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Jeffrey J. Merrick

THE THING ABOUT CHANNELS

WHENEVER I REGARDED my mother's skin in those last few months on Wellfleet, I thought of the gardenia in the side yard, the way their petals would brown from the slightest touch of your finger like something bruised. The cancer fed on her color from deep in the marrow, leaving her landlocked that summer, whiter than a sand dollar and more fragile still. But even in dog-eared photographs you'd see how every long-distance swim left her one shade darker, skin polished to a sheen and smelling faintly of salt. She'd turn amber and finally bronze as I rubbed four pounds of goose grease over her then helped her suit up. I'd smear coat after coat around her stout legs, over her broad freckled back, shoulder blades hard and rounded as tortoise shells.

I revered the goose grease for its water-resistant properties, the slippery stain it left on my hands, the way water would bead on her chest as she rose from the foam grinning hard. It was the only way to keep her from freezing, to shield her from jellyfish venom and fish that bite. And it helped me keep sight of her as she crawled through steel blue tides three times her size, strong arm over arm, a water wheel, flesh flashing through the mist as though in distress. If only the sun would break through, I'd think when she'd fade from view, hands in my back pockets, rolling on the balls of my feet. Then I could plot her choppy wake with the brass telescope my father gave me. Then I could trace her even strokes for miles, keep time with her quick craning breaths, and her cap would gleam jade under a pale swatch of sky.

"I knew you'd be waiting here for me," she says as I dry her shivering torso after she's crossed the English Channel for the last time, 1964, the Dover cliffs behind us huddling tall. "You always are."

I have the urge to tell her how much I wanted to be in the little boat behind her. With her spotter and trainer, two sunburned men who in memory are always unshaven and frowning, shouting hoarse commands down at my mother's swim cap. "You'll just get in the way," they'd say nearly in unison whenever I'd ask to come along. "You're only thirteen, kid. And what about your seasickness?"

“Sometimes you’re the only thing that keeps me going,” she says, still trying to catch her breath and this could go on for hours.

“No I’m not,” I say more to the mist than to her, watching her spotter and trainer elbow for room in front of the microphones. They’re making swimming gestures, laughing in tandem. Carrying on like that, as if they did the swim. What are their names anyway, Frank and Lou? What about my research, I want to say, all my notes and statistics. What about me?

She pulls her knees up to her square jaw, twisting the wet from her wheat-colored hair. I think of her cancer, our proliferating secret, and my stare catches on her endangered beauty like a well-concealed snare. Her eyes widen, my reflection doubling in her pupils, her irises green as running through clover or thyme. To calm myself, I concentrate on the fat drops of Channel water, the way they’re beaming on the rigid cords of her neck. Still giving off their blue chill as they streak down that splendid neckline, down the last coat of goose grease, a sort of precious finish plating her fine heated skin. Then there’s the purpling man-of-war stings to consider, at least twelve of them, welting viciously on her sand-covered arms and legs. The kiss and bite of a dozen jealous lovers, and not one of them could hold onto her.

“We’ll need the anti-venom for those,” I finally say, looking down at my soggy shoes. “Unless Frank and Lou forgot it. I never would’ve forgotten it.”

She’s holding my chin on the tips of her fingers, still swollen and feather-soft from the long soak of sea. “Noah, you understand. How every stroke I take brings me closer to you.”

She named me Noah because she loved the concept of all that water covering the earth, the fern-green promise of delivery and oak plank running down. She didn’t see Noah as I did, a wild-eyed crackpot with a staff, a cork bobbing slipshod over an endless sea. She forgot all about the wrath and the rain, tidal waves pounding everything senseless, entire species drowned by God except for just twos. And she didn’t think about Noah’s nausea on the bow of the ark, his yearning for land, a cruel progression of mirages trembling on the skyline, quicksilver and lime.

I see the summer of 1964 as though through soap bubbles, when there is the chance sound of quail in the morning, the slow burn of sage in the canyon below my house, a split-level rental on stilts, peeling stucco the color of an unhealthy lung. You might even think it decrepit as you negotiate a bare shoulder of Mulholland in the bleached light of another failed August noon, freesia clinging to wrought iron gates and everywhere the scent of jasmine shaped like brutal white stars. But I have a theory that a house on stilts helps you sift the remnants of citrus from the Santa Ana winds stinking sweetly of low Mohave. And for hours I lay alone on this bed with my shirt open, waiting for the arroyos to fill with the sound male coyotes make when they're half dead with desire and their hearts are breaking incrementally.

