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# Tick Check and Other Stories

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# Tick Check and Other Stories

Claire Beyette

*April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019*

Advised by Marilyn Sides



*For my family*



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## Tick Check

My mother, sister and I stand naked in the Safford Campsite facilities cabin. Our bodies not hidden, but sheltered from the outside world by layers: these walls, the pine forest, the ocean. Beneath our toes, the boards are gritty. There is no toilet; just a long, wooden bench on one wall, a shower head, a sink. *Not Potable*— a red-barred sign warns. Outside, the sun hangs in the sky like a teabag seeping chamomile. Smell the floral scent on the salt breeze coming through the pine-slat walls.

My sister raises one arm, letting it droop at the elbow to rest on the crown of her head. I stand behind her letting my eyes fall over her armpit; around the curve of one breast; across her waist, lightly dimpled with dusky purple lines where the band of her athletic shorts pressed into her skin.

“Other side.”

She turns and raises her other arm. A lizard sidles up between the slatted floorboards, then edges back into the shadows, careful not to draw our attention. This— the ritual of our daily tick check—is a simple enough precaution against Lyme disease. Stand still on one of the island’s interior paths and you will see them crawling through the pine needles. At night, by flash light, they are visible through the rayon tent floor, drawn to us like iron filings to a magnet.

While I look over my sister, my mother rests one foot on the rough bench, smoothing a ragged nail with the edge of a quarter. The sunshine dripping through the skylight collects in the dimples on her back. In the past she has conducted the checks, but yesterday she dropped her bifocals off the back of her kayak, so today I take her place.

On the other end of the bench, our clothes are quarantined in a pile. Now, after a few days spent on the island, they are mottled with sweat and other stains. It feels nice to be free of

them. My sister drops her hand to brush away the grains of sand pressed into her side by the edge of her bikini cup. Flecks of sea glass glitter blue and green among the other grains.

“Wait. I’m not finished.”

The arm flexes, snakes back over the head. Her skin is high thread count— like satin rippling over the divots between her ribs. It glows from beneath. I run my thumbs along her shoulders and down her back, feeling for tick-bumps. She has just crested her full height; the muscles along her spine are taunt and corded, as if they have been hauling her upwards.

"Have you seen that picture where you try to spot the deer ticks in a poppy seed muffin?"

"I'd probably just eat it."

She swings her hair across her other shoulder. The hairs at the nape of her neck are pale gold and curly. I brush them aside to examine the dark speck at the base of her hairline— a skin tag— then move down her legs, pausing over freckles. Her calves hum with the effort of keeping still.

“I found one. Wait—wait—no, just dirt.”

Through the plank wall dividing the cabin, the groan of tired pipes, a burst of water, a shriek. We straighten, ears erect.

"Pullywog?" Mom's knee still rests bent on the bench; it is a revolutionary pose— that of Washington on the Delaware.

"I c-can't t-t-talk Aunt J-Jill." A prepubescent voice, blue-lipped.

"He's freezing his *balls* off." The word 'balls' announced gleefully. A wet smack. The splatter of water hitting the floor. "Hey!"

"Make sure you check all over. Don't forget between your toes. Get your Dad to do your head."

"K- k- kay, Aunt Jill."

In this cabin surrounded by sea and forest, our smiles are older than we are. I run my hands over the sandpaper wrinkles of my sister's ankles. "All clear."

She steps aside and bends to pick over our clothes, flicking the dirt between the floorboards. My mother steps into her place.

"Top to bottom?"

"Mhm."

She bends her head and flips her short hair up with two hands. Spinal ridges rise one by one between her shoulders. She is darker than my sister but she too runs blond at the base of her neck. I sort between the spikes and loops of hair that escape her grip. When I finish, she lifts her chin and runs two fingers under the curve of her jaw.

"Is that one?"

"No, just a mole." We are all prone to moles.

She stretches an arm up and all along her body curves shift upwards— the protean rolling of waves on the sand. A purple nipple swivels into view. I am fascinated by all the colors her skin contains: blue, and red, and green, and gold, traced in places by sparkling veins of quartz. I use my fingertips to separate freckles from the bumps along the underside of her arm. Her skin is softer than my sister's; like linen, the wrinkles echo writing.

Tracking my motion towards the floor, she shifts her weight and raises the other arm. I follow from wrist to ankle, studying the effortless stacking of her joints. She has taught her muscles the art of looseness— a peacefulness that allows settling. Three days ago, when I stepped off the plane and hugged her, I was surprised to feel my nose bump against her forehead. We were once the same height.

"Where are the tweezers? Thanks. You've got one behind your knee."

Shiny black, with a red dot on its back, the tick releases under the tweezers, its legs crushing in on itself. I drop it between the floorboards. It is the magic of this place that everything unwanted falls away beneath our feet. On the other side of the wall, the tussle bangs through the door and runs shrieking back towards the campsite.

"Thank you." She returns to the bench and I straighten where she stood. My sister steps up behind me.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

I close my eyes and feel myself in hers. With each breath, I fill the corners of the cabin. I have gathered my first roundness in the bow of my stomach. The muscles of my legs that once ached with adolescent longing, are now steady under her fingertips. I both reach and settle, like a skipping stone that for an infinite moment hangs at the top of its arc.

Know this— I too have been effaced in the bathroom mirror. It has used my fingernails to stretch and pinch and pop. I have shared dressing-room stalls where the lighting layered in my pores like sand and huddled my nakedness in the corner while I changed. I have watched my mother grasp two handfuls of herself over the top of her jeans in the locker-room mirror, and later copied that motion. I have left my shade in the half-reflective windows of subway cars and been the paler for it. In blank surfaces, I have found flaws so big they suffocate.

But in this cabin seventy miles from everything, standing naked with my mother and my sister, I am echoed again and again. My ankles. My ears. My hands. My thighs. How they were, how they are, how they will be. Our eyes are mirrors that, turned towards each other, reflect into infinity. How boundless the beauty of existing in spectrum! Shining in a beam of light that raced

a hundred million miles from the center of the sun to burst through this skylight. Come stand here and feel it—the countless colors waiting to crystalize on the surface of your skin.

## Magnolia Creek

It is easy to sleep on the school bus. The driver leaves the lights off and there are only five of us on this route so we spread out, the empty like seats airbags cushioning us against each other. With so few bodies to heat it up, the bus never gets warm but the chilliness is clinically soporific, like a hospital waiting room. Tyler, who flirts by offering up trivia facts like they are flowers, once told me that almost everything hypnotic is found prenatal. Supposedly, the gentle swaying of the bus reminds me of my mother's gait, the hum of the engine the shushing of blood through her veins.

It also helps that I am tired— so un-fucking-believably tired. For the past few months my father and I have been locked in an exhausting game of leap-frog, him staying up later and later, listening for the sound of the bathroom door, and me staying up even later to fool him. At this point I'm too tired to care who wins. It has been feeling less like my life, than a TV show I'm only half paying attention to; I'm just waiting for the end of the season to see who caves first.

Breakfasts, which are quiet and— for me— include disappointingly little caffeine, always begin the same way. When my alarm rings I gather my uniform under the covers with me and spend a few more blissful moments floating in a cloud of comforters as I wait for it to warm up. This never lasts; the clanking of pans drags me from my cocoon. Downstairs, my father stands by the stove wearing the purple slippers I got him the Christmas I was ten after reading that purple was the color of kings. The now threadbare remnants of his royal vestments.

“What do you want for breakfast, Michaela?” he asks over his shoulder. I am angry at the bags under his eyes. They accuse me. They disrupt the narrative I tell myself, which is that this is something he is doing to me, not me to him.

“Coffee,” I say, dropping my book bag by the door.

“Coffee isn’t an option. You can choose oatmeal or eggs and bacon.” He has reverted to the speech patterns he used when I was little, clean choices delivered without emotion.

“I’m just going to get a cup when I get to school.”

“But not in my house. Not so long as Dr. Peroski says no caffeine. Oatmeal or eggs?”

“I don’t care. I’ll have whatever Dr. Peppy recommends.” We’re not trying to wound each other with these words, anymore. We lob them softly, like powdery snowballs that fall apart wherever they strike. I push whatever food he chooses around my plate until the school bus comes and he can no longer keep me there.

And so, without a caffeine jolt to keep me up, I curl into the side of my backpack and drift pleasantly in and out of consciousness. While I doze, I chew on a strand of my hair, sucking it in and out, in and out, in and out.

I’m proud of my hair— Victoria’s Secret model hair, falling to my waist in unbroken, coppery waves. I take excellent care of it, brushing it with short strokes and working a faintly-exotic-smelling oil into the ends. Still, whenever I’m falling asleep, I daydream about how it would feel to shave it all off. In my fantasies, I always use a straight razor— one of those old flip ones that men use in lumberjack-themed ads. It is heavy in my hand. Heavy like you know it is expensive just by picking it up, or that it is old, but either way it’s high quality. I imagine the slight tug on my scalp as I slice through each strand. How the red tangles would look on the bathroom floor, like a discarded party dress. How it would feel to scrape the remaining stubble from my scalp with the blade. Light. Heady. Like puking.

The bus jolts rudely as it enters the school parking lot and I bang my head against the window. A sleepy grunt from behind me is wet and fleshy as a spit wad.

*Magnolia Creek.* Would they let me sleep in? Their website shows a rainbow of women smiling blankly. Everything, including their teeth is a calming shade of white so bright it's almost blue. Empty, like a house that's never been lived in. I can have that if I want. Maybe it would be worth it to float unencumbered on that empty stream of white. My heart thumps in my chest as if I've been running. When I place my hand on my chest, I can feel its beat through my breastbone.

