go until she disappeared, but I didn’t stop staring at the spot where Jezzie had been because we always waited for everybody to get back in the door and I didn’t want to leave anyone behind. I stood there and the snow kept falling on me and heaped up around my legs and I got so cold I couldn’t feel my hands or my feet or my face, not even my nose, and I wanted to stay longer but I had forgotten to bring my coat, just like Mama. I counted to three hundred and seventeen because of Jezzie’s house and she still didn’t come so I went back over the ice, deep dark blue to green to white, and then I went up the shore toward the shack, closed the door and thought about my bed just in case the door forgot where we came from because Jezzie wasn’t in it. But I came out in the attic just like always, and I went down the stairs without looking at the sixth floor. I kept going down and the moon kept going down and then everything was dark.

That night, I dreamt me and Mama went swimming in a snow-pond, and the next day during cereal I was gonna tell Jezzie, but she wasn’t there and Little Mary wouldn’t understand so I forgot about it because that’s what happens with dreams sometimes. Later, Ms. Orleans came to see us during snack, which was weird because she’d just been the day before and it was usually at least a week between visits, but I guess office staff were worried about Jezzie or maybe that she’d convinced us all to go after her or something. As soon as we were done eating, Ms. Orleans pulled me aside and asked if I ever thought about running away. I said no too fast, but I couldn’t take it back so I looked down at the floor. Ms. Orleans said it was okay, if I knew something I wouldn’t get in trouble. I thought about
telling her we’d gone through the door in the attic to visit the lake and that’s why Little Mary
got so upset and had to go to the hospital, or about how Jezzie just walked off and
disappeared, but I decided against it because that’s the kind of thing she’d probably get
worried about. She asked me if I was sure and I said yes and then she said if I ever wanted to
tell her anything I shouldn’t hesitate because all anybody wanted was for us girls to be safe.
Ms. Orleans gave me a hug, which she said she really wasn’t supposed to do, but I told her I
was glad she did it anyway. Then she smiled and said she would be back, and she left.

Jezzie was missing for sixteen days exactly before office staff put a new girl in her
bed. She was small like me, so I showed her where the laundry room was and how to use the
shower with the leaky faucet. Little Mary smiled at her sometimes, but I think she was full up
making friends who weren’t forever and she never really tried to be nice or talk to her about
how Sunday House was, like she did when I first met her. The new girl was there because
she punched a boy in her grade so many times he had to go to the hospital, but she said it
was because he punched her first. Her parents both worked at the university. Ms. Orleans
came to see her a lot and office staff pretty much let her do whatever. She got to go on off-
sites with her friends from school, and one time she let me have some of her cupcake from
the fancy cake shop on the square. After that I felt like I owed her and plus I thought maybe
if we were friends I could go on her off-sites too, and if I was really lucky, she would bring
me home with her when they let her leave.

At first she didn’t believe me when I told her about the door. She said it sounded like
a book she read once and it wasn’t real-life, so there was no way it was true in the attic of a
crap-o shelter like ours. I got kind of mad when she said crap-o, but I promised if she came
with me we could go wherever she wanted, so she said yes and we both tongued our meds,
just like Jezzie always did. When we snuck up the stairs I made her stop at the window with me to look out over the capitol square. I pointed at the statue of Lady Forward and told her about the time I walked out on the lake in a snowstorm with Jezzie, so far we couldn't even see it anymore, and she smiled but she didn't seem to think it was that cool. When we got to the attic, she complained it smelled like shoes and screamed three times even after I told her we had to be quiet.

“There’s bats up here,” she said. “This is stupid.”

“Okay,” I said. “We gotta hurry anyway, before night staff find out we left.”

First she said she wanted to go to the Children’s Museum so we could play with all the exhibits without anybody else around, but I’d never been before and I didn’t know the address of it for the numbers, so I told her she had to pick something else.


“What’s your address?” I asked and she told me, no B in hers, a big one across the lake. We stepped inside and I closed the door and told her to think really hard about her house, that pretty soon there would be a blink and a sizzle sound like if she were holding a camera. The new girl was always talking about her dog and all her dolls at home, and I hoped when we got there, she would let me play with them too. It was taking a long time in the door and I could tell she was getting real fidgety like Mama used to when she needed something from the grown-up store. I tried to pretend like it was normal, but the new girl wasn’t having it.

“Is this some kind of joke?” she asked. I explained sometimes we just had to be patient, but then the new girl opened the door anyway. She started walking back toward the stairs but then she turned around and made an ugly face at me. She said some of the other girls told her not to be friends with me. That I was bad news and I was never gonna leave
because my mama was a loser and nobody else wanted me, that I was always gonna be just another girl stuck in Sunday House.

“That’s not true,” I yelled, and the new girl laughed at me when she saw I’d started crying, just a little – the kind Mama said were sneaking out because they had to.

“I thought you said we were supposed to shut up?” she said and laughed again.

“I’m not stuck at Sunday House,” I yelled again.

“Jeez,” she said. “Don’t be a freak.”

That’s when I punched her. Not very hard, just a thump on the side of her cheek. I’d never punched anybody, and it hurt. The new girl started wailing right away, said she was gonna run downstairs and tell night staff what I did, that I was trying to sneak out, that I’d tricked her into coming up into the creepy attic and she was afraid I was gonna do stuff to her in the closet. Before I could stop her from screeching or telling, before I could say sorry or knock her over and make her sit still and promise not to tell what we’d done, the new girl ran away.

I stood in the middle of the attic floor for thirty-seven seconds trying not to panic about how much trouble I was in. I knew it was bad that we’d been sneaking up there, but I was more scared staff would think it was all my fault that Jezzie was missing and Little Mary was sad, and now the new girl would have a bruise on her face so that would be my fault, too. Then I burst into real tears and ran in the closet and slammed the door shut behind me. I couldn’t think of any place but Tenney Park. I thought maybe I could go to the bridge that the older girls said was warm enough to sleep under, that maybe Jezzie was there and we could hang out and be friends because I wasn’t a baby anymore. Maybe Mama had come back to look for her car and wandered all around the lake, stopping in every parking lot she could find. Maybe the family with the Christmas lights would let me stay with them. I started
saying Tenney Park over and over, Tenney Park, Tenney Park, Tenney Park. I waited and
waited, and waited some more, but the blink-sizzle sound never happened.
THE LEAVING PLACE


WHEN MARISOL MERA DE SILVA was seven years old, she found her father’s head in a metal bowl at the Leaving Place of Orellana. Like the fruit of a bromeliad, plucked and waiting to be washed. Beside the bowl on the riverbank were the heads of her five elder brothers, staked through the spinal columns with their eyes wide open, staring up at a yellow moon. She did not cry. She was not surprised. But she could not leave them to rot where they had been murdered, and so Marisol has been carrying their bones around in a bag, looking for a better place to put them down. There is a Leaving Place in each of the twenty-four provincial states of the country, and in ten years of searching, Marisol has been to all of them except for one. For ten years she has been carrying the bag of bones, trying and failing to leave them behind. The bones are heavy. They clatter against her back when she walks. Sometimes when the air is humid, she can smell the peculiar scent of her father’s bergamot cologne hanging around the bag, and she has to hold her breath until it passes.

Before the war, Marisol had loved bergamot because her father smelled always of citrus. A direct descendent of Simón Bolívar, the original rebel of America del Sur, he was intensely proud and had named her brothers Simón, José, Antonio de la Trinidad, Palacios Ponte, and Blanco. After her mother died in childbirth, Marisol was left the only girl among six strapping Mera de Silva men.

By the time she was old enough to attend, the guerrillas had banned girls from school, thinking they were more likely to become anarchistic and destabilize the country if
they were permitted to read. Instead of following their rules, her father had given her an encyclopedia and his old Polaroid camera.

“Start with A,” he’d told her. “You have to know what it is the world is made of.”

After dark, he’d take her out into the jungle surrounding their house and point at the glittering formations in the sky, at the shapeless moving things in the trees. He would quiz her on their spellings, test her memory with things she’d learned from the book. He’d cup tiny insects in his palms, catch birds and bats with mesh nets, and hold them up for her to see. Sometimes they’d spend hours plucking plants and stones from the forest floor, their hands dirtied beyond washing by the time they came home.

When the fighting broke out, he’d painted a sign on their outermost wall – Resistencia. In bold red letters. Then he started holding meetings in their living room. She used to sit on his lap while he spoke to their neighbors, all the lights dimmed so that they could not be seen from outside. After the government closed his library, her father tried to file a petition with the international court. But the high judge refused to see him, and their neighbors told him to be quiet.

“Bernardo Mera de Silva,” they said to him, “you’re going to get yourself killed.”

One day, Marisol and her brothers and her father all went out looking for anaconda eggs. She snapped photos and kept lists of the animals they saw. When she did not yet know their common names, she made them up. A bird with long, bulbous tail feathers was the turquoise cuckoo-clock. The cobalt blue tree-frog with golden speckles was little lapis lazuli. And a tiny, common shrew she named the pepper-breasted toul-a-ree because of the way it chirped when looking for insects to eat. She spent most of her time trying to take photographs, holding the Polaroid to her eye to capture bursts of colored feathers as they flew.
There was a bright flash above the canopy, and then a rumbling. *Rum-boom.* She dropped the camera in swamp mud, and as she bent to clean the lens with her sleeve, two more flashes showed. *Rum-boom-boom.*

“Stay here,” her father said. “We’ll be back.”

She climbed into the canopy to look for *white-keel-keels* and *lazy-yellow-big-beaks*, and settled in to wait, snapping photos. Only when the sun settled below the horizon did she realize how much time had passed. Convinced that they had forgotten her, she dropped out of the tree, and walked and walked and walked until her feet were sore, and it was dark, and she knew that she was lost. She tried to follow the stars as her father had taught her, but the canopy was too dense and she could only see occasional spots of light. The air began to smell of wet loam and sour milk, and when she came upon a river, the stink of moldering fish was strong. A patch of moon shone murky yellow on the water ahead, and a glimmer of light caught on a metal bowl sitting on the river bank. She came out into the clearing and looked in the bowl, around to the heads of her brothers. Before she could cry or move or even breathe, the low growl of a man’s voice called out from behind her.

“Look boys,” he said as she turned to meet his eyes. “There’s another one.”

She ran without thinking, without knowing where she was going, and just when she thought they were gone, she’d hear them after her again.

“Girl,” they called. “We know you’re there.”

She ran to a tree with low branches and began to climb. Looking up, counting points of light, she held her breath and pretended not to hear the creak of branches below.

“Little bird,” they called. “You think you can fly?”

She climbed until she couldn’t, the canopy a sea of leafy dark around her. She kept her sight skyward and waited. She named the constellations as they moved. The creaking
rose until it seemed to Marisol that the men would reach her then, and she looked down to face them. But in the branches she saw only a boy with glasses and bold, round eyes. He was not much older than her, maybe twelve, and there was a rifle strapped across his chest.

“Bring her down, Vasco,” she heard the men below them say. He moved to touch her, and the branches groaned beneath him. Marisol was quiet when he put his hand on her foot. They stared at each other in the dark. They stayed like that only seconds.

“Hurry up, boy,” the men called.

The boy kept her gaze when he spoke. “She’s gone,” he said. Softly at first, as if he needed to convince himself. As if saying it out loud had made it so. He blinked and slid his hand away.

“She’s gone,” he called out, louder now. Then he turned and disappeared. Marisol held the Polaroid to her eye, but she did not pull the shutter. Through the blurred lens she watched him dissolve into the trees. She did not stop watching until the sky lightened, until everything around her had been washed in a sickly, golden glow. After she was sure the guerrillas had disappeared, Marisol returned to the river bank. She could not bring herself to bury the bones in the place where they’d been murdered, and so she stuffed them in a bag and started searching for a better one.

For ten years, Marisol has wandered the country, trying every Leaving Place she can find. The skulls are heavy. The teeth and the tiny bones of the fingers clatter when she walks. She has tried many things to leave them behind, but for some reason, the bones never seem to settle. At the Leaving Place in Azuay, she arranges them on the ground alphabetically and by size and age, but the next morning when she wakes, they have returned to the bag beside her. The Leaving Place at Cotopaxi is inside of the volcano, but even molten lava does not
destroy them. Three days later she finds her bones scattered beside a hen house, lighter than
feathers. Although they are much easier to carry, they are so white that they glow in the dark
for almost a week, shining through the burlap of the bag like a beacon lantern. The Leaving
Place of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas used to be in an achiote field, but by the time
Marisol finds it, it is beneath the catacombs of a Catholic church because the Archbishop
came to visit and decided that it was best if God kept a closer eye. But her father had not
been a religious man, so she disappears without trying to leave anything at all.

Marisol is not the only one searching. During all the years of conflict, the guerrillas
have turned thousands into orphans, widows, and involuntary veterans. Some keep their
bones in bags like hers, or pull moving carts stacked high with coccyx, femurs, scapulae.
People articulate the skeletons and have them act like living beings, entire villages made of
eerie marionettes. Former soldiers do not carry bones but artillery instead, loads of heavy
metal shrapnel or unexploded weaponry, cartons full of empty copper shells. In a town
called El Corazon de Huecos, she meets a veteran whose rifle has been bolted to his back. It
hums and whines like an engine when he stands still for longer than a moment, and he tells
her that he has not slept in years, that all he needs is someone who knows how to weld.

By the time she is seventeen, Marisol has only one place left to try. She has heard the
Leaving Place in Manabí is near a coastal village named for the summer migration of
humpbacked whales. As she rides a bus south along the Pacific, the bag rests in her lap,
smelling of musty paper and milk. The sun is disappearing slowly behind the tree line. She
points her little Polaroid out the open window and takes three photos. A gray slur of ocean.
A man in a yellow hat. A sign that says: Pta. Ballena 3km. When the bus pulls to the side of
the road, she breathes in and leans across the seat.

“Do you know which stop this is?” she asks an old woman beside her.
“You tell me, mija,” the old woman says and smirks, her eyes deep and sightless.

“The dog can see but it can’t read.”

A mountain hound lies in the aisle, its long, brown ears puddled on the floor.

“Oh,” says Marisol. “I didn’t realize.”

“Never you mind,” the old woman says. “We’ll just ask the driver.”

When Marisol steps onto the road, the air tastes of salt. A scrubby gravel trail leads through the trees in the direction of the beach, and after the bus pulls away, she can hear the faint *sbusbshsh* of the ocean gnawing on the land. The old woman leans one hand against her dog, holding a square leather case in the other, and they start walking toward the trail. When Marisol does not follow, the old woman calls over her shoulder.

“Well come on then, mija,” she says. “There’s no place to go except this path. Where are you headed?”

“I’m looking for the Leaving Place.”

The old woman stops.

“Thought I smelled melancholy on you,” she says. “Do you have a place to stay? Tide’s a little too high to show you there just yet tonight.”

“No, Abuela.”

“We’ll ask Andrade at the corner store. There’s a shack out back, sometimes he rents to travelers.”

“Thank you, Abuela.”

“Stop calling me Abuela,” she says. “Makes me feel old. Call me Esmera. Do you have a name?”

“Marisol. My family called me Mari,” says the girl. “Nobody’s called me much else since.”
“Since when?”

“Since they got their heads cleaved off.”

Esmera tilts her head sideways.

“There’s no point in keeping it a secret,” says Marisol.

“Probably there isn’t. It won’t change things like that to hide them.”

As they walk, Marisol holds the bag over her shoulder and watches the canopy for the movement of animals. Black eyes glint in the late-afternoon gloom. The mountain hound presses its head into the woman’s hand. Light below the canopy shifts and blinks in patterns, scattering across the forest floor like sleeping, mottled cats. A stream begins and grows beside the path, and when they reach the beach, it is wide and tea-colored, leaching into the tide.

The village is smaller than most she’s seen on the coast, and there are only a few houses visible along the tree line. A tidy, concrete store sits in front of a long, wooden dock, where several boats sway back and forth on anchor lines from the water, covered in fishing equipment and nets of drying sea-catch. The store is painted brightly, a string of blinking lights along the roof. A sign above the door says: Safe Travels – Welcome to Punta Ballena. Near the door an old man sits behind a low apothecary counter, playing cards. Esmera eases onto a chair in the corner, and the mountain hound curls up at her feet. She pulls a trumpet from the leather case and licks her lips. Blows a few short notes.

“Ready for practice, Andrade?” she says. “I brought a guest tonight.”

“And isn’t she a pretty one,” says the old man. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s been a long way,” Marisol says. “I could use a drink.”

“Pobrecita,” he says. “How old are you?”

“Old enough.”
He raises his eyebrows and sets a murky glass on the apothecary table. She stares at the floor while she waits for him to pour.

“Would you like to sit?” he asks.

“This is Marisol,” says Esmera. “Wants to go see the Leaving Place.”

He clucks once. “Sorry to hear that.”

Marisol shrugs.

“Why don’t you set that bag down, mija.”

The girl pulls it closer to her chest.

“Do you have a room for trade?” she asks.

“Just your size,” says Andrade. “In the mood for music? Esmera, play us that horn of yours.”

He pulls an accordion from beneath the counter.

“You like to dance? We like to dance around here.”

“Let the girl be, Andrade,” says Esmera.

“There’s a bed back there.” He points to a small wooden shack behind the store, bougainvillea curling up the side.

“I don’t have a lot of money,”

“We’ll talk about that later,” he says. “Que rica la música, Esmera. Let’s start with marimba.”

Marisol slips outside, the sound of the trumpet following her into the tiny shack. It is set back from the beach and into the tree line, a single open room of walls made from salt-bleached driftwood, floors of pale blue ceramic tile. There are shutters but no screens, and the sugar-lime in the yard is growing its blooming branches through the window. She sits on the bed and sets the bones at her feet. She watches a trail of ants march across the floor,
counts them until her breathing slows. The first night in Punta Ballena, Marisol falls asleep to the sound of Esmera, laughing and blowing her horn.

That night, Marisol dreams of somersaulting through saltwater, and of whales that sing in an accordion wheeze. With each roll beneath the surface, there are liver-spotted bodies swimming in circles around her. She stretches to touch the graceful arc of fluke, the bristle comb of baleen, the glossy orb of eye. Always, they are just out of reach, and she wakes dizzy and gasping, the smell of sugar-limes in her nose.

She comes out into the yard, her father’s camera around her neck, and Esmera is making pancakes on a flat, steel griddle which sits above an open hearth in the ground.

“Hungry?” she asks. Marisol sits and Esmera hands her a plate, heaped with fruit.

“I hope we didn’t keep you up,” she says.

“No,” says Marisol, mouth full of mango. “I slept well.”

“I’ll take you to the Leaving Place after breakfast. It’s quiet in the morning.” Marisol nods.

“I met the General, you know,” says Esmera. “He was very charismatic.”

The old woman flips a pancake on the griddle and it sizzles in the grease.

“I never saw him, just the guerrillas,” says Marisol. Esmera smiles.

“The last thing I ever saw was his mouth,” Esmera says. “He had a very cruel mouth.”

She touches her fingers to the gnarled skin beside her eye sockets. “But he had such beautiful lips. Like broken plums.”

The girl holds up the camera to photograph the old woman in the morning. Esmera with her mouth open. Esmera with her eyes closed. When breakfast is done, Marisol goes to get the bag of bones from the little shack behind the store. Andrade is plucking early fruit.
from the tree in the yard and shakes his head when he sees her start to carry them toward
the shore.

“Leave that be today, mija,” he says. “The Leaving Place isn’t going anywhere. You
can always take them tomorrow.”

The old man hands the girl a citrus bloom, and gently takes the bag from her hands.

“I’ll take care of them,” he says. “They’ll be here when you return.” He sets the bag
inside the shack and waves her off. Marisol follows a few steps behind the old woman and
the mountain hound, out past the fishing dock and on toward the shore. Her bare toes sink
into oyster shoal as they leave the solid shelf of the beach. Low tide makes little salty prisons
of the crevices in the rocks, and she is careful not to step in pools, filled with jelly-petaled-
waveries and spiny-blue-and-purples waiting for the ocean to return. They walk nearly a mile from
the tree line before, finally, a hole appears before them. The mountain hound stops just as its
feet reach the edge.

“Welcome to the Leaving Place,” says Esmera.

The hole is like an eye in the earth, wide enough to push at the horizon, and deep
enough that Marisol cannot see the bottom. Millions of bones are suspended in the sea, the
water gem-like shades of teal and blue and gold. The smallest bones constellate in ossified
bursts, and the names her father taught her rise into her memory. *Ursa* and *Aquarius*, written
in metacarpal. *Pleiades*, a crooked trail of broken femurs. Pieces of the sacra are still attached
to long strings of vertebrae, and she watches them twist and wind.

“How many in there?” she asks.

“After thirty years of war? Mija, I couldn’t even guess.”

The mountain hound whines and shoves at her side with its nose. The tide is rising,
saltwater seeping out of the hole after each surge.
“We’ve been lucky,” Esmera says. “But still we’re all missing things.”

Esmera bends and puts a hand beneath the surface.

“People come here looking for all sorts of fixing. Some find it. Some don’t.”

She turns her hand back and forth as if she is feeling for something particular, and Marisol watches the water rile. Then the old woman stops and plucks a clutch of molars from the surface.

“Here’s one who needs some mending,” she says, and holds it out to the Marisol. “Time to go. The tide is shifting too much today.”

Esmera turns and leans against the mountain hound. They walk back toward the tree line. Marisol looks for a moment at the molars in her hand, then lets them fall back in the water. All she sees is a constellation: Cassiopeia in teeth.

As she follows Esmera back from the Leaving Place of Manabí, Marisol sees a young man watching her from beneath the carriage of a pick-up. His eyes are round and warm, the color of roasted coffee. She sees him again later on the roof of the church, peering through a pair of binoculars. At noon she spots him bobbing a few hundred yards out to sea, swimming laps in front of her shack. Finally, she catches him staring from the branches of the sugar-lime.

“Hey,” she says, stepping up against the trunk. “You there.”

It seems he is not expecting her to speak, and he shifts to hide behind a branch. Then he falls out of the tree.

“You’ve been following me,” she says as he picks himself up off the ground.

“Not really.”

“No?”
“Just being near,” he says. “I’m no good with people anymore.”

“You look familiar,” she tells him, only realizing as she speaks that it is true.

“Maybe,” he says. He steps forward and plucks a stray leaf from her hair.

“How about I show you something?” he asks.

Marisol is hesitant.

“You’re the girl from Orellana,” says the young man. “I want to show you something.”

“Esmera already showed me the Leaving Place,” says Marisol. “I’ve already been.”

“I know,” he says. “This is something else.”

They stand by the road to wait for a ranchero, and when the crowded truck arrives, Marisol volunteers to sit in the bed. A humid cold settles on her skin, and she watches the curls of his frizzy hair follow the breeze through the windows. This makes her smile, and she closes her eyes. She taps the cab window to catch his attention. He turns. He spreads his fingers against the screen, and when she presses her hand against his, they are touching in infinitesimally small places. The truck pulls to the side of the road near a white stone hut no bigger than Andrade’s store. The young man motions through the cab window for her to get out, and she jumps.

The light inside the building is bright, and it takes her eyes a moment to adjust before she sees the walls are covered, floor to ceiling, in Polaroid photographs: a man on a bicycle, his tiny daughter standing on the handle bars. A flash of rainbow feathers, the panicked flight of a macaw from the canopy. Six scientists, their rifles and their biological equipment entangled. Children in muck boots, clutching yellow frogs. Two women cupped in the buttress of a fig tree, laughing.

All of the Polaroids are blurred and peeling, in color and in sepia.
“I take photos like these,” says Marisol, and holds up her camera. She snaps a photo of the back of his head as he moves through the light. He continues walking toward the northern-most corner of the room, and she comes to stand behind him. Taped to the wall in front of them are four Polaroid photos: a little boy in glasses, standing with two girls in pressed, navy uniforms; the same boy, very young, holding a tiny, golden fish; a pair of guerilleros with automatic rifles, masks obscuring everything but the eyes; the young man with bright, wide teeth, freckles scattered across his face.

“Where are these from?” asks Marisol. She looks from the photos to his eyes and back again. He pulls a different one from the wall and sets it in her palm. She stares at the photo, her seven-year-old face looking back at her from the peeling paper. Her arms are wrapped around a book, its leather cover clearly displayed. She is smiling. Her father stands behind her, looking somewhere to the left of center.