The truth is I've developed a thirst in the back of my throat for the instant the sheets begin to stick to my skin. With this comes a longing for the taste of rising humidity, clavicles filling with twin pools of sweat indistinguishable from sea water and just as cool. It makes me think of Panama, my mother twenty-three and barely alive after the alligator attack. She was just a few hundred yards from finishing her swim through the Canal, passing ship after ship, cutting across the isthmus more brown-green than blue. She could hear the crowd cheering beyond the reeds, saw the bobbing primary colors of the small band assembled on the dock, and with the breeze running all along their ruffled sleeves, they looked like rare birds preening on the same leafless branch. Then the crush of thigh bone, the terrible backlash of tail and the big pull down.

"There's nothing like the alligator's grip," she says one July night on Wellfleet a few weeks before her death. "Elegant in a way, like a waltz. Spinning you toward the ocean floor, around and around. You're in a whirlwind of sand and alligator belly. And all that glorious red. It takes you a few moments to realize what's happening. That it's your blood. You can't breathe. And you say to yourself, shouldn't I at least be screaming?"

"Keep eating." I'm feeding her blue mussel soup in bed, each curling mussel a soft tongue, forming all the words I never said to her.

"Imagine, Noah. Leaving this world that quickly. To the sound of applause. A pair of maracas shaking just for you."

“But then you wouldn’t have met Dad.” I try not to stare at her scalp, a weak shine through the snarled wisps of hair, dry and thin as the skin of garlic. “You wouldn’t have crossed the Channel, the Strait of Gibraltar. And how about the Bosphorus Strait?”

And you wouldn’t have had me, I think with a pang that makes me look away. Which I might prefer to this season of the multiplying tumor and the virulent pastel. I don’t know what to make of these desiccated winds from the east, blowing through me in much the same way our clothes are dancing on the line so damp and empty-handed. It makes me think of my father, always somewhere far off the jagged coast of Rhode Island and I want to say Maine. I know how low we are on money, how cod can’t possibly pay for cancer. He’s explained it to me again and again, how at this time of year a fisherman has to be in the Gulf Stream, beyond the whale yards, where the bluefin and angler are running. Though I don’t mean to, I know how I stand there before him, every time he’s preparing to leave, eyes wet and accusing. It has something to do with these winds, I could explain, the way they withhold, bringing back nothing but the stale breath of hurricanes and maimed cockleshells. But still I keep hoping these winds will bring him home, the thrill of his outline in the doorway holding his duffel, his smile vast through the copper scruff.

“My little worrier,” she says through the rising corkscrews of steam. “Even when you were eleven, you’d fret and fret about my times. Checking that stopwatch of yours every few minutes. Memorizing the records of all those swimmers I’d never even heard of. All those sea creatures you’d read up on. Your research, you always called it.”

I start counting the forty-five mauve toothmarks neatly punctured around her left thigh, tracing the snout-shaped scar. I loved to run my finger fast over the scar, an unthinkable smoothness, drops of candle wax winding freeform through the faded butterfly stitch. Even after three shotgun blasts the alligator would not let go, refusing to relinquish the sweet taste of her. They pried its dead mouth open with a tire iron, six arms heaving up, a drunk missionary sweating profusely and shouting last rites. They couldn’t find her heartbeat, blood spilling over the dock like a pagan sacrifice, something involving daggers and drums and one thousand calla lilies.

“What kind of summer is this for you, Noah?” More wheeze than sigh as she studies me in the expiring twilight, stroking the cowlick at the end of my part as though something remarkable is growing there. “Always watching me. Keeping track of all my medicines, my chemo appointments. The way you kept track of the currents, the water temperature. You should be swinging under a tree. Holding a pretty girl’s hand.”