I navigate a jock-free route to my locker and exchange my backpack for the bag of cosmetics I keep in there. I wear makeup so that I have an excuse to spend passing periods in the bathroom touching it up. My favorite before-class spot is the first-floor bathroom which is painted a pale minty-green, like chewing gum strips. A hospital color, though now it seems they are careful never to use it. Hospitals have to keep changing so they don't look like themselves, appearing, as they do, too often in horror movies.

Two girls are already in the bathroom, forehead to forehead by the far sink, when I arrive. I recognize one, Brianna Hardman, from several of my AP classes. She has a dark, lightly freckled complexion and is good at soccer, Model UN and flirting without seeming slutty. There are two groups of popular girls at Fairview Prep: the bitchy group and the nice group. She is part of the nice group, which does all the same stuff as the bitchy group but doesn't seem trashy doing it. I don't belong to any group—a fact of which I'm proud. I enjoy the freedom of floating between them or, better yet, remaining completely apart, untouched by all their petty dramas.

At the moment, Brianna is sobbing and not trying very hard to get herself under control. The other girl, who I don't know but is obviously a toady, is patting Brianna's arms and

shoulders, clearly drinking in the drama. I could try a different bathroom, but there's no guarantee I could find a free one before the bell rings, so I set my bag on the first sink and angle my body away from them, counting in my head the minutes until my next moment alone.

"And then Mom chewed me out, like, right in front of Lily. Why would she do that?" Brianna says, running the palms of her hands under her eyes so that a dark streak of mascara smeared across her cheek. "Like, now I'm just an example. I'm her big sister and now she's, like, only going to think of me like that," she says.

"So, it wasn't yours?" The friend leans forward on the sink blocking Brianna's face. I'm trying not to pay attention to them, to fade into the green tile walls, but their emotion is distracting. It keeps tugging my eyes back to them through the mirror.

"No, of course it was mine. You saw me buy it from Kevin," Brianna says resentfully. "But Mom didn't have to, like, you know. She could have waited until Lily was in bed before going apeshit on me. I, like, raised her when she was little."

"It's not your fault." The friend gives a sticky-fingered smile. Brianna hiccoughs with misery.

"I read to Lily every night before bed. I gave her her first pet. Mr. Bubbles," she says. "She's going to think I'm just a shitfaced junkie."

I attempt to close out the sniffles and focusing on brushing pale glitter across my cheek bones, but I'm angry. Chances for peacefulness are so difficult to find, I had counted on this one. The first bell rings and I reluctantly gather my supplies, radiating waves of hatred at both girls as the friend makes a production of blotting Brianna's face with paper towels.

*Magnolia Creek*, I think. Silence deep enough to drown the eyes as they whisper from the corners of the rooms. And all I would have to do to get there is nothing.

My dad chose the clinic at the University because it's the best, even though we have to drive forty-five minutes to get there, twice a week. I refuse to talk to him and whenever he tries to turn on the radio, I turn it off so that we have to sit in silence. From the moment we get in the car, until the moment we step out onto the driveway at home, we are in a sonic dead zone. I hope the sound of his heart deafens him.

The clinic walls are painted a chipper periwinkle. Hospitals struggle with the balancing act, trying to look young and relatable without sacrificing their authority. Two weeks ago, Dr. Peroski had on a trendy army-green jacket and floral top, but she made it look like scrubs anyways. I remember because the flowers, poppies, were distracting, like she'd come from surgery.

"How do you think the week went, Michaela?" she said. This is always her first question after she has installed me on the quilted armchair and roller-chaired herself opposite me. She already knows how the week went—as soon as I walk through the door a nurse wraps me in a paper gown covered in baby giraffes and forces me onto a scale backwards so they can see the number but I only can guess. The point of the question is to see whether I answer "great" (a lie) or "not great" (an understatement) and thus how cooperative I'll be that day. Two weeks ago was a "great" day. Her expression didn't change but I knew that internally she was rewording all her points to account for my open hostility.

"Would you be surprised to know that you lost weight again?" she asked.

I don't answer questions they already know the answer to. She wrote on her chart to give me a moment to change my non-answer then rolled her chair back a few inches. "This clearly isn't working Michaela," she said. "I think it's time we start investigating other paths."

“I like this path just fine.” I don’t, but it is satisfying to pretend.

“Let me tell you about some other options,” she said, not giving me a chance to speak before she continued. “There is an inpatient center nearby, Magnolia Creek. You could go, focus on getting your disorder under control without other distractions or stressors. They have a very high success rate.”

I was furious. Hidden cameras in the bathrooms, the bedrooms, everywhere. GTMO for mental cases.

“No fucking way. I’m not going to let them watch me like a fucking psych study.” The image of my dad shuffling alone through the house in his threadbare, royal-purple slippers burned in my brain. I watched him repeatedly open and close the refrigerator door, its light shining in the dark kitchen like a blinking eye.

“Observation is a necessary part of treatment,” she said. I stared at her shirt. How could she ignore the bloody poppies dripping down it?

“I’m not sick,” I shouted.

“Just take a look at the website.”

“No.”

“Alright, Michaela.” Thin lips. Finally. “If this is the path that you want to be on, you need to show me that it’s going somewhere. If you haven’t gained weight in the next three weeks, then we will choose an inpatient program.”

Of course—the medical “we”. She would make a discussion and I would live with it. “Three weeks?” I asked. I could do a lot with three weeks.

She hesitated. “Unless your potassium levels dip before then,” she said.

I slammed my back against the quilted chair.

This, not the weight, is what they're really worried about, and why I can't have any coffee— my potassium levels are dangerously low. Potassium is an electrolyte, a charged particle, that runs across your muscles allowing them to clench and unclench. And, because the heart is also a muscle, too little means first an arrhythmia, then a flat line. Every time a person throws up they lose potassium, which is why my levels are shit. The irony is that we are learning about this in AP biology right now. *Hypokalemia*. Too little potassium of the blood. Worth a full two points if you remember the Latin.

I left the office swearing that I would never go to Magnolia Creek, but that night, while I was waiting for my father to fall asleep, I flipped through the website. I wish I hadn't. They take all your belongings at the door, even your clothes, everything except for photographs, but, if I went, I wouldn't even bring any of those. There's no homework. No forcing dad to stay up to watch me. Just a drenching silence. Bigger than the silence in the car. Big enough, it seems, to dampen everything.

Before lunch, instead of my usual free period, I go to the school swim center. Once a year we are required to take a swim test. Everyone complains about having to miss a free period, but there is also a carnival air to being allowed to leave the main building in the middle of the day. Going from our blue and green plaid to seeing everyone in swimsuits is a gossip overload.

After fourth bell, I rush to the pool so that I can at least change in one of the locker-room bathroom stalls instead of out in the open. My swimsuit is baggy on me. I cinch up the straps as tight as possible, distorting the stripes into wavy lines. I don't have boobs anymore, but I still have a butt, which stretches my swimsuit into two angular points, poking out behind me like a joke. I'm desperate for a towel, but I'll have to walk all the way across the pool to get one.

Most people think that girls have eating disorders because they want to be beautiful but, because of self-esteem as buoyant as the Titanic, think that they're fat and ugly. I think that is bullshit. Nobody who really thought they were ugly ever tried to make themselves pretty. They become specialists: memorize the first 500 digits of Pi. Get way too involved in their church youth group. I had a cousin who learned to cook because an ex-boyfriend called her fat and she believed him. Like, at least that way she'd fit the part.

No. The only reason anybody ever made themselves throw up was because they wanted to feel light. I would swell up like a hot air balloon if it meant that I could bounce along the ceiling of the pool like a soap bubble, no one's attention focused on me. Nothing to focus my attention. Free.

But, so far, losing weight has failed. Instead of becoming lighter, I've become aware of my bones—the hard, dense inner core I can't do anything about. I lie in bed at night pinching my hip bones, collar bones, knees, shoulders, feeling where the knobby bits at each end press into my mattress. I've known how to swim since I was six but, looking at the water slapping hungrily against the sides of the pool, I *know* I'm going to sink like a rock, dragged to the bottom by my leaden skeleton.

When most everyone has filtered in, we are instructed to sit in rows of six on the metal bleachers, shifting forward when the front six are called to the diving blocks. Tyler sits directly behind me. I wish he hadn't. I hate how he watches me, always pretending to be looking at something else, but not very good at it. I ignore him and focus on the metal bench, cool against my thighs.

If I gain one pound— maybe two, to show it's not just water weight— I wouldn't have to confront Magnolia Creek. Dr. Peroski would breathe a sigh of relief. My father would shuffle

across the kitchen in his purple slippers to bring me a cup of coffee. We all need a breather. In two weeks, I could have lost it again. Water splatters my face as the first group dives into the pool. Everyone stands and we shift one row down the bleachers. Tyler takes my place, tries to catch my eye. Failing, he sits down and squeals.

“Eeeewww! The seat is warm!” He does a little wiggle, planting his swim trunks more firmly where I was sitting. Everybody laughs— not at me, at Tyler whose butt squelches obscenely on the metal.

I’m mortified.

I know that he is flirting. Like the warmth caused by my butt against the metal bleacher is still a part of me. I know he doesn’t mean anything by it, except to get me to look at him. And now I am looking at him— hot and hard like a fist to the face, because, through his laughter, I’ve expanded out to encompass every surface I’ve touched, all the air I’ve pushed through my lungs. I’ve become enormous; hot, lumbering and stagnant. The splash of water as the next group dives in sizzles on my skin.

I’m half out of my seat already when my group is called forward. I step up on the diving block, grinding my toes into the white ridges. Brianna Hardman rises to my left, her tan ponytail flicking her shoulders. Just as the whistle blows she looks at me and flushes.

I step off the block and sink quickly. The white tiles lining the pool are pale green through the chlorinated water. I’m back in the first-floor bathroom, the moment of passivity stolen from me this morning returned. I watch the bubbles rise up, struggling to fight their way through my hair. I float with them. *Magnolia Creek. White sheets changed daily by blank-faced nurses.* Then, I break the surface and I’m treading frantically, my legs like helicopter blades, thrusting me upwards.

