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Salted Water

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Salted Water

The AC in the car is bars and goose shivers as the glowing sunburn from yesterday settles deep into your itchy, pink skin wherever it isn't sticking to the worn fabric of the backseat bench. This feeling will be your first-ever memory.

You look out the window for the sun but you can't see it. It's too cloudy today to see anything beyond the blinding haze of the air on the bay in the town next over from yours. Millions of water droplets in the air catch the light and turn it hot and thick, like steam swooping up and out when the lid comes rattling off a boiling stovetop pot.

You climb out the backseat and come round to stand beside your mother's car in the lot, looking through the glass window at her face obscured by a smaller, grayer fog as she finishes smoking a cigarette all the way down to the filter. One day, you will look back and wonder if looking into that car window, what you saw was the smoke cooking her like the steam you once saw boiling bright red lobsters when you looked into a stockpot covered by a tempered glass lid. It was so hard to tell exactly when the boiling water killed them; which moment was it exactly when their antennae twitched for the final time?

Swirling smoke, trapped on your mother's side of the glass, pulses in and out with her breath and obscures your view of her. You can't see what kind of face she might be making, or even if she's looking at you at all. You remember an intense feeling of relief when the cloud finishes its pass over her face and it's still her there.

It's hard to see good when the light isn't clear.

When she gets out and slams the heavy door shut, you run quickly from the car lot down over the sand hill—hot, hot, hot on the soles of your feet—and wait for her there at the bottom of the dunes. You look back at her still standing by the car and adjusting the beach bag on her shoulder. You can't go down to the water, not yet.

She wades in the shifting sand down the path, between the little wooden stick fence line and the dry-rotted railing you darted past before. Each step is even and unhurried, headed toward you. You see she isn't hopping from foot to foot to keep the soles of her feet from burning and you want to be strong, too. Strong like a mother.

Bottom lip between teeth and eyebrows drawn together, pulling everything in, in, in, you hold yourself careful and pull up one leg, balance the arch of it to cool off on the inside of your opposite thigh—later, you'll know this as tree pose—and you stand on the other foot long as you can stand it. Spread your toes and wiggle. One, two, three, four... Stand a little longer on the hot sand. Switch. The time it takes to steady yourself doesn't count; don't begin counting the hurt until you're standing still. Think of something cool. One, two, three, four... Stand a little longer...

Switch.

Your mother catches up to you, finally, and you start hopping between feet again. "Can we see her, mom? Let's see her!"

Your mother scrunches her nose the way she does when she's looking close at something in the mirror and doesn't realize her teeth are bared viciously at her reflection. Her head turns this and that way, scanning the beach where all the people are sprawled out beneath the hazy sky, showing her teeth to all of them. Whenever you think of this moment, you will remember looking at your mother closely and you will wonder how the wind, whipping across the beach, blowing sand and salt-air directly into your ears until you almost couldn't hear anything at all, didn't even touch her.

She pushes her wired glasses, sliding down from sweat, up her nose and pulls her feet from the catching sand. She steps off toward a nearby dune, the swell of the baby inside her belly leading the way. In a second-long daydream, you imagine that out of her stretched belly button shines the beacon of a lighthouse, calling you, like a ship orbiting in the harbor, home. Toward the family in there. You follow. She crouches down, one arm hugging your someday sister and the other stretching toward the tiny hills of sand, either reaching toward something or to hold herself balanced. You want to hug her, too.

Moving the sand aside, your mother rediscovers for you the ladybug you visit together each day you come to the sea. You can't wait to show the baby the way your mother shows you. Its little bug body is shiny red with polished black and white spots—later, after the baby is born, a different kind of red skin, you'll not have forgotten how vivid the bug's tiny body is. You'll tell her about it on the morning when she finds treasure: a plastic toy volunteer firetruck or EMS car in an off-brand box of frosted corn flakes, gleaming engine-red in sunlight when all else is the beige of dry, low-sugar cereal, like a ladybug against the backdrop a hazy-gray bright beach sky under cloud

cover. You'll have moved by the time she's old enough to be out in the sun at the shore, and she'll never see the ladybug for herself.