But outside the window there are no pretty girls or swings hanging from trees. Only the mockingbirds fighting invisibly in the maples, singing the stolen songs of other birds, back-talking the moon. Through the branches I see the outline of the harbor dim and piecemeal, the waver of boom and yardarm nearly graceful in the first smear of starlight. She’s staring out at the tangled tacking of clippers and sloops, jutting above the bank of fog she’s made with her breath on the pane. One quarter of her reflection looking feebly back as if to say, what now, Antonia, now that you’ve run out of channels to cross?

When she turns, her expression is distant, laugh lines easing around her mouth in a way I want to remember. Almost smiling for a moment as she notices the toothmarks I’ve roused, a madder shade of crimson on her swan-white thigh. I could always tell when she was thinking of Panama. A thin breeze would ripple over each green iris, sea glass resting in tidepools clear and exactly three feet deep. As I slip into dream I can sometimes hear her distinctly, speaking in tongues in her fourteenth Panamanian fever, through the bamboo clacking together and all the dry beards of palms.

My father holds her limp hand though they haven’t yet met, the only other American he’s seen for six months. He is twenty-eight, four years younger than I am now, his long face unshaven, red shaggy hair a distraction of curls. Child’s hair, you’d want to brush it from his wide blue eyes that always gave him the look of someone startled or possibly lost. His left arm bandaged from an explosion in the boiler room, the Portuguese trawler that went down in flames at the mouth of the Canal, three men pulled under by their own heavy nets. He’d tried to save them, but they went down so fast, leaving nothing but surges of bubbles filled with faraway screams. Through a smudged window of this makeshift hospital he’s watching four shirtless men,

skin like terra cotta kilned by the unswerving heat of near noon. Waist deep in the clear water, dragging in their full tortoise nets. And he thinks, life is a succession of worn nets cast over unsuspecting things.

“Look, Noah,” my father would say after speaking too long about Panama, biting down hard on his lip as though seeing it clearly and for the first time. “Don’t you know there are some things a man wants to forget?”

But still I asked about it, every chance I’d get. The best time to ask him was by the fire, late at night when neither of us could sleep, flame shadow licking his long features blood-orange and calmly neglecting. He’d resist at first. But soon Panama would overtake him, and he’d talk about it for hours. I’d sit on the floor, lean against his chair, between his legs thick as pilings. All the while running his callused fingers through my hair, each finger a blind mariner, wandering alone on a deck and somewhat perplexed. His pale blue eyes, pinwheeling in the frantic half-light. I sense he had the same lonesome look when he turned in the water, realizes he’s survived, but the trawler is a fireball mouthed by cool wave.

The breeze through the mangrove is a delirium of hacked mango and brine, the pollen of bugle-shaped flowers dusting the skin. Through the rubber trees the screech of a toucan, and the caracara will not be consoled. He watches the way a rainbowed drop of perspiration falters down my mother’s thick stalk of neck. Her lids begin to flit, translucent, tiny veins that make him think of fresh prawn. He tries to remember, but no, not in any port has he encountered a woman with shoulders broad and strong-looking as this. He feels faint, a meteor shower washing white through his skull as the transfusion loops its way out of him toward her. He’s suddenly aware of his arm, the walls seem to shudder with the scalding and for a moment he looks down for the benzene-soaked flame. The pain, astonishing, like flying too close to the sun. And she shares it so willingly with eyes tightly closed, the rumored woman who runs with marlin, drowning in alligator dreams that make her sutured leg thrash.

He considers the possibility that their matching blood types mean something more, though he’s weary of all the superstitions at sea, the bearded men making Portuguese promises to stars, with their offerings of lemon rind and carved teak angels dropped over rails. But there’s

something about her face as she turns toward him, the profusion of white mosquito netting perhaps, it could so easily be mistaken in this heat for a long wedding veil. And he reasons that love is a sort of transfusion you receive from a wounded stranger on a shore of hot sand, when the fever is rising and the water is capable of third degree burns.

“All these memories,” he says one late July night before leaving for sea, spark and hiss from the fire as he pokes at it absent-mindedly. “Sweet as they are, can’t you see they hurt like hell?”