During lunch, I wander through the hallways, chewing a stick of spearmint gum. When it's almost time for biology I come to the room and find it unlocked. I like the science labs, they glitter. Glass instruments line one wall, on the other white lab coats wait for heads to fill them. Today, a tank of goldfish swirls on the metal table used for demonstrations, a hurricane in a bowl. I watch them as the other students filter in.

Mr. Conner likes to begin class with what he calls "real-world exercises" such as calculating the likelihood that you're carrying a cardiomyopathy or estimating the number of bacteria on a doorknob. It lets him pretend that he is teaching science, not just how to pass a test, and gives him time to work through the unnecessarily complicated algorithm he has invented to determine lab partners each week. He passes out half-sheets of paper with today's problem and retreats behind his desk, fingers pressed to his temples, muttering over a sheet of scratch paper.

Two seats down, Tyler half-heartedly scratches at the problem with a mechanical pencil, while trying to catch sight Mr. Conner's paper showing the groups for the week. He shoots frequent glances at me. Please, anyone but him, I think. On his other side, half hidden by the demonstrations table, Brianna is not bothering to pretend to work on the brain teaser, but absentmindedly watching the bowl of goldfish. She looks pensive. No one who hadn't been told would know she spent this morning crying in the bathroom.

"Got it!" Mr. Connor brandishes the piece of scrap paper triumphantly. "Listen up, everyone. We have a jam-packed class today, so we'll go over this problem at the start of next class. We have a rare opportunity to see the cardiovascular system in action, so let's get this party started!"

I'm paired with Brianna, thankfully, and not Tyler. I move my belongings next to her as Mr. Connor distributes lab manuals. His enthusiasm is exhausting. I let his description of the goldfish vasculature wash over me until everyone rises to choose lab stations.

Brianna and I are left with one of the lab stations in the middle of the room. We assess our dissection kit and pull the powdered latex gloves over our knuckles. As we join the line in front of the fish tank, Brianna speaks.

"I don't normally lose it like that," she says. "In the bathroom, this morning. Were you listening?" We shuffle forward in line.

"Not really. No," I say.

"Things have just been, like, really rough lately." She's won't look at me head on. She wants something from me, but she doesn't want to say it. "I don't have a problem," she says eventually.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," I say. Some of the tension goes out of her shoulders.

"Thanks." She holds out the tray so Mr. Connor can scoop a fish onto the scarred plastic dissection trays and help us place a water and ammonium soaked cloth over its gills. It lies stunned, but still breathing, its little chest rippling like molten copper under the lab lights.

Back at our station, we examine the veins that are visible in the tail. They expand and contract as the heart pushes blood to the extremities. It's hypnotic. I am beginning to float on the cloud of ammonium rising off the tables. Brianna recedes as I sketch the lines in my observation journal. Shush, shush, shush. Just like the bus engine. Mr. Conner's voice whispers from below that we should move onto step six of our lab packet.

I pick up the scalpel. How glittery.

“Stop. This is wrong.” Brianna’s voice cuts, tight and loud through the cloud of fumes. Her freckles are very dark against her face.

“No, it’s not. We have to cut through the musculature to see the inner vascular system. It’s step six.” I dip the scalpel towards the goldfish.

“Stop! We can’t. It’s alive. You’ll hurt it.” She pushes my arm away. There is a white ring all the way around her eyes.

“It can’t feel anything. It’s happy. It’s sleeping.” On the tray, the gold fish pulsates in agreement.

“It could have been someone’s pet. Somebody could love it.” She won’t look away from the tray, standing protectively over it, one hand on each side.

“It’s a feeder fish.” I’m speaking loudly. Can’t she understand how badly I need her to let me float through this, guided by the scalpel tip?

Mr. Conner appears by my shoulder. I’m shocked. How did he get up here so quickly?

“That’s right. Be ready to observe,” he says. “You’ll only have a couple minutes.” The edge of the scalpel rests against gold scales. It is sharp. Brianna sways and bumps into my shoulder. Her hand lurks in the bottom of my vision, pressed hard against the lab table, the knuckles turning white.

The fish parts like an envelope. There is no blood. Inside, a tiny, red dot jumps. Beautiful. The room eddies around it, tugging the lab coats into new watery shapes. Being not much more than a lab coat, I eddy too.

Potassium. Electric petals that stream through the veins. So hard to hold onto. The heart beats metronomic against the inside of my skull.

Below me, Mr. Connor is encouraging everyone to Draw! Draw! I am vaguely aware that Brianna is crying again, wide sobs that show her gasping, watery teeth. Everyone has turned to stare at her. I don't need to stare—she is crying about Lily and ecstasy tablets and a Mr. Bubbles—I watch the heart.

It has developed an arrhythmia. Unequal motion and silence that jars more and more against the ticking of my own pulse. Nothing marks the last contraction but emptiness.

I turn around. My own heart has decided to escape, clawing its way up my throat. I open my mouth to release it. Pale green bile hits the floor, tasting of chlorine, ammonia and mint chewing gum. Bent over at the waist, my gaze locks across the pool of sick with Brianna, who is sitting on the ground.

It is the first time I've puked in front of another person in years, the first time I've puked unintentionally in just as long.

"I'm not sick," I say.

The class is gaping bug-eyed at me. Behind my back a boy laughs in a maniacal falsetto. Everything is frozen, sharp, still, and bright, but strangely watery. The ripples in the world made by the goldfish heart are encased in glass. By some miracle— and it is miraculous— my heart keeps throbbing inside my chest. I could listen to it forever.

## Milkweed

My mother and I are planting milkweed in the backyard of my childhood home. It has been a couple hours since we started, which is a long time to be doing yardwork seeing as I'm just here for the weekend, but I don't mind. It feels good to sink my fingers up to the third knuckle in the soft earth, like I'm back in a way I haven't been on previous visits. Each milkweed plant is a thick stalk and a cluster of cropped off stems, branching up from a clump of dirt. They look like fingers— like my mother's fingers more than mine— dry and boney, with wooden knuckles. I ease them gently from their black plastic containers into the ground.

My mother wanted the shovel, so I let her have it. She digs fiercely— hole after hole, spilling down the side of the hill towards the river. With two hands, she grips the handle of the shovel to her chest, puts her right foot on the head, and drives her weight through the point into the ground. She steps back down onto the dirt, twists the shovel free, begins again. I wait to step in if she gets tired, but she just keeps digging. Her hat with the fly-fishing lures hooked to the brim hangs down her back, so that her hair glints, pearly in the afternoon light.

I stop to look at the stack of remaining flats and wipe the sweat from my forehead. There is a funny pleasure in knowing I have left a smear of dirt in its place. We are approaching the point where there will be more holes than remaining plants, but I say nothing.

All winter, my mother left the plants in the basement. They would have stayed there, if something about the sight of me dragging my roller-bag up the front-walkway hadn't reminded her. *I have something wonderful! Come see!* she shouted across the lawn. I left my roller bag on the front porch (you can do that here) and let myself be pulled down the basement stairs. Pressed shoulder to shoulder on the last step, we surveyed the containers which covered every inch of concrete.

The plants were grown as part of an experiment conducted by a butterfly researcher at the university. Last fall, the study finished, she gave them away in the Kroger parking lot— as many as you wanted for anyone with a sunny space to plant them. Mom told me this story multiple times simultaneously, the ends of her sentences unravelling, dropped, and later rethreaded. I looked at all the flats, some stacked on top of each other to make room. She wouldn't have been able to fit them all in her car in one, or even two trips. Cobwebs stretched between the stalks.

*Did you water them?* I asked.

*Maybe,* she said.

While she digs, I transfer the plants into holes and pull the soil back in around them. As careful as I am, the root-balls break apart in my hands. Dry for too long— the roots have turned to dirt. Still, I try to hold them together until they are in the ground, cupping the dry earth tightly even as it crumbles away between my fingers.

My mother hasn't stopped talking since we began. Her sentences are punctuated by the slice of the shovel in the ground. "Dr. Greer was counting caterpillars in that field over by Wilson— you know, right behind the playground?" she says. "There was a caterpillar on every plant. Two on some! That field must be an acre. Chock full of milkweed."

I grip a container and wiggle the stem back and forth to free the plant, but it breaks off in my hand. My mother hasn't noticed. She is verbally tracing migration paths all the way from Mexico. I pour the dirt into the hole and place the stick on top.

By the time every container is empty, the long drift towards evening has begun. I fill back in the remaining holes while she fetches the hose. We take turns spraying them with an even mist and watch the water pool in the depressions.

"A good day's work," she says. "Dinner?"

We wash as much dirt as possible from under our fingernails, but brown rims cling to the quicks. The wave of fatigue I've been watching for all day hits her as we stand at the sink. Her hands shake, scattering water droplets on the floor. She presses them together. I hold her elbow as we walk up the stairs, and when she starts towards the kitchen, I stop her.

"No, Mom. It's okay," I say. "You go put your feet up."

From her recliner she can half see me through the doorway as I cook. I look through almost empty cabinets until I find ingredients to make spaghetti. You used to have to be ready to catch whatever fell out of the pantry when you opened it.

While I cook, we talk about topics that don't suffer from being discussed over your shoulder, the kinds of things you talk about with strangers—the weather in Maine this time of year, my job, my husband's job, the impossibility of avoiding corporate politics. She is fascinated by Ellie's fourth grade project on solar panels.

"You should ask her about it," I say. "She loves your calls." She is silent and I realize that she took this as a reproach. Then, I realize that I can't think of a single thing to say to make it not one, even though that's not how I meant it. I scrape the spaghetti sauce off the sides of the pot. "It's nice to be back, even just for a couple days," I say instead.