“Where did you get this?” she says, the Polaroid shaking in her fingers. “My brother took that on my birthday.”

The young man swallows. “When I was twelve, the guerrillas took me from my parents and made me fight for them. One night, many years ago, I chased a little girl into a tree.”

Marisol feels nauseous, and the bright light in the room makes her eyes sting.

“I found the photo where we left their bodies.”

“My father kept that in his pocket,” she says. Her mouth tastes of sour milk and bergamot.

“I was so young,” says the young man. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t have a choice.”

“What’s your name?” she asks him.
“I’ve been waiting for you,” he says.

“What is your name?” she asks again.

The young man kneels before her, tears in his round, brown eyes.

“Velasco Reyes,” he says. “My name is Vasco.”

She clutches the photograph of her father in her hand when she stands and runs out into a rush of humid air. The sky seems stiff, and then at once, there is a cold release of rain.

During dry days, Punta Ballena is all driftwood and dust, but in the storm, it seems the world is made of mud and maracuya, tree limbs drooping with heavy, yellow fruits. The young man follows Marisol back to the store, a few steps behind on the road for nearly a mile. She comes into the yard and hides behind the building. She pulls the shirt from her back, desperate to wash her dirty clothes. But the young man follows still. Her undershirt is soaked all down the front, and she can feel him staring at the pink of her breasts as the wet cotton shifts. She cannot look him in the eye.

“Please leave,” she says. “Please leave.”

Marisol shuts the door of the shack and peels the last of her clothes from her body. Naked, she lifts the bag of bones onto the bed and curls herself around them. She lists aloud all the flora she can think of, slowing the ragged heaving of her chest with each remembered name. *Pink-and-yellow-bottle-brush.* In, two, three. *Moon-blooming-gramophone.* Out, two, three. *Strangle-climbing-ladder-tree.* In, two, three, four. *Prickle-bellied-piña.* Out, two, three, four. She always remembers the river when it rains, even though it was a cloudless morning when she returned to the bodies, her skinny legs sunk knee deep into the Napo. She’d waded into leftover bits of her brothers, clutching the Polaroid camera her father had given her just a few days before. Peeling photo paper floated down onto the surface of the river. A sleepy-eyed squirrel monkey, mid-leap. A human head in a bowl, teeth perpetually smiling. Her
seven-year-old toes, mud-brown beneath the murky water. She falls asleep to a steady drum of rain on the tin roof.

She wakes in the dark, still wrapped around her bones in the little shack by the store. A mesh net hangs above the bed, its white gauze swaying slightly in the dark. The rain has stopped and she swings her feet to the floor, slides them into a pair of rubber boots. She pulls her dirty shirt over her head and opens the door. When she comes outside, she nearly steps on the young man. He is asleep on his arm, curled on the ground beside her door, his skin stretching across his spine in the moonlight. Lines of scar tissue march along his shoulder blades, around his belly, over his hip. She bends to put her hand against him and he shrinks.

Out from under the tin awning she can see the dawn begin to creep across the horizon. Bats swoop and dive, pursuing early morning mosquito swarms. The knee-high rubber mucks feel cool against her legs. A low note starts somewhere in the dark ahead, and it rises and turns sharp, joined by three more. An eerie chorus grows, swells, inflates in unison on the air. Then there is a flash of light. The sound takes a while to travel from so far out on the water, and it rolls rum-boom over her ears. More light bursts, and then the sound.


The whale song swells again, sounding much closer to the shore. Marisol moves toward the rising line of ocean. In the blue world before her she sees three dead whales on the beach. A fourth, the smallest, exhales. The smell of something sweetly rotting hangs above the sand. All the moisture is evaporating from the whales like chalk, sloughing off in lines of salt that disappear beneath her fingers. The water sweeps around her boots. Up, above her knees and the soft of her thighs, the small of her back. Everything rises and the
sea is cool, and for a moment, she hopes that it will keep going, high enough to submerge their lost bodies, that it will take them back. She imagines them released from their weight, lowing and shifting in new bones. The water slinks backward again. She presses her palm against the little one, watches her hand move slowly as its great ribs expand.

“Every few months, we find them come ashore like this,” says a voice from somewhere near, and she squints into the morning haze. Andrade stands a few yards away, a massive woven net across his shoulder. He holds a line in one hand and a chum bucket in the other.

“Even the little one is enormous,” she says. “Like standing next to a train.”

“Esmera says their fins are like giant, wilting wings in the water,” he says. “She swam with them, before the war. Now they won’t let anyone come near.”

“That cannon fire,” says Marisol. “I thought it was over.”

“We are never sure,” he says.

The whale breathes out, a wheezing hum falling from its drying lungs.

“I always wish there was something we could do,” says Andrade. “But there’s no easy fix for a creature that big. We’ll just have to hope she doesn’t last too long.”

Marisol is quiet.

“Nice time for a boat ride, mija. The tide’s real high right now. Go get your bag, I’ll take you out.”

The young man stirs when she opens the door, but he rolls in sleep and does not wake when Marisol leaves again, carrying the bones toward the shore. With the sun rising behind them, the fog dissipates as they walk onto the fish docks. The houses of Punta Ballena are small and distant down the beach. Men who smell of brine and sweat carry fish back and forth from the other boats, their arms muscled and black with ink. Marisol holds
the burlap bag against her chest. Birds scavenge on the meat of the dead whales. Andrade helps her into his boat and she sets the bag between her feet. The Evinrude spits until they are so far from shore, the trees look like swaying feathers. The old man cuts the engine, and bones materialize in the water around them as the foam settles.

“Such a long way when you have to walk along the tide bed,” he says.

She sees Virgo made of maxillae, a set of ribs turned into Leo. The current shifts a pelvic girdle sideways in the water, and the Corona Borealis appears.

“Doesn’t it bother you, to fish from here?” she asks.

“No always,” the old man shakes his head. “But some days, yes.”

“Then why do it?”

“People in Punta Ballena have been fishing here for centuries,” he says. “The bones have only made the catching easier. More food for the reef fish, more food for us.”

A film on the surface glints pinkish in the morning light.

“What is that?” asks Marisol. She slips her hand into the water.

“Mostly calcium,” he says.

“Can I swim?”

“It can’t hurt.”

The water is warmer than she expects. The salt does not sting her eyes. She sinks beneath the surface for a moment, and she holds her hands out to look through her skin, all the veins and arteries flushed red and violent blue inside her palms. She feels nebulous. She is made of matter unknown. She watches Andrade move in blurs across the sky. Whale song keens and bellows, amplified in her ears underwater.

When she surfaces, she pulls herself back into the boat. He drops lines, bits of chum-flesh hooked and suspended from red bobbers. The girl names the fish as he reels them in:
rainbow-beak; baby-black-and-yellow; wide-eyed-eagle-ray. Andrade fills the bottom of his boat with writhing, shiny things. The last line he pulls is run through a skull at the lacrimal bone, the fish flailing on the hook beneath it. He plucks the fish and tosses it aside. Marisol watches as it flips against the bag of bones, shedding pearly-gray scales on the rough rub of burlap. Its eyes are round and blank. She turns to Andrade as he slides the line out through the socket of the skull. He holds it up for her to see. The rounded bone gleams, as if it has been polished.

“What are you going to do about the boy?” he asks her.

She reaches for the fish, puts her hand to its muscled side, feels it struggle beneath her fingers.

“He caught me once and let me go,” says Marisol.

“No small thing,” says Andrade.

“My father gave me an encyclopedia when I was seven,” she says. “I used to spend hours looking at the photos. I remember this one. They call this fish a skipjack,” she says.

The old man draws his knife. He cuts along the lateral and the intestines do not spill. Piece by piece, they eat every bite of the fish. When they are done, Andrade pulls at the cord of the Evinrude until the engine sputters to life, the vibrations humming through the floor of the boat.

“I’d guess it’s been a long time since you started carrying that,” he says and points to the bag at her feet. “I’d also guess you don’t care to tell me why.”

Marisol doesn’t move or make a sound, so Andrade continues.

“Mija, I dreamed for years of what I’d do with mine.”

“How did you get rid of them?” she asks. “I’m tired.”

“One day maybe you’ll be more tired of remembering.”
“Where did you leave yours?”

“Bones will only settle when you want them to,” he says.

The engine hums beneath them. Marisol looks down into the water and then back toward the shore.

* To my knowledge – beyond a short sojourn near the Baja Peninsula in Mexico – my mother never traveled to Central or South America, although she did have an extensive collection of Hispanic magic realist literature and spoke occasional Spanish in my presence. At the same time she supposedly wrote this piece, the period of violent military dictatorships throughout much of Latin America was coming to an end, but the geographical indicators and political or historical events depicted in the narrative seem to be a mix of several conflicts. I see various aspects of myself or my family’s history in her characterizations: I was fond of both photography and bird-watching as a young girl, and often identified creatures based on physical features when I was unfamiliar with their species names; my father was active in local politics and once ran for city office, but was forced to quit the bid by a powerful anti-union lobby; our next-door-neighbor, Jamuna Shrestha, is a Nepalese refugee, and often took care of me and Ollie when our parents were unable to do so – she is blind in one eye, but it was her husband who played the trumpet. I am not sure what my mother meant to tell me from this story, nor why she thought it appropriate for a seven-year-old to read. Maybe it was a kind of subconscious preparation for her future abandonment, or an offered explanation of some kind. It seems we have both spent our early adult years seeking a leaving place of sorts for our similarly restless hearts, so perhaps it was simply a story she thought I would come to know.
CHAPTER 2 FIELD OBSERVATIONS & SYMPTOMATIC PRESENTATION
DISPATCHES from THE HIGHEST TIDE

Field notes and anecdotal research for “Causation, symptoms and impacts of hydracy: comorbid water-related addictions, eco-emotional traumas, and manic depressive or psycho-schizoid response in women of related and unrelated descent.” Conducted with support from the University of Wisconsin’s Doctoral Program in Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography and Eco-Psychology, and in conjunction with grants from the Center for Island Climate Adaptation and Policy, the National Science Foundation, the New England Journal of Medicine, and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, August 2008 – June 2009. See “Influential Texts” in Appendix A for referential material.

NAMDRIK RESTS AT 05°37′00″N and 168°07′00″E, a coral atoll of the Marshall Islands in the Ralik chain, which means in Marshallese that it started “on the sunset side of things.” Unless you are skilled at sailing by star-inflected wave patterns and in possession of an outrigger canoe, Namdrik is accessible only by airplane or shipping boat. Eighty miles southwest of the Marshallese capital island of Majuro, another 2500 miles from Hawaii, the Philippines, or Papua New Guinea, and nearly 6600 from Wisconsin where I grew up, there are no internet cafes, no cell phone towers, and only a handful of solar panels on the entire island.

Inspired in part by the stories my mother told me as a child, I’ve wet my feet off Pacific beaches as far north as Washington State and as far south as the Gulf of Guayaquil. Snorkeled with fish, sea lions, sharks, and turtles, floated on the painfully brilliant turquoise of reefs, and above the unending darkness of the pelagic zone. Although I’m far too clumsy and imbalanced to surf, I love to wade through tide pools looking for sea hares and urchins. I’ve been kayaking, whale-watching, and sailing, slept on boats as big as apartment buildings and one as small as a pickup truck. I’ve loved the sea since I was very little, and have never been hesitant to wander into the water. And so when people asked me why, of all places, I was going to the Marshall Islands to study the marine impacts of climate change on an isolated community, I gave them a very simple answer. “It’s in the middle of the ocean.
Right in the middle. Two-thousand-miles-from-anywhere middle. I couldn’t get closer to the
ocean if I tried.”

DAY SEVEN

The men of the island use jambo to mean going out on outriggers when the pelagic
bwebwe schools thrum too close to shore. Moon Ralphi, my twenty-four-year-old host sister,
tells me it means to take a walk – five minutes to the corner store for kanamnams, alone
through the palm groves to the ocean-side; surrounded by forty singing women, all of us
clapping our hands and moving toward the house of a widow. I will learn it applies equally
to both the flight of white terns and the 34-seat Dash-8 in the Air Marshalls’ fleet, a twenty-
year old plane still running on a faulty propeller. As a verb, the word means forward
momentum by foot or motorboat or automobile, on a hot-pink beach-cruising bicycle with
no brakes, a rusting tricycle missing two wheels, a moped or a motorcycle, even a bright
yellow unicycle, if one had ever existed in the Marshalls. The vessel is unimportant, so long
as the body is moving. I like this open, simple definition. This is the only kind of physics that
makes sense to me.

This morning, Moon’s thirteen-year-old brother Benjamin asks if I want to sail over
the lagoon to the uninhabited island. To jambo across the water. At least, this is what I think
he says. He could also have said something about the laundry hanging on the line behind my
hut, because he’s pointing in that direction when he speaks, and maybe I’m not supposed to
hang my tank-tops outside. Or maybe he was offering advice about the ukulele chords I am
mangling with my clumsy fingers. I am holding the instrument and he motions between us,
so maybe he wants a turn to play. I’ve heard him at night in the cook house, and he is better
than I’ll ever be. His voice still cracks on the low notes, but his melodies are clear and lolling
like the surf behind us, so I hold the ukulele toward him. He grimaces. He does not want the
ukulele. I shrug, and for what seems the thousandth time today, I ask him to repeat himself.

“Do you – ” he points to me. “ – want to sail – ” he points to a broken outrigger
beached on the shore. “ – to Madmad with me?” He points to himself and then to the tiny
island on the other side of the lagoon. In these motions there are words I recognize,
individual sounds that Benjamin separates, elongating the vowels and consonants so that my
clumsy ripalle ears can understand them. Even though I am exhausted in every way possible,
petrified to do anything other than sit in my hut and listen to all the moving, foreign things
outside, the palm fronds and the mangrove crabs and the crunching of feet on coral stones,
even though I think that maybe I might get in trouble because women are bad luck on
outriggers, I say yes.

I say yes because Benjamin smiles whenever he sees me. Because he is patient and
soft-spoken through every repeated phrase. Because he is thirteen, and already so good at
being kind to strangers. But I say yes most of all because I am surviving on adrenaline, and
the island across the water is even more remote than the one we live on. Here, on this outer
atoll one square mile in size and thousands of miles from home, the thrill that comes from
pushing all the boundaries I can find is limited only by my ability to swim.

“Yes,” I say and nod my head. But in Marshallese, nodding means nothing. So I try
again. Aet, I say. Inne. With great concentration, I shift my eyebrows upwards.

Benjamin laughs. “Wait here,” he says, and holds his hands out as if balancing on ice.
He reminds me of my brother, Ollie, who has also always been inordinately kind to strangers,
who grew up wanting something stable and never found it, who made sure everyone around
him never had to worry. In these first few days, I miss Ollie most, more than the internet or
cell phones, the comforts of my father’s house. I write him letters, but who knows when he’ll get them, or when I’ll get one back.

Twenty minutes later, Benjamin returns lagoon-side in an outrigger he has borrowed from his father. He jumps out and gestures to a tiny platform between the main boat and its balance.

“Sit,” he says. “Let’s go before the sun sets.”

I wade into the shallows and pull myself up awkwardly. I cross my legs. Benjamin gives me a thumbs-up, leans all his weight against the boat to set it moving, and leaps back in with one fluid motion. As we pass over deeper and deeper water, the color shifts from teal to cerulean to cobalt. Swimming things splash and catch at the corners of my vision. He points to where they’ve disappeared and names them for me: pako, ek, won, jojo. As we near the center of the lagoon, I look to my left some half a mile and marvel at monuments of exposed coral, a bone yard of bleached stone on the sand flats between our island’s westernmost point and the curving southern tip of the uninhabited one. Benjamin tells me stories with child-speak and body language, about a giant tiger shark all the fishermen fear, about the ocean squalls which wreak havoc on the island in the windy season. I reply in single words. Emman, good. Ukuk, wow. Emman, good. Ukuk, wow.

When we reach the far shore, he helps me out and we explore. No one lives here, its swampy, mangrove interior populated with coconut crabs, palm rats, migrating white terns, and feral pigs. As we wander through the jungle, feet sunk in sucking mud and mangrove roots, a cloudburst of brilliant white feathers flairs above us, and the air fills suddenly with an eerie, tinkling chorus of high whistles. He points to the birds as they take flight north, toward the open ocean. Most words he teaches me that day I forget, will forget for months
until the sound of them feels warm like salted butter in my mouth, but this name I remember. *Bao in jetoh*, he says. Spirit birds.

The mosquitos soon drive us from the jungle back to the water, where I sink to my waist and try to spot flickers of fry in the murky, sky-blue waves. Benjamin comes to me with handfuls of green mussel shells, a side-dish for dinner this evening, and he lets them fall into the basin of the outrigger. He shows me how to find them, pointing to the faint trails of furrowed sand which appear when the tide sweeps backward. I dig my fingers through heavy earth, rejoicing in every tiny victory of bivalves uncovered.

Near sunset, he decides that we should go back, pointing to the sky and saying *bon, bon*. I head for the platform between the boats again, but he grimaces.

“You should steer,” he says. “It’s easy.”

“Me?” I am hesitant, the warnings from orientation about gender rules and alienated *ripalles* still ringing in my ears. “It’s okay?”

*Aet*, he says, emphatic. So I climb into the main vessel and settle in, bare feet surrounded by the slow shifting of mussels searching for a way back underground.

At first our path is crooked. The wind picks up with the falling temperature of evening. I struggle to control the sail. The wake behind us carves whorls in the water, so much darker now than it was when we came. But Benjamin is a good teacher, and soon I have learned to shift before the boat does. I set course straight ahead in the distance, toward an outcropping of trees on the inside shore of the larger island. When we come close enough to shore, he points at the tin roof of my hut.

“See,” he says. “You knew exactly how to get home.”
DAY SIXTEEN
Moon says if I’m really ever going to be a leddik in majel, I’ve got to learn to walk like one. She says I’ve got to take it really slow, like I’ve got no place to be any time soon and nobody’s gonna notice whether I get there or not. She says this is awa in majel. Marshallese time. She has a point – the place is 6 miles from end-to-end, and it’s surrounded by water. Where am I going to disappear to? In a zoom-zoom across the lagoon, I drum my fingers against my thighs, impatient, and she asks if I think I’m going to swim to Majuro. We walk to the general store, not more than six American blocks from our house, but I’m rushing. She says slow down, no need to hurry. We’ll all get there someday. Some day, she says, I might be on my way to the airport. Maybe I’m on a bike ride. When it rains and I’m all the way out in Ajalto on the rusty black bike, stay put. The road is gonna flood and I’ll get my Guam all muddy if I try to ride back while it’s still storming. Moon says I should go find Sera Liotak, the old healer who taught her everything she knows about Marshallese medicine. She’ll make you some tea, says Moon.

Maybe it’s mail day and I want to get a head start arriving at the airport, take the scenic route. I’ll be sweaty because it’s hot and there is absolutely no wind coming from the ocean-side, and when I see Belisa standing in her yard (because Belisa is always standing in her yard) and she asks if I want a coconut, Moon says I should say yes. Because it’s too goddamn hot to keep going just yet, and Belisa’s got a freezer so the coconut is probably cold. The mail will get where it needs to go with or without me there at the airport to greet it. Next thing I know, it will be dinner and the sun will already be halfway set, so maybe I should just enjoy the tree-fruit and then come back home for dinner. Sometimes this happens. There is always tomorrow. I can always go to the airport tomorrow.
She says, if somebody asks me where I'm going, all I've got to say is jambo. If somebody asks me why I'm going somewhere, all I've got to say is jambo. All the girls on island, the Samuel sisters, the ones with that big mango tree in their yard, or Martine and Jolly and Christina Beasa, who live in the green house near the school, Mary and Lydia’s girls. Or the skinny Jidik twins with their big hair bows at church. Big Gretel on her bicycle. Especially her. Moon says all those girls get their noses in everybody’s business and they’ll talk three times fast ’til Tuesday before I put one more foot forward. So if anybody asks, she says: one word answer. Jambo.

Moon says it like this: “There is. No need. To hurry. Can I say it again? One step at a time, likatu. Let the Guam slide across your hips each move you make. Yeah, those white girl hips. They’re small, but you got ’em. Swing your ass back and forth a little. Whish-whew! Those lakatus will be whistling next time they see you on the road. Let the balls of your feet roll on those zorries, real smooth, like you’re making bwiro with your toes. See how much nicer it is to take your time when you walk? There you go.”

DAY TWENTY-SIX

The principal at the elementary school is a perpetually smiling man named Fodomar Iban. The only other person of six-hundred-some on island fluent in English, he is funny and easy to be around, especially because there is no language barrier between us. On Monday afternoons, I use the shortwave radio in the main office of the school for check-in with my field director, and Fodomar usually hangs around afterward to chat. We sit amidst piles of unused, moldering textbooks – shipped six-thousand miles from Texas, their language is too advanced for the students here – and talk about everything from Kofi Annan and the Obama campaign, to papaya soup recipes and the bad American eighties movies his kids watched while they lived in Guam. The walls of the office are plastered in mildewed
posters, its windows clouded with algae and salt, and one day when the weather is stormy and the radio picks up only static, the room seems more like an abandoned research outpost in the jungle than an elementary school.

“I was caught in a storm like this once,” he says. “Fishing with my uncle.”

“On the uninhabited island?” I ask, because this is the only place I know to fish.

“Farther east in open ocean. Six in the morning, we went out in his al-u-min-i-um canoe, and the rain came up behind us. Soon it was so heavy I could not see my own hands. The bottom filled and I thought for sure we would sink.”

I don’t say much. He has stopped smiling, but he chuckles when he explains how they had to shout to hear each other above the beating water, how his uncle jumped into the sea to rudder when the motor flooded and died.

“After twelve hours, the rain had stopped, but we had been floating for so long, we had no idea if we were a mile from shore or halfway to Kiribati. Neither of us had ever learned to read the waves, and the sky was overcast, dead gray for days. So we waited for someone to come.”

He tells me they spent six nights in the al-u-min-i-um canoe, eating raw fish, sleeping in shifts. That they saw a form in the distance, how they yelled until their throats were raw, and that his uncle threatened to swim for help when it disappeared over the horizon. How he has never been so thirsty, or surrounded by so much water.

“The US coast guard found us near Ailinglaplap,” he says, the smirk returned to his face, as if the idea of drifting eighty miles north in open ocean has become amusing in its recollection.

“You’re lucky,” I say. Elap am jerammam.

He nods.
“Am I the first person you know to be,” he pauses, searching for his words. “– what is the phrase – lost at sea?”

“Yes,” I say. “I’ve never known anyone else who has ever been lost at sea.”

“In an al-u-min-i-um canoe,” he says in seriousness.

“Not even in an oil tanker,” I say.

This makes him grin.

DAY FORTY-ONE

Etri is Moon’s eight-month-old son. He is a curious baby, always reaching and touching and testing with his pudgy, sticky, fingers, shoving shells and batteries and bananas in his mouth without differentiation. He stares at light bulbs and kittens with shiny-wet eyes the color of a petroleum slick, equal parts black, marled brown and deep, cobalt blue. Sometimes when he is fussy and I am feeling restless, I take him on jambos to the ocean-side. Like so many of his ancestors, I think he is a wanderer at heart, but he is still limited by his toddling, baby legs, his hesitant steps. He is impatient to join the rest of us walking folk, frustrated by the slow speed at which one can explore from the vantage of soft palms, the squish of knees against knobbly coral gravel, each another painful reminder of the distance he has yet to go. He seems soothed, somehow, when traveling at adult speed, hip-height to the rest of the world.

Since I was very young, I’ve talked or sung to myself while doing any number of things: walking to school, waiting for the bus, washing the dishes, hiking in the woods. At eighteen months, my mother once found me in my room, speaking baby jibberish to a pile of stuffed animals. She told me I was having some very deliberate, serious conversation, telling the plush bears and horses and dolphins a story no one else would ever understand. I do it now on Namdrik when I’m lesson planning in my classroom or biking home from the
airport, and sometimes I catch Etri doing the same when he’s crawling around in the coconut debris by himself.