From the slouch of his back I can tell he’s thinking of my mother, already too ill to share their bed. He had to carry her in from the car after her chemotherapy appointment this afternoon, my mother ashen and gaunt in his arms, a burnt offering the gods wouldn’t take. When he turns, he is bold silhouette framed by new flame. And with the right trick of light, he’s swimming from the wreckage toward shore, through all the fierce smoke and debris. At first he suspects it’s the dreaded Isle of Skulls in the distance. Then he sees the welcoming strand, laid out before him as though on velvet, gleaming like walrus tusk and nearly as curved.

“Just listen to me, Noah. Going on and on like this. I sound like one of those toothless old men gone mad at sea. We know to stay away from them.”

“Why?”

“Because if you listen to even one of their stories, you’re through. Every one of them swears a woman is still waiting on one shore or another. Young and pretty as the day they met. Still looking out at the water for some sign of you. You try not to think about her lips, her sun-streaked hair in the breeze. Maybe she has a flower in her hair. Like the tiger orchid your mother wore, tucked behind one ear. The morning the missionary married us.”

He shakes his head as if to wake himself, leans forward, a long exhale spiralling across my shoulders.

“The villagers came from all around. Covered the dock with palm fronds. Some of them were wearing necklaces made from the alligator’s teeth. And when we kissed. Well, we forgot about our bandages, the pain. The shriek of the sea tortoise, all the clubs slamming down. What almost happened to her on that dock.” His voice trails off, fingers

pausing on my scalp for the longest time. "Enough about Panama."

Never enough, I'm thinking, arms wrapped around my knees, knowing full well there'll be more.

There is a sudden confluence of cane sugar and whirring weather vanes in the shape of roosters, brown barefooted children running through groves of coconut trees. The sky turns appaloosa with clouds, clubs cracking tortoise and close by a transistor radio heavy with static, a conga so fast it seems to be pecking at air. He feels the rush of his second pint of blood as it pumps toward her frenzied heart, and the grip of each ventricle is the quickening clench of her hand. He wants to smooth back her sand-colored hair, remembers he's seen the inside of certain spiny conches with the same unexpected luster. But their arms, strapped side by side to the same splint of bamboo, inseparable as trellis and vine.

"Antonia," he whispers in her ear, savoring each round vowel of her name, so many of them. As the last drop of his blood gurgles into her arm he thinks, I know better than this. You're a lure tied with yellow silk thread and dragonfly wings. The more decorative the bait the sharper the hook. I know being away from a woman like you is another name for scurvy. I've seen men leap from the stern on the forty-second parallel with foam at the mouth, howling their lovers' Spanish names, fits of longing so protracted they'd rather be chum.

But the clutch of her hand, nails nearly piercing his palm. Her uneasy respiration draws him closer, the scent of crushed lilacs rising up warm on each sparrow breath. She is the sound of all sixteen reels spinning starboard, the moment the sturgeon are cutting through the water like a hundred inflamed incisions, snapping his lines taut as catgut. He thinks vaguely of the Horse Latitudes, the stories he's heard of those tranquil waters, their lethal drought of wind. Each slow turn of wave a cobalt seduction, spinnakers left useless as the shed skins of snakes. There are old fishermen who swear after too much rum that ghost ships still drift like millpond leaves through the Latitudes. And in the pained hush that follows the suggestion that this is the nature of love.

Myth, he has to remind himself, though the line at sea is sometimes as hard to discern as the longitudes hand-drawn on old sea charts. He's passed through them on warm starless nights near the equator,

when the weak gust over canvas is an aroused lover's breath moving urgent and close. She arches her spine, mutters something softly he wants to confuse with his name, some secret shared only by greased women passing seamlessly through shipping lanes. And he stares at the fiery face of the woman all the villagers call Mermaid, coaxing her through the milked heat of the green papaya moon.

Sometimes I ask myself why anyone would keep living in a lung-colored house with stork legs. Maybe I stay for the creaking of pine floorboards at midnight, when the summer winds are still charged by the high desert sand and the rose powder off every dry riverbed. It is the sound of each blood-stained deck my father set out on. Something to do with the indecisive sway of this house during fire season, when dust clouds begin their incendiary spin through the wildflower and scrub. The way the canyon converges with first moonlight, a sunken armada, hundreds of upended hulls spilling ingot and bullion, gold coins bearing the faces of discarded queens. It soothes me in much the same way wet sand rubbed hard on my mother's legs stopped the sting of the jellyfish, drawing out the venom pulsing toward the sound the human heart makes.