"I was excited when you called. It's been so long."

"Only since Christmas. We were all together then." I bend to taste a noodle, to avoid the look I can feel her shooting my back. "All", in this case, fails to include both my brother and sister. There are no plates in the sink or dishwasher. They are all stacked neatly in the cupboard. I rinse a fine layer of dust off the top one.

We take dinner onto the back porch to survey our work while we eat. The light filtering through the pine trees has turned cool. The porch is off the second story. A long staircase

stretches down towards the garden. Under the hose, the individual holes have blurred into one field. The stems look disorderly, poking up at random from that wash of blue mud.

We eat in silence. Not-talking is a luxury which can only be had in person. It is also a way ignoring how short of a time I'm here for. We only have a handful of meals together. Everything that we have done, the yard-work, the silence, has been pretending that we have many— long visits are for spending time together. Short visits have reasons.

All day, I've been waiting for the moment when those getting those reasons out is a relief. That moment has passed, without making speaking any easier. I think back to all the conference calls with my siblings, squeezed in during lunch over the car's blue tooth. We always started off talking quickly because we were going to get this sorted and done with, but before long I would just be sitting, clutching an empty Tupperware and listening to static over the speaker phone. We all agreed that it probably needed to be done quite a while ago. They agree that I had to be the one to do it, because I have been the best about visiting, so it is less manipulative if I am the one to ask her.

"Mom," I say, "Is it time to move?" A katydid thrums against the side of the house. Night birds dart between the trees and fix their claws into the bark. In the dusk, everything has been distilled into motion, sound, and stillness. My voice alone has physical presence.

My mother puts her plate on the floor. She rests her cup of water against her chin as she looks down at the little sticks in the ground. In the blue light, her veins shine through the skin on her arms.

Just when I have decided that she is going to ignore me, she says "You know, they always make the same stops along the way. The same caterpillars we hatch this year will come back every year. Forever."

I can't bear to look at the milkweed anymore. The soggy remnants look so fragile that even me thinking they are dead might be enough to squash them flat.

"Nora, Caleb, me too, we're worried about you down here by yourself," I say. When it becomes clear she won't respond, I add, "We really want to see you more." I wince and kick myself for playing that card, even knowing I was always going to.

"Then come visit. I've got three bedrooms," she said.

"It's not that easy, Mom. Ellie's got school. I've got work. Nora and Caleb have families and work."

"You would put me in a home?"

"No. Ned and I would find you an apartment near us."

"Not yet."

We knew it wouldn't be easy to convince her. Her love of Georgia, if not as strong as her love for us, draws from the same pool. I didn't realize how much of me still needed to be convinced as well. I remember waking to the brown thrashers warbling outside my window. Doing homework at the kitchen table. Hormone driven fights during which it seemed like nothing could be normal again. Finding the stripped kitten—he passed last fall. Sitting on the porch together and peering between the branches searching for a patch of stars. The memories rise like beads of sap welling up through a splint in the pine bark. I touch them carefully and find they are still sticky, with only the appearance of amber. I didn't come for these memories.

"Come back with me, Mom," I say. "It's time. We won't sell the house."

There is another silence, in which, all at once, the peepers begin to sing.

"I just want for us to be together, again, here," she says at last.

On nights like this, we used to string a badminton net between two pine trees, right across where the milkweed is now. We would play two on one with the two rotating. We'd play until the net and the rackets were no longer visible, and the white shuttlecock was the sole point, moving back and forth by its own volition.

"I do too, Mom," I say. "But it's time. We've got a plot of land waiting for you in the backyard. Come plant a garden with Ellie."

A darker shade of blue is rising up from the river to meet the blue filtering down through the pine needles. We on the porch and the milkweed plants beneath us, rest in the last strip of light between them, just enough for me to see her face tilted downwards.

"You watch," she says. "There will be a caterpillar on every plant. Two on some. They'll come back every year. More and more of them. They'll cling to the pine trees and the side of the house and rest their wings in the sun. Orange and black everywhere. You'll barely be able to see the river. They'll come back."

It's too dark by now for me to see them as she sees them. But I can hear the rustling of their wings as they settle down for the night.

If I could make things grow, the milkweed would reach the porch. Purple and orange blossoms would brush circles around our knees. Heavy pods would spill their milky seeds. There would be a hundred caterpillars on each plant. If I could make things grow, the plants would toss bees between their blooms like shuttlecocks. We would push our way through the stalks with open fingers and feel small again. And everywhere, everything would hum the same song— a scale that never stops rising. If I could make things grow.

## **The Triangular Man and the Circular Dog**

The triangular man and the circular dog passed by the window every day at exactly 4:30 pm. Ella watched them. The big window in the living-room was wide enough that she could follow their entire progress, from 3:45 when they started-down the left-hand side of the cul-de-sac till 5:15 when they turned the corner on the right, and never have to move her chin from the back of the couch.

The man wore a green jacket which hung from his sloping shoulders, stretching steadily outwards until it ended abruptly in a pair of side-walk grey slacks. The dog was reddish brown and, seen coming head-on down the street, was perfectly round. Together, they gave the impression of a green triangle and brown circle growing larger on one side of the cul-de-sac, then shrinking on the other. Only for a minute, passing directly in front of Ella's house, did they hint at a third dimension. Here, she could see the head balanced on the triangle's point and, on top of it, a grey jockey cap with earflaps. This hat looked familiar— like something worn by an older relative— without calling to mind a specific hat she remembered.

They seemed to her like a story from her old first-reader: "Triangle Man and Circle Dog go for a Walk"— the kind of book with big geometric pictures that she had read in Mrs. R's class. Ella missed first-grade, which might have been the best year of her eleven years and was certainly the first one she remembered in any detail. As she watched them, she liked to imagine that she sat in one of the bean-bag chairs the reading corner slowly flipping through a picture book, while Mrs. R. perched, calm and solid, just across the room. They walked so slowly it might take them five minutes to pass between two mail boxes, but their meandering was precise. At 4:30 to the minute, the dog would stop and sniff her mailbox as the man watched.

4:30 was a strange time of day in the neighborhood. The yellow busses had hocked and spat the students back on their steps and passed on through— but the smaller cars bringing the parents home hadn't yet started to filter into the neighborhood. There wasn't a single adult in the entire subdivision, that she knew of, except for the triangular man. At 4:30, if she turned her head to the left, she could watch the opening credits of “The Sweet Life of Zack and Cody,” through Brian's window and catch an identical flickering in her peripheral vision from Sophie's house on her right.

4:30 was stranger still in January, when it meant that the sun had already begun to dip behind the roofs. In the slanted light, the neighborhood looked two-dimensional, the houses like tin luminaries. When their windows lit up, they seemed empty, with nothing behind them but light. It seemed to Ella like dinner should happen right at that moment—should already have happened—but there was no one to cook it. Even though she knew that her parents would be home before it was fully dark, she still wondered: What if something had happened? What if it just got darker and darker and they never came back?

Perhaps to compel this, she refused to turn on the lights. There seemed to her a universal which stated, “Parents must be home by dark.” It was as if the house getting progressively darker would force her parents to come home and turn on the lights. Until they did, she just sat resting her chin on the sill of the big window, which had the advantage both of facing west to hold onto the light as long as possible and of looking straight down the street by which her parents would enter the neighborhood.

It was a tremendous responsibility, being the one who had to keep the house awake in the dark. She could feel it fighting to drop off to sleep. Its drowsiness, cold and suffocating like a refrigerator door, threatened to swing inward on her. Only by her immense focus on the progress

of the man and dog between the mail boxes, did she manage to keep it awake. In this way they, like the lights, were a sort of clock—one that both measured the time until her parents came home and also forced their return. She knew that when they disappeared, exactly an hour and a half after they started, her parents were already waiting at the intersection to turn into the neighborhood. At the end of the end of the cul-de-sac, where Ella lived, the houses bunched together like plastic beads slid to the bottom of a string. Thus, watching their progress relative to the mailboxes gave the impression that time sped up as they got closer and slowed down as they got further away.

This—the fact that time seemed to move faster in their orbit—was what convinced Ella to break her parent's first rule and leave the house. That day, she waited until they started picking up speed when they were halfway down the cul-de-sac, before she grabbed her jacket from by the door. She stood at the end of the driveway scuffing her toes against the cement and tried not to look like she was waiting for them.

Closer inspection revealed the triangular man was actually a cone, triangular from every direction, while the dog, which seen head on was a perfect circle, became a rectangle when seen from the side. The man saw her but didn't try to hurry the dog. He followed along two steps behind it, stopping when it stopped. He didn't worry about pretending not to look at her. Rather, every time they stopped, he turned his head 90 degrees to look right at her. Pretty soon she began to feel silly for hiding her watching and stared straight back at him as well.

The dog reached her first. He sniffed her toes then, with just as much interest, the grass on either side of them. The man stood two paces off and stared at her expectantly. He had grey eyes that were set deep in his head. This made him look imposing, like a school principle, but

also a bit bemused, as he had a tendency to squint to see past the bushy white eyebrows that hung low over his nose.

“Hi,” she said.

“Well, hello there,” said the triangular man.

And that was enough rule-breaking for one day. Ella trotted back up her driveway at a pace just barely slower than running. She watched them amble down the other side of the cul-de-sac from safety behind her big, glass shield. After a while, Ella’s mouth started getting dry. She thought about the pitcher of filtered water in the refrigerator. When— if?— her parents came home, the first thing she’d do was pour herself a big glass of water and drink it all. But she couldn’t do anything until then.