Her first fear is a stuffed E.T. doll she receives on her first Christmas from an uncle neither of you know, and so when you tell her about the ladybug you'll leave out the bits about the inky black antennae and how bug legs feel crawling through the soft hairs on your arm, remembering how she cried and cried until her face was as red as the first time you saw her.

Babies aren't much different from aliens. Her deep fear of the unknown, the extraterrestrial, will manifest again years later when, for a whole summer, she forces you to watch marathons of scary alien movies, one after another, pretending all the while she enjoys them. That summer, you will wonder if some part of her remembers the doll.

Grinning so big your cheeks are tight and your teeth dry in the wind, you crouch down between the switchgrass stalks with your mother and touch one extended fingertip to the creature. You pet her softly, your friend.

This is your first best memory.

Years later, your mother leaves you and your little sister to stay with your great-grandparents who live several miles inland for what she says is only going to be a couple weeks. You'll be sitting at their kitchen table eating pretzel rods and helping your sister with her math homework. That's when you'll meet your Aunt Betty for the first time.

Aunt Betty had a soft button nose and the skin on her face was plump and smooth. She looked almost like a balloon filled with water. She had terribly long fingers with well-manicured nails. They were clean, thin nails that felt like a soft scratch when she rubbed your back through a t-shirt during a hug. Even now, whenever you think of them, you still imagine what-ifs in which as she scratched, her nails bent backward against the flesh of your arms. She smelled like baby powder, and she imagined what-ifs, too. You know this because sometimes you'd hear her talking to someone in the living room or in her bedroom, but when you'd walk into the room or pass by her open doorway in the hall, you'd look to see who it is and find her completely alone. Aunt Betty lived with your great-grandparents that year, too, so you saw her all the time. You never let fingernails like hers touch you now.

"Did you salt the water for the potatoes?" she will ask.

Of course, you will have. You will have chosen potatoes from the cellar and carried them up the stairs in the dark in the makeshift tray of your t-shirt hem. Your sister will have stood brave at the top of the stairs, shining a flashlight to guide you through creaky, uneven steps, or away from a possible hoard of cellar centipedes so you didn't trip, and to guard you against worse danger, in case Aunt Betty was right and there was someone living in the house you hadn't met yet, or an alien monster, or a bad spirit, or something. But your sister will have been too afraid to go down herself, so the beam of the flashlight will be her only contribution. You will have washed the potatoes in the sink, brushed them and peeled them, and set the water to boil and salted it. You will have planned on taking them out of the water by draining the big pot into the sink before mashing the potatoes up with a big serving fork and putting them into a greased dish for twice-baked potato casserole. "Yes, Auntie Betty," you will say, looking over to where she stands in front of the kitchen sink.

You will roll your eyes at her while as you answer, scraping hard salt off the pretzels with your teeth. Those rolling eyes will catch on the spirals of the conch shell on the ledge behind the sink. Transfixed. The conch shell will be the exact color of the peaches and cream oatmeal your mother cooked for the last time on the morning she dropped you off at your great-grandparents'. It will remind you of the little beach your mother used to take you to and the round swirls of wind over dunes.

The sound inside, if you would have put it to the side of your face, feeling the cool shell on your cheek, would remind you of the disorienting noise of the sea breeze whistling over the grass and buffeting your ears during your daily quest to find your friend by the dunes. It would remind you of her little body, shiny and smooth under the beat of the sun, and the shock of diving into cold water. You never will get to show your sister the ladybug.

The conch would have sounded just like the noise of the sea pulsing in your ears after a dive, and in the moments before it, too, when you would listen to the noise of the waves crashing around you and anticipate what it would feel like to be below that water. You were never annoyed by the pressure of saltwater echoing in your ear late at night after your mother took you home from the beach; it reminded you of swimming under the heavy weight of the ocean. Tears would prick your eyes when you woke in the morning to the itchy water-leaking-out residue of an ear-just-popped. You always wished it would stay there forever.

Betty will putter around the kitchen for a few minutes, shifting things and wiping a counter down while you continue to help your sister with her homework. Then, she will ask again. “Did you salt the water?”