On nights like this there is often the curve of my mother's vertebrae to consider, the rise of her spine a series of sea pebbles laid generously end to end. And even through closed lids there is the insistence of Santa Monica in the distance, lit softly as though by paper lanterns, the slump of the pier where men with fishing lines and pails rummage the dusk alone. Beyond this there is the burst of green as the water swallows the sun whole, the horizon line begins to blister, then an upsurge of violet that in certain twilights is all the consolation I need. These are the colors I choose to confuse with daybreak behind Wellfleet, sea-dampened shadows creeping constantly forward, a silence compromised only by foghorn.

The summer of the pale green swim cap. She wore it everywhere. To the farmer's market outside Wellfleet, polite women in tennis skirts, sunglasses perched in their stiff platinum hair, pretending not to stare over the hills of loganberry and grape, through the dusted shine of Granny Smith apples that might have been blushing. On our bike

rides along the shore lousy with broken oyster shells, ringing our weak bells as she hummed something by Patsy Cline, something about having to be crazy for being crazy for you. The afternoon sun foraging the dune grass, a steady gemlike glare off her cap as we rode. Sunday mornings we'd ride our bikes to the nursery on the thistled edges of Gardiner's Bay, loud with sage hens and loons skating low over the water and everywhere the scent of peat lush in the shade. We went there because its forget-me-nots were always in season. She'd taken to planting them everywhere, filling each rusted basket on the front of our bikes, promising the owner with the wooden leg we'd be back for more.

As if we'd ever forget, Mother. How you used to count at least two hundred shades of gray between landmasses, how you said you could hear the continents drift in your seventh hour at sea level, halfway across the Channel when you were only vaguely aware of the chill of your long limbs. How you longed out loud in your night fevers for the sting of one more man-of-war, the way they used to dilate wildly beneath you, tracking you for miles, rising up from the murk like obscene flowers in conspicuous bloom.

"That's not it at all," she groans three days before dying, struggling to sit up in bed though I've said nothing to wake her. She regards me childlike for a moment through the morphine, as if trying to decide whether I'm hallucination or sea angel. "The thing about channels is you're never quite sure when you've reached the inner stream."

I wonder whether she's there in her mind, in the center of the last great strait, skin greased and consorting with waves.

"In your eleventh hour out, you can't believe how numb your legs are. The pain, incredible. And the cold, there's just no escaping it. Then all of a sudden, the water is placid. Lukewarm tides surround you. You look behind, in front of you. But there's no land in sight, and you say to yourself, maybe there never was. That's when you're certain. You've finally reached it."

"The inner stream," I say, holding her shrunken hand, white-knuckled around mine. Tightening with each stab of pain, washing over her like a tide, complete with its own rip and gravitational pull, something done in collusion with moonlight.

"When you reach the inner stream, there is no more ache or regret.

You're tempted to stop fighting the current, go wherever it takes you. You could just roll over on your back, surrender yourself to the blue. Soon you begin to grow uncertain of your own skin." She holds out her broom-thin arms as proof, all whittled bone and chemotherapy blossom. "You look down and suddenly you're silver. Like the school of bass passing beneath you. So close, but never quite touching. And you think, it'd be so easy to run with them."

When I look up, there are tear tracks on her face, and for a moment, they are glittering and utterly silver. Smiling the way she would whenever she'd come back to shore, lithe arms pumping at her sides and even the tide shrinking back. Her high cheeks blushing now, you'd want to rub one finger over them until your teeth clench, thinking all the while of sea snail shell, the first spokes of the sun weaving on the water and making you squint. You swore it would never rise again without her, and yet it is, demonstrably, streaking toward you all the way from the horizon and with such alarming grace.

Whenever I remember my mother's swims, I see myself standing on at least twenty sandbars, all of them crumbling. Leaning against seawalls messy with algae and valves, a thick towel over one shoulder, a stopwatch around my neck. I'm scrawny, all knees and adam's apple, goose-bumped arms crossed over my clipboard. Freckles the shade of nutmeg, eyes squinting through reddish brown hair. In every photo I wear the same look of troubled wonder my father used to, it's as though he's passed it down in his cedar sea chest. Though I try, I have difficulty smiling because I've spent every spare hour in the school library, researching each conceivable threat in my mother's waters. I've memorized the feeding times of every known predator and my latest fear has something to do with electric eels with scalpel sharp teeth.