There was another reason, other than the necessity of watching the man and the dog, why Ella remained glued to the couch: as long as she stayed by the window where there was still light, however dim, she was safe from the cat. The cat, named Mahalu, was all black except for his white left paw. This white paw she always saw first when he came flying at her out of the dark. It was explosive— like the trail of smoke from a bottle rocket. She would see the streak of white and just have time to tense up before he hit her. Not a big cat, still he was muscled and street-lean even after years of having a home. His legs packed a punch. One minute she’d be creeping down the hallway, wondering if that was him under the hall tree, the next she’d be on the floor. He would stand on her chest and rise up on his back legs to box her head back and forth between his paws. Then, before she could even push him off, he would dive back into the dark.

He could be hiding in any one of a hundred places just above or below her line of sight, and no matter how hard Ella squinted at the dark places in a room, she could not tell if he lurked

in them. Her brain took Mahalu's side, creating motion in the corners of her eyes that she was forced to turn towards. These phantoms were never Mahalu— just when she was certain that she had seen him creeping past her knees, he would drop down on her from above— but sometimes they flickered in the same place where he was hiding. It was worse to know that she might force herself to *not* look towards an imaginary movement, only to have Mahalu spring out from that direction anyways.

When her father had gotten the new job which made it impossible for him to pick-up Ella from school anymore, her mother spoke to the other parents and discovered that Sophie (twelve) and Brian (also twelve) loved their time home alone but had to be given strict orders not to watch TV and eat junk food all afternoon. Because the difference between eleven and twelve doesn't seem that big to anyone who isn't eleven, her mother told her that if she was hungry she could eat carrot sticks and peanut butter, that she could only watch one half-hour of television, and that her homework must be started by the time they got home.

She only tried to get the carrots once. She was reaching for them in the fridge when Mahalu sprang on her from behind. She had fallen forward against the refrigerator light switch. This unexpected plunge into blackness was what she thought about when a friend asked about the most terrifying moment of her life. The TV she never even went near. The den where it was kept had only one tiny strip of window near the ceiling and was crammed with piles of books, papers and too much furniture. Ella must be content to creep along the half-lit edges of the house. The dark interior belonged to Mahalu.

At 5:20, just after the man and the dog turned the corner at the end of the cul-de-sac, Ella looked all the way down the street and, though she couldn't see it, knew that her parent's car was waiting next in line to turn left into the neighborhood. She threw herself between the light panels,

hitting the switches upward, stepped over Mahalu (who knew what was coming and tried to ram his back against her shins out of excitement), dumped a tin of cat food in a dish. She poured a big glass of water and was sitting at the kitchen table with her homework out when her parents came in, their arms full of grocery bags.

She accepted their kisses and hugs, like a soldier receiving a letter granting her an honorable discharge. But the feeling of relief didn't last long. In the bright kitchen, with her father chopping sausage into a pot, it was so clear that there was nothing to be relieved about. Of course, they had come home. Of course, she was safe; she'd always been safe. Mahalu, smacking up his food and occasionally spitting pieces back on the countertop, was not a night-fiend. Ella crawled onto the couch beside her mother and curled into the crook of her side. She closed her eyes and let her stroke her hair, her parents' conversation blotting the last anxiety from the air.

The next day Ella knew from the time the man and the dog first appeared that she would go out to meet them again. Having escaped from the house once, it was impossible to force herself to stay inside when she knew how much calmer she'd be the moment she left the doorway. Again she lingered at the foot of the driveway, puffing clouds of air and staring back at the man every time he turned to watch at her.

"May I pet your dog?" she asked, when he arrived. This didn't count as talking to strangers because she'd said the exact same thing to unknown dogwalkers with her parents there.

The man nodded. Ella placed a careful palm on the dog's back. Its fur was coarse and short. Flakes of dandruff were clear in the longer fur along its spine. She patted the dog's shoulder blades because its head was still down, nose to the sidewalk.

"What kind of dog is he?" she asked.

“He’s a hound dog. A real hunting fiend,” the man said.

“What’s his name?” she asked.

“Hound.”

The dog, with its squashed-up nose and little ears, did not look like a hound. Ella looked at the man’s face with his white hair and papery wrinkles. There was nothing remotely fiendish about either one of them, except perhaps the man’s fingernails which were cut short, straight across so that there were two sharp points on either side of them. He kept these wrapped up in the leash or tucked in his coat pocket, so they wouldn’t have been noticeable except that Ella was exactly at elbow height. She couldn’t help noticing how sharp they looked.

“Thank you very much, sir. He’s a very nice dog,” she said. She held her head very straight and spoke formally. This was the way she acted that made her parents’ coworkers say things like “Doesn’t she almost make you want one of your own?” If she was going to disobey them by talking to strangers, then at least she would act in a way that would make them proud.

“You’re welcome to pet him any time,” the man said.

After a few days of coming out to pet the dog, Ella started waiting at the end of Brian’s driveway rather than her own. That way, she could walk double the distance with the man and the dog before returning to her own house. The time she spent outside passed ten times quicker than when she was inside.

Ella learned that while the dog sniffed with equal attention everything that came in front of its nose, the man focused intensely on some things and completely ignored the rest. For the first part of the walk he might be fascinated by a flapping shutter or crack in the sidewalk, but as soon as Ella left the house to wait for the man, she became the thing he focused on. Though this made Ella slightly uncomfortable, it also seemed appropriate given the intensity with which she

herself had focused on the man and dog when watching them from inside the house. Sometimes the man tried to hurry the dog to reach Ella faster, saying “Yup, yup,” and tugging on the leash, but the dog ignored him.

She knew that he wasn’t like the other adults in the neighborhood. For one thing, she didn’t know anybody here who was as old as he was. Most of the adults were about her parents’ age. There were also a lot of kids her age. She knew that reason why her classes had all new textbooks was because her class, and the couple years above and below, were so much bigger than the older grades. For parents in this neighborhood having kids wasn’t an obligation— it was a way of proving that you really could ‘have-it-all’. They’d found their jobs, bought their houses, and started their families in exactly the right order. Ella, who last year was accidentally sent to a summer camp for preschoolers, was careful to never refer to the man’s age, in case it made him feel awkward.

While they walked the man asked her questions. “What’s your favorite thing to eat?” “Do you do well in school?” “What do your parents do for a living?”

“They’re lawyers,” she said. Then, because it was polite to ask questions back and because she had been wondering why he, unlike the other adults, was at home during this part of the day, she asked “What do you do?”

“I don’t. Used to grow the cherries, though.” He squinted at her from under his eyebrows. “How long you lived here?” he asked.

“I’m eleven?”

“Ah.” That seemed to explain something to him. “I’ve lived in this neighborhood since before they built it.”

“That’s nice.”

He raised one of his square tipped fingernails at her. “You find a way to make yourself a lot of money. It gives you clout when people want you gone.”

Her father said something like this about money, but the man made it sound like an accusation rather than advice. Ella smiled and looked down at her feet. She always did this when people told her things that she didn’t know what to do with. They had reached the foot of her driveway. The man was looking up at her house. He stayed still, even when the dog reached the end of its leash strained to continence.

“Never even set foot in one of the big, new houses,” he said. He paused, framing his words carefully. “I’d like to see what they’re like from the inside.” He paused again, before he spoke, uncomfortably, almost as if he didn’t want to speak at all. “Would you show me your house?”

Ella mostly felt disappointed. It was clear from how he wasn’t looking at her, but off to one side, that he knew he shouldn’t have asked her that. The one adult in the neighborhood had let her down. “Maybe you should come back when my parents are home. Like on Saturday or Sunday,” she said.

But he didn’t show up that weekend, or the next, and though she continued to walk with him every day he never brought it up again. And so, she started waiting for him further and further down the cul-de-sac and following him farther and farther past her driveway. The afternoons went faster and her time spent on the couch was less anxious for being shorter.

Ella was in trouble. She watched the man and the dog coming down the street, with more than her usual intensity. She knew that if she went to the bathroom before leaving school, she would be able to hold it until her parents were home. But today, Mr. Detulio had kept them late, so

she had to run to catch the bus. She sat on the couch, squeezing a pillow between her legs, trying to will her bladder to expand. But the more she thought of the long dark hallway separating her and the bathroom, the more she had to pee. Faster, please faster, she pleaded silently with the man and the dog, but they continued to make their almost imperceptible progress towards the house. It was an impossible situation. If Mahalu jumped on her on her way to the bathroom, she might wet herself, but if she tried to stay by the window until her parents got home, she also might wet herself. For the first time, she was angry with them. If the man and the dog would just walk at a normal speed, then her parents might get home in time.

When she couldn't stand it any longer, still clutching the pillow between her legs, she went and stood at the doorway in the living room. For a long time, she looked down the hallway. She knew the furniture in it, even if she couldn't see. If Mahalu wasn't under the hall tree, or waiting just behind the door to the kitchen, and if the door to the coat closet was closed, and he wasn't top of the chest of winter clothes— then she might be safe.

Rather than face the terror, she let out an experimental dribble out but felt intense mortification at the warm wetness. She put the pillow down by the doorframe and took one step into the hallway. Two more steps confirmed that he wasn't under the hall tree.

Her bladder felt like it was shaking. Her stomach clenched with every step. To her right was a slightly paler rectangle that was the kitchen door. One more step and she'd know if he was behind it. He wasn't.

Ella froze. The door to the coat closet was open. She could see the reflective strips on her father's biking jackets catching what little light there was. She couldn't take another step. She knew with perfect certainty that the moment she did, he would spring out from between the folds

of coats. But she couldn't stay standing here, because even now, Mahalu could be creeping up behind her. So, tensing for impact, she took the next step. Nothing.

One, two, three. The chest where they kept the mittens and scarves was on her right. A step to reach the middle of the chest, another to pass it. And still no white paw streaking towards her head.

That was it, safety. Four more steps— she took them quickly. There was the bathroom doorknob, faintly brassy to her left. She reached for it. What was that white blur in her periphery?