Walking through the unruly jungle is a good place for this, and Etri makes a good companion. While we wind through the palms and buttress roots toward the ocean, I tell him nonsensical information or explain random aspects of ecology, test new strings of Marshallese phrases, practice the gospel songs for choir in my off-key, warbling solo. He responds in hums and burbles, craning his baby neck over my shoulder to point and jabber at the passing foliage, the hidden, sleeping sea birds in the canopy above us. I’m sure if anyone ever followed along, their opinions of my mental sanity might be confirmed. I wouldn’t mind too much. Sometimes I think we just need to push sound from our bodies, to speak out loud, to be noisy, even if it is never heard.

DAY FIFTY

In broad daylight, the tin-and-thatch ramshackle hut which is my home on this tiny, isolated island has all the charm of any cheap, beach-side hostel cabina – its large, wide-mesh windows provide for a lovely ocean breeze day or night. Its simple cement floor is easy to keep clean. And the view of the jewel-blue lagoon just fifty yards away doesn’t hurt. There are banana, coconut, and pandanus trees right outside my door. In comparison to some field sites I’ve heard about, I am lucky because I have my own private hut some two-hundred yards away from the much larger home of my host family. Even the ubiquitous creatures I find inside – bruise-purple mangrove crabs, flea-bitten stray cats, roaming bands of piglets, all sizes of centipede, cockroach, Polynesian rat, and wolf spider – seem more like natural additions than invasive presences in a home that has such flimsy physical barriers with the outside world.
Yet when night falls, for the first time in years I find myself becoming afraid of the dark. And when I say dark, I mean no light other than the cyclic glowing and dimming of the moon. I have a headlamp and a solar light, but when those go out, the very air seems infused with black ink. All manner of noises click and clack across the tin roof. I sleep on the floor, and I wake more than once with the feeling of wriggling insects on my skin, or the weight of a nocturnal rodent moving beside me. Once, after willing myself still during a series of mysterious scrabbling sounds, I give up and flip on the solar lamp. Inches from where my head has just been, a crab the size of a pineapple waves its four-inch pinchers in some kind of bizarre midnight duel with the tin wall. Peaceful sleep on a tropical island is more difficult to achieve than the glossy travel magazines will have you believe.

I am a tough girl, raised by my father to embrace the dirty and uncomfortable aspects of the outdoors, and I refuse to be squeamish of a few unwanted visitors. I adopt the flea-bitten cats as pets, and give them names like Sweet-Pea, Fat Mama, and Mango. I learn to lure hungry crabs out of my hut with bits of over-ripe plantain. I leave the wolf spiders alone. Although I will admit that I still throw rocks at the rats, and that I once reveled in the writhing death of a six-inch long centipede that I had sprayed with an inordinate amount of toxic Raid, after a few weeks of uneasy sleep, I learn to accept all-comers in the night. I pretend the tickling sensations on my skin and in my hair are all in my imagination. I roll from my stomach onto my back, and go back to sleep. But there is one thing which never fails to set my heart racing in the middle of the night. The flash of an industrial power fishing flashlight through my window, and the disembodied voice of a strange man come-calling for to bwebwenato in the dark.

Because of the singular room and communal living conditions of most Marshallese households, if couples want privacy from their other family members, they are forced to find
uninhabited spots in the jungle or on the lagoon front, lay a bed of fresh palm fronds, and ignore the various unfortunate side effects of having sex outdoors on a tropical, mosquito-infested island made of coral gravel and sand. The euphemism for such jungle trysts is a word which also means “to speak” or “to have a conversation,” but during my orientation the field directors at the collaborating university in Majuro made it very clear that when anyone, particularly a woman, is invited to *bwebwenato* at night by a member of the opposite sex, the meaning is unequivocal. They also stressed that any female foreigner who appeared overly friendly and receptive to male attention – platonic or otherwise – would immediately garner unsolicited advances of the late-night variety.

Around three a.m., I am jolted awake by a flashing light and the foreign sound of slurred, drunken speech inches outside my window.

“Sssshh,” hisses a male voice. “Lena-eh.”

I freeze like a startled rabbit. Without thinking, I flip the solar light at the apex of my tin roof, illuminating the interior in a hazy yellow glow. Outside, it is pitch dark because of the new moon. My eyes dart to the air slats in the tin walls, warped open like gaping wounds in the flat metal. They move to the window, and the inch of uncovered screen at the side of the building. To the sagging space at the top of the curtain string. If I were to look through any of these holes in my house, all I would see outside is the inky black night. Yet anyone looking in would be able to see me and everything else as if I were in an aquarium under halogen lights. An exotic fish on display, completely ignorant of the spectators around me. I sleep in the middle of the hut in a tank top and basketball shorts. No bra, bare-shouldered and bare-kneed, I might as well be naked by Marshallese standards. I flip the light off again.
Besides my students, no one speaks to me in anything but Marshallese, and in the haze of sleep, it hardly registers that the man who has arrived at three in the morning is speaking to me in English.

“Lena-ch, I want to talk to you,” he slurs.

“Not now,” I mumble. “I’m sleeping.”

“My wife is gone. Come outside.” The strong beam of the light sweeps through the curtains, back and forth across the room. “I want to kiss you.”

“Won in?” I ask. The flash light shines directly in my bleary eyes.

“This is Ted,” he says.

In my spare time, I volunteer as an English teacher at the elementary school, and I recognize this man from my adult ESL classes. I know that he has spent time in Guam and the United States. His English is quite good, and he has always been a pleasure to have in class because he likes to participate. He starts to ramble about how much he hates his wife, how he had an American girlfriend in Guam, how she left him to return to the United States. He says he wants me to replace her. He slurs and tells me that he once came close to death, and that he wants to sleep with me. He speaks until I interrupt him.

“If you want to practice English, we can do it during the day. I’m sleeping right now.”

“No,” he says, growing more adamant. “Come outside now.” Then the wall shakes as he bangs the flashlight against the tin. The light jumps toward the ceiling, and back through the window again.

“Not tonight,” I say, and my heart jumps in my chest at the aggression I can hear in his voice. “Go to sleep and we can talk in the morning.”

“You’re a bitch,” he growls, and bangs the wall again, twice, three times. “Fuck you.”
I am acutely aware of how flimsy the window barrier between us really is, and I get up to make sure the door of my hut is locked. He hears me move inside, and repeats the curse again.

“American bitch,” he says. “Come outside.”

I refuse to respond, and sit silently in the dark on the opposite side of the hut while I wait for him to leave. He continues to flash the light and swear for several minutes, and I hear him stumble around the perimeter of the hut. He bangs on my front door. He tries to pull it open, but the lock holds. He swears again. He leaves. I do not sleep for the rest of the night, anxious and livid and trembling until the sun comes up, and I feel safe enough to go outside.

**DAY SEVENTY-THREE**

When I packed my hiking backpack for the year, I decided to bring one pair of well-loved navy blue Saucony Jazz trainers, the kind of tennis shoes I can wear without socks and not rip holes in my feet, the kind of shoes I figure can carry me a few miles and back before an ever-familiar persistent throbbing rises up in my shins. Warned by my orientation manual to wear baggy clothes so as not to attract unnecessary attention, told that I would most likely be mocked for voluntary physical exertion of any kind, I make up my mind to run regardless. Several of my research friends are runners as well, and we report our practice over shortwave radio dates. We all complain about the oppressive humidity, claim our aptitude for distance greatly impeded by the equatorial heat. One man is attacked by a stray dog, bitten directly in the ass – strong enough to draw blood – for a discretion no worse than passing by unannounced. A woman is run off the road by a flat-bed truck, only to be chased through the bush by a rut of angry pigs. But we keep going, and a few brave – perhaps foolhardy – souls say they will train for a marathon during our tenure. We have so much time, it seems,
and we have nowhere to go but in circles, back and forth along the limited miles of the ocean-bound atolls.

After these unsettling months of language barrier, culture shock-and-awe, and gastrointestinal upheaval, I need to run, to settle my crazy mind a little; to move somewhere of my own volition; to prove that I can still carry the weight of my body, even if I am terrible at bucket laundry and fire-starting and volleyball. I pull a t-shirt over my head, yank a pair of my ex-boyfriend’s baggy basketball shorts up over my hips, and push my feet into the Sauconys, my skin already flushed and swollen in the humid October air. As I walk across the coral gravel yard, Moon and our next-door-neighbor Belisa look up from their afternoon tea and ask where I’m headed.

“Running to the airport,” I say. “Ajalto. Somewhere like that.”

Moon looks incredulous. “Why would you do that?”

“I like it,” I say. “I want to see the island.”

“But it’s so far,” she says. Ettolok. “I’ll ask my boyfriend to bring the zoom-zoom over. Maybe tomorrow he can take you for a ride.”

“I’ve run that far before,” I say, stretching one leg across a bench. In Madison, I always ran from my house along the lakeshore, west toward Picnic Point and through the nature reserve where my mother used to take me in the summers. After she died, it was often the only time I could think of her without getting angry – instead of crying I could exhaust myself. Instead of hating her for disappearing, I could lose myself in trees. I could not ignore the lake that swept her up, but I could trace its boundaries with my feet and I could mentally contain its body with mine. Each May, regardless of sleet-storms or shin-splints, muscle spasms or mud-sucks, I marked her anniversary by running to Raymer’s cove and back. By mid-July, I could run the length without feeling the Wisconsin summer heat.
I am confident on the island it will be no different.


So I head east, jogging with my head up and my eyes bright, waving stoically at everyone I see along the road. Children rush to catch up, squealing and sprinting behind me with their limbs akimbo, mouths wide open in glee. They fall back after a few yards, but their voices trail behind me like a chorus of small cheering birds. I breathe deep and speed up. I am a track star! I am the wind!

And no less than twenty minutes later, I have slowed to a pathetic crawl. I am cranky and sweating more than I ever thought possible. Certain that my face is the color of the red snapper I had for lunch, a meal I am now trying mightily to keep inside my stomach, I want nothing more than to fall to the ground, to peel all the clothes from my furnace of a body, to throw my tennis shoes into the bushes, to lie down in the middle of an ice chest. Unfortunately, there is no ice chest near and I am more than two miles from home, therefore unable to disrobe without causing a major scandal. Even pushing the sleeves of my t-shirt above my shoulders might mark me a harlot: the near-naked ripalle who showed off the soft of her arms in public. Gasp. When islanders wave hello or call out across their yards, I raise my hand in response, cursing long-dead missionaries and their puritan clothing policies under my breath. Who the hell wears long sleeves in the tropics? Who the hell gives a crap about covering knees? Knees are not sexual. Shoulders are not seductive. It’s ninety degrees! I’m dying!

I stop. I lean over my chaste kneecaps and yack into a patch of scrub grass. I wipe the sweat from my face with my shirt, heavy green cotton which is now at least three shades darker than it was when I left. Although I have never been to this part of the island, I know that I am nowhere near the airport because I can still see the bend of the land as it curves
west around the shallow cove of Ajalto in the distance. I lean over my kneecaps again, set my palms flat on the dirt road, and think wistfully of popsicles, of Wisconsin blizzards. Blood pounds in my ears, and I can barely hear above the thump of my own heart until the sound of barking comes from somewhere in the thick jungle beside me. Suddenly a yellow mutt lunges out of the tree line fifty yards ahead, teeth bared, hackles up. Thoughts of rabies shots, mangled flesh, medevac helicopter rides to Majuro flash through my mind. I turn and try to walk calmly in the opposite direction. The dog snarls and jumps at my heels until I pass some invisible line on the road, where it halts and leaves me to retreat in peace. I walk for a while longer, but I am stubborn, too proud to admit that I have not acclimated yet, and make up my mind to run the rest of the way home. I pick up my feet. I breathe deep. I start to jog again. I don’t think I’ve ever moved so slowly.

Seven first-grade boys, the same kids who cheered me on before, now swarm around me like bees, outpacing my inching progress easily.

“Why are you so red?” one boy asks, giggling.

“She looks like she’s going to puke,” another says. “Aren’t you hot?”

“Yes,” I say, breathing hard through my nose. “I am very hot.” As if this is not obvious. I am too exhausted to be annoyed, but I grit my teeth and pretend not to hear them.

“Ripalles are so sweaty,” a third says, making a face as he runs along beside me. He puts one hand against my elbow and points toward the beach. “You should jump in the lagoon.”

Yes, I think. I should jump in the lagoon. This child is a genius.

When I can see the giant breadfruit in the Ralphos’ front yard, I start to sprint. I come flying over the white coral stones, chest heaving like a racehorse, a crowd of hysterical six-year-olds trailing behind me. A few of Moon’s male friends are lounging in the shade of
the cookhouse, and for the first time, the sound of their wolf whistles make me grin. I pull my Sauconys off mid-stride and dive head first into the surf, water all around me, the heat of my body dissipating with each second I spend submerged. I come to the surface for breath and laugh so hard I almost inhale the sea. All seven of the little boys have ripped off their clothes and are leaping, butt-naked, into the ocean.

DAY ONE HUNDRED

Moon invites me to a birthday party for a one-year-old little girl named JoJo who lives with her grandmother, Julynn, in a house at the far western side of Namdrik. Birthday celebrations are – almost always – entirely female, the only exceptions being for infants, very young boys, and the occasional elderly grandfather. Sometimes a large group of women from one of the four churches on island gather and celebrate together. Other times it is just a few neighbors and friends. This afternoon, the birthday group is us, and Belisa comes over with her daughters, their hair pulled back in tight braids, all of them wearing their best Guam dresses, purple floral patterned smocks. Everyone has something to give to the birthday child as a gift – a bar of soap, a package of ramen, a box of laundry detergent – and Moon has an ukulele for singing. She asks me to carry the baby, and ready to birthday, we head out for the party around six in the evening.

On our way there, the sky opens its mouth, inhales all the air from above the ocean, and releases everything over our heads in a downpour hard enough to carve holes in the earth. By this time we are halfway to the house and we are already drenched, so we just keep on going. Julynn stands in her doorway, watching as we burst into the yard shrieking and covered in mud. The birthday girl is sitting in the corner, wearing her favorite muu-muu and staring wide eyed at the bag of candy her grandmother has left on the table. There are around twenty women seated at the walls of the room, and they all start to clap. Moon
strums a few chords on the ukulele, and then we are singing. Hollering, actually, above the rain on the tin roof. The storm stops and everyone sings louder. All of the women circle around in front of the birthday girl, setting the gifts in a pile beside her. Marshallese relatives are defined loosely in comparison to stereotypical Western standards – cousins are siblings, nieces are offspring, and aunts are mothers all the same. The children settle against the walls, leaning against their mothers, sisters, and grandmothers.

Julynn picks up the bag and switches on the radio, starts swinging her hips. Timpani-inflected techno-beats and crackling, pirated versions of 1990s American pop songs blast from the single speaker in the corner. Back and forth, up and down, around and around the room she goes. Everyone knows what to do – if you want candy, you have to shake it, too. She throws bubble gum and Tootsie rolls in the air, and everyone dives for the flying candy like it’s a small-town holiday parade. Women I have never even heard speak in public are laughing and squealing, white teeth wide, eyes squeezed shut in uncontrolled glee. In the middle of a particularly popular move, I feel something warm against my arm. I turn and suddenly I can see nothing but Belisa, boisterous and howling and large, waving a pair of fledgling chicks in the air. They are shoved unceremoniously into my arms.

“Dance with the chickens!” someone shouts.

“Now she has bao, she can get a boyfriend,” someone else hoots.

A woman named Doreen bursts into the room with an iron pot on her head, and she dances her way toward me as the others cheer her on with a chorus of wiisb-weetee! And synchronized claps. We bump hips and bums together like we’re in some sort of Micronesian Ludacris music video. We writhe and shuffle in our Guams, the slinky polyester fabric and obnoxious neon prints perfect for booty-dancing. When grey-haired, seventy-three year-old Sera Liotak, one of the oldest women in Wot Kojro, shimmies into the middle
and hikes her Guam above her knees to join us, it is clear I have unwittingly entered myself in an informal competition. The three of us curve and hustle to the music, each pausing for effect and applause as our moves grow ever more sexual. I cling to the baby chicks as they squirm in my arms, afraid they will leap in terror and that I will accidentally crush them mid-dance. But soon enough, Doreen and I are forced to bow out as Sera takes control of the crowd.

We sit back and cheer with the rest of the women as she rolls her arthritic hips and shakes her breasts, which rest like oblong melons against her belly, loose from the wear nursing ten babies extracted from her flesh. Just as she raises her hands in defiant victory, a woman named Galina streaks into the center. The loudest, raunchiest bukarar of Wot Kojro, she pulls off her Guam to reveal nothing but an ill-fitting thong. She swings the dress above her head like a lasso. She grabs her own breasts and shakes her voluptuous hips. She lets a series of nonsensical howls loose from her mouth. And then she runs for cover in the back room. By the time she returns to the party, fully clothed, everyone is laughing so hard that no one even notices.

At the Marshallese pace, Julynn’s house is a forty-five minute walk away from our house, and the act of moving on the road of Namdrik without headlamp or moonlight is a meditation in trusting my feet. Moon pushes a wagon loaded down with sleeping toddlers, and as I carry Etri against my chest, his hot breath collects in the fabric on my shoulder. I have the chicks too, warm lumps of fuzz asleep in the pocket of my Guam. One foot in front of the other, I let the soft pads of my toes clutch at the rubber of my flip-flops. In my experience, Marshallese women walk more slowly than most, especially at night. There is no hurry to arrive anywhere in particular, and they almost glide, as if to relish the shift of muscle and joint with each step. So gaudy in daylight, by night the Guam dress clings gracefully to
the skin of my hips and breasts and shins. The ocean breeze flutters through the fabric, leaving kisses of dried salt behind on my sweaty skin. Even in a large group, no one speaks much, and the road is wide enough that I feel alone in the humid inky-black air. Mid-March, the windy season is blustery but warm. The sky above is leopard-spotted with stars, clouds splitting and colliding in low-front woven patterns of hanging moisture. I know my mother would have loved this place, and the women here are the same kind of loud as she was, the same kind of curious. In some ways, I am more like her than not.

When we get back, I wave goodbye to Belisa, and her daughters follow her across the yard and into the darkness of their house. I give the baby back to Moon and we say goodnight, too. In the mon kük, I take the chicks from my pockets and put them in a box to keep them safe for the night. Then I feel the way toward my hut in the dark, anticipating the quick scuttle crunch of gravel around me as a few of the stray cats follow me to bed. Because of the aggressive toms roaming the island, young females love to sleep inside, and ri-Majel do not take as kindly to the strays as I do. I strip down to a tank-top and shorts, lie down on the floor, and let the warm, buzzing purr of happy cats and the ssh-shussh of the lagoon waves loll me to sleep.

**DAY ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN**

When the imported food grows scarce between shipping boat deliveries, I lend my diving mask to Benjamin for days on end. He is still learning to read the currents of the reefs, still a little clumsy with the spear his grandfather gave him, and even though I know his sight is stronger than mine underwater, sometimes he comes back from fishing trips with eyes like open sores, laced with red, weeping excess salt.

This morning, I am sitting in the mon kük with Moon when Benjamin returns with both hands full of dripping catch. She cleans them in pumped water and sets them in metal
bowls to wait for the soup pot. In one, the curling rubbery tentacles of an octopus, its mantle loose and wrinkled like a wind-sock. In another, the slim bodies of juvenile tangs, hogfish, and damsels. In the last bowl, she coils a speckled eel colored equal parts motor oil, mother-of-pearl, white sage. I’ve never seen one out of water before, and I reach out to touch it, wet and shining against the dull aluminum. It slides beneath my fingers, and its thick-muscled length leaves a filmy residue on my skin.

“We can eat it?” I ask, uneasy at the thought of this flesh slipping down into my stomach. “Sure,” says Benjamin. “Maj-mouj tastes like sweet grease.”

We take the rusty beach-cruiser bicycles to the airport, racing our own shadows along the dusty road until we both come out against the open space of the airstrip. We leave the bikes and our flip-flops in the brambles of mangrove and let our weight sink through the sugar-soft sand of this northern shore, hurrying to walk in the warm shallows, to wade carefully across the coral field toward the wave break. As sunlight filters through the cloud cover over head, we walk crouched like fishing cranes between the pits and gullies of the tide pools, bending to a squat when a flicker of movement catches our eyes.

About a half mile down the shore, Benjamin finds a narrow pool, clear and round as a stone well. I dip my feet to feel the heat of the caught water, but pull them back abruptly when an eel snakes upward toward the pink of my toes, its bright white body invisible against the sun-bleached coral save for the faint brown spots along its dorsal fin. It swims and swims in circles, moving up and down in the water column. I wonder how long it has been waiting for the ocean to return, how hungry and tired and over-heated its body is becoming.

The isolation of an atoll like Namdrik creates a unique strain of endemism which infuses everything on the island, and its biogeography means that everything which comes
must stay until the island allows an exit, or until the ocean rises up and eats it away, inch by inch. Marshallese ecology is marked by incredible biodiversity, including 1000 species of fishes, 362 species of coral, 728 crustaceans, 27 marine mammals, and 5 species of turtle. Linguistically and culturally, too, the Marshall Islands are an amalgam of many disparate lands. Settled by Polynesian maritime navigators around 500 B.C., the islands were subsequently colonized by the Germans in 1885, the Japanese in 1914, and the United States in 1945. Finally, the RMI signed a Compact of Free Association for its independence in 1986. It now has a population of approximately 60,000, around 600 of whom live on Namdrik. The language reflects its history, too. Jambo from the Japanese verb meaning “to wander,” tima from the English “steamers” that became ubiquitous with the inundation of the shipping industry; and ejaromrom with its lyric Polynesian lilt, lightning.

But like many “developing nations” with limited natural resources and vulnerable coastal ecosystems, the RMI now struggles under a form of environmental neo-colonialism. Although it contains very little of the heavy industry or mechanized infrastructure that has contributed to climate change, marine symptoms like ground water salinization, food crop shortages, and coral bleaching have already begun to manifest in the RMI. These environmental problems have prompted a growing number of rural Marshallese to emigrate away from their atolls to urban centers in Majuro or Kwajalein, or internationally to Guam and the United States. Conservative estimates for global sea levels from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggest that by 2090, the ocean may rise up to 16 inches from its 1990 measurements, and 2007 predictions from the National Academy of Sciences say that this could increase as much as 56 inches, depending on continuing emissions levels and temperature flux in the pole regions. During my stay on Namdrik, I hear from many of the elder residents that ibwjtata – highest tide – has been drawing lines
farther and farther into the center of the island. In a place where the highest point is less than three meters above sea level, and where land mass is less than one mile square, even a slight change in sea level could be catastrophic.

**DAY ONE HUNDRED & THIRTY-NINE**

Saturdays are usually busy. Saturdays are for things like bread making and sweeping and trying not to get too pink when I sit on the shore. Doing the dishes. Doing the laundry in my bucket, and trying not to attract a crowd. This Saturday, I am washing my Guams and bleaching my moldy pandanus mat, staving off the rain with murderous thoughts of soggy clothes, when my nine-year-old neighbor brings Etri over on one skinny hip and announces that it is time for breakfast. Breakfast means leftover pancakes and the sashimi that Benjamin brought to our house after his dawn trip to the ocean-side. Breakfast means sitting in the shade and drinking lime and talking about how much rice to buy from the boat on Wednesday. Today, Moon asks if I want to _kalo_ in the jungle. Unsure of what this will entail, I say sure. I have been so busy with research that I have not been able to spend much time with my host family, and I am eager for any excuse to do so.

Before we go looking for the ribbon trees, I sit with Moon in the _mon kuku_ and prepare pandanus fronds for weaving. She teaches me how to strip the spiny edges from the long, stiff leaves with my thumb nail, when to remove them from above the embers so that they will be roasted but not burned, how to curl them into tight scrolls, to pound them flat with a stone club. Eventually, this pile of roasted, flattened vegetable matter will be woven into the intricate sleeping mats which are ubiquitous in every home on Namdrik.