I pace along the shore, straining for some sign of her cap, a facet of wedding ring like a wink of the sun. The passage of time presses down hard on the rib cage. I consider the word stopwatch as I check it again. If only I could. Stop watching. I could slip into the salt flats to the west, pull these vapors around me like a freshly skinned pelt. I could disappear as absolutely as the noisy freighters in the mist. I would scarcely be noticed on this gunmetal afternoon. My heart begins to hammer, eyes bulging and uncomprehending, a tree frog para-

lyzed in the center of your palm. Because I have done my research. I know that divers are strangled in sea kelp forests, that Great Whites are always mistaking swimmers for seals. And I remember Panama as though I was there. Men struggling against the drag of their own nets down. My mother splayed open ripe as casaba, blood streaming slat after slat of dock, the sky a confusion of rankled birds taking flight.

On the English side of the Channel the crowd is thinning and still no sight of her. Two heavy women in rag wool sweaters are taking down the flags strung over the finish line, avoiding my glare. Maybe they'd stay if they knew what only my mother and I and the oncologist back in Boston know, what my father won't know until we reunite almost accidentally on the same Wellfleet shore. That this will be her last swim across the Channel, across any waterway. That even she can't outswim the cancer, tracking her like the alligator skimming backwater canal, eyes coasting lurid and shot behind the flutter kick, still yearning for her after all these years.

The men with moustaches and large cameras are packing up their equipment, spitting wads of tobacco dark as first tumor. If only I could be on the boat with her spotter and trainer, Frank and possibly Lou. They probably forgot the spear gun, the shark repellent. They laughed when I told them to watch out for eels, just rolled their eyes. "Electric eels," I said, pointing at the National Geographic close-up. "You probably need someone onboard, you know, just to look out for them."

But soon I am waiting alone among the clam-diggers, solitary and sand-blind as Bedouins. This is the hour of scythe-backed women fingering cowrie shells, remembering for a moment the warmed contours of a dead husband's lips, sifting sand through weathered hands as though measuring time. They look at me as if to say, we know each crash of wave away from her is an open-palmed slap to the face, spraying assurances sea-damaged as driftwood or sponge. We, too, are pining away. For the moment husbands lost at sea return speaking wind through our hair, embracing us in much the same way a starfish wraps itself around oyster, so hard at times we can feel our shells breaking. This is why we're doomed to rake through the sand for bitter-tasting things with ridged shells, jimmying them open alone by the fire, all the while knowing there's no possibility of pearl.

I wait for her with a patience pointed as the pebbles ice-cold beneath my feet on the Strait of Gibraltar, the albatross tracing my name with crude-slicked wings in the air. I wait against the cliffs of Dover, steeped shadows menacing on the sand. I can't stop thinking about the National Geographic eels, their lust for underwater electrocution. Half-mad with worry, I am chasing the papers flying high off my clipboard. All my useless statistics, darting back and forth above my reach like swallows. Dive-bombing into the water around my knees, one by one, my ink running off the wet paper like uncontrollable tears. It occurs to me that my whole life's been spent waiting for her and knitting my greased hands, in one hostile twilight after another, the stars honing their edges on the oily water and far off the horns of ships that will not stop bleating. And then I see it, her pale green swim cap, slicing through the gathering fog, catching a sliver of moonlight as though only for me.

I am a thirteen-year-old insomniac backlit by dawn. The moist air sweeps low at all the maple leaves big as outstretched hands. I've spent another night counting my mother's gluey coughs in the next room, thinking about the radiation, what it's doing to her in that room the color of champagne gone flat and warm in the glass. Through my window I'd watched the lighthouse below Chatham, spinning in the distance, a glow small as the light fireflies make under the birches. I'd emptied the Cuban cigar box filled with her hair on my pillow again, arranging it under my flashlight into fishing boats, alligators, women navigating wide mouths of channel and canal. I'd stroked brittle tufts of it against one cheek, untangling it in my mouth damp and soft as magnolia. It was everywhere that summer, curling against the cracked porcelain of her bathroom sink, matted in the shower drain, bunched in her brushes like the abandoned nests of so many robins. Each morning I'd collect it before she got up, careful not to wake her. Somehow I sensed she'd need it, later, when like the thaw of a hateful winter it would all be over, the birds returning in perfect formation.