Mahalu hit her like a falling rock. She fell backwards to the floor. Yellow, slitted eyes blinked too close to her face. The hands she raised to protect her eyes hit fur. Thrashing, she tried to fling him off, but he spat and took a swipe at her face. He was stuck— one claw had gotten caught in the collar of her polo shirt. The claws on his other paw scratched against her collarbone as he frantically tried to yank it free. She screamed and he yowled back.

Then as suddenly as he hit her, his nail unhooked from her collar and he was gone. Ella gasped for breath still lying on the floor. He had come from above. She had thought she knew every obstacle in the hallway. What had she forgotten?

Above her, she could just barely make out a white figure— a painting of her mother and father dancing at their wedding. It was encased in ornate wooden frame was nearly twice as deep as the canvas. Mahalu must have somehow balanced on the rim.

Ella pulled herself up off the floor and stumbled forwards into the bathroom. She closed the door fully before she turned on the light. The sudden brightness hurt her almost as physically as the cat. Touching her collar in the mirror, she saw two long scratches. Not so bad. They itched

more than they hurt. She peed until she couldn't get another drop out and ran the length of the hallway back to window.

The man and the dog were already two houses past. She thought about running after them. She curled up on the couch among the back pillows in as tight a ball as she could. Here, curled up fast asleep in the dark, was where her parents found her when they got home. No, she wasn't sick, she said. All night, she was careful to hide the scratches. She was embarrassed that she had let things get so desperate in their absence.

Ella stared at the wood panels of her front door. She couldn't do it— couldn't walk through that door alone knowing that Mahalu was inside. She pretended be unlocking the door until Brian and Sophie were inside their respective houses and the bus had pulled away, then sunk to the ground with her back against the porch rail. It was cold. She tucked her knees up inside her puffy coat so that only her sneakered toes poked out. Not for this first time, she thought how nice it would be to have a sibling.

The man and the dog had appeared at the end of the cul-de-sac. She could only sometimes she see them between the slatted porch-railings, but she knew they were coming, dependable as ever. She waited until they were almost past Brian's driveway before going to join them.

"So, there you are," the man said. "I was starting to think you wouldn't show." Ella shook her head. The man squinted at her. "Now then, what's the matter?" he said.

"The cat got me." She pulled back her collar to show him the long scratch.

The man scoffed. "The hound shows 'em cats who's boss, don't you Hound?" he said, jiggling the leash. The dog kept picking at the hair between its toes with its teeth.

Ella froze. Was this the solution to the cat problem? True, the dog didn't look particularly fierce, but maybe, faced with a small, furry animal, buried instincts would suddenly kick in and "the hound" would become the fearsome, hunting beast the man advertised. Ella imagined being able to go to the bathroom, to get a glass of water, without worrying about Mahalu. She would give just about anything for some small piece of that daily horror to disappear. The man was looking up at the house again, tracing the gables with his eyes.

"You—. Would you like to come see my house?" Ella said.

The entire way up the driveway the man kept glancing all around, behind them and at the dark houses. "Yup, Yup, hound. Yup, Yup," he kept saying, tugging on the leash, but the dog refused to hurry. Ella knew that he was afraid someone would see him entering the house with her, but she wasn't worried. The only people in the neighborhood were her classmates who were looking at their television screens not out their windows. Her only fear was that the dog wasn't frightening enough to scare Mahalu.

Ella went first through the door into the house. She stood to one side, by the couch, as the man entered the house. He stood for a moment in the entryway, sloping shoulders hunched, before snapping the door shut behind the dog with a sharp click.

He turned into the living room and she stepped back to let him pass. Ella had never seen the man so widely focused. Everything interested him, from the afghan draped over the couch to the lock on the piano. He walked a big circle around the living room and touched everything—spines of books, the aux cord dangling from the speakers, her mothers' decorative bowls. He picked a framed picture of her family from the end-table and pressed a single finger pad purposefully against the glass. The dog, taking no notice of the transition from inside to outside, continued to sniff its way along the floor.

Ella wished he'd hurry. What if they didn't find Mahalu before her parents got home? How would she explain the man to them? She moved to stand by the hallway's entrance, trying to silently hurry him along. Finally, completing his circuit of the room, he drifted past her into the dark hallway. She followed, as close to the dog's heels as she could manage without tripping.

In the kitchen, the man opened all the cupboards and clinked his nails against the dishes. Outside, it was getting darker. Ella could barely see the triangular form of the man ahead of her. She followed him through the house mainly by sound. She hoped he understood that she couldn't turn on the lights, now, more than ever, she needed to be certain that her parents really were coming home. She was relieved that, though he touched everything else, he never made a move towards a light switch.

In the dining room, the last room on the first floor, the man paused before the table, and tapped one blunt nail against the surface.

"Humph, Cherry," he said. For a moment, he stood at the head of the table, looking over the long-polished surface. Then he turned, quickly, and started up the stairs. Ella paused—no guests ever went upstairs. There was nothing for them up there, only bedrooms. But, she couldn't stay down here; they hadn't found Mahalu. Every second she hesitated at the foot of the stairs she was just getting farther behind the dog. She rushed to catch up.

They met Mahalu at the top of the stairs. He appeared first as a growl—low, malevolent, hysterical. Ella felt like all her insides had flipped over at once. She shrunk back against the banister to have something solid behind her. The growl resolved into a shadow ten feet in front of them. The man who had been running his fingers over the towels in the linen closet, stopped and turned slowly towards it.

The dog, who had been sniffing a stain on the carpet, lifted his head to face the cat. His nose twitched first to one side then the other. Mahalu took two steps sideways towards him. His back was so arched that his front and back paws sat practically on top of each other. Spitting like a penny in an electric socket, he took a swipe in the dog's direction. Though too far away to connect, this was clearly meant to show how long his claws were, how powerful its swing.

Ella was scared for the dog. If he failed, she would spend the rest of her life hiding from the cat. But the dog didn't flinch. His knobby legs, splayed towards the sides of the hallway, were steady. He raised its abbreviated muzzle to the ceiling and let out a long, baying howl that proved that, despite appearances, there must be some hound mixed in there after all.

Mahalu dropped flat on the ground, as if squashed by the sound. He stayed there, legs extended like a pancake, until the hound stopped howling and lowered its nose back towards him. At this point the cat turned and tore away as fast as he could, his nails making shredding sounds on the carpet. The dog watched him run, then with a satisfied huff, dropped his nose back to the carpet.

Ella slid her back up the banister to stand. She pictured Mahalu, a trembling mass under her parents' bed. The hallway somehow seemed brighter than it had a few minutes ago. She wanted to wrap her arms around the dog's neck and kiss its stubby nose. The man, who had gone back to flipping through the linen closet, was now shuffling towards the master bedroom.

"My parents are coming home," she said firmly.

The man turned back towards her in silence. She couldn't see his face in the dark. Heart still racing from the encounter with the cat, she stood fists clenched on the top step. For a minute she thought he might refuse to go. All she could hear was little puffs of air as the dog, completely undisturbed by the cat, sniffed its way back towards the staircase.

“Well, I’ll go then,” he said finally.

Ella led them straight back to the door. She watched until they had reached the end of her driveway. At the foot of the driveway, the man turned back to look at the house. Without being able to track their progress down the cul-de-sac she had no idea what time it was or how long until her parents got home. It was almost full dark now; more windows sparked to light every moment she looked down the street. She raced back along the path they had walked sweeping her foot in big arcs to erase the footprints on the carpet. There was a cloudy fingerprint on the picture the man had touched in the living room. With her breath, she fogged the glass and wiped it clean.

She turned on all the lights and was sitting at the kitchen table like usual when her parents got home, but she forgot to feed Mahalu. He was skittish all night and didn’t even come out when her mother, realizing he hadn’t been fed, popped the lid on a cat-food tin. Her father wondered if maybe it was a bit of residual trauma coming out. Who knows, he said, what things he saw when he was a stray, all alone out there on the street.

Ella sat on the couch, munching on carrot sticks and peanut butter while she watched the triangular man and the circular dog. It had been four days since the dog scared Mahalu and she hadn’t gone out to see them since. Every day the sun seemed more reluctant to go down and the house more alert. From her place on the couch, Ella could see almost the entire length of the hallway lit up. Mahalu, thoroughly cowed, didn’t even come out when Ella opened the cat food tin. She never saw him until the moment her parents walked through the door, when he would appear and mewl petulantly at their knees.

Though it was still cold, even the window-pane seemed to radiate less chill when she craned to see in her neighbor's houses. Brian was watching a show she didn't recognize. It appeared to be some kind of musical. Girls with bouncy curls twisted back and forth. She wanted to hear what they were singing. With Mahalu gone, would it be safe to go into the den? Suppose she turned on just one, small light. Surely that wouldn't prevent her parents from coming home. She was just about to head into the den, when she saw the man and the dog, paused at the foot of her drive way. The dog finished sniffing her mailbox and tried move on, but the man tugged its leash. Dragging the dog behind him, he shambled up the driveway.

Though Ella had been on the brink of relaxing, all the superstition that she had begun to release flooded back to her in a moment. "No," she thought "go back." They were her clock. If they didn't keep walking, her parents might not come home.

Hauling on the leash, the man half lifted the dog by its neck up the porch steps. He rang the doorbell and looked insistently at Ella through the window. She shook her head. He rang the doorbell again, longer this time. When she did nothing, he pressed the doorbell again and left his finger there, staring at her. The house was filled with an awful screeching sound that wouldn't end. Ella fell backwards off the couch and stood with her back pressed against the far wall so that the man could no longer see her through the window.