Even now, you aren’t sure why whenever you think of your first memory you involuntarily also remember this day in your great-grandparents kitchen. But the sensation of waking up to that buffer of water slipping away from you and leaving things startlingly clear is similar to what you remember next, and maybe that’s why these two different days are so hard to unpick from one another. Under the pressure of enough water, everything begins to feel connected.

You will finish the problem with your sister first, so turning to face the stove is slow like the movements of the students in the geriatric water yoga-aerobics class you will lifeguard at many years later. Then you will turn toward Betty. You’ll watch her as she uses a dishtowel to lift the lid off the pot.

The whole memory is watery, really, with that odd quality you ascribe to days when you have water trapped in your ear canal and you’re there but you aren’t, not really, because water absorbs sounds and force like your mother absorbs wind, slowing it so it has no effect. Water makes its own force, too—there’s nothing you can do.

White steam will rise everywhere in a great *whoosh* and circle around her head in a cloud even thicker than cigarette smoke. It won’t disguise the movement of her other long hand reaching surely into the pot, but it will turn her shapes alien in the fog. That whoosh of steam is the last sound in the memory—after it, the scene is silent and moves too slowly, as if underwater. As if it were your head clouded by steam rather than hers. As if the steam were cotton stuffed up around your ears. Cotton padding like what you remember being around the inside walls of your sister’s crib so she couldn’t hurt herself. Her hand will go in the pot. And you can’t see it, but it *must* go into the water, you think. And you will remember thinking that you have no idea what might come out.

She won’t just dip her fingers in, either, to gauge the temperature, or something. She will reach in and then keep reaching. Steady. Her arm sinking out of view. The water will bubble angriest around her forearm where it is submerged. You can imagine the sound, can’t you?

Steam will obscure her face completely, and you will think of the steam surrounding a crash-landed spaceship in a movie you saw with your sister last weekend. Like in the movie, you almost won't know what's happening in that fog, from which either good or bad could still rise out of the torn silver of starship and metal cooking pot. You won't know, not for sure. Not until the memory is complete.

She will draw her arm out of the water smoothly—one day, it will seem important that there was no resistance when it went in or out—and you won't be able to think of anything except that this kind of blistered skin looks nothing like sunburn even though it glows hot and raw in the kitchen light. It looks more like the angry skin of an infant, and you know now that the steam cooked her fingers. It was hard to see good, then. But now you know more about the things that blur. The result is a different kind of red than any lobster could ever be, and you'll wonder for the rest of your life if there's any ethical way to boil your food alive.

She will lift a single white potato pinched between a thin, red first-finger and a slick, blistered thumb to the lips of her steam-flushed face—and bite. You'll watch the tips of her fingernails dip into the potato, piercing its skin in thin crescents. The still slightly-firm potato will resist her teeth at first like a fingernail resists bending and then give way. Horrified, you will remember it like you remember admiring your mother's steps in the sand—sure despite resistance—and you will sit frozen.

You don't remember what happened next. Did emergency services come to the house, or did someone come to drive Betty to the hospital? Is the only red firetruck the one in your sister's cereal? Did anyone scream? The memory goes fuzzier than your memory of your mother's face obscured by dirty glass and cigarette smoke. Anything could be under that blur.

When you left the beach that day, there was brine under your tongue and you loved it and wanted to gag both, and there was crystalized sand, hard rock salt, between your teeth—shocking and flavorless when you crunched to discover.

About Shilo Previti

Shilo Virginia Previti was born near the marshy outskirts of no Irish Atlantic City, NJ, and raised in a cedar bog during a natural Pygmy Pines wildfire deep in the Pinelands reserve. They have held various jobs on the east coast, including teaching English in county jails, assisting with writing workshops for Murphy Writing, and moonlighting as a waitress & a newspaper deliveryman, but they have recently moved away from the sea to complete an M.A. in English at UND. In their writing, they are particularly interested in meditating on the environment, animal rights, queer identity, narratology, class warfare, and radical dreams. When you see something beautiful, look and then look again.