Down the hill is the grainy harbor where metal things clang against masts like accidental bells. There is the sudden yellow of marigolds and mums through missing pickets as I walk headlong through the haze. On the tilting horizon I spot a vessel no bigger than a mite and

it's possible that my father is on it, trying to differentiate me from the specks on his telescope. If you wipe the lens, I will still be standing here against all the gray clapboard, waiting among the ragged hydrangea, nodding their heads and conspiring like thieves. Waiting for you the way Noah must've waited for land, for even a twig of olive tree in the mouth of a dove. It's what I do best, waiting in dense marine layers. It's as though I'm one of the run-down lighthouses planted on each Cape point, every last one of them dedicated to drowned sailors.

August moon dark orange and bloated through my open window, skip of curtain a slow turning dance of many veils. The moonshine dragging the harbor is my mother's nausea in her room, breathing as if trapped in a sealed chamber of nautilus shell. There is the surge of her hacking through my outspread hand on the wall, and for hours we are strangely connected this way, the pain in her chest running umbilically through me. I think vaguely of tuning forks, the lonely way a lightning rod tames rainstorm from rooftop.

She's outlived the predictions of the hospice nurses by over three weeks, another long-distance record she's determined to break. All summer they've taken turns driving clear down here from Boston in their starched uniforms. Sweatless women who somehow trust chemotherapy, padding noiselessly through torrid Cape afternoon. These are the keepers of the hypodermic, guarding clear vial of morphine like a mysterious erotic flame. Instead of chokehold or murder they use words like slipping, passing, parting, as though she's packing a steamer trunk and leaving by train. Their news invariably leaves me depleted and gripping screen door. It's as though they think I'm a slow learner, repeating the same words over and over.

Nothing more we can do.

It must be my eyes, I begin to realize, an uncertain flecked hazel, always protruding as though in slight disbelief. As though I don't know my mother is dying. I've known since the day they vanished, the criss-crossing tan lines left by her swimsuit, a sort of geography I could map out my whole life on.

When the moon sinks to sill it will be too late for cigar box and flashlight, this idiot voodoo of mine, powerless as my own puppet-maker shadows on the wall, the shapes human hair make in the dark.

But I can't resist the touch of it on my skin, sometimes feeling distinctly like whiskers, my father rough-housing with me in the yard, breath smelling of spices traded only in faraway ports. I'm staring at the scar on his forearm in an elongating noon, fascinating, like the base of a volcano, molten and still cooling after so many years.

Still there is a fistful of hair in the weakening moonlight. Tonight it is the scent of wilted lavender and orangepeel, a touch of black tobacco from Cuban cigar. And though the smell seems oddly forbidden, it's the only way to bring her back even partially intact. Images of her begin to march past me, stilted yet vivid, like the clacking old newsreels my father saved of her swims. Her legs are planted on the shore, sizing up another inhospitable strait, swim cap blazing like a small captured sun. Her feet buried as though she might take root in the sand, as though I could will tendrils sufficient to fasten her there for even one season. It would be the long season of replenished marrow and mother's hair, growing back fast in my fingers, swift as spun gold pulled from a loom.

She wakes me from a dreamless sleep, face down in her shed hair. She's wearing her swim cap, goggles loose around her slight neck. She sits on my bed, rubbing a patch of her ruined hair between two fingers. Her face dappled by the quivering leaf shadows, the straps of her favorite swimsuit showing beneath her robe. "I'm going for a swim," she says after awhile, the back of her hand trembling slightly on my cheek.

"Wait a minute," I say, still drowsy as she leads me downstairs by the hand. "Let me get your towel."

"I won't need it this time."