The sound stopped but Ella stayed where she was. Suddenly he appeared, walking in profile, barely five inches from the glass. He was standing on the strip of mulch between the boxwoods and the brick wall. When he was directly opposite Ella behind the glass, he turned to face her. His lips moved and, though Ella couldn't tell what he was trying to say, she shook her head and kept shaking it, back and forth, back and forth. "Please go away" she mouthed. "Please, please, please go away." He looked right at Ella and smiled. Slowly, deliberately, he tilted his

head forward on to the windowpane. Squashed against the glass his face was bulbous, amorphous— no shape at all really.

The room seemed infinitely darker with him in the window. Ella couldn't see any road at all behind him. She slid, back along the wall, towards the door, and the man mirrored her, leaving a long grease stain along the window. She cracked the door, just enough to let in a cold slice of air.

“Let us come in,” the man said.

“I can't.”

“We never finished seeing the house.”

“There isn't that much for you left to see.”

“Then come out.”

“I can't.”

“You always do. We love seeing you. The hound and I wait to see you. It's the best part of the day.”

“I'm going now,” she said. “You need to come back when my parents are here.” She tried to swing the door shut, but the man shoved his arm into the crack and push the door wide. Arms extended, he took one step into the house, then another. Ella ducked under his arm but collided with the leash. Falling, she dragged the dog with her and they tumbled down the porch steps in a tangled mess of fur, rope, and limbs. Ella scrambled up and took off running down the street.

Her socks pounded against the cement. Sophie's house was on her left. She could knock on Sophie's door, but she would have to wait for her to open it and the man might catch her. She kept running. Her lungs burned with the cold air, but she didn't feel the cold on her skin.

Everything had shrunk to intersection where this street met the larger street where the parents came. She didn't think what she would do when she reached it.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Ella saw that when she and the dog had fallen, the man had dropped the dog's leash. On its own, the dog had returned to their usual route on the sidewalk. Sniffing along at the same pace as always, it grew smaller with every square of sidewalk Ella crossed.

But the man hadn't followed. Ella stuttered to trot and looked back at her house. Barely visible inside the window was the dark, triangular form of the man. Without the dog, he was something else entirely from how she had known him before. He was no longer a page from a picture book. He was monstrous. Worse than Mahalu had ever been.

Ella kept stumbling away from him. She had left the cul-de-sac entirely now. All around her were empty, luminary houses. In reality, any one of them could have someone inside it who could help her, but in the half-light they seemed utterly uninhabited as cardboard shells, colder and less inviting for being bright. The parents had begun to come home. Their cars turned onto the street and slowed to neighborhood speeds.

The T-intersection was still far away. Ella watched the identical flash of headlights as they swung into the neighborhood but couldn't make out the colors of the cars. She felt herself like a girl printed on sheets of paper, even with the turning pages, unable to make any progress through the three-dimensional world at all. She sank onto the cement. Her splayed fingers couldn't feel any texture. For all she knew, the sidewalk was made of cardboard. Sometime soon her parents would drive past and see her. Or the dog would catch up— all she could do was wait and see which would come first.

Either way the man would stay in the house. It seemed impossible to Ella that even her parents could remove him. Like Mahalu, he would lurk in every dark corner, even if she never saw him again. He was here forever.

## Three Memories of My Uncle the Fisherman

When I think about the reasons why I love my uncle, I never remember this: how his focus is so intense that it makes everything— even the ocean— fall silent. The breakers, which yesterday crashed against the shore, grinding the sand away to nothing, foam gently around my feet. I can hear every bubble as it pops. Sitting on the sand beside him, I watch his net smack the ocean, again and again. Shards of slate-grey water break off the surface and, hurtling towards us, fall just short. I crave this peacefulness, which is the closest I will ever come to submerging myself in someone else's meditation, but I never remember it.

In my mother's stories, my uncle is always striding out into the Arizona desert with nothing but a piece of twine and coming back with a string of trout dripping down his back. In her stories, when everyone else is covering in dust, my uncle is slick with mud. He is a hero who can reach his bare hand under a rock and pull out a catfish. With a single worm he can feed a whole campsite of people. Even Jesus started with two fish, she jokes.

She was nervous when she called to tell me that he would be joining us on our vacation. She kept bringing it back up, like she hadn't adequately justified his presence.

"You know, he's never seen the sea. I thought he'd like to," she said. Then, later after we had moved on: "The flight was just so cheap. I couldn't resist."

"He's letting you pay for his flight?"

"I told him it was cheaper than flying all of us out to Phoenix."

"I'm excited to see him again, Mom." I tried to sound enthusiastic enough to end her doubt— I really was excited— but every time we call for the next few weeks, she apologized for not asking me before inviting him. This will be the third week in my lifetime that we have spent with my uncle, the fisherman. We are all afraid of ruining it before it begins.

This morning, our first at the condo, felt like a day from an earlier month picked up and dropped in the middle of June. It was the kind of weather that lets you pretend you're a local—the sky and sea a uniform gray with the occasional gust of breeze knocking raindrops from the air. With no pressure to rush to the beach, my parents, sister and I sat in the wicker chairs in the condo's kitchen, sipping coffee and talking in low voices.

My uncle emerged from his bedroom. Yellow beard, reddish skin, feet like small boats. He peered at us curiously from beneath golden eyebrows, as if we were strangers who had wandered into his camp during the night.

“Coffee, Jeff?” my father asked.

No, he said (*See, I thought, this is why I love him.*) He was going fishing. He looked us each in the eye. Would anyone care to come with him?

I thought, ‘what the hell, we’ll try again. Maybe this will finally be the time it works.’

This is the best moment of any adventure—when everyone agrees and looking into each other's eyes is a silent pact to whatever necessary to succeed. I carried his poles slung on my shoulder between the dunes.

Those poles are planted in the sand beside us. The lines running from their tips into the waves, arc in the breeze. Beside them are a bait and tackle box and one of those cloth bags that stands upright when filled with water— so far it is empty.

Standing up to his thigh in the surf, my uncle casts his net out to sea. First, he gathers the weights in his right hand, then the muscles in his back and shoulders till both the rope and back are tightly coiled. When he releases them, they ripple and expand together as one motion.

A wave comes up and loosens the sand under my hips. Wiggling my fingers down, I pull up a fist full of coquinas. I curl my fingers around the shells and swish them through the surf to

wash away the sand. They are sunset colors— pale blue, yellow, dusky purple, rust. After a moment, their fleshy tongues poke out to taste my fingers.

I am on my knees, scraping my hands through wet sand. The upper layer is the same rusty red as the sandstone cliffs around me, but beneath the surface flecks of jasper, lapis lazuli, and amethyst glow in the dusky light. I sort them into little piles based on color. As I dig, the grit burrows under my fingernails and makes them tingle— a sensation that feels like possibility.

I'm eight years old and this is our second to last night camping with my uncle. This is the first time I've met the hero from my mother's stories. The jury is still out on what I think of him, but I like the way he pulls my braid, not hard, sort of cautious, like he's never seen one before and wonders what it does. He has yet to perform any of the miracles the stories describe, but I'm watching him. Even while I sort the grains of sand into little colored piles, I am watching because tonight he has promised magic.

Earlier this evening, when the air was just starting to cool, he looked at me out of the corner of his eyes and said, "there's a fish out there with our name on it. Let's go get it."

As he steered the little motor boat through the twisting waterways, my uncle explained that tonight is only the preface to the real magic. Desert fish are smart, he said. To catch one, first you need a bait fish, still alive and wriggling on the end of your hooks. They won't bite for anything else. That is what he's trying to catch with his net. Tomorrow morning, he'll take me out in the little boat and show me where trout float, still as rocks, under the cutaway banks.

I look up to my uncle where he stands thigh deep in the water, casting his throw net into the center of the lake. The skin on his shoulders is the same color as the rocks. The net falls into the water and he stands, measuring a moment of stillness. Unlike my mother, he has never left

Arizona and so knows things she doesn't— things like just how long it takes for a weighted net to reach bottom.

He shakes the net free of the water. I can see from the stillness of his face that, again, there is nothing in it. We will not stay here much longer, so I too force myself to be still, afraid that an out-of-place movement will call attention to the dark. I focus on digging down, past the red sand to where the earth is iron-black. I am proud to be there alone on the shore with him. Proud to be sitting patiently working my hands though the earth, dredging the sand while he dredges the water. Proud to be part of the rippling motion of the stream mixing with lake and my uncle pulling the net free from the water.

Suddenly he shouts my name. I run to him. When I'm close enough to smell the dim, cool scent of wet rope and the spicy warmth of his skin, he shakes the net, flecking me with water droplets. In its folds, three silver fish, the length of my index finger, twinkle like the first stars in the sky. I stroke their silky skin as my uncle untangles the net and tosses them into the waiting bucket of water.

He straightens and stares out over the lake. I look where he looks. Sensing his dissatisfaction, I start to worry. Are the three minnows darting around the edges of the bucket not enough?

I look back towards the hole I dug and the stream bending to fill it. Then, I see through surface to where there are fish flowing like a second stream beneath the first. They pour down from the mountain tops, a silver cloud boiling and frothing as it tumbles over the ledge into deeper water.

I shout and my uncle casts the net blindly where I point. He strains to bring it back to the surface. When it breaks free it has come alive with the celestial bodies of a hundred, blazing fish.

With one hand, he holds the glittering mass above my face. The veins under his skin ripple like cords of quartz in sandstone. We laugh and dance, stamping our feet in the sand. He places a hand on my shoulder, sending water droplets trickling down my arm. His dark eyes are still warm from the sun.

We pour the fish into a fish tank full of water built into the center of the boat. Gripping the edges of its hatch lid, I watch them as my uncle steers the boat triumphantly through the twisting sandstone passages. The black waters around us are full of reflected stars. Inside the tank the fish swirl, as vivid and watery as the milky way above me. I am rich in many small and shiny things.