A few other women arrive in the yard around noon, and armed with rusty machetes, the group of us set out to _kalo_. The path into the forest is muddy from the recent rains, cluttered with dead palm fronds and coconut husks. The farther we get from the road, the
more the jungle thickens with the walking roots of coconut palms and pandanus, the mythic buttresses of breadfruit. Black mangrove roots press upward like knobby thumbs at points of swampy low-lying area. We climb in and out of tangled liana. I lose my flip-flop in a suck of rust-red earth, and when I bend to fish it from the mud, I rip my Guam on a spiny palm. Finally we come to a stand of young, straight-stalked trees. Moon pulls one toward her and hacks at the base with a machete until she is holding a piece about eight feet long in her other hand. She swings the pole over her shoulder, and starts on another tree. I ask her how many we need. She scrunches her nose and mouth upward in the noncommittal facial expression which means am bebe. “Your decision.”

The physical labor of finding and gathering lo is rewarding, and I am determined to show my Marshallese girlfriends that a leddik in palle can carry just as much weight as a leddik in majel. After we have accumulated about twenty, Moon shows me how to strip the bark from the trunks with quick, harsh machete strokes. My hands begin to callus, the skin of my palms dyed red from the tannins in the bark. We tie the naked stalks in bundles with twine, and sink them into a standing pool in the heart of the swamp. Moon says we will return in a few days, that the water will loosen the wood so that it can be peeled away and made into ribbon. Even though I know any place on this island is never more than a few hundred yards from the lagoon or the ocean, a straight route back to my hut, I am disoriented in the thick jungle. I follow close behind as Moon leads us back to the main road.

**DAY ONE HUNDRED & SIXTY-TWO**

Ted has returned several nights this week, each time more belligerent than the last. I have not seen him during the day or in public since he’s started harassing me, and I am nervous to have any sort of interaction alone. Lucky for me, Moon is not so shy. This afternoon, we are walking to the corner store as a group of men, including Ted, approaches
from the opposite direction. They are carrying diving gear, clearly headed to the lagoon. I’ve
told her what has been happening, and she smiles as they get closer.

“Ted-ch,” she yells. The men look at him and then back to her. Ted is looking
anywhere but at us.

“Going fishing? Be careful you don’t get bit, it’s shark tide right now.”

A few of the men laugh and shove him playfully.

“I hear you’ve been bothering the leddik in palle,” she continues. “Your wife goes to
Majuro, and you think she’s not going to hear about it?”

“Liar,” he says. “She’s lying.

“You’re a komaturtur,” says Moon. All of the men except for Ted burst into jeers.

“You show up at her house in the middle of the night, call her names,” she says to
him. “This is the thanks she gets for teaching your children? Worror!”

The men jeer louder. Ted walks away. Ted does not come back that night.

**DAY ONE HUNDRED & NINETY**

Sometimes at night, Moon tells me the stories of *ri-jako* – those who have been lost
at sea – with a nonchalance that I find disturbing at first, but it makes sense when I
remember how inescapable the ocean is here. Namdrik itself is so narrow that it is difficult
to find a place where the sea is invisible, and the pressing sound of waves against reef is
ever-present, a constant reminder of the marine world where men are weak and small and
easily swallowed. But to *jumbo*, to wander, to travel far and wide, is an inherent part of
Marshallese life, and the dangers of the ocean are not nearly enough to erase the impulse to
travel across it.

Before the whalers and the missionaries arrived in the 1850s, the Melanesian
navigators who found the islands did so in outrigger canoes which had been built from
hollowed breadfruit trees. Those who stayed continued to travel between islands, to jambo while watching the stars and learning to read the wave patterns forming on the ocean surface as it flowed around coral growths and volcanic land masses. During thousands of years of oral tradition and story-telling, men passed this knowledge down through generations with maps of the sea called meto. Made from the hard center stems of palm fronds, intricate patterns on these stick charts allowed islanders to navigate hundreds of miles through open ocean by watching for the points of current shift and wave conflict which would indicate an approaching island. Today, Marshallese men hunt tuna, shark, and sea turtle from their outrigger canoes on the open ocean. But the number who continue to practice ancestral navigational skills by traveling from island to island has dropped exponentially since the advent of steamer shipping in the region, and even more so after aerial traffic became more common. Very few Marshallese still know how to make meto. The convenience of an airplane or a passenger boat is too appealing, and the dangers of outrigger sailing are still very much apparent.

Even over short distances, outriggers are very easy to capsize. Repeated over and over, the mayday call – lost at sea, lost at sea, lost at sea, lost at sea – begins to shed its meaning, but an island one square mile in size is too small for things to be forgotten, and everyone I meet on Namdrik has a friend, a lover, a brother who once stepped off dry land and never came back. Drowned, drifted off course, floated too far from shore to swim. Caught in the doldrums, caught in a storm. Some have disappeared on easy fishing trips, or during weekend excursions to larger islands nearby, even pulled out by riptides not feet from their family homes. A three-year-old girl with a palsy in her left leg nearly died just down the lagoon beach from my hut; she’d tripped and fallen, and unable to swim, choked on the surf
until she was blue. Her father found her in the shallows, and sucked the ocean out of her lungs until she breathed in something other than water.

**DAY TWO HUNDRED & FORTY-ONE**

Everything aches. It is three in the morning and I woke up clammy, even in the stillborn air that hangs over the atoll. I tried to go back to sleep, but all of the muscles in my body feel as if they have been pried apart from their bones with a pair of jagged-toothed pliers, replaced at odd angles, in the wrong places, stretched just a little too far from their joints. I feel as if I’ve been left to cure in the sun like bruised meat. Heat collects above my hips. At my temples. In my teeth. The tin walls of my hut are cool and I hold my palms and my cheeks against the rippled metal and wait until the temperature seeps in. I fall asleep leaning and wake up with a rat in my lap. I wish I could say that this did not make me cry. Turn the solar on in my hut hoping that this will keep the rodents away – it doesn’t – and splay on my stomach in a puddle of sickly white light from the halogen bulb above. Wait like that ‘til morning, drifting in and out of lucidity. Moon comes to check on me around eight when I would normally have been leaving for school, finds me lying like a crumpled bird on the floor. Brings me hot water with lime leaves, sets the mug by my head.

By the next morning, the fever has settled into the space behind my eyes, rolling waves of pain across my skull and down my spine. I have not showered in days. The whole bold world is nauseating. I drag my sleeping mat into the yard to escape the noon sun tin oven, hoping that the air outside will move at least a little. There are squash blossoms on running vines, swarms of mosquitoes, small crawling things in shells which trace sandy routes across my skin. There are curious children with ukuleles, and they sit beside me in the crabgrass, strumming and laughing and pressing their tiny hands into the flesh of my back. They scatter when Moon comes toward the lagoon.

Under the awning of the main house, she makes me sit with my head bowed forward.

“You look like a dead cat,” she says as I lower myself over the seat back of the wooden bench. She stretches her hands over my head and into the nest of sweaty hair at my neck.

“Show me where the fever started,” she says.

I don’t know what she means, so I point to everywhere it hurts at the moment. There is a bottle of oil beside her and when she rubs it on her hands, the smell sends bile into the back of my nose. The oil is warm, tingling until it absorbs into my skin. I close my eyes and let her scratch my shoulders, push the skin of my cheekbones away from the bridge of my nose, roll my fingers between her palms.

“Go back to bed,” she says. “Tomorrow will be better.”

It is not even mid-afternoon, but the effort it takes to walk from my hut to the house and back is enough to make me want to lie down in the middle of the yard. I resist the urge and curl up on the floor with the door of my hut wide open.

Lucid dreams blend into vivid, subconscious surrealism by the time night falls. The world is dark and blurred like a bad photo exposure, and I roll over on my back to look toward the sky through the grated window pane. A man is swinging through the trees, hollering and threatening to burn the whole village to the ground. He leaps from palm to palm, long, dirty black hair obscuring a face made of fish bones. Men from the gospel choir collect in the road, hurling \textit{waini} at him by the handful. He laughs as they litter the air with black specks that never come close. The coconut meat warps and morphs into slender-
bodied black terns, whose feathers fall to earth and grow tarantula legs, skittering beneath their feet.

A woman named Big Gretel goes riding by on a bicycle, her three-hundred pound frame grotesque in contrast to the shrinking wheels of the bike. She yells as it begins to melt into the ground.

“Everyone get off the island,” she says. “Get to the airport!”

Women grab their children and throw them toward the sea, but instead of raining down into the waves, they remain motionless in the air, stuck to the night like stars with warm brown eyes and missing teeth and Hawaiian print Batman t-shirts. Men begin boarding their outrigger canoes, yellow tarp sails unfurling and speeding them far past the tide break, blinking out on the horizon. All of the women hurry on to an empty vessel, push out into the ocean, and never notice the holes in the sides until it is taking on saltwater. They watch the children as the boat drifts beneath them and sinks into the lagoon. At the center I see Moon, reaching into the sky with her fingers outstretched.

DAY TWO HUNDRED & SEVENTY-EIGHT

About two weeks before I am supposed to leave Namdrik, I am at a gospel choir practice with Moon until almost three in the morning, and we are delirious and bleary-eyed on the walk home. On a full moon in May, the sea is rough, loud against the atoll as it rises. The moon hangs huge and low over the lagoon, and its rays bounce off the water and shine away in violent refractions, splinters of light that seem as if they could be made of physical matter. As we come toward the darkened form of the family house, something moves in the pandanus just above my head and I stop. I pull the tangled fronds aside to find a bird, its plumage glowing in the dark like a clouded bulb. *Bao in jetoh*, the spirit bird, startles and takes flight over the lagoon, off toward the open ocean.
We sit on the bench beneath the giant breadfruit tree in our front yard, her playing the ukulele, me singing along in warbled Marshallese. When the song ends, I tell her that I have not been sleeping well because my hut is bōbaruru – full of crabs – and I expect her to be sympathetic. I tell her about the twelve-inch purple mangrove crab which I found clawing out of my laundry in the middle of the night, another that I caught sneaking through a hole in the wall during broad daylight, of the hermits I can hear scratching and echoing from the tin. I expect her to give me some advice, some way of ridding them from my house. Instead she laughs.


“They know?” I ask. “They know what?”

“That you’re leaving,” she says. “They always know.”

She tells me of a Marshallese legend which says that whenever someone is about to move away, hermit crabs surround the space. It doesn’t matter, she says, if the person is to vacate for a place just down the road, or to leave an island completely. Regardless, they can sense that a hole is opening. She says om are constantly searching for new homes, that they covet larger shells for their bodies to grow and stretch. She says they know there will be an emptiness in need of filling soon, so they are gathering around.

“The om are just waiting,” she says. “Don’t worry. They’ll leave you alone soon.”

“When I’m gone,” I say. She raises his eyebrows and turns back to the ukulele.

That night I lie on my back and listen to the small noises in the walls around me. I try to ignore them, but a dark part of me won’t stop returning to the reason for their presence, and I feel suddenly – irrationally – compelled to keep them away from my house.

I stand up and turn the solar on, grab my headlight and my shower bucket, and throw the latch open on my door. In the light of the full moon, I round the perimeter of my
hut, tapping at the tin until I rattle loose the crustacean invaders. Some crawl out along the
ground, a slow and purposeful forward motion which makes me want to throw them far into
the lagoon, to a distance so great that it would be impossible for them to return before I’ve
left. I grab them in my hands. I set them in the bucket, accumulating so many moving bodies.
I take the bucket and walk as far as the airport, almost three miles down shore. I pour them
into the surf and watch as they begin crawling up the land again, like oil spilling across water.

DAY THREE HUNDRED

To *jambo* is to wander, to travel far and wide. To pass through, pull out or push on.
To shove off from shore. To range, roam, rove, or to stray away from the path, wherever it
might be headed. To disappear into the bluest and wildest of yonders. To go searching for
the sun-hole waiting just over the horizon. To meander, mosey, or move along. To light out.
To peregrinate. To exit, stage left. To flee. To fly. To simply float away. For me, it means
walking home from midnight choir practice with Moon; the salt spray on my face as we take
a water taxi to Madmad for a class picnic with my fifth-grade students; walking palms and
breadfruit buttress roots, reaching farther from their trunks, inch by inch, searching shallow
ground for fresh water.

The shipping boat that will take me away from Namdrik arrives off the northeastern
shore on a Thursday evening. The children hardly leave my side, and they trail behind me
like mango-eating, ukulele-playing shadows. Even Etri seems fussy, and I carry him around
until he falls asleep, his sweaty baby belly pressed into my side, one baby arm sideways
against my ribs, his little mouth drooling down my shoulder. I don’t mind his wet, heavy
heat – soon enough I will be in Wisconsin, and then it will be mid-winter again, the whole
world drifting in snow. At his age, once the scent of my soap is gone from the Guams on
our laundry line, he will forget that I was ever here. I will miss him especially, I think,
because I watched him learn to walk. I was witness to the first of his many, stumbling steps. Right now, I am greedy for the humid, sticky grace of baby flesh. He breathes, I breathe, in and out like water on the shore.

On Friday, the captain announces the itinerary over shortwave – departure for Kili on Sunday morning – and I start to sleep in the main house instead of my hut. The space between them is less than two hundred yards, but even this is too far when I think of six-thousand-mile plane rides, fifteen-hundred-dollar tickets, lost packages and letters by airmail. Benjamin tells me the tima takes three days to reach Majuro. That it will make me sick; that the engine room smells always of raw motor oil and canned tuna; that the open sea presses endlessly against the iron sides of the boat until the sky sticks permanently sideways. I spend the night with half the women in our neighborhood roasting kwonjin and baking coconut cookies, delicious in spite of the tiny flour maggots which speckle their dough like flecks of vanilla bean.

In the last night hours before Saturday dawn, Moon and I lie on a pandanus mat in the yard, tracing the faint trail of some unnamed satellite with our fingers. I open my mouth only to swallow the air, lapping at salt, shell-calcium, dried brine, old blood. I think of all the clichéd things I could say about the constellations, how their blurred white bodies looks like milk spilled on dark glass, how they’ve all long since died and their light is only late in coming down, but I let her tell me stories instead. She knows more about the stars than I do anyway.
AFTERWARD

When I first come back to the United States, I stay with a friend near Monterey, California for a week, and for seven days my withdrawal from the ocean is gradual, measured in city blocks and minutes spent inland. At night, I toss for hours in her bed, its pillow-top mattress too soft, and in order to sleep I have to lie on my back on the floor. I pretend the streetlights streaming through the window are the moon, that the hum of traffic on asphalt outside is actually the sound of saltwater moving across sand. When we go to bars or restaurants, I have to force myself to speak to strangers in English, to go through the middle of a crowded room without flinching my head in apology, to eat my meals with a fork instead of my fingers. I try not to think about how landlocked it will be in the Midwest when I go home. My whole body feels crooked, as if somehow several vertebrae had become misaligned in my spine when my flight crossed over the international dateline.

Because it is 2009 and the economy collapsed while I was in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the Oppenheimer lab does not have enough money to pay me as much as they were, and I live with my father for five months before moving half-mile away to a cooperative on Lake Mendota. To start over or to restart, I can’t quite decide; some days it seems like both, and sometimes it feels like I can’t do either. In a city filled with politicos and protestors alike, I miss Moon, our neighbors, and the baby above all else. I stare at the cuts of lake trout on display tables at the Farmers’ market and think of Benjamin, how everyday he went spear-fishing to feed nine people even though he still needed help with algebra.

No one warned me how long culture shock would last, that it would be worse in reverse. The first time it snows, I am cold under layers of spandex and smart wool and plaid. People laugh. They ask, weren’t you raised in Wisconsin? But what they don’t understand is that for three-hundred days, my whole body was hot. Wet in sweat or fevered in sickness, flushed
from embarrassment, sun-burnt, stifled under layers of polyester-rayon blends. I was so hot, for so long, in so many ways at once, that now without the equatorial sun or the humid Pacific air or the societal ripalle spotlight, I am always cold. My bones do not know how to be warm, anymore. I do not know how to be warm, anymore. And so I spend nearly a year trying to remember.

Although I am terrible with the cardinal directions and practically incompetent with a compass, I have been memorizing roads home my whole life. Walking is meditative, riding my bicycle like an expedited lucid dream. I could guide you blindfolded along myriad paths in Madison, starting at the university campus, spiraling outward on State Street toward East Johnson, down either side of the lake-locked Isthmus. These minutiae always fade as I begin to discover another place, but whenever I return, footsteps come back in floods of sensory memory. The problem this time is that there is only one road on Namdrik to remember, and months after leaving I can still visualize the placement of potholes furrowed into the dirt after a storm, the bend in the path before the Ralphos’ house, the growth of palm stands around the general store. These are memories that refuse to fade.

The island never had internet or cellular service while I was there; solar electricity was a luxury. Now the only contact I have with my host family is intermittent; postmarked. During the holidays I send flat-rate boxes of candy and school supplies and soap. A few months later, I receive small envelopes marked NAMDRIK RESEARCH or LENA, their hand-written contents like inky pockets of packaged island air. In 2010, a year after I have left, a letter comes from Moon. She tells me that the hermit crabs still accumulate behind my hut, that she finds them dry and brittle on the floor beside my old window. She says the window still faces the lagoon. She says everyone still thinks I am going home and coming
right back, and that no one ever tells the little ones any different. She says they don’t know how far away it really is. She says they send yokwe. She says they send jeramman.

That summer, I send an envelope marked AIRMAIL to the Ralpho family. I hope that it will arrive safely, that maybe it will get there sooner because the distance is less from the west coast of this continent. The paper seems lighter even than its name, and I worry that it will be taken by the wind or dropped somewhere in the water. I go down to the shore of Lake Mendota and stand with my feet in the water, imagining it is the sea, that the northern shore is Namdrik instead. I think: six thousand miles is forever. Six thousand miles is no different than the moon.
MARINA RALPHO, MOTHER

The old women said they had not seen a windy season so long since the war, since the hurricane that came after it. They said that when this storm finally passed, there will be nothing left of the island but us. That we would all be washed into the sea by the slow wear of water. In a way they were right, I guess. It just rained, and rained, and rained for months. We forgot what it felt like to be dry.

I was twenty-six. Pregnant for the fifth time, three live shining boys and a stillborn before her. Everyone in our house slept in a huddle. We pulled plastic blankets around us when the rain blew inward and sideways through our windows. My husband built that house with his bare hands, but we never had enough money for glass. In the mornings, I used to send my boys running out from under the cover of our hut to the jungle-side in search of dry coconut husks for the fire, for crabs flooded out of their holes. When they could not find either, we ate nothing but banana mash. We went without a fire for days. Everything was wet. Everything.

The night our solar generator died, I remember standing beneath the bare bulb in my cookhouse, washing our dishes in the sink, and looking up as the filament suddenly flickered and went dark. I put one hand on the warm side of my belly and held the other up in front of my eyes. I could barely see my own skin. I dragged those dishes out into the yard in a five gallon bucket, and it was like the air itself had turned to water. I went to sleep afraid to breathe.
I woke sometime near dawn, a familiar ache pulsing in the deep cradle of my pelvis. My mother made me walk along the lagoon shore. She led me into the waves and pressed her hands into my back as the saltwater rose and fell. It was not until the next night that the child dropped, a girl, and in the eerie dark I held her out to her father, birth-cord still dangling, the baby’s eyes clouded in wetness. All the batteries on island had long since died, our petrol all used up. I told him to name her, and he said he wanted nothing more than to see the earth at night again, to see her face and mine, to sleep without the sound of water beating on our roof. He called her Moon and set her on my belly, so empty without her there, and she stared at me with eyes made of milk while we told her stories of things we hoped she’d live to see.

LANGDRIK JOTA, ISLAND CHIEF

Trouble comes when we expect things to stay the same, and I spent most of my life on that island thinking that breadfruit would always ripen, that coconut trees would always bend and sway and stay steady in the wind. When I was a boy, I thought unless I caught them with my hands, took them from the sea by force, fish would always stay where God left them in the water. Trouble was they don’t.

Time came when I was an old man, more years on me than my father or my grandfather had ever seen, when we had a storm that brought whole strums of tuna up on dry land. Thousands of blue-bodied fish just threw themselves out of the surf. They speared through pandanus fronds, got themselves stuck in bundles of coconut two hundred feet up in the air. One broke through the windshield of the Samuel’s pickup truck. Another lay gasping for water beneath the bell of the Protestant church, its heavy, muscled sides heaving. They were thick as sand fleas along the lagoon-side beach, strewn as far inland as the swamp
behind the Baptist cemetery. They piled up on the linoleum floor of our store, bruising their precious flesh against stockpiles of canned meat, cartons of cigarettes, packages of soap.

The sun hid for three days and three nights, and when it finally broke, there were scales plastered to the cinderblock walls of the school building and the community center, stuck like wet chicken feathers to everything. The road was thick in drowning fish. My eyes were pretty bad by then, but I could see them clear by their pearly flesh shining. In that strange, unfamiliar light they flashed blue and teal and gold before they died. I thought I would go blind from the beauty of it.

My sons brought the biggest to our yard in a wagon, and the whole island came to feast on easy catch. At least one woman from every house showed up for the slaughter, an assembly of machetes and metal bowls. Marina Ralpho brought her girl, the one we sent away before the water took her too, and I remember she sat at the end of that line and held the fish against a board with her tiny hands while her mother cut off their heads, severing flank from spine, flesh from still-warm hearts. We ate so much our teeth were bloody in sashimi. We salted as many as we could before they spoiled, but there were still so many left to rot, the air stunk like sour bilge until the rain came back and washed the reek away. We didn’t see the new salt lines on the mangrove roots.

EKNER BEASA, GRANDFATHER
As a child, my granddaughter climbed everything she could find. Me, her brothers, the spindly walking palms roots that grew thick behind the community center. A flight arrived once a week, bringing goods and mail and passengers to and from Majuro or Ailinglaplap, and on Plane Day, Moon used to beg me to boost her up. She scrambled along the tin roof of our cookhouse to watch that foreign, flying thing return into the clouds. But as the price of fuel rose and the government’s old Bombardier jet broke down part-by-part,
the time between trips grew longer and longer. Eventually the airplane stopped coming altogether, and everything at our little island airport – including the asphalt runway and the tiny solar-powered terminal – was overgrown by saltweed and mangrove. After that, the only way to leave was by sea.

News of the fieldtrip ships came over the shortwave radio, and it seemed the entire island would gather along the shore of the southern reefs to wait for their arrivals. Anticipation was high for long-lost relatives who might have made the journey back, for the strangers who would soon be neighbors, for the friends who might be leaving with the ship, missing for lengths of time unknown. Moon would say she wanted to watch the ship come in from up high, and she’d climb the giant breadfruit in our yard, a tree I told her was older than any living thing on island.

“Even you?” she’d ask, paused and cautious in the lowest branches.

“A little,” I’d say. “Keep going. Tell me what you see.”

She’d climb until there was nothing higher strong enough to hold her, and she’d get nervous, call for help, and so I’d climb up after her. From that canopy we could see everything in the world that we knew to exist. Distance on island is measured in terms of footsteps, the traveling capacity of a church-bell toll, the amount of time it takes to walk from one side of the coral flats to the other. From the canopy, my eyes could follow the winding wet of the road as it stretched from our house into the town center, to the northwest on toward the horizon. The open ocean spreading outward like blue oil.

The last boat that ever came our way arrived on a Sunday. Moon was nine. Still curious. We were watching just as it neared the shipping yard, and a break in the low clouds above us sent light deep into the water. We watched some great thing surface and then disappear beside the iron hull, its body dark against the white sand shallows. We watched it
swim in circles around the ship laden with fuel, rice, mosquito coils, light bulbs, batteries. There were people, too, families leaving from islands lower in the water than ours, seeking refuge from places which had already begun to flood. She asked me what it was, and I told her it was called raj. A whale. I told her it was the biggest thing in the sea.

JULYNN SAMUEL, NEIGHBOR

Even before she could talk, we all knew her as a soft-throated girl. She could mend the broken wings of fallen white terns with her hands. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d made dead birds fly again. Never saw such a thing in my life, but with that girl, I’d have believed it. I was the third-grade teacher at the elementary school, and she skipped class more times than she showed to hang around the medical outpost, to learn healer’s things from Sera Liotak. The Ralphos lived next to the school in the high ground, and I used to watch her gather bitter kelp and creeping squash blossoms from the clusters around the playground, crouch at the tide line with her little Guam tucked between her knees, arms elbow-deep in buckets of green mussel, inky squid, all the old things for headache and heartache and sore kidneys. I don’t think she ever learned to read. Not that it mattered much to us, we didn’t have any books but the Bible.