It's not until we're standing before the breakwater I realize what she means. We're alone on the shore, the ten thousand or more footsteps from the day before swept away by high tide. Only our own prints side by side in the sand, disappearing behind us in the tall dune grass, bending in the breeze as though in labor or prayer.

"You're too weak to swim. This isn't a channel. You know it's just ocean out there."

She's holding my chin up on her fingertips, regarding me the way she would after every crossing. Like she might be admiring the South-

ern Cross, the Northern Lights on the China Sea. Never at all like I felt, a spit-shined star with all the tips dulled.

“It’s not the pain,” she says in a soothing way. “It’s the boredom. There’s just no more adventure. You understand. How I’m being ground to powder in that room. I just can’t bear to wait anymore.”

And almost I say, neither can I.

“Remember something, Noah. No body of water will stop me. From finding my way back to you. With each breaker, each crest of wave, I’ll be moving closer. One stroke at a time.”

The wind is cooler at the water’s edge, nearly caressing the last curls below her swim cap. I watch the moonlight, how it’s careening on the dome of her cap, building inertia rainforest and chrome. She loosens her robe, skin radium white beneath the slack straps of her suit. She grins as she drops the robe from one hand to the mirrorlike sand. Soon it’s consumed by the foam, hauled out by all that roiling white-green, arms reaching back toward us in a sort of prolonged empty wail.

“Look how you’re shivering out here. Let’s go back. The water’s too cold.”

“The water was always too cold.” She hands me something metal and round. I know before looking down it’s my tin of goose grease. “But we managed, didn’t we?”

I unscrew the lid, study the sienna shine on the surface, the four deep grooves left by my fingers on the French side of the Channel. And all this time I thought it would be her last swim. Her bones feel breakable as I begin to grease her shoulders. But soon she is burnished cherry furrowed by moon, my tears beading on the back of her neck and beginning to blaze. With the last coat down the length of her leg, I am waxing outrigger or canoe, something I can paddle alongside her to the horizon line. I run both hands across her thigh, feel the alligator’s teeth for the last time, scarlet and sleek and almost humane.

“The sea laid its claim on us long ago, your father and me,” she says, looking down at her scar with a knowing expression. “These marks are here to remind us. Like a branding iron. We belong out there.”

My throat constricts when I think of him, standing in the doorway and calling her name, the husked daybreak whirling past his frame

with only the dust and me there to greet him. "What will I say?"

She reaches for my hand, opening my reluctant fist finger by finger. "He'll understand."

She tells me about the note she left my father. How she left it on his pillow. Next to all her medals, looking like a pile of ancient currency, something men might have died for on the open sea. She wrapped the note around a worn piece of bamboo, both ends frayed. It will be a few moments before he remembers its contours sure as her breath, every brown honeyed knot, the fevered flush of skin upon skin. The splint used in the transfusion. She kept it all these years. And when I see him study it by the fire, his face turning to quiet amazement, I'll know she was right. He will understand completely.

We must have said we loved each other as the moonlight withered, every footprint we made flooding with water almost immediately, each floating hermit crab an ark a world might depend on. We must have reassured each other in small ways, held each other close, my face covered with goose grease and sand and the salt left by our tears. But the part I remember most clearly is the heat of her lips pressed on each closed eye, that faint lavender scent like an anxious yank at the heart, all rusty hook and sinker.

"Wave to me when you get there," I call out, my voice reed-thin through the loud tide and spray.

Hands cupped around her mouth, the back tow impatient around her meager legs, I can barely hear her shout, "Where, Noah?"

"The inner stream."

Her smile is mother-of-pearl as she nods, adjusting her goggles in the last smudge of moonlight. She's moving out with purpose, wading through each incoming swell before she dives in. I watch her pierce wave after wave, getting her rhythm now, needle and thread. Her kick frail but in stride, a delicate wake fanning out behind her. Slight arm over arm, stroke steadying as she passes the last lobster trap and buoy. Skin positively silver as she clears the outer bar, where she always said she could see the land fall away, dropping off her body like moose hide to floor. The skyline is appreciable now, the suggestion of pink and soon dusted rose. And somewhere in between is the inner stream, receiving her with lapis and turquoise hands, warming her weary limbs even now. I sit back in the sand, watching her cap in the distance, an abalone shell held up to the sun.