The next morning, I wake up to the sound of raindrops hitting the lake. Still half asleep, I snuggle deeper into my sleeping bag. I know that in a minute, my uncle's fingers will tap the outside of the tent, calling me back to the boat. This doesn't happen and, slowly, I realize that there are no raindrops hitting the top of the tent. This mystery draws me over my sleeping sister and out of the tent.

I straighten into the clear grey of day breaking too early in the desert. There is no rain. I look towards the lake. There my uncle kneels, reaching shoulder deep into the grounded boat. Around the base is a jagged puddle where the water leaked out of the fish-tank during the night and streaked back towards the lake. He pulls out a handful of greasy grey and tosses it towards the water. In the air it separates into a dozen teardrop-shaped fish. They hit the water with a dull smack and splatter which, now that I can see it, doesn't sound anything like rain. I stand, feeling my place in the silence like day old grit under my fingernails.

When my uncle turns, I see through the shadows to his face. It is as grey as the mountains, the lake, and the dead, useless fish. I see him as he sees me seeing him. His shoulders

sag towards the water. Tomorrow morning my family will get on a plane. Back to that midwestern university town where only fish are the pallid sunfish that hang comatose by the banks of man-made ponds. I think about the fish out there, the one with our name on it. We left it too late. There is no time now for me to join the stories.

And so, neither my uncle nor I say anything. We just stand in silence, watching the dead minnows as they are pulled away by a current. They bob and wobble like a dull river running over the surface of the lake.

The tide has turned. The sand has hardened under my hip bones as the ocean pulled away. My uncle wraps the folds of his net around his arms so that it doesn't drag as he walks up the beach to rejoin me. I look at his red-clay chest with a thumb print beneath his sternum. It is deeper than I remembered; he is more bowed.

I hand him a bottle of water. He takes a long drink, and rummages in the pack for an energy bar. When he is outside, his gaze refuses to fix on anything human. It flicks constantly back towards the water.

"There are fish out there," he says, "One of the guys at the bait shop caught a yellowfin right at this spot."

"If there are fish out there, you'll get them."

"It doesn't always work like that."

"What's out there?"

"Sea bass, amberjack, mackerel, yellowfin, all sorts of things." He rubs his jaw. "I don't know. Maybe if I used a different bait"

"What are you using now?"

“Mullet cubes. Maybe I should try a spinner. I don’t know. It’s different. Don’t know what I’m doing.”

“What do you think of it? Mom said this was your first time.”

“It’s a lot of water,” he says, already starting back towards water. “I’m going to get that fish for you. The one with your name on it.”

The second time we return to Arizona to visit my uncle, I am twelve. The lake doesn’t look the same as I remember. The plains stretch flat around the lake with barely a rumple at the bank. We drive for hours along the edge and never change in elevation.

“Where did the mountains go?” I ask.

“This is a different lake,” my mother replies. “We’re in Utah.” I am briefly disappointed. I wanted a repeat of last time. This water is different— still perfectly clear, but stained amber, like the thick of varnish on my school desk.

When we arrive, my uncle kisses my mother and hugs her for a long time rocking back and forth. Like most twelve-year-olds, I am sensitive to affection, but just when it is getting awkward, he picks her up and carries her screaming to the lake. They tumble in together. He rises, dripping, to shake my father’s hand and flecks his shirt with water droplets. But he wipes his lips dry before he kisses my sister on the hair. He turns and points one finger at me. I freeze mid-movement as if to help him get a clearer picture of me— no blurring around the edges.

“Your mother tells me you’re quite the go-getter,” he says. “What’d you say we go-getter some dinner?”

We take the same little boat that I remember from last time, now with a few aluminum plates, beat in shiny patches across the hull. He kills the engine in the middle of the lake and for

a moment we float, drifting slightly away from shore and staring at each other in silence. He clears his throat.

“So,” he says. “I thought we’d try catfish this time since, uh, they’re less picky.”

A white tub which I had failed to notice appears from between his feet. Inside are greasy clumps of chicken liver. He threads one over a hook and hands the poll to me. I dangle it uncertainly a foot over the water until he has threaded a second hook. With a flick over his shoulder he sends the bait flying over the surface of the lake. It lands softly, with barely a ripple. He takes my poll back from me and sends it flying in the opposite direction then hands it back to me.

We sit back to back on the bench and stare at the tips of our poles. His shoulders are hot, like how skin feels to touch after a sunburn.

The poll jumps in my hand. I try to turn the handle, but it jerks out of my hands and starts spinning wildly. More and more line hurtles into the water. My uncle throws himself backwards over the center of the boat to take it from me. He pulls back once sharply, causing the tip of the pole to bend almost back to touch itself. I pick up his pole, dropped in the center of the boat, because it feels wrong to have empty hands. With steady strokes he reels the line back towards us. We see a dark shape rising through the water.

My uncle whoops. He fights the line more and more the closer the fish gets. The water seems to bend upwards in the moment before it breaks surface. A giant catfish, whiskered and glistening thrashes in the air.

“That!” he says. “That is a sixteen-pounder! We caught a sixteen-pounder on a ten-pound line.” He threads a nylon string through the fish’s gill and drops it back in the water. “Your

mother is not going to believe this.” But I suspect she would believe anything. I believe he could do anything.

At our campsite there is a fallen tree whose roots hang out over the water. My uncle ties the string to one of the roots. When it hits the water, the fish darts towards the center of the lake but hits the end of the rope and swings back in a wide arc towards shore. My uncle pulls on the knot appreciatively. He tells me to keep an eye on it while he makes a fire.

Determined to perform this job to its fullest, I climb up on the tree. Feet balanced on one root and gripping another with my left hand, I hang as far as I can out over the water. The fish continues testing the rope. It swims parallel to the shore, as far as it can until it reaches the end of the rope. I’m waiting for the rope to break so that I can haul the fish, hand over hand, back to the surface, like my uncle did. Each time it turns around, there is a flash of pale belly and its whiskers flick across its face.

After a while, the fish starts to swim slower. It no longer reaches the end of the rope before turning back. Finally, it comes to a stop directly beneath me. Its fins scull back and forth keeping it perfectly still in my shadow. With every flutter of its gills, its sides expand and contract. It is beautiful.

I can feel a thought trying to enter my mind. I watch the fish with an intensity designed to block it, but the thought finds its way in anyways: we caught the wrong fish. That’s why this doesn’t feel right, triumphant, like I expected. There is some other fish out there— one with *our* name on it.

And then I realize— I could let it go. I imagine gripping the nylon rope, pulling it to the surface, feeling the fish fight against me, like it had my uncle. I see myself slipping the rope out of the gill, the sliminess of its scales and the soft shuttering sound of its gills struggling against

the air. I watch the arc the fish makes through the sky as I heave it back into the water. I see it dart into the darker waters.

The wind changes bringing smoke from the campsite. My feet slip from under me. As I fall towards the water, the root I'm holding slices the palm of my hand. I stand up to my knees in the water, blood dripping from my palm. The fish, panicked by my sudden entry into its world and the smell of blood, explodes, thrashing against the rope. It kicks up water, splashing me. The amber water muddies around us hiding the fish. Under the water, the rope slaps my legs, burning them. Bits of gill float to the surface.

I only notice my uncle when he lifts me out of the water and sets me back on the bank. Back at the campsite, I sit in a folding canvas chair while he wraps my hand in gauze. I am fiercely proud of myself for not crying.

He pulls the knot in the gauze like he did the rope then bends to pick up a rock. I scramble to get up out of the canvas chair which is too deep for me.

“Anna, stay here,” he says.

“I want to come.”

“Anna, stay. This isn't something little girls should see.”

I watch my mother teach my sister to feed sticks into the fire. The light is prettier than any electric light. When my uncle comes back, he carries the fish his bare hands. His fingernails are perfectly clean, almost unbelievably so.

The two filets are pearly white with dark veins running through them. There is no blood or bits of gill, not even a tail. They look the same as you would get at a super market. We eat them crusted in the cheese packets out of macaroni boxes, wrapped in tinfoil and pushed down in

the embers. My uncle tears the tinfoil into five sections with a piece of fish on each. I've never tasted anything like it, salty, juicy flakes of white flesh that separate on my tongue.

In 8<sup>th</sup> grade English we each have to memorize a poem and recite it for the class. I'm assigned "The Fish" by Elizabeth Bishop. It is about a woman who catches a fish that nobody had every managed to catch before and sees all the other fishermen's lines still caught in its lip. When I get the last line, I start to cough and can't stop. The words taste like smoke and powdered Kraft cheese. Elizabeth Bishop let the fish go.

My uncle is chasing the tide down the beach. Already, it is halfway to its lowest point, and racing faster as it goes. A long expanse of wet-packed sand stretches between me and him. I dig my fingers into the sand but no longer find coquinas. They have followed the waves from underneath the sand. The bucket still rests beside me, empty. Its surface, a perfect circle, reflects the sky. Looking across the wide, flat surface of the ocean, it is hard to imagine that it contains anything more than the bucket does.

Maybe there are fish out there. A whole rainbow of marine life. I imagine them hanging in the waves, just below the surface, so that they rise and fall with each swell. But even if there are, we aren't the right fishermen to catch them. We aren't using the right bait, or it is the wrong time of day, or we are standing in the wrong spot, or...

From a distance, my uncle looks even bigger than he does up close. As he begins to blur, his rusty skin glows in the grey light so that the halo of his refracted light solidifies and extends the boundaries of his body. I begin to understand the outsized presence that a person, though barely known, can grow to have in our life. Even as I watch, the sight of his back is changing

into memory. Memory— not quite the same thing as story, but close. Neither truly includes the teller.

Three memories of my uncle, the fisherman: My uncle and the fish we never got a chance to catch. My uncle and the fish we caught but shouldn't have. My uncle and the fish that might not exist. These stories cannot fit into the cannon that my mother tells. Instead, I hold their images in my head, and trace whales on the sand.

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