My granddaughter was the first to show signs of the salt plague. She was three, maybe four. Moon was much older then, around twenty-six or twenty-seven, confident in her ability to heal. But she still had the face of a child. I took my granddaughter to their house and asked if Moon would see her. I sat in the corner and watched as pieces of skin sloughed off and settled on their cement floor like ashes, the new flesh beneath as white as the salt we’d heard fell from the sky in colder places. I couldn’t stop myself from crying. She looked so much like she’d been dipped in bleach. She was just a baby. Moon asked her if it hurt, if she itched. The little one said no, tickled her stomach and said, “Buzz buzz buzz.
Like bees.” Moon told me to take her home, to bathe her in the milk of five young coconuts. That she’d come by the next day to make sure everything was fine.

It wasn’t even highest tide yet, but that night the sea came up and just kept going. Moved right through our house. Have you ever woken with the ocean in your mouth? We waded across the yard to our outrigger, fell asleep in the bowl like the ancient refugees who found our island even before Jesus himself. Moon rode up early the next morning on her old blue bicycle, a bag of plants and balms and remedies slung over one skinny shoulder. She asked my granddaughter to breathe in, breathe in, and the little one spit up water in my hands. Moon put an ear to her chest and said she could hear bubbles in the child’s lungs.

**SERIA LIOTAK, HEALER**

Early on in the sickness, Moon told me she had not slept in weeks. Even after the windy season had ended and the weather had turned still and hot, she said she heard the water inching toward the trees stone by stone, hungry for new space to flood. That girl could hear things I could not: sea terns calling to their hatchlings from miles out over open water, the rustling of hermit crabs in their too-small shells. I believed her when she told me that the sounds of tiny creatures underground seemed strange and muffled.

In some places the flooding was minor – a few inches or more – but in the areas nearest the shore, or in the gulley at the center of the island, there were homes half-filled with sea. Stands of coconut and cultivated breadfruit began to yellow and die. I was a young woman during the American War, and the sound those fruits made when they dropped were like water-bombs, each cluster another meal lost to spoil.

People all across the island fell ill. Their skin peeled away in patches, leaving a stiff white shell that crumbled under the slightest touch. They grew brittle and they lost anything too easy to bump. Children made jokes of missing fingers and detachable ears, swapping
their salty pieces. Some lasted longer than others, but once their lungs began to fill with salt
water, it never took longer than a week or two to disappear completely. We worked night
and day, handing out ginger and shredded coconut, dried sea grass. We tried things meant to
hydrate, to diffuse excess sodium, to clear the chest cavity of phlegm. Isaiah Patrick, the only
one trained in Western medicine, prescribed pills called ciprofloxacin, doxycycline, IVs of
antibiotic cocktail. Nothing worked, and supplies depleted faster than anyone could have
expected.

Within three months, one hundred seventy-five of six hundred residents had begun
to show symptoms. Almost forty had died. We buried them in burlap sacks or in plastic
cartons, but sometimes there was so little left that it seemed almost better to let the body
dissolve in the sea. One night the Mayor called a meeting, and I stood in a line with the other
women at the back of the community center while the men argued over each other in the
dark. The school principal blamed God, blamed us for not giving alms at service on Sundays.
The shopkeeper said it was a curse from our ancestors who had been lost at sea. The Mayor
said we needed to leave the island. He turned the short-wave on, and we listened for what
seemed like hours to the static, to the voices of other frightened callers. Ours was not the
only island.

BENJAMIN RALPHO, BROTHER

By Christmas of the last year, two-thirds of the island canopy was bare, the skeletons
of so many trees left to molder under the humid sun. Even slight winds set slender palms
creaking. Their root systems were weak and easy to topple. The only things which seemed to
thrive were the mangroves, waxy leaves plump and shiny green, supple with salt. Our mother
refused to let us go spear-fishing for too long, afraid we’d swallow too much salt. For the
first time in my life, I was afraid of drowning.
Anyone who was still able to walk after the New Year evacuated to the higher ground of the eastern side. They came wading down the road in groups of three or six or seven, leaning on each other and stopping every few yards to cough bloody water out of their lungs. Our house was still dry, the giant breadfruit in our yard still green and heavy-boughed with fruit, and we filled our floors with refugees: the Patricks in the cookhouse, those who were left of the Samuels and the Lolins in the back room of our store. My parents gave up their blankets to the Reverend and his wife. Some were already showing symptoms, the salt lines creeping up their limbs. I tried not to look, to let them pretend that it wasn’t happening too. A few were too weak to carry anything, and so we ferried baskets of belongings from the drowning side of the island, what remained of the rice stocks piled on the tops of our heads.

The full moon came and shone over our sodden island, a light so strong we could see everything trapped beneath the water as if it were glass instead, or some strange breed of warm, algae-ridden ice. My sister took to visiting her patients in a small metal canoe, and every few hours she would circle back for more supplies, her voice small and tired in her throat. She told me about the remnants of things she’d seen floating in the drowned jungle, the pieces of abandoned homes and rotted trees which caught the bottom of her boat and made it difficult to navigate. She said there were children, already turned to salt splashing along the road, laughing and pretending to be water-demons, arms held above their heads, teeth bared in hysterical snarls. One day she came home near tears, a basket full of tiny bones in her boat.

“I passed over what was left of the stillborn cemetery,” she told me. “The pigs are there. I could hear them rutting, the wet crunch of new bone.”
She said even though they’d never breathed or walked or learned to tell the time from the sky, their bodies meant they’d been here once. She said the bones in her basket were those of the child our mother lost.

I woke that night in a shallow pool, a line of crystallized salt at my temple. Moon was sleeping on the floor beside me, still dry somehow. I pulled the wet clothes over my head and scratched at my own dissolving skin. I didn’t want to wake her, didn’t want to tell her that it had finally come to our house too, so I climbed out the window and up onto our tin roof, casting my eyes over all the people who would drown in their lungs.

HEZKIEL BAO in LAL, BOYFRIEND

Moon was miserable, you know, trying everything she could think of to stop it from happening. But how could she have stopped the ocean from rising? I tried to tell her that. I said, you can’t stop the water. Didn’t help. She had such a big heart, I think she’d probably have tried to give it away if she’d ever found a way to get it out of her chest.

One night that last summer, we went to the mangroves on the island across the lagoon. A bunch of us had planned to take the outriggers out there because we wanted to visit the salt flats before they were too deep to dive for. We were afraid of spending too much time under the surface. Rumors about swallowing sea water that wouldn’t come back out. It makes sense when you think about what was happening to us. I asked her to come because I thought the dark and the quiet of the ride would be good for her. The blue tide was in, and all those millions of glowing bodies made it so we could see straight to the bottom of the lagoon, even at the center. She pointed to the slurring, tiny things beneath us as we moved. Said she liked the way I made her beam.

The other boys went north around the mangroves, but I held her back, told her I wanted to show her something I’d found in the coral. An old classroom globe made of paint
and glass and rusting metal, with a hole half the size of the Pacific in its side. A speckled octopus had made its home inside, and when I reached my hand in to pull it out, the creature curled around the jagged edge and split itself wide open, spilling its ink sac in vain against the night. I pulled it out and set the globe in her hands. We watched the body flash its death colors until they were too faint to see.

Everything was quiet except for the suck-suck of water against wood, and she winked at me, said I’d found the world at the bottom of the ocean, asked me how I’d seen it, had it been there all along. She traced along the inked, blurry borders of the continents, the raised ridges of the mountain ranges, and as she moved across the Pacific, dissolving paint flecked away beneath her skin to reveal cloudy glass, milk white with the residue of calcium and salt.

“I guess we’re already gone,” she’d said, fingers hovering over the hole in the globe where our islands should have been. “Do you think if you ever leave, you could find your way back without a map? When the land is gone, and you couldn’t read the waves to find us?”

I did not answer. As if she’d known there was nothing left to say, she kissed me and pulled the Guam over her head, slid into the wake up to her breasts. God, I would have followed her anywhere like that, just to keep my body near hers, all the round, warm flesh of her next to me. I’d be lying if I said we were celebrating something, but I’m not so sure it was a mournful thing either. She wouldn’t look me in the eye for days, like I’d started to dissolve before her. The night before she left, she snuck in through my bedroom window and curled herself around me. She told me that I tasted like the sea. Already bringing up liquid with every breath, I offered to go with her anyway.

“Too late,” she’d said, and set her hand against the ashy skin above my lungs. “But I’ll keep you with me for as long as I can.”
I wish now that I knew how to find her, but she was right about the hole in that old globe. We're all lost without that island we were born to, our ears and lungs and mouths filled in with the same water that ate away the land. I'm lost without her to show me the way. If I ever saw that girl again, I'd tell her she was the only bright thing I ever learned to see.
THE HIGHEST TIDE CAME TO MY ISLAND ON A CLEAR NIGHT, when the moon hung huge and low over the lagoon. A group of us had gathered beside the shore for gospel practice at the choir master’s house, our cardboard mats laid haphazard across the stone coral yard, baskets of baked coconut ready for late-night snacking. We usually strung an electrical cord with a bare bulb from the giant breadfruit tree at the beach line – a light to shine over us as we sang – but the moon was so bright, the bleached coral stones glowed. The choir master’s yard was two hundred yards of flat sand inward from the lagoon, and the water slipped across the surface so quietly at first, we did not notice until our mats were wet. My neighbor jumped up, squealing at the brush of fish flesh against her calf. Another plucked a ribbon of seaweed from her toes. Then the tide rolled back toward the sea basin, and the land breathed dry again. We women stood and ruffled our Guam dresses. The men went to the shore, laid their hands on the water and came back, proclaiming it had been a surge of some kind. Perhaps a pod of whales nearby, they said. But a few minutes later, the tide returned. It rose an inch and then two, far enough to suck at the soles of my feet, to submerge my toes, to lip at the round bones of my ankle. The next day, people woke with lungs full of saltwater. It was not long before the salt plague spread to everyone but me.

A few years before, Lena had come to study how the rising ocean was changing us, our land, our way of life, and she lived in a hut beside my family’s house for almost a year. In her spare time, she worked as an English teacher for the children in our island’s elementary
school, and so she taught me, too. We spent most nights telling stories, back and forth in English or in Marshallese. Raj for whale and bwebwe for crazy. Ejjaromrom, lightning. Ibwijtata, highest tide. She was the only person on our island not born of it, six thousand miles from everyone she’d ever known, and she told me it was lonely to be the only stranger all the time. After she left we kept in touch for awhile, but it was difficult without a plane to bring letters, without a telephone to call. We lost hold of one another.

I don’t know how she found me again. News reports, maybe, or the Immigration officers – after the Americans discovered me lost at sea on the outrigger, they kept me quarantined to one room someplace in California for nine months. I think they were afraid I was contagious, as if I could’ve brought the tide along behind me like a shadow. The staff were friendly, but at night they all went home, and when I was alone a part of me hated all of them. Is your home still above sea-level? I wanted to shout from that tiny, colorless cell. But they didn’t understand only those who’d already begun to drown were in danger.

When Lena called the quarantine center, it had been almost four years since I’d seen her. She said she’d heard what happened, that she’d cried for weeks thinking we’d all died. She said my island was the first to disappear completely. Of twenty-five nations affected, the hundreds of thousands already infected, I was the only one that escaped the disease. She worked for a lab in Wisconsin with experts in psychology, environmental depression, rare forms of pneumonia. They thought maybe I’d survived because my heart was stronger and my skin was more pliable and that I was less likely, genetically speaking, to succumb. She’d told them I was a healer, that I might have some knowledge of the illness, or the island, that no one else would know. Would I be amenable to participating in their tests? There was no ocean in her city, but she said I could live between two lakes, that I could take sailing lessons or learn to scuba dive. Tok im bwebwenato, she said. *Come and we’ll tell stories again.*
When I first arrived in Madison, the researchers put me up in student housing, a clean one-bedroom near the lab for easy commute. But it was so quiet I woke up sometimes thinking I’d gone deaf. On my island no one was ever alone. We ate from the same bowl of fish and rice, and we passed one cup around the circle. With so little land to walk on, we went everywhere together – to pray, to smoke cigarettes by the lagoon, sometimes just to wander. Whole families slept in one large room. Those first days alone in my apartment, I drifted up and down the streets, spiraling around the white orb of the Capitol building to revel in the minor company of strangers. I sat for hours beneath Plexiglas bus shelters or beside the lakeshore at the student union. At lunch, I went to the fruit stand near campus because the old proprietor sold mangoes and papaya, and sometimes let me take the bad ones home for free.

The researchers could tell I was unhappy and they did their best to make me comfortable, but the only one who really knew what I needed was Lena. She’d always seemed fragile to me, a woman like a spirit bird with dark, wet eyes, but in the years since she’d lived with my family, she had grown larger somehow. She’d studied ethnography, said she never could divide a person from her landscape, the language from the mouth of those who spoke it, and when I met with her in the lab, all we did was bwebwenato. It was a kind of therapy, to sit in her office without notation or prodding, to speak and be heard instead of interrogated. One night, she asked if I was hungry. Would I come home and eat with her and all her housemates? She said they lived on the lake, in something called a co-op, where everyone shared everything, where they cooked for each other and slept together in piles by the fire when it was cold. It was old and broken down, but warm.
“We live like a family,” she said. “And you’re so far from home. Why not come be part of mine this time?”

As we walked up to the house, six floors of crumbling stone and wrought iron and glass built into a slope that leaned toward the lake, I remember thinking it looked as if it wanted to submerge itself, that it would, one day, slip into the water and disappear like sand. The main room was as large as my elementary school, a ballroom with stone floors and windows taller than my father was. Cast-iron radiators lined the walls, their black metal coils clanging with heat. There was a great white fireplace and too many bookshelves to count, and beyond the windows was a balcony, a backyard, and finally, the lake. Even from across such a space I could hear the waves pressing and pressing against the shore. It was the sound of both home and the plague that took it from me, and my breath caught in my throat. I froze. Lena took my hand and led me through a pair of sliding doors to stand on the balcony, that whole giant house at our backs like a guard against the city.

“Lake Mendota,” she said. A lake, not an ocean. I was surrounded by land, not water. I breathed out. The sun bled into the surface. Lena shut her eyes and said when she’d heard my island had been inundated, she’d contacted all the immigration centers for Marshallese in the US she could find. There were expatriate populations in Hawaii and Washington state, even as far east as Arkansas, but everywhere she looked, it seemed the majel community had disappeared.

“I took a flight to Springdale, to see for myself that everyone was gone,” she said. “All I found were water stains. Rings of salt.”

She said even in Arkansas, so far from the shore, the people had felt the sea rising to swallow them and been unable to stop it. The social workers at the Center for Migrants told her the Marshallese had stopped showing up for work. They’d been reported missing. The
city had ordered an investigation, and the CDC swept for contaminants. A local news station even made a cable special. But after a year, all leads ran dry and everyone stopped looking.

“Moon,” she said. “There’s no one left but you.”

A low, resonant horn blared from somewhere near us off the lakeshore.

“Sundown,” she said. “So the boats know when to come home. I love that sound.”

Lena said dinner at the co-op was always just after the horn, and she took me back into the house and down a set of spiral stairs, where the rest of her housemates had clustered in the basement industrial kitchen. A tall man with long dark hair stood over the gas range, sautéing a pan of orange and green vegetables. Another younger man stood behind him at a cutting block, surrounded by growing piles of lettuce, sliced apples, chopped nuts. A woman in men’s clothing stopped stirring a pot of rice that smelled of coconut to turn a record player on, and suddenly the room was filled with the soulful music. She danced up to Lena and kissed her straight on the mouth, grabbed her by the hands and then started to dance again. They both laughed as they bumped into the cabinets, into the recycling bin, into the tall man sautéing at the stove. He glared, but I saw his mouth twitch as if he couldn’t stop from smiling. The woman in men’s clothing let Lena go, jumped up on a chair, and grabbed a bottle of bourbon from a shelf above the pantry, then she disappeared up the stairs just as her record ended. Lena brought a handful of limes over to the cutting block and motioned for me to bring a pitcher from the cabinet.

“Let’s make juice,” she said. “Just like you used to on the island.”

It was a warm night, so we took our plates outside to eat at an old wooden picnic table beside the lakeshore. There were ten or twelve of us all together, some who lived in the co-op, others visiting like me. They all seemed to know each other well. Their stories came in common phrase and shorthand, almost like another language in its strangeness, its pace,
and at first I had trouble understanding them. The tall man with long dark hair spoke head
down, eyes closed and smiling into his plate. The woman in men’s clothing leaned forward
to touch everyone with her broad, warm hands. An older man with red hair didn’t speak at
all, except to make faces at what everyone else was saying.

Then one of them asked how I’d met Lena. She looked to me and put one hand on
my back. It was hard for me to find the words. To explain, again, how I’d cast away alone on
my father’s outrigger. I cleared my throat. Sometimes English wasn’t enough and I broke
into Marshallese. Lena was a good translator. I expected them to look at me with pity, like
the newspapers and the camera crews and all the people at the quarantine. But they didn’t.
Instead they said, *We’re glad you’re here, or, welcome home,* and none of them said anything about
being sorry. We just sat shoulder to shoulder, eating in the dark until the flood lights
flickered on behind us.

The lab in Madison was a special project – a center for trans-disciplinary exploration
of how a sinking island might manifest in me. Lena offered to interpret, but I understood
most of what they said because they spoke slowly, as if I were a child. At first, they asked
about my earliest memories of home – what did the inside of a *lo* forest smell like? How did
I learn to see underwater? A pulmonary specialist, an osteopath, and a professor of
dermatological disease ordered test after test – MRIs, full-body x-rays – to find some hint in
my lungs, my skin, my bones. The atmospheric scientists showed me hydrographic maps of
the Pacific and pointed at swirling blurs of blue, then wanted me to translate their meaning
into monthly tidal patterns. How long after the highest tide did symptoms begin? they asked.
Was this a seasonal disorder, or something that happened only once and spread? I could not
remember clearly. Everyone had turned to salt and drowned in their lungs in front of me,
but I kept on breathing, in and out and back in again. No one asked me what I’d done to try and stop it.

I’d been alone on the outrigger for almost nine months. The psychologists told me the rushing sound of water in my ears was only a hallucination. Still, every night, I dreamed of swimming, hand over hand back to the place of my birth. Of swallowing the sea in gulps. Of drinking until I saw the land rise from where we lost it, until the water was back where it belonged. Sometimes I arrived by airplane, or on the wings of a spirit bird. I was a whale, a great cumulonimbus, a motor boat. But sometimes I was on the outrigger.

I’d come into the lagoon on a course straight toward home, the banana fronds overgrown across the panorama of my mind. A hoard of piglets rutted in the sand and I followed my mother as our neighbors watched from their yards, the women with babies slung against hipbones, all the men holding industrial flashlights aloft to shine a clear way down the road, dark even at highest noon. We wove through the coconut groves, into the swamp behind the Baptist church, out beyond the broken asphalt of the airstrip and into the shipping boat yard. She turned, long black plait swinging. I stepped forward to meet her and felt the water rise again, my toes wet in a tide sweeping inland. Every time, I looked down to walk my way clear, but the ocean kept spreading, leaking further and further out of place.

Slowly, I spent more time at the co-op instead of in my empty apartment, and eventually I just moved in. There were always people to be near, to find in the dark or to tell me stories when my mind would not stay quiet. Most were slightly younger than me, mid-twenties maybe, but not what I’d thought of as American. Everyone who lived in that house was a little strange, all of them outcasts or souls exiled, and they took me in without question.
Sam, the older, red-haired man, obsessed over emptied seeds and the discarded carcasses of cicada, and we stood in his room for hours, staring at his collections under mason glass. Micah, the man who smiled into his plate, wrote comic books and manifestos, and he taught me to play my island songs on the grand piano in the ballroom. Dagberta was an overwhelming flirt with everyone including me, always using her soft, pink mouth to charm me into riding on the back of her motorcycle. She and Pete, the youngest, both liked to drink, to dance until their limbs were sore, to sleep through the boring daylight hours. On my island we danced for everything – babies’ birthdays, Christmas, the first tuna of the rainy season – and when I told Pete this, he loved it. He made me dance with him at night and in the daytime, in the communal bathroom and down the halls. He took me by the hands and we swept down the spiral stairs, across the ballroom and the balconies, until our laughter echoed out over the lake like gulls.

I used to love to climb, to be high enough to see the whole ocean spread before me. I used to wish for bird wings. After what happened, I was uncomfortable anywhere not close to the earth. There were no open bedrooms in the co-op, but I didn’t mind because it meant on the hottest nights of summer I could sleep in the backyard beside the lake. When it was cooler and I had to sleep inside, the only place I could hear the water was the floor of a small alcove just off the kitchen and the dining room. I tried to get up before dawn so the other housemates wouldn’t notice, but sometimes I’d wake to find Lena asleep on a cot beside me. She was careful not to hover, and often the only trace of her was the blanket she left draped over my shoulders, or the map of my island that she’d stolen from the lab to put up on the wall. I never mentioned it, and she never asked. It was a kindness only one who had known the same kind of loneliness could give.
Just like we did when we were on the island, Lena and I started to *bwebwenato*. Sometimes we sat in the high-tops at the bar beside the dining room. At night we bundled cut logs into the ballroom and curled up on a couch beside the fireplace. But there was another balcony in the attic, and once a few months after I’d moved in, she suggested we go there.

“So we can speak into the treetops,” she said. “Just like that giant breadfruit in your yard.”

Sixty feet above the ground, the view of the lake from the roof was almost like my ocean. The black locusts had just begun to blossom, and the wind brought a punch of honey to my nose. I leaned out over the stone parapet to look down into the backyard, to the wooden picnic table where we ate, and the chickens as they gathered new grubs from the yard. From that height, I could see the scattered debris that had collected and wedged into the scrub of the hill: shards of ceramic plates, loose pages of newspaper, a yellow kayak upturned to reveal its splintered hull. A dock reached outward from the land into the water, and its shadow cast a darkness over the shallows. I saw fishes circling, watched them gulp at the surface for mayflies, but then one jumped too far and caught against the slope. It bounced and flipped into the jumbled brush, bruising its flesh against a rock. Its mouth opened and closed as it tried and failed to drink the air. It arched its spine and curled away from the water, and finally it stopped, both eyes glossy. My heart began to hammer.

“I have to go,” I said. “I didn’t realize we would be so high.”

I sucked the smell of honey through my nose again. I trained my eyes on the northern shore of the lake so that I could remember there was only land around me. But I couldn’t. I broke and ran, half-falling, down six flights of stairs in a sweaty, whistling panic. A crowd of other housemates were coming up as I came down and I nearly knocked them
over as I flew. I burst out into the backyard and the chickens scattered as I threw myself against the dirt. I thrust my hands into the loam, searching for some sign of creeping water. By the time Lena came out into the backyard, I’d dug several dozen holes. Some were just handfuls but others were like wounds carved into the land. Her face crumpled when she saw them, and she sat down beside me to fill them.

“You know it can’t find you,” she said.

“Then why am I the only one?”

“It’s my fault,” she said, leaning forward over a hole as she scooped the earth back where it belonged. “I know it upsets you.”

“Everything upsets me,” I said.

“I look at pictures sometimes, and I can’t believe it’s all gone,” she said. The ground around us was pocked with mounds of loose soil, but as her hands smoothed and flattened the earth into the holes I’d made, it was almost as if they had never been there at all. Just as she reached toward the last one, I grabbed her wrist to stop her. She looked up at me.

“But you weren’t there when it disappeared,” I said.

Lena made me tell the researchers I had panic attacks after I read a report in the newspaper about an island where eight thousand people disappeared in less than a month. She was actually worried about me, but I think they were more concerned I might die and ruin their study before they could publish it. At the lab, they asked about hygrometers and sea level measurements, halophilic plants and fisheries concentrations. All I could say was that the first family to lose their floor to the ocean was the Samuels. The baby girl was only four, I told them. She was born right here, I said, and pointed to a tiny place on their maps. The hydro-geologist told me this meant nothing unless I could tell him how far below the
ground the water table was, but no one on my island had ever thought to measure this in inches. Their maps were tiny, and some of them were wrong. They did not denote the hollow in the north belt mangroves, or where we buried bwiro to wait for it to sweeten. They did not even label our bwidej, the land of our mothers and our mothers’ mothers, the land that gave our names to us. Now everything was gone – there was nothing left to measure, and they all said my memory was too dangerous to trust.

An environmental depression expert urged me to spend more time in their swimming pool. He said a controlled setting might lessen my fear because I could see the limits, but chlorine made me gag and I couldn’t even put my feet beneath the surface. Finally the neurology team suggested a focused meditation, a timed session in which I thought intentionally of all the things that scared me most. They told me it could be short, ten minutes at a time. Lena offered to sit beside me while they watched the neurons fire through my brain.

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll try.”

I expected a machine like a casket – the kind I’d already spent hours trapped inside – but it looked instead like a clumsy, electrified helmet. They told me it would be difficult to hear above the pulse of their imaging monitors, that if I needed anything I should raise my hands and jump as if I were on fire. Then they pressed it over my head and my mind filled with the sound of waves, the same one I could hear if I held an empty conch to my ear. Before the session started, we had discussed the kind of sensory details I would focus on, and the eerie artificial ocean in the helmet made them very easy to find.

Memories flashed through my head: the little girl who caught it first, her white, scaly flesh flaking off beneath my hands. Rotten breadfruit falling against the muddied, flooded ground. The hiss of water in my boyfriend’s lungs, the taste of salt as it bubbled out his
mouth and into mine. A multitude of panicked voices in the community center. Constellations of salt. Sweeping water away from the church pews with a broom, the clang of our old cast-iron bell. Wet with sweat as I scooped salt water from our last fresh well. A spreading distance between me and a line of the dying. Their eyes in the dark as I drifted away, alone on the outrigger.

When the neurologists took the helmet off, I didn’t even realize I’d been crying. They asked if I needed a glass of water or a moment to lie down. I shook my head, and they led me to another room where they brought the imaging scans up on a monitor. As I stared at the screen, tiny solar flares burst and faded across my cortex, and the researchers passed their hands over points they said were used for consciousness and language processing, for perceptive thought and deriving meaning from emotion. I asked if they could point to individual moments, if they could identify a spot like hibiscus at the central line as an image of my mother, or the growing whirl of blue and rose above the left temporal lobe as her voice. They shook their heads. No, they said. With repetition, they might find a pattern in activity. In time, they could make a map. I should practice clarifying thoughts.

“To lead a relatively normal life,” they said.

“Could this help if there are others?” I asked.

But the neurologists did not have an answer.

That night, trying and failing to sleep beneath the black locusts in our backyard, I heard the sound of splashing and laughing below me, and at first I imagined it was a flickering of memory, the remnants of my island coming out of the ground like steam. I sat upright, wiping at my arms and legs. I stood to shake out my ears, to press my palms to the earth and check it was not growing damp. But then I heard it again - a laugh familiar from a
different place - coming from downhill at the lakeshore. I followed rickety stairs to the dock, eyes trained upward on the stars. They bowled over the water, a brilliant smear of milky light tracing the curve of the earth. It was windy enough to lick the lake up into whitecaps. Great rolls of water came unending from the center half-mile out of sight. I found my housemates floating on their backs and doing somersaults into the waves. The lake swept them up and down, backward and forward like the glass bulbs men on island used to keep track of clam traps in the coral.

I lay down on the dock with my head and shoulders over the water, belly against the wooden planks, and extended my arm downward into the lake. Lights from the shore to either side of us glimmered across the surface. I breathed in the smell of weeds and silt, a strange scent so unlike the ocean. I had not been so close to water since the plague, and I think I would have stayed frozen and hovering above it like that until daylight, but Lena swam back into shore.

“Hey, likatu,” she said, water dripping from her body as she walked down the dock. She pointed at the surface below us. “It’s really shallow. Not even to your waist.”

Then she jumped in again, a graceful diving start that splashed too far out to feel. The dock shook beneath me and I turned to see Pete and Dagberta running down the planks. Micah followed not far behind. Dagberta did not even stop before she threw herself from dry land in a cannonball. Her wake swept over Lena, and both women came up laughing. Micah waded in from shore, and he sunk beneath the surface, disappearing in reverse until only the top of his head was visible. Pete took my hand in his.

“On the count of three?” he asked.

We leapt, arms and legs flailing, and when we hit the water his grip slipped from mine. For a moment I hung suspended beneath the lake. I opened my eyes to find the moon,
but the water was too murky and the light was faint and clouded. I could hear the murmurs of my friends above, the churning of limbs, the rustling of stones under current. I was surprised at the strength of the waves and I let them carry me, each surge lifting my body forward and backward. When my lungs began to burn for oxygen, I set my feet against the silt and burst upward. The water was shallow. I leaned back and gave myself over to the pulse of what Lena called our water-hearted city.

A year into their study, the research team told me they wanted to hold a press meeting at the Monona Terrace, a conference center built to look as if its majestic arch of main-floor windows was sinking into the lake behind them. It would be informal, they said, just a presentation of their findings to date, a brief question-and-answer with other university officials, an opportunity for me to speak. I wanted people to know what was happening, but I was anxious. Lena promised to come along.

“I know how it feels to be trapped in a crowd of curious strangers,” she said.

The event was outside on a warm July day, but by afternoon a thunderstorm had crept along the horizon. As an employee led me through the conference center toward the lakeside terrace, I was surrounded by giant images of my brain plastered to the walls of the entrance hall. Reams of pulmonary scans and blood tests mottled what empty space there was between them. High-resolution photos hung from the ceiling like advertisements for an exhibit: ganglion cells like strange fruits, swirled and spotted in primary colors; spidery trees of dendrites painted teal and gold. I’d seen a few of them before, but most were new to me, and I stared open-mouthed at my own body.

The employee brought me onto the semi-circular terrace and told me to sit at the end of a long line of folding chairs off-set on the stage just behind the podium. I leaned over
the parapet behind them to look into the water, but the sky was dark with storm clouds and I could see nothing beneath the surface. The crowd gathered, their flash-bulbs firing, reporters waving their hands in the air for an interview. Lena had promised to sit near the front, and I searched until I found her, one familiar face among a thousand. The researchers arrived and one approached the podium to speak. The crowd stood to applaud and I lost her.

One by one, they talked about me as if I were somewhere far away, as if I were deaf or incapable of understanding English. The pulmonary specialist and the neuroimaging technician called me the patient, while the rest referred to me as the individual in question. The hydro-geologist used my name at least, but he pronounced it incorrectly, even though I had known him for months. Every time the climate scientists talked about my island, they spoke in past tense. An audience member asked the psychologists if they’d determined a name for the disease. Without hesitation, they said I showed symptoms of severe post-traumatic stress disorder and acute environmental psychosis, that although I escaped without skin rashes or saline-like pneumonia, I was very much a victim of the salt plague.

The only question for me came from a woman near the middle of the crowd, and it wasn’t even a question, really. She said I was brave. My story inspired her to help. But when she called me refugee, a murmur of agreement rippled through the audience, and a tiny pin inside my heart came loose. In the year I’d let them draw blood from my arm and suck air from my lungs through a tube, in all the discussions of my cerebral cortex, no one ever mentioned a diagnosis in such specific terms. I’d tried many times to express how it felt, but I’d never found a significant mass equal to whatever it was I’d misplaced beneath the ocean. And in the end, all they needed was a word.
The thunderstorm that boiled up on the Terrace that afternoon hovered over us long past sundown. It was the kind that made the air heavy, like the squalls on island that seemed to carry the whole ocean with them. I wanted to sleep beneath the balcony, even despite the rain, but Lena was worried I would catch cold and she insisted I stay in the alcove for the night. She brought me some tea and gave me a blanket, and she left me lying on the floor, one window cracked so I could hear the lake. I was so tired, I didn’t even notice the sound of water.

On the outrigger, I’d survived on my own anger. I said cruel things to God and to out-of-reach fishes, to birds flying somewhere I could not follow. In the first few months in Madison it was fear that kept me going, then discomfort, a kind of messy happiness, a sense of change. I’d tried to convince myself there was nothing I could have done. But the co-op was old and in disrepair. Someone should have known the cast-iron radiators would not withstand shifts in atmospheric pressure forever, and that night, the thunderstorm was just enough to make them burst. Maybe from an air pocket or the shock of water hammer, a cavitation, but the clang of heated gas and metal beat into my ears, and I woke to a spew of radiator fluid rising from the floor.

At first I thought it was a dream or a hallucination, but when I opened my mouth to breathe in, I choked. I stumbled out into the dining room and up the stairs to the ballroom, where steam poured so hard from the radiators that the floor-to-ceiling windows had fogged over and the broad ballast ceiling had begun to drip. Water was streaming from the front entrance and down the foyer stairs in iron-red rivulets, so I turned around again and ran for the backyard.

The rainstorm had slowed and the clouds were dissipating, revealing patches of the night sky behind them. A few of the other housemates stood in the yard, half-soaked in their
pajamas or their skins. Most of them were upset, cursing about the things the flood had ruined in their rooms, but Pete and Dagberta seemed to like the chaos. Over and over, they climbed and leaped from the ballroom balcony, hollering about dancing in the rain. When they saw me, they grabbed for my hands and spun me around until we slipped in the mud. They fell down, laughing, not realizing my eyes were wide with fear or that I was speechless, stone-faced, in shock. Then Lena came out of the house, and her chest heaved as if she had been running.

“I was so – and I couldn’t find you –” she said. “The radiators – and the floors were just – oh my God – what it made me – Moon, I can just imagine.”

As she hugged me, I noticed she was holding the paper map from the alcove wall. I backed away from her and she tried to put it in my hands.

“Water was just pouring from the ceiling,” she said. “It’s a little wet, but I saved it for you.”

It had been on the wall of the room since I’d moved in, and many months of sun and dust had faded the ink. Blue had become white, green a faint yellow tinge. A blurred gray outline of the land was all that remained on the paper. I knew she was trying to be kind. I knew that. We had been close while she lived with my family, and she’d loved our island, too. But I was supposed to be the healer – it was my responsibility to keep my neighbors and my friends alive, and I’d failed. I watched their skins slough off. I held them while they coughed up lumps of salt. And still, the cemetery flooded, and the elementary school flooded, and the land I was born from flooded. The ocean turned against me, and I had no place higher to climb when it came.
I ripped the map in two just as a full moon came out from behind the clouds. A few last drops of rain fell onto the paper, and we stared at each other as they ate translucent spheres out of every continent and ocean.
CHAPTER 3 DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT
OF EVERYTHING GOING UP (UP, AS WE ALL GO DOWN)

Returned in the package of personal effects from Mendota Mental Health Institute, c. 2011. Handwritten by my mother in journal #2, containing dates ranging from 1978 – 1983. This particular entry is dated May of 1982, one month prior to her return to Madison, WI and her first meeting with my father, Patrick Bailey, at the Memorial Union Terrace of the University of Wisconsin. Reproduced and notated here for purposes of clarity, c. 2013.

WHEN I FIRST RUN AWAY TO MONTEREY, I drive right through the night and up to the shore before I sit with both feet trailing off a dock into the Pacific. In the morning, I wake up and I look and look for the end of it, but here’s the thing: I think the end of the ocean doesn’t exist. It goes on for miles and miles, and then even at the horizon I know it just keeps on going. It’s a thing that will swallow me whole. People have been taking boats out to sail around after the ending of it for thousands of years, and some even say they’ve found it. Some people claim they can swallow it back, but they can’t. I think, if you go out looking for the end of the ocean, maybe you don’t get to come home.¹

After a few weeks, I find work at a dive on the marina where they don’t ask for proof of age, where most of the regulars call me only the Barmaid – a name I do not like for obvious reasons. Most of the guys are as you might expect, including Arthur, the young captain who looks the part: black-bearded, rubber-booted, a poor shanty singer when he isn’t swigging whiskey. He comes in on Thursday nights regular like fog, smelling of catch, the skin of his hands stained ruddy brown from the blood. He orders his drinks and tells me I make the best ones. He flirts, and – believe me – I like to be flirted with by a rubber-booted, fishy-smelling man who loves a boat more than his mother same as the next girl. But I start to notice Arthur never calls me a barmaid, and then we start talking, telling each other things about the place only a regular would notice, like how the volunteer firemen always pick ABBA songs off the jukebox if they’ve had a bad night, like how Red Myrtle switched from

¹ Although her juvenile records are sealed, my father says my mother told him she ran away from Sunday House for Girls of Dane Co. several times during her extended stay there, the final incidence being just after her seventeenth birthday, at which time she disappeared – apparently, to California.
well tequila to rum for no reason in particular. It’s a thing we share, me and Arthur. I know him and he knows me, even if it’s only in the dim vomit vicinity of this bar. So one night in the summer, when he asks if I like to take risks, I answer him.

“Depends on the sort,” I say. “I’m wary of boatmen.”

“Lucky for you, I’m the trustworthy kind,” says Arthur.

“Well then, I guess so, I do. Yes to your risks.”

He drains his glass.

“Tomorrow at sun up,” he says. “We’ll come get you out front.”

“Who’s we?”

“You’ll see.”

I am intrigued.

The next morning, Arthur arrives in the back of an old blue jeep. Two men sit in the front seat, one who looks like him if he’d been younger and blue-eyed instead of brown, less-bearded and a little longer in the face. The one who is driving is slim, wearing glasses. Arthur opens the door and beckons me inside beside him.

“Boys, this is Retta. Retta, the boys.”

“Hello,” I say. “Who’re you?”

The slim man reaches one hand backward to shake. “Emile.”

“Emile is a monk,” Arthur says. “And it’s his birthday. The other is George. He’s just my brother.”

“My mother said brothers are trouble,” I say. “Happy Birthday, Emile.”

“Did she have any sons?” asks George.

“No,” I say. “Just me.”
“Well,” he says. “Seems you’re trouble enough.”

I like George immediately.

We pull away, out of town on South Cabrillo Highway toward the coastal mountains of Big Sur. The inside of the car smells of old newspaper and lavender, which Arthur says reminds him of their mother, a large woman from Salinas who is afraid scorpions might overtake her house from the inside out.

“She grows whole sills of flowers,” he says.

George and Emile lean chest-to-shoulder while Emile drives and George fiddles on a mandolin. These men are terrible singers, but I too am a terrible singer and fuck it because nobody cares if we’re off-key. Woody Guthrie ballads mostly, a little Hank Williams, some old-timey bluegrass. The coast rolls by, and the air smells like salt and seaweed and cypress. The sun’s out, of course, and the boys are laughing and we’re passing drinks back and forth, a few tabs of black acid to make the world a bit brighter, all except for Emile the ascetic, the righteous, the clean one who has offered to carry everyone clear. I’m glad I’ve accepted Arthur’s invitation even though I have no idea where we’re headed. I like this strange and accidental mission we are on. I sing along, off-key.

Arthur and I sit squashed together in the back seat and he wraps his arms around my belly to keep me in the car around the curves, his mouth warm against the close nerves in my neck. I can feel his bellow-lungs breathe in and I match them until it seems we are one beast, one heart pulsing. My eyes trace the shore and push out toward the horizon, and then I turn around and press my mouth against his to taste him. George lets out a yell but I don’t care,
and I kiss Arthur harder. It has been a long time since I last cared what anybody thinks of me.  

Twenty-nine miles south of Monterey, just past the Bixby Canyon Bridge, Arthur pulls the jeep up to a metal gate and picks the padlock with a pocket knife. We drive a dirt road, winding our way over a hill and down through to an inlet, where a house the color of hammered silver leans precariously above an eroding dune, its foundation made from rough blocks of purple jade, its windows of Plexiglas meant for buckling. From outside it looks plain, a wooden shack left over from the hard years after the oil booms were over, but on the inside the house is a ramshackle museum of seaside curiosities, its walls decorated in Audubon plates and painted Esselen murals, bookshelves lined up one side with its volumes separated by dried grasses and taxidermied birds, their airy bodies perching dramatically on driftwood like they’re about to take flight straight through the ceiling, like the rest of us aren’t even there. A giant comb of baleen stretches the length of the galley kitchen ceiling and I climb up on the counter to set my palms against it. Open shelves show inlaid sea glass, ceramic bowls, canning jars filled with pickled shellfish, urchins, tiny squids. I stare and stare, touching everything with my hands like a child.

“What is this place?” I ask them. “Who does all of this belong to?”

Emile says his father worked for Edward Ricketts, the man who ran Steinbeck’s famous lab down on Cannery Row, that all three of them were sailing buddies, that they went on expeditions to Baja and British Columbia and anyplace else they could reach by sea.

“When Ricketts got hit by a train, he left this house to my parents,” he says.

“First time Emile brought me here, I fell in love with him,” says George.

Emile turns red. “Stop,” he says. “That was never my intention.”

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2 Given that she was in this state of mind just before she met my father, I can’t help but question the entirety of their relationship. For how long did she love him? Was it ever genuine?
“I think I might be in love with you, too,” I say.

George and Arthur laugh, but Emile just smiles a little and shrugs.

“Well, it’s a magical place,” he says.

He starts rustling through the pantry and sets George off to chopping and roasting and currying the myriad produce they’ve brought in paper sacks from Monterey, so I ask Arthur to show me around.

They have a garden, its plots of gnarled heirloom tomatoes and avocado and olive interspersed with wine grapes and pears, and he points toward the flags in the trees—Tibetan prayers for the wind—strung from branch to branch, kaleidoscoping around the yard in a spiderweb of unraveling cotton. There are Roman candles and screeching fountains, too, and Arthur shows me a collection of smoke grenades inside mason jars. He says they are making lists of landmarks.

“Well, the suburbs are sprawling,” he says. “We live in a plague of plastic.”

“So it’s mayhem you’re after,” I say.

“Not so much mayhem as mischief, maybe.”

There are cartons of course ground powder, milk crates full of glass bottles, their bodies stuffed with feathers and lemongrass, small trails of fuse line spilling from their apertures like tongues.

“And these?” I ask.

Arthur says they are for tonight, a birthday party, that they are harmless, that they go off with a pop! when the fuse licks.

“It splatters smoky residue across the inside. They’re noisy more than anything,” he claims. The longer I look, the more of them I see—the scrub-grass field around the house is swarmed with small holes, shrapnel cans and pie tins, stainless steel utensils, bits of bubble
gum, sodium bicarbonate, magnesium and wire copper. I breathe in deep through my nose and my lungs are filled with citrus, with sulfur.

“What happens tonight?”

“We’re going on a boat ride.”

Arthur says there is an old man down the hill from the sand house who owns a boat we could live off for months without going into town for supplies, that they’ve been stockpiling canning jars and dehydrating produce. We, as in the four of us, as in me too, suddenly. I like this inclusion. I like this man with his plan, his lavender mother and his unraveling house, the tiny things he has exploded in the hills above the ocean he knows like a lover. I stand on my toes and pull at his t-shirt until I can see the curly hairs ring at his neckline, until I am standing with my mouth only an inch below his mouth, until we are the same as the sun. The world begins to flicker and bend at the edges. It is at this moment exactly that George sticks his head out the back door, hollering for lunch.

The four of us sit around a table made of rough cut plank, and the boys pass wine and food while they explain their plans to me. George says he’s found an old man with a broken-down purse seiner in a fishing fleet just north of Big Sur, a boat perfect for short trips up and down the settled seashores, for snatch-and-grab jobs in port towns, for sojourns onto beaches and into the mountains, the coastal stands of redwood, cypress, eucalyptus. The old man likes him, says he wants to help wreak havoc on the tourist traps, to live from the land and the sea and nothing else. Arthur claims he can guide us along Baja and down around Mexico, maybe even through the Panama canal, the Caribbean sea. Into the Amazon.

“What do you think?” Arthur asks. “Are you in?”

“For your birthday,” I say to Emile.

“Happy birthday, baby,” says George, and everybody grins.
“Every boat needs a name,” I say. “Does it have one?”

“Or a manifesto?” asks Arthur. “Every rebellion needs rules.”

His voice is sarcastic, but it seems like a good idea so I spit back to show my mettle.

“People have to know what we’re about,” I say. “Or are we just assholes?”

“We?” the boys ask in unison.

“Sure,” I say. “I love a little revolution.”

“How long should we plan for?” asks Arthur. “As long as you like. We could have you back in Monterey tonight –”

I think of the bar, the bad tips and mouths of dirty men too close to me. To Monterey, where I sleep on the beach alone, or in my van, in an apartment above the bar when I make myself sleep with the manager. Strangers’ beds or their floors, their couches, in the backseats of their cars. Just like my mother, I’ve never been one to carry things so much as people. The sea _hush-hushes_ me from down the hillside and in this moment I want nothing more than to submerge, to drink saltwater, to become a clownfish, a strand of kelp. I will burst if I move inland beyond eyesight of the shore. I love these boys even though I hardly know them, and I cannot imagine leaving.

“How about a little longer,” I say. “How about we see what we can see.”

“Good girl,” says George. “I like this one.”

Arthur smiles, a wolf in plaid wool, six feet of sky and smoke and muscle.

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3 I never heard much about any likeness I might share with my maternal grandmother, but this need to be near water has obviously passed on to me. Was she hydratic, too? It has been suggested that psychedelics and hallucinogenic drugs like LSD and psilocybin trigger psychological episodes in young patients. I wonder if this was the first time my mother recognized it?
After lunch is eaten and the kitchen cleaned, the dishes done and put back on their shelves, the brothers move out into the yard and set to harvesting as much fruit as they can fit into their jeep.

“We’ll can. The sun will dry tomatoes on the deck,” says George.

Emile and I watch them work, their backs broad and wetting with sweat as they move in unison like dancers, but then he takes me by the hand and pulls me into the house.

“You can only stare so long,” he says. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Emile is the most graceful man I have ever met, so easy with praise and soft syllables his words run like warm butter from his mouth and I catch myself drooling at the sound. We pack notebooks and field guides from the shelves. Binoculars, a compass, every map we can find. I discover a dresser of vintage women’s clothing, and we play dress-up while we pack t-shirts and socks and linens for the rest; he twirls in a skirt, I curtsey in a cotton gown. We scatter. As we gather toiletries from the bathroom, more books from the main hall, small apothecary vials of spice, he tells me about the months he’s spent in Antwerp, Bahia, Saigon. That he’s been teaching science in the public schools all along the California coast, not so much for the money, he says, but because he’s never found anything half as lovely as talking to children about catastrophe and atoms and the physics of flying things. The other boys want trouble and turmoil, but Emile just wants to collect medical supplies and donated books, to leave them like mystery gifts on the doorsteps of orphans.

“Hey look,” he says, and points toward terns through window glass. In an instant, I am gone with them. I am carried on their backs over the trees and the hills of yellow grasses and off across the beach, all bodies swaying in unison with my acid-vision. The flock streaks white paint across the sky, lines of motion that drip down into the ocean and pool in glints of sun on the sea, and then their bouncing refractions again return to our continuous loop,
faster and farther in until I do not know where the birds begin or end, or where I am among them. I spin and spin until Emile swims in and brings me back to dry land, to the floorboards of his sand house, to my limbs, their muscles and bones holding me upon the earth.

“If you get lost all you need to do is hum,” he says. “You’ll come back into your body.” He puts both my hands together at my heart. He shows me how to find my way. The thrum of my breath at the back of my throat vibrates through my jaw, into my inner ears, out my eyelids. I know where I am again. The only song I know is one my mother sang me as a child, a lilting melody that makes me think of dim cloisters filled with addicts and visits to the food bank and walking everywhere on foot, even when the air outside had left zero far behind. She would point to the cold stars and sing *oh, say, let us fly dear* which meant I was to say, *where, ma?* and she’d answer *to the sky dear,* and we’d go back and forth to keep our bodies warm. The song always ended with the both of us together, practically shouting *Up, we go up,* *up we go!* so the words echoed off the cement buildings on our block. In our flying machine, she used to say, we would make our way home.  

Late in the afternoon the four of us shift down the hill, carrying boxes of fruit and explosives in our arms, backpacks strapped to our shoulders. A storm has darkened the air above the ocean, and the sloping hills of scrub-grass have turned dull gray and brown beneath a quick, salty wind. At the shore is an abandoned marina and a tiny shed, its dock missing most of its boards, the buoys faded, every light post bare. Clusters of kelp rot on piles of coastal jade. Arthur reaches for my hand, and a fog from the storm moves in around us. George shrinks behind the shed at the shoreline and returns moments later with an old

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4 I hum this to myself when I am nervous.
man in a blue jacket. He has a mustache, dark eyes, a face leathered under years of Southern California sun.

“You’re the Colleto boy,” the old man says to Emile. “Look just like your father. Ricketts wanted to leave the Flyer to him, but he owed me too much money, so I took it.” He lifts one lip in an ill-humored smile, and licks his tobacco-stained teeth. “Your boyfriend here says he wants to buy it off me.”

“George,” Emile turns. “This is too much.”

“Happy birthday, baby,” says George.

The old man nods his head, scooping at the fog beside his face so that he can speak with a clear view. He beckons us within arms’ reach so that we can see each other and I am caught in a circle of tall men. My breath fights a losing battle with the fog, and the clouds lick at my eyelids, my cheeks.

“Alright then,” the old man says. “But if you don’t mind, my great-granddaughters would like one last ride.”


“Seven,” the old man says. “Don’t worry about them. They’re small enough. Any y’all got open sea experience?”

Arthur raises his hand.

“Good. We’ll need all the ready hands we can get on the water this time of year. Any number of strange things bound to happen. You got life jackets? You know how to swim?”

At almost eighty feet, the Western Flyer is a dying steed on its knees, a calliope missing its windpipes, a wreck barely floating, its white sides fading badly into near-holes along the prow. The portside windows of the cabin are hazy green with mildew, and the captain’s
wheel hangs at an angle, off kilter from the keel. Long ago the name had been painted in black along one side of the boat, but now the letters are only ghosts in the wood. I think of all the thousands of miles between here and that foggy, invisible horizon, the far places I have never even dreamed of seeing. I set my hand against the captain’s wheel and spin the shining wood.

I imagine the bow as it swings against its own headwaters, sliding easily along the rocky shoreline. I imagine we sail out of sight into the fog. We stay away from dry land for weeks. Arthur teaches me to draw maps, to tie fish nets, to pump bilge and chart a course within any wind that finds us. I write plays and we perform them for each other, midnight monologues, epics, flash scenes, battles. I learn to free dive. I swim with whale sharks and dorado…. George plays Irish ballads to the ocean, sings Otis Redding to the seabirds. He makes jokes and eats too much for comfort. He drinks all the whiskey and we put him on our shoulders and threaten to throw him overboard, but we love him too much to do it. Emile conducts experimental surveys and we are his collecting team. He writes a treatise on maritime trade, a report on the diversity of sea stars and the color palettes in guano, and when we stop to find dry goods and send letters, to drink tequila and cervezas at the bars of Baja or Puerto Vallarta or Zihuatenejo, Emile learns words that none of us know and he brings them back to us, teaches us the names of plants and fishes and tiny microscopic beasts, and in this way we acquire new tongues, dialects, stories no one else in the world has ever heard. We will wake every morning in some new place, some new world where we would never grow unhappy or bored.

The boat shifts on the tide and I am brought back to the present.

I move slowly, distracted by the acid-waves that follow every movement I make, but George and Arthur seem used to the shift, and Emile is still sober and strong. The old man
sits at the prow near a stack of life preservers, his great-granddaughters circled around him on the deck. Arthur heads toward the captain’s quarters. A sputtering rumble sounds, and the boat churns away from shore. I bend over the railing to feel the spray on my face. The waves are choppy. Arthur comes out of the captain’s quarters and he stands with me against the prow, clawing at the fog to watch for monuments of stone or shallow water that neither of us can see. We turn back to the deck, where the great-granddaughters have moved their eyes upward, pink tongues lolling across their tiny white teeth. The littlest girl does not like the rain, and has curled herself into Emile’s lap, has pulled his sweater over her head like a hood. He talks to the rest of them in big, theatrical gestures, his teacher’s eyes and face contorting until they are all howling in glee.

The boat pitches and bucks against rough water, and slowly all of us grow yellow except for Emile and the girls and their great-grandfather. George falls over into a barrel and moans. Arthur drapes himself across the bow. I lie on my back against the deck and my head thrums and I feel every molecule of hydrogen and oxygen shift beneath us, as if I can feel the poles in incremental measurement, as if I am a compass spinning. A pressure grows behind my eyes and suddenly I fear I have gone blind, that the rings of light echoing in stellar patterns off the fog are the remnants of my optic nerve bursting into pieces, that the tiny pathways of my retina and lens are firing and dead and so I am dying and everything I ever saw or smelled or heard is dying, a world I knew that now has never existed, will never exist. Vomit rises in my throat. I turn sideways to empty my stomach, and my internal compass shifts again.5

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5 Sounds as much like a dissociative attack as it does a bad acid spiral, but without scans or blood tests it would be very difficult to decipher a difference based on the description alone. To my knowledge, I have not experienced a dissociation this violent or complete, but studies also suggest that these events cause short-term memory loss, or even prevent their formation entirely, and perhaps I would not remember it if I had?
Now I am right with the boat, comforted instead of tortured by its rocking. I plaster myself to the floor and transcend. I am a brittle star, all suction cells and sensory endings. I am a cephalopod, rippling on my limbs toward the water. I find myself climbing the prow, spilling over one limb and non-vertebrae and membrane at a time. Just as I reach the edge, ready to drop into the sea, Emile leans down into my view.

“Up, up, a little bit higher,” he sings. When he takes me by the hand I remember that I have them. I close my eyes and swallow. It is difficult to find my voice. My tongue. I have a mouth.

“Oh, my, the moon is on fire,” he sings again. He sets his hands against my face and I follow the warmth of his palms to the surface of my human skin, like I’m swimming forward through millennia of evolution. I grow bones, fingertips, a spine, a brain like a globe. We see each other clearly again and I hum the first few notes.

“One, two – now we’re – off, dear,” I say, my voice buzzing in my throat. I am not spilling overboard anymore, but I am weak from the memory of my starfish limbs, my nautilautal legs, and so I sit and the little girls swarm over me.

“Ho high,” says Emile. “Hoopla, we fly –”

“ – going up, up – she goes – she goes up –” The sound reverberates over and over like whale song in my skull.

“Back?” he asks.

I nod. The littlest girl huddles up next to me, holds my hands in her tiny fingers. Her grandfather stands and reaches into a crate beside us, then throws a huge net out of the boat, its woven fiber laced with chunks of iron. He throws two more over the sides, and when he sees me watching, he winks. Arthur is still draped over the bow, and Emile has taken George up into the crows’ nest to look for the horizon, to see if the fog has lifted higher over the
sea, so no one else is paying attention to him except for me and the tiniest girl beside the railing. A bolt of lightning strikes nearby and every one of us is illuminated. I still find it difficult to speak, but I manage to spill out a question.

“What – are – you – do-ing?”

He points to the nets, flapping his arms like a bird.

“Western Flyer likes to lift off in the fog sometimes, so when the sky gets too close to the water, we have to put weights in to keep her down.”

I lean over the prow and see water dripping from the keel, more than a foot between the bottom and the sea. The storm curls around us like a swarm of bees. My skin and my bones vibrate with another flash of lightning. Arthur stands for a moment, then hurls himself back over and throws up again. The old man pulls a nautical map – hand painted and covered in illegible notes about the stars – from his jacket.

“Mars was supposed to be bright tonight,” he says.

“Good thing,” George says from somewhere high up in the fog. “I was afraid we wouldn’t be able to see shit in this weather. Hey Retta girl, c’mon on up in this flying machine, we’ll go up – ”

“Up we’ll go, we’ll go up,” I sing back, feeling wobbly but wanting to be near, so I climb to join them in the crows’ nest. It is a tight fit. The three of us wrap our legs around the mast to keep steady. As the boat tips and rocks below us, it seems the old man’s weights do no good and the Western Flyer only rises up from the fog.

Like coming up for air after a long dive, when the boat escapes the fog into the clear night above, we are breathless. The stars are bright and an ocean of cloud spills all around. George has a pipe between his teeth, its bowl filled with blue tobacco. Smoke seeps from his mouth in octopi rings. We poke our fingers through them and watch as they turn into sea
birds, cloud creatures, tiny moving pictures that shift before they’ve settled into something
definite.

“Have a pull, sister,” he says and passes it to me. “Might bring us back down and
sure as hell won’t make this day any stranger. Never seen such a land-cloud as this from the
house.”

I do not know how much to trust my eyes or my mind anymore. Emile is my anchor
to the earth, and I turn for him to help me find it. “Is this real?”

“Is anything?” he asks.

As we hover over the clouds, the boat spins slowly in circles, growing higher still
above the surface. George and Emile have taken to singing nursery rhymes and playing hide-
and-seek with the girls. Their giggles echo eerily through the air, and what water that was
trapped on the deck streams back and forth, bringing with it a flood of brittle star arms,
lengths of kelp, bits of the bottom of the ocean. The girls clap their hands and chase tiny
schools of fish, and the littlest one climbs up on a deck chair and jumps into the air,
squealing as she splashes down against the deck. But Arthur is still curled over the railing on
his belly, groaning with each slight shift. When the Flyer dips its prow sideways toward the
fog, he opens his mouth and drinks of the milky air, eyes closed against the unstable world.
The old man shakes his head and wades forward.

“One of you needs to come down and keep course,” he says. “This here is a rocky
coast.”

George and Emile are setting off sparklers, lemongrass bombs and smoke-jars in
celebration, so I volunteer to come down and help. The old man sets the compass in my

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6 If the old man and Emile are the only sober ones on the boat, wouldn’t they be conscious of this? Suspicious.
hands, and I am surprised to find its bronze-and-glass weight heavy for its size, a globe no
larger than a plum. I move it back and forth and watch as the fine metal of the needle is
pulled ever northward on its crux.

“Where am I supposed to point it?”

“South,” he says.

The compass burns in my palm. Before my mother left me, she used to say that
women grew out, not up, meaning everyone knew neither of us would ever stay put. She told
me if I ever figured out where I was going, I’d fall right down dead before I could take two
steps farther. What sense, she used to say, was there in keepin’ on if I already knew what was
waiting at the end of it? Oh say, let us fly dear – where ma? To the sky, dear. I have also come to
know the restless feeling she had in her heart.

George and Emile set off a bottle rocket, a firecracker, a series of white paper globes.
They hang in the air like medusa, floating slowly toward a giant yellow moon that seems so
close we could touch it with our hands, and I reach forward and almost lose my balance.
Another firecracker spits and spins, and one hisses through the window of the captain’s
quarters. It explodes. The light fills the night. Glass tinkles and sprays, and then everything
begins to quiver.

Suddenly we and the boat are upside down, the sea of fog now sky. One at a time, I
feel my toes give way from their grasp on the floor. Everyone begins to pull loose from our
flooring and float head-first back down toward the ocean, and we bump and spin like
particles pin-wheeling about whenever we make contact with each other. The plastic chairs
and life vests from the deck have disappeared completely, and a stream of kitchen utensils comes slowly out the stairwell.7

Emile tries his best to keep everyone calm. “All of this is because of the physics,” he calls to the little girls, who are shrieking and whirling every which way. “Equal and opposite reactions.”

He revolves past my peripheral vision, reaching toward the littlest one, but she is moving more quickly than the rest of us. She does not recognize the danger of drifting in mid-air. She swims and flaps and spirals herself through space, and Emile sails past her.

“Grab hold!” shouts their grandfather, and they all reach out their tiny hands and click together like magnets. He grabs the tiniest one, who has just collided with the captain's wheel, and pulls with all his might back toward the boat. George wraps one long arm around the railing on the starboard, and the old man swings them sideways. I reach out, Arthur clinging to my foot, and the children float between us like a line of chattering kite tails. Strings of fire crackers and roman candles fall from their crates, catching on the mast, the railings, their fuses sparked and flashing wildly.

“Everyone grab hold,” shouts the old man again, but it is too late for Emile, who glides headfirst into the fog. A firecracker falls past him and an explosion opens the cloud around him wider. Rain begins to pour down – or is it up – over us as we watch him go. George gasps after him, but his arm is the only link between the ship and half the girls we’re holding, and there is nothing to be done. His eyes well over. Emile is lost.

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7 After I received the package of personal effects from the Mendota Mental Health Institute in 2011, I scheduled an interview with the head psychologist in charge of my mother's case, Dr. Susana Bell. When I showed her the text of this journal, she stated that my mother's delusions commonly included maritime or nautical imagery, often juxtaposed with feelings of imbalance (mental and physical), loss of directional or locative ability, and an irrational desire to submerge all or part of her body in order to regain a sense of equilibrium. Dr. Bell suggested this habitual behavior was directly related to my mother's death, and seemed alarmed when I mentioned that I had experienced similar irrational desires in several isolated incidents, particularly after my return from the field site in the Marshall Islands. She requested that I return to her office for a series of psychological diagnostics, but I have yet to do so.
“We need to pull the boat back around,” says Arthur.

It is the first sentence he has spoken in hours.

“Everything is misbehaving,” he moans, rain pouring upside down across his yellow face. He leans to one side and we heave, all of our weight together. Our legs wave in the air, an upside down forest of human limbs, and the water slides from our bodies and pools on the deck, streaming northward. But the boat refuses to conform to the laws of gravity, and it seems we will hang right-side up from a floating, backward boat in the sky for eternity.

“Try again,” I call, and the little girls join in. “Think heavy things.”

“I’ve got rocks in my pockets,” shouts one.

“Me too,” says another. “They’re as big as my head.”

“What else have you got?” I ask and a flurry of voices fill the air.

“A whale!”

“Uncle Albert!”

“I’ve got a – a – a elephant!”

They are pretending, playing a game that only children care to practice, but suddenly the boat creaks, so we think of heavier things and shout them into the fog, too.

“An anvil,” says George. “And a gorilla.”

“I bet you can’t beat what I’ve got,” growls the old man. “I’ve got the Great Wall of China in my pockets.”

My mother used to say that a lot of things were only true after someone said them out loud. So I say elephants and anvils, timpani drums filled with stone. We suspend imaginary weights from our shoelaces until the Western Flyer rocks sideways.

“A mountain comes to mind,” croaks Arthur.

“Which one?” shouts the tiniest girl.
“Everest,” he says, and then the boat spins like a corkscrew.

We are thrown into the air, all going up, up, until we are all coming down, and the roman candles are flaring, the whiz-bangs whiz-banging, the smoke grenades pop! popping! and blowing smoke in every direction. All the flying things go past us and we pick up speed, our own weight propelling us back toward the earth until we find it.

When the dust of our crash has settled, we see the fog is gone. Everyone has fallen through the floor into the galley of the boat, and when we stand up, we have to hoot to find each other, calling and answering through the rubble of the ship. Every time we find someone the girls giggle and ask if we can do it again. They scatter, hiding in crevices and wreckage until we find them. The air is so clear I can just about see through myself. The sky is pitch black, stars falling down around us like twinkle bulbs, the giant yellow moon now very far away.

Arthur blinks, rubbing his face. He gathers the girls into a pile, all of them flabbergasted, open-mouthed, excitable as wind-up toys. They chatter. They say we are on some different planet, like maybe we have just floated off into a gap in the space-time continuum, that this is Neptune or 1957 or Ancient Greece, the years of Tyrannosaur and Pteranodon.

“This is outer space, right?” the tiny one asks.

“Right,” he says. “This is outer space.”

“Then these are all aliens,” she says, pointing to a puddle of bioluminescent algae that has pooled at her feet. “They only eat applesauce.”

“How did we get here?” I ask as I climb down the mast. “I think we’re starting to sink.”
It seems Arthur feels better now that the boat isn’t rolling nearly so much, and he begins to throw the children ashore, one by one like sugar gliders. The rest of us wade, oil-black water sweeping in and out on the tide. The *Western Flyer* looks suddenly like the rotting skeleton of a pirate ship run aground, listing precariously with her deck half submerged in the tide.

George sinks down in the sand and stares at the water, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Shipwrecked,” he says. “How in the hell did we get here?”

All seven girls are plucking stars from their sockets and holding them out or dropping them in the sand, throwing them at each other like snowballs. The smallest has pulled off her shirt and tied it around her head, and she closes one eye and growls into thin air. She grabs as many stars as she can muster and then throws them all at once, their light showering down around us. I go up behind the girls and whisper in their ears.

“All seven girls are plucking stars from their sockets and holding them out or dropping them in the sand, throwing them at each other like snowballs. The smallest has pulled off her shirt and tied it around her head, and she closes one eye and growls into thin air. She grabs as many stars as she can muster and then throws them all at once, their light showering down around us. I go up behind the girls and whisper in their ears.

“Uncle George is sad,” I tell them. “Go give him a hug.”

They crowd around him and surround him with their tiny hands, kissing his ears and his eyelids.

“We have to find him,” he says. “What happens if we can’t find him?”

Arthur and I look at each other, but neither of us has an answer.

The old man says we need to leave the boat behind, that the little girls are wet and hungry and we should head home, wherever that may be. Although we have difficulty getting George to move, we promise to come back in the morning and look. The moon is huge in the distance and there is a faint light below it, and we move toward it in hope of finding some sign of the world as we knew it again. We walk and walk down the beach
behind the old man for what seems hours or even days, all sense of time and reality severed with Emile gone missing. George and Arthur are both covered in tired children – they look like Catalpa trees, their skinny children fruits swaying unconsciously in rhythm with the rest of the parade. I hold the smallest in my arms, her tiny black head resting on the thread of my collarbone, and I can feel the pulse of her heart against mine, her *rum-boom rum-boom* a beat to keep pace inside. Every once in a while Arthur looks back to find my eyes, and I know then that even the most adventurous of souls get scared when the way forward is not certain.

As we walk, the last streams of acid let my mind wander out into the ocean and back again to the land, up the hills we pass and into thin stands of olive grove, the waving silver grasses that bend their heads back and forth toward the moon. I am here and not, an old woman who has lived years, a babe just coming into existence. I imagine the little one at my chest is actually my child, a girl I must show the world to. I begin to sing.

*Oh say, let us fly, dear.*

We will ride in hot air balloons. Travel to continents and isles unknown, to swim with fishes and with whales, to wash our feet in the convergence of many rivers, in the suck and rise of salty tides.

*Ho high, the moon is on fire.*

I will teach her the names of the constellations and how to find her way, to sing and dance and ride a bicycle, to grow things from the ground. I will show her how to keep her breath in her body, how to love without losing herself or falling behind.

*Come dear, in our flying machine.*

I will tell her stories every night before bed, and I will never leave her.

The old man leads us up away from the shore, and a dim light at the crest of the hill grows brighter and brighter until I see it is a lantern, hanging from the hand of a figure in the
dark. As we get closer, the light throws itself across the space and the figure steps toward us. George cries out and breaks into a run. Emile, alive and well on two feet, breathing and smiling in all his pieces, opens his arms to welcome us back home.

*Up, we go up, up we go.*

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8 Will this be me, someday? Am I already here?
THINGS WE FOUND WHEN the WATER WENT DOWN

Initial compilation of research for “Causation, symptoms and impacts of hydracy: comorbid water-related addictions, eco-emotional traumas, and manic depressive or psycho-schizoid response in women of related and unrelated descent.” Conducted with support from the University of Wisconsin’s Doctoral Program in Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography and Eco-Psychology, and in conjunction with grants from the National Science Foundation, the New England Journal of Medicine, and the Wisconsin Historical Society, Sept 2007 – May 2014. See “Influential Texts” in Appendix A for referential material.

flood, n. /flʌd/ 1. an overflowing or irruption of a great body of water over land not usually submerged; a profuse and violent outpouring of water; an inundation, a deluge.

The flood of the Madison Isthmus lasted for three days in May of 2001, beginning on the 14th, a Monday morning. Gusts of wind spun Lakes Mendota and Monona into a frenzy until they lapped at the land bridge of the city with white-wave tongues, anatopic ocean barrels rolling in fresh water. Thunder muffled the morning. East-bound traffic around the Capitol Square slowed behind blurring windshields, the stream of headlights dimming in humid air. The spring leaves of trees inside the Arboretum grew electric green with each lightning strike. Rain fell harder, and people on the sidewalks hunched under their umbrellas. Others watched from beneath caves, wet-cheeked, as the storm drains overflowed. Classes at the university were canceled, and the student dorms evacuated. The line between dry land and lake pushed farther inward. On either side of the Isthmus, streets emptied of everything but water.

I was eighteen and working an after-school shift at the café on East Johnson when the Tenney Park Dam failed, spilling Mendota even farther into the city. At four p.m., Radio WORT announced all blocks of Jenifer, Mifflin, and Williamson east of the Capitol closed until further notice. Five minutes later, the voice came through again to say Monona Bay had
burst across John Nolen Drive, West Washington Avenue, and South Park Street. *Find higher ground*, the DJ said through heavy static. *Shelters available. Call now for assistance, toll free.* I closed the café just as the basement began to fill, and rode my bike three blocks home through muddy water, my feet dipping in and out of the misplaced lake as I pedalled on the road. My family lives at a crest of land on the Isthmus, overlooking Mendota from high upon a hill of marsh, yet even there the lake had risen within feet of the house, my father’s old canoe floating keel-skyward, bobbing on a nylon line attached to a dock submerged some six feet down. My younger brother Ollie was wearing a yellow slicker and skipping rocks from our backyard, his wiry twelve-year-old legs sunk into a pair of green wellies. Already soaked, I sat down next to him.

“Hey Lena,” he said without looking up.

“Nice boots,” I said. “Where’s Dad?”

“In the attic,” he said.

“Is Mom up there?”

“No,” said Ollie. “The police called. Dr. Crow found her.”

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**fig. 2 Hydrographic map of Lake Mendota, Dane Co., WI.** Leonard Sewall Smith and the Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey. Milwaukee: Northwestern Litho. Co. 1906

**Transcript of Interview with Patrick Bailey (Father)**

7 July 2011. Bailey Family Residence, 640 E. Gorham St. Madison, WI 53703
Emalene Bailey: Tell me about the night you met Mom.

Patrick Bailey: What do you want to know?

EB: Everything.

PB: Everything?

EB: Everything.

PB: You mean, what she was wearing, all that?

EB: I said everything, Dad.

PB: Alright, alright. She certainly made an impression [laughs].

EB: How so?

PB: June 1982, I worked security for the Union Terrace after-hours. College kids are always trying to steal those chairs, you know, so they have somebody sit in the boathouse all night to watch the cameras. Didn’t pay much, but it was a good gig. I liked the quiet. Around four-thirty, just before the sky started getting light over Mendota, I hear this caterwauling come from somewhere in the duckweed. I mean really terrible singing. Awful. So I come outside, and there she is.

EB: On the dock?

PB: Skinny dipping. Singing and swimming in circles, maybe fifty yards out.

EB: So you arrested her.

PB: No. No, I wasn’t a cop. I couldn’t arrest people. I tried to give her a warning.

EB: A warning? Geez, Dad, just let a girl grab her clothes and run. High spirits, summer fun. All that.

PB: You better not be getting any ideas, Lena. I feel like I’m giving you ideas.

EB: Who me?

PB: You look just like her when you make that face.

EB: So you gave her a warning.

PB: I said I tried – she just laughed at me, wouldn’t swim in.

EB: And then you let her go.

PB: Not exactly. She was a very charming girl.

EB: Is that a euphemism for something dirty? Gross, Dad.
PB: [laughs] She kept saying the water was fine, wasn’t I hot, just a quick dip. Then she climbed up on the dock, dared me to race her out past the buoys, and took a running dive back into the lake. What can I say? I was nineteen. She was naked. It didn’t take much to convince me.

EB: So you jumped in after her.

PB: So I jumped in after her. Sometimes I think I’ve spent my whole life jumping in after your mother.

EB: Did you kiss her?

PB: After she kicked my ass in that race, she kissed me. In the middle of the lake. And then again under the dock, and on top of a kayak in the boathouse –

EB: Okay, stop.

PB: You said you wanted to know everything.

EB: I changed my mind.

PB: Mercurial, just like her.

EB: I’ve never been very good at math, but June ‘82 plus nine is March ‘83. I was born in March of ’83.

PB: And my daughter says she’s no good at math.

EB: Seriously Dad. You’re saying I was an oops baby?

PB: [pauses] You were an oops, baby.

-- silence --

PB: Look, Lena. That doesn’t matter. Believe me. She was so excited to meet you. Best day of her life. Best day of my life, too. Don’t tell Ollie I said that.

The first time my mother disappeared, she was twenty-seven years old. She slipped out the lakeside window of our upstairs bathroom on a length of knotted bed-sheets in the middle of the night, just like people do in the movies. Dad used to take us fishing near Picnic Point in a wooden canoe he kept tied up to the dock
in the backyard, and the next morning it was gone. A few nights later, the University of Wisconsin Aquatic Patrol motored up to the dock, Dad’s canoe trolling sideways in the water behind them. Ollie and I were playing catch-a-minnow at the shore with head lamps, and I remember the way the intermittent blue-and-red flashing from the sirens caught and scattered against the swarm of mayflies buzzing under the floodlights on our house. Dad didn’t say much that night. The missing persons report I found at the Dane County Records Office lists Raymer’s Cove as the “official recovery point” for the canoe, so I can understand now why he would’ve been quiet back then. The tent colony just north of there has always been a transient community; limnology graduate students, homeless folks, farmers’ market interns looking for an open patch to grow some organic weed. As far as Dad knew, my mother was living out there. She was raped and dead. She was in a polygamous love rhombus with the limnology students. She was leaving him and moving to the moon.

That summer I was seven, Ollie almost two, and Dad was driving double shifts for the bus company, so our neighbor, Mrs. Jamuna Bharati Shrestha of the Katmandu Shresthas, watched Ollie while I rode around the neighborhood on my teal two-wheel Huffy. I liked Mrs. Shrestha because she smelled of the cumin and ginger from her family’s restaurant – Himal Chuli, the Nepalese place on State Street – and she let me go wherever I wanted as long as I told her first. I remember biking the six blocks from our East Gorham house to the Capitol Square library branch, being allowed to dress myself – this was a big deal – and eating nothing but popsicles and watermelon all summer. There are three photos of me from 1990 in our family records, and in all of them I am wearing the same Rainbow Brite t-shirt, my mouth stained a savage, cherry red which seems to leak into my teeth like blood. In retrospect, Dad did the best he could given that he was over-worked and probably
heartbroken, but most of my memories from that summer involve very little parental supervision.

About a week after the police found Dad’s canoe, an envelope addressed only to me – “LENA BABY” written in black ink – appeared in the mailbox. There was no return address, but I recognized the familiar swoop of my name in my mother’s handwriting. I took the envelope up to the second floor bathroom and sat down in the claw-foot tub. Inside the envelope was a single sheet of paper. It was thin and cold to the touch, as if it had been kept inside an icebox. The typing was neat and even, no mistakes. I read it once, and then I read it again. I read it a third time out loud, my voice bouncing against the pale gray walls. I had no idea what “the North Country” meant, but there was never any snow in Wisconsin during June, so I knew it had to be somewhere far away. I put the letter back in its envelope, slid it between some sheets in the linen closet, and went outside to find Mrs. Shrestha, who was feeding stale roti to half-grown goslings from the dock with Ollie. I asked if I could go for a bike ride.

“As long as you’re back by six,” she said, and reached to grasp the back of his t-shirt as he leaned precariously over the water.

At the library, I pored over National Geographic magazines in an attempt to decipher where my mother might be. The librarian told me there were only certain places on Earth where it was cold enough to have snow cover in June. That during the summer months in these places, sometimes the sun didn’t even set. That it could be light out all night long. I asked her to help me make a list where these things were possible, and I photocopied the corresponding maps from atlases. After dinner that night, I took the letter out of the linen closet, taped the maps to my bedroom walls, and marked my favorite speculative locations with little yellow pins. I imagined my mother building igloos with the Inuit in the Arctic
circle. Racing sled dogs across the Siberian tundra. Dancing around the North Pole with her arms spread wide, smiling up to an everlasting sun. I read the letter again, and wondered where she might take me “next time” she ran away, and what Dad and Ollie would do while we were gone. I wondered how I could assure my two-year old brother there was nothing to fear in a world where our mother was missing. How long I would have to wait until “soon” came to pass, and she would actually come home.

**Senator Feingold Praises Community Response, Rescue Efforts**

18 May 2003

Dane County citizens around Lakes Mendota and Monona have been left stranded without electricity, potable water, or medical care since record rainfalls last weekend pushed flood waters into parts of Madison, Maple Bluff, Middleton, and Monona township. Luckily for some, local legend George Crow has taken it upon himself to see that they are brought to safety. "Mr. Crow offered to use his 25' vessel for search and rescue efforts," said Asst. Police Chief Noble Wray, who estimated on Monday that as many as 35,000 people have been severely affected by the storms. "Already, he’s found 68 folks. After spending most of his life on this lake, Mr. Crow knows the area better than anyone. We’re lucky to have him." Water levels still stand at more than six feet in some areas, and state officials have requested federal response funding. In a phone call from his Washington, D.C. office, Senator Russ Feingold (D) lauded Crow, saying that, “as a long-respected member of this community, people like Sailboat Crow exemplify the spirit of the great state of Wisconsin.”

**Isthmus**, *n.* /ˈɪðʒəməz/ 1. a narrow strip of land, bordered on both sides by water, connecting two bodies of land. 2. *anatomy, zoology* - a connecting, narrow, part, organ, or passage, especially when structures or cavities larger than itself.

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Interview (cont.)
7 July 2011. Bailey Family Residence, 640 E. Gorham St. Madison, WI 53703

EB: Why didn’t you explain when you brought Mom back in 1991?
PB: We didn’t think you were old enough.

EB: Ollie wasn’t, but I was almost nine. I knew something was up.

PB: You’re a smart cookie. It’s why I call you Twinkle Toes McGillicudy.

EB: That doesn’t even make sense, Dad.

PB: I know. I know. It’s my fault.
EB: That’s not what I meant.

PB: I guess I thought you’d never know the difference.

EB: But she was so still and swollen, like someone’d filled her with helium and tied her to the floor.

PB: Mom was – [ clears throat] – it was a hard time for her.

EB: I know that now, but I didn’t understand at the time, and I couldn’t explain anything to Ollie. He had nightmares for months after she came home, did he ever tell you that?

PB: No.

EB: You remember the winter of 1994, when he was in kindergarten and sick for weeks? She took him out of school one day. The nurse called me down to the office and told me he had a fever. I came home and the back door was wide open. There was a letter on the dock that said Ollie loved orangutans and they were going to Jakarta, a double trail of boot prints across the ice. I got Mrs. Shrestha and we found Mom lying in the woods on her back, Ollie beside her with his face painted orange and red, shivering in the middle of the snow.

PB: Where was I?

EB: I don’t know, where were you?

PB: Lena –

EB: Hmm.

PB: Grandpa used to tell me that your mother was made of light, but I wanted to think that I could contain it, that maybe your mother would grow out of it. I had this image of our lives in that house and it took me a long time to realize it would never happen.

EB: What about us?

PB: Ollie doesn’t worry me, but every time you disappear around a corner, my heart spins a little in my chest. Ever since you were young. Doesn’t really slow down until I see you come back around again.

When my mother first returned, Ollie and I clung to her like infant primates, even sleeping in our parents’ bed, or on the floor beside them. But as we grew more aware of her erratic behavior, both of us started to keep a safe distance until we could determine what sort of mood she was in. Sudden fits of anger made her snarl at us during dinner. She threw heirloom silver in the lake, broke boxes of ornaments against the icy boulevard on Christmas Eve. Melancholy meant the house devolved into a mess of soiled laundry and cat litter while
she lay curled on the floor of the attic balcony, staring out across the lake. Dad was still driving bus, but he started working weekend jobs for Brumley’s Clock Shop on Williamson Street, and he used to bring the smaller pieces home so he could sit with her while he fixed them. I loved to watch as he plucked the parts from the backs of the clocks, the gears and screws and springs like tiny mechanical bones that needed mending. I used to think maybe all my mother needed was a clock-smith. Someone to pull out all her pieces, clean them in oil, polish them in cloth. She never spoke, but every once in a while I caught her making eye contact with him, staring as if she were trapped somewhere in her skin. Almost ten years passed like that, my mother in a state of perpetual emotional flux, Ollie and I orbiting around her, holding our breath for the next shift in her weather-pattern moods. Dad had given up almost entirely, his whole life suspended from any sort of stable forward momentum.

One warm fall Saturday in October of 2000, she was talkative and cheerful for the first time in months and she took me to the Farmers’ Market. We mulled over quarts of grape tomatoes, munched on rhubarb tart, weighed the purchase of Halloween pumpkins versus several pounds of Amish-grown cider apples. I stopped at the King Street Bakery cart and lost her in the crowd. Figuring she’d wandered ahead I kept going, making three full loops of the square before I realized she was gone. With my arms burdened in produce and autumn prairie flowers, I walked a few blocks to look at Mrs. Shrestha’s restaurant.

It was busy inside, the Saturday crowd buzzing over lunch. I went behind the counter and sat down on a stool near the stove. Ollie and I were old enough not to need watching anymore, but Mrs. Shrestha was always happy to see me when I stopped by. She put her roti-floured hands on either side of my face as we said hello.

“Has Mom been in this afternoon?” I asked.
“Not today, Lena,” she said. “Are you hungry? Have some momocha. You’re so thin these days. The peanuts and coriander will be good for your belly.”

She brought me a plate, but I was too anxious to eat anything. I put them in a carton and left, my prairie flowers wilting in the strange October heat.

The house was empty when I got home. I set the bouquet in a glass at the kitchen window, called for Ollie. At twelve he was taller than me, but quiet like Dad, easy in his body. He was standing in the shallows beside the dock, feeding grapes to a school of fat, steel-green carp as they swarmed around his feet.

“Have you seen Mom?”

“No.”

She told me once that the sound of Mendota flowing into the cove gave her a better sense of reality, and watching my brother stand beside the lake, I suddenly realized where she must have gone. She’d said that to feel the water on her toes helped remind her she weighed something against the earth, and that she was always worried about forgetting it, like the simple fact of gravity could be ignored and thus, erased. Of all the things she’d said and done, this seemed to me the craziest of all, because by seventeen I knew only too well how it felt to be held down; I worried only about where she might disappear to when she went away. Although I didn’t at the time, I think I understand now what it was like for her, barely able to recognize the tethers which kept her attached to us. But that afternoon, I had too much nervous energy and I thought maybe if I could catch her with her feet in the water, I could remind her the next time she forgot.

“Want to race out to Raymer’s?” I asked Ollie. He nodded, and dropped the rest of the grapes in the water. The fish roiled at the surface, oily tails splashing as they fought over the moldy fruit.
We rode as fast as we could from our house to the Memorial Union, west toward the base of the peninsula, weaving in and out of the walking students, joggers, and stroller-pushing mothers. As we moved onto the rounded end of Picnic Point, the trail began to clear of people, and we raced side-by-side, glints of sun-blue lake streaming past in the semi-naked undergrowth beside us. We slowed along the University Biocore Prairie, its low-lying marsh turned to sand as Mendota had ebbed and flowed with the seasons. The trail tipped and climbed.

The late-afternoon air was chilled by the time we arrived at the tent colony. During the summers, it was always full of folks tending to gardens, lounging in pup tents, writing and watching the preserve bloom. But as the weather grew colder, the graduate students and the East-side hippie families migrated back toward the city center, and by midwinter the only people who still lived there were the homeless men who’d been kicked out of Porchlight or Grace Episcopal for being belligerent one too many times. I saw three men seated around a kindling fire. They waved to me. I waved back.

At the end of the trail, the parks department had built a wooden look-out, and Ollie and I left our bikes to go farther on foot. The bleached stairwell led down to meet the cove, its sandy basin peppered with streams of rotting bubble algae. At dusk the lake seems to go
for miles, its northern banks dissolving in a mirage of land and sky, and I scanned each kayak, canoe, and floating log for a hint of my mother’s form. I took off my tennis shoes and set my own feet in the lake, as if I could summon her to the shore. But she was not there, and the heat of the afternoon was long gone from Mendota’s chilly autumn water.

Not more than thirty yards away, a sailboat was anchored and a man on deck was pulling the canvas from the mast. I’d seen him many times before, drifting with his bright blue sails flung out to catch the wind. Dad says that Dr. Crow has lived on his boat every summer since before anyone in Madison can remember, but he always disappears in the colder months. No one sees him again until Mendota thaws in the spring.

“Awful late for you kids to be this far out,” he called.

I wanted to wade out to the boat, to ask him where he went in winter.

“Let’s go, Lena,” said Ollie. “I forgot my headlamp.”

The front porch light was on when we got home. Our house was dark, quiet except for the hushshhush of the lake as it filtered through the windows. Dad was asleep on the couch. The cordless phone lay on his stomach, a faint white blur which moved up and down with his breath. Ollie went into his room and shut the door. I moved through the house and out toward the dock. As I drew closer, I saw a Ball jar nestled in the marsh grass, glowing, just above the water line. I picked it up, feeling the cool of the lake on the glass. There were two sheets of paper inside, curled and tied with colored ribbon. I counted thirty-seven fireflies, glinting as they flew back and forth across the jar. I brought it up to the second floor bathroom and sat in the claw-foot tub. I tapped the lid to make the bugs fall down against the bottom, and pulled the papers out. Without the overhead lamp, the insects cast enough
of a glow so that if I held the letters near my face, I could almost read by the light of the brilliant, yellow bodies.

After I read them, twice to be sure, I went into my room and held the jar up to my wall, searching on all the maps I had for the words “Belle Isle.” For a place in the world where the Indian and Atlantic waters merged. According to the letters, my mother was now somewhere on a cod-fishing boat, or swimming against the open sea. I’d never been to the ocean before, but I was sure I couldn’t be misunderstanding something so vital about geography – how had this jar traveled so far unbroken? Where had she found the fireflies this far north, so late in the year? She’d vanished at the market only hours before. Surely this was a joke. She was nearby, watching through a hole, ready to leap out and say: Where next? Two girls against the world. Onward.

I pulled the shower curtain aside, running my finger along cracks in the tile. I opened the medicine cabinet. Looked under the linens. Behind the sweating metal plumbing of the toilet. I moved into the hallway, listening for a change in sound as I walked, a sign she might be hidden in the walls. Creaks followed my weight across our old wooden floors, down the staircase, but when I stopped, so did they. She was not in my parents’ closet, between

**Letter 2 (Copy) Dated 3 October 2000.**

dear girl,
I hitched a ride on a cod boat headed east across the Atlantic from Belle Isle, and wouldn’t you know your momma is a natural fisherman. I stink to high heaven of fish guts and brines, but the boys don’t seem to mind. Most of them address me as Missus Bailey, but a few have started calling me Retta, and I like that. Do you remember when I used to show you where the Pleiades would fall into the lake if you wished for it hard enough? The stars out here seem close somehow, like they’re just about to plunk themselves down into the ocean. I’ll bring a little cosmic fire ball to keep by your bed at night. We’ll put it in a jar, and then you’ll never have to sleep in the dark.

**Letter 3 (Copy) Dated 3 October 2000.**

dear girl,
bad day today. It’s cold here, darling. I went looking for the intersection of the Indian and the Atlantic, hired a guide to show me the way. I swam and swam, but the water was so icy it made my tits hurt, just like when you were a baby, and I had to turn back. You were always so hungry, eating me up with that tiny pink mouth. Sometimes I thought you would never be full. Tell your father that the Cape is empty of everything it was when we were young.
clothing fragrant with the scent of them combined. The blankets on their bed were rumpled but empty. Dad was still asleep on the couch, so I crept around the main floor in darkness, peering in the kitchen cabinets. She was not on the deck. I soaked myself up to the waist wading around in the water, feeling for secret tunnels in the sand-shale with my toes. She was not in the marsh grass where I’d found the Ball jar. She was not in the old paper birch beside the shore. When I turned back toward the house, my heart beat harder in my chest as I realized where I had not looked: a dim bulb in the attic shown through the window. I felt foolish for searching high and low like a child on a scavenger hunt, and I rushed into the house. I climbed up to the attic. But someone must have left the light on, because when I arrived the only trace of my mother I could find was me.

Interview (cont.)
7 July 2011. Bailey Family Residence, 640 E. Gorham St. Madison, WI 53703

EB: Why did they ever let her come home if she was so unstable?

PB: That was my decision, actually. She stopped responding to the drugs, and they didn’t think she would hurt anyone, so I signed her out.

EB: But what were you planning to do? Keep her in the attic?

PB: No. No. I guess I didn’t really have a plan. It just broke my heart to watch her there when I knew it wasn’t doing any good.

EB: And then she went back anyway. Maybe you should’ve left her there the first time.

PB: So she could stare at the wall all day? No.

EB: If I end up like her, I hope you lock me up.

PB: You’ve got too much of her in you to stay still. You need to see the sky, put your feet in the water. You need to move.

EB: They have lake view rooms. I bet they have exercise bikes at the loony bin. No matter how hard you pedal, you’ll always stay in one place.

PB: Not good enough for my girl.
Although no one would admit it, I knew when my mother hadn’t returned by morning that she’d disappeared again. That next day it was much colder outside, scarf-and-sweater weather as Mrs. Shrestha says, and I shivered as I walked to the library with the letters and the jar. The librarian made me leave the fireflies at the circulation desk – no insects allowed – but she helped me look on the maps in the back room of the international records section. We discovered several things: Belle Isle is both an uninhabited island in Labrador, Canada, and the northernmost peak of the Appalachian Mountain chain. Just below Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of the African continent, the convergence of the Indian and the Atlantic oceans occurs at a point somewhere near 34°50’ south and the 20° eastern meridian. I went home to map the possibilities on my wall, drawing red dotted lines in arcs and zig-zags back and forth across the water. If I acted like my mother was a pirate, or some kind of new-age explorer wandering all over the world, it was much easier to pretend nothing was actually wrong.
That winter was especially blustery, and each time there was a storm at night, I used to take my blankets to the attic and watch the snow fall on the frozen lake, the whole city glowing in its own soft, golden cold. But I did not miss my mother like I had when I was little. There was no thrum inside my chest to be near the heat of her in the dark. A certain kind of peace settled over us without her there, like she had left the windows open and a pool of stale breath had poured finally from our house. As months went by, I reread her letters less frequently, and stopped going to the library after school to look for clues. Ollie seemed to grow inches overnight, as if he had been curled over on his spine and learned suddenly how to straighten himself out again. The hole my mother left behind was there and ever-present, but it was an honest absence. By the spring of 2001, I stopped wishing I could find her altogether. Instead, I hoped only that whatever weight she’d found would keep her where she’d landed. That maybe she’d stay away for good.

Then that May, the night before the flood, I came home from my job at the café on East Johnson and my mother was sitting on the couch in our living room. Dad and Mrs. Shrestha were there too, at either side of her like sentinels. Ollie stood in the corner, as far away from the couch as he could manage without leaving the room. It’d been more than six months since she’d disappeared at the Farmers’ Market, and there’d been no more letters, no notes. I didn’t know whether to touch her to make sure she was really there, or turn around and run.

“You’re home,” I said.

“I’m here,” she said.

“Where’ve you been?”

She looked at Dad, asking for permission to speak.
“Your mother has been ill,” said Mrs. Shrestha. “She has been in therapy.”

“Great,” I said. “Good for her. Next time maybe I can ride along.”

“Come sit,” Mrs. Shrestha said. “I brought your favorite takari from Himal.”

“I’m really not hungry, thanks.”

“Lena,” said my mother. “Let me explain.”

Her voice was strange, like it’d been filtered through tin. She spoke so quietly it made me angry.

“Yeah, I want to hear all about it. Everything. Did you bring me a fallen star from the ocean? How’s the weather in South Africa? Or were you in South America again this time. Brazil, maybe? Colombia? I would go to Guyana if I had the chance. I bet you would like it there. The Peoples’ Temple at Jonestown is looking for new members since all the other crazy folks killed themselves.”

“Lena,” said Dad. “That’s enough.”

“It is,” I said. “I’ll be in my room. Pretend I went to Antarctica or something. Somewhere with lots of light, and plenty of water. Really far away. Difficult to reach.”

Before anyone could respond, I’d already run up the stairs. I locked myself in my room and refused to answer the door, even when it was Ollie’s turn to knock. I stared at the maps, the Ball jar with the desiccated fireflies all crumpled at the bottom. Then I snapped. I pulled the colored paper from the walls, ripping through continents, mountains, river valleys. When everything had been stripped away, I was so angry I couldn’t do anything but sleep.

I woke very early in the morning to the sound of water running, and when I got out of bed, the wood was wet beneath my feet, a pool forming through the crack under my door. I came down the hallway to the bathroom and found my mother sitting in the middle of the tub, water overflowing the basin and spilling across the floor. She looked surprised, and she
reached for the faucet as if she were going to turn it off. But instead she spun the handle and
the water roared out, streaming past my feet. Her clothes were soaked and I saw how skinny
she was, her ribs and her breasts pressing against the wet cotton of her slip. A lot of high
school students would probably think it was weird to see their mother practically naked like
that, but honestly she’d never acted much like a mother anyway, so it didn’t really bother me.
The slip was oversized, something I’d once worn and paraded in front of an old dressing
mirror, my attire an unintentional farce of her own unraveling image; the gaudy coral lipstick
smeared across our teeth, our slender necks draped in strings of cheap freshwater pearls, two
pairs of dirty feet pressed into two pairs of pleather pumps. As I watched her shiver in the
tub, I realized how young she was, that she’d been a child raising children, and from within
some sudden urge to care for her in return, I asked if she was cold. She didn’t respond. She
just kept touching the scar across her middle, from when they’d pulled Ollie out.

“Did you swim here, baby girl?” my mother said with a furrow in her brow. “You’re
not supposed to be this far out on open water without a life jacket.”

Then she sank herself under. I moved over the tub and watched as she began to
blow bubbles, the fabric of the slip wafting through the water like smoke. She held one hand
up, still submerged, and spread her fingers against the surface. She opened her mouth. She
started to swallow. I grabbed at her elbow and tried to pull her out, but the weight of her wet
body was more than I could lift, so I ran out of the bathroom and across the hall to my
parents’ room, the water spilling after me. Dad was asleep. By the time we came back to the
bathroom, my mother had disappeared out the open window, the faucet closed and dripping
into the tub, a trail of wet footprints glistening on the cold tile floor.
A flood is a storm for the perpetually hungry, for those who must swallow everything within reach. When I think of the flood on the Isthmus now, it is in strings of verbs like “seep” and “saturate” and “roil,” but clean would be just as honest. Everything it left behind when the water receded was new. I think a flood can be cold and mean, consuming in slow gulps or in the quiet press, press of fluid against solid. In simple terms, ours was just too much water with nowhere to go, although I think it also embodied a certain kind of balance. Anything left empty was filled in the end.

It’s true that Ollie and Dad and I are still alive, but I’m not sure I would go so far as to say we survived her. Unless you think of my mother as a natural disaster. I could think of her like that. After everything that’s happened, Dad says she wasn’t meant to settle. He always says this as if he feels guilty for containing her somehow, like he thinks she would’ve been fine had he let her go. But I lost her at the Farmers’ Market, and it was as much my fault she drowned in that ward as it was his, or even the flood’s, so I wish he’d understand that and stop blaming himself so much. I never saw Dr. Crow at the morgue or her funeral or anything, but I think he knows who I am. Every once in a while I see him on Mendota. I wave sometimes. He always waves back.

Someday I want to ask him about the people he found. That building on Governor’s Island used to be for all the musical instruments the patients played with in art therapy, but
apparently when my mother was there, they didn’t let people play music anymore, because
after the water drained out of the building, it was full of rusty trumpets and tambourines
missing their metal jingles, a bunch of violins and cellos without any strings.

If I’d been writing the article, the one about them finding the “missing patient,” I
would’ve described all of that a little more. I went to visit the ruins while I was doing
research, and I feel like she was probably okay with everything when the water started rising.
It’s an old, cagey place except for the windows. They let in so much light it’s like the walls
aren’t even there. I imagine it was kind of pretty, the way he found her. Floating around like
her body didn’t weigh a thing.
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