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As the Water Recedes

The weeds have grown taller than any man I've kissed here, where the water has held its breath and pulled its shoulders from the shoreline. Broken bottles and rusted cans, empty shotgun shells, and plastic handles from children's shovels now jut up with the dead carp and bullheads from sand that's turned to muck. This is not the place where I grew up, barefoot from rock-to-rock in play paced by tides, along the shore of the bay of Green Bay, where my family's house is set. It isn't the shore that my father knew before the flood of '73 filled basements with green water and fish eggs, before he became a man who smokes but never runs or swims or loves a woman, when he still wedged his small boat in the backyard where grass and sand met at the silver light post, which worked then. He mows it all down now—all those green weeds whistling where once there was water.

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I know how a cold wind elbows through a room. Anger becomes visible in the breath let out. Laughter's still warm in the air. My parents are early in their thirties and early in their nights. Pull-tabs are pulled back. Aluminum cans are fisted down to Formica like empty baritones. Some curtain falls and sparring begins. I have seen the way rage wedges between the keys of a ribcage and plays a man in the same octave as happy. Both love and hate come from the core of human muscle, and such desire spun in the gut demands the attention of arms, good or bad. It is a matter of degrees, not kind. A girl can never be too early in her life not to sense this shift in pressure. I have yet to outgrow it—to hold my breath and pull back, to mow it all down.

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As a girl, I built rock forts and dry-smoked bamboo sticks while the push and pull of water pressed its rhythms in me. Everything the waves forced against the rocks was swallowed back, gone. Fury and mercy in chorus canceled each other out, kept me still. When I was eleven, I waited through every night to watch the sun throw morning over the bay. Facing north on the dike that the city built after the flood, to disconnect home from water, I took in nothing but the red sputter of a single lighthouse. As the sun broke, the east shore—swelling with oversized homes and the University's seven-story library—fell to green. Westward, the sky-blue slide at the amusement park, seagull-ridden Kidney Island, and the Pulliam Plant's smokestacks woke. And when the tide came in again, and the sun fell closer to the slide and smoke, water covered the lower, smaller rocks and cleaned my feet.

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> **Anger-*noun*** constricted, tightness, to squeeze, a strangling, fear. 1) a feeling of displeasure resulting from injury, mistreatment, opposition, etc. and usually showing itself in a desire to fight back at the supposed cause of this feeling...SYN.—anger is broadly applicable to feelings of resentful or revengeful displeasure; indignation implies righteous anger aroused by what seems unjust, mean, or insulting; rage suggests a violent outburst of anger in which self-control is lost; fury implies a frenzied rage that borders on madness.

Maybe it matters that the man played by his own desire—my father—had his own summer of sleeplessness and need, that it was Typhoid Fever that first led him to coil his own lynch-man's knot during three months of quarantine at seven years old. The

walls close in. The room goes cold. Black grows whole in his eyes. Does the moment where a boy learns to silence his love and spin his anger toward the world deserve a name before the power of its definitions and histories have been swallowed, gone? A girl doesn't need to know *fight or flight* to know those eyes fuel more than one heartbeat, to see an absence, to understand the physiology of merciless fury.

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Russell and Edith build their white stucco house by the bay in the 1940s, when untamed grasses grow yellow and tall to the edge of sand. He has the foresight of storms and lays six-inch concrete floors. She has the foresight of home and plasters figure eights like rolling waves on every wall. Here, dollars and tempers will always be short. Here, my father is one of four boys growing in and around and with the water, and it is only his eyes—when he looks toward the sputtering red—that show what it means. The floating raft he nearly drowns beneath, the white board Grandpa builds so the boys can learn to ski, the stolen bicycle parts he dumps over the side of his boat and never gets caught. He swims for hours, skis for miles, shoots pheasants from a basement window when he should be in Catholic grade school. He cherishes the grandmother who cooks the game and never tells, the mother who risks love enough to die for him, crossing the border of quarantine to empty his bedpan and sing him to sleep. He never tells his father he loves him before or after he hears the *old man* complain about the financial burdens of sickness. He hates the *son-of-a-bitch*.

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I am seven, maybe eight. The bar is loud, smoky—a little like home but a lot more men. They've put down their picket signs and picked up their beers. It was my first time on a line but not in a tavern. Light shines from the right each time someone comes or goes. The bar is behind me. The man in front of me

has Ws on his pockets, one of which is white where his wallet is. My father bends to whisper in my ear: "Do not stand behind him," he says and pulls me to the right by my bicep. The "do not" comes out slow like it does when I bring toads in the house and Mom asks Dad to tell me not to do this, when they're on each other's good side. "I'm about to knock this mother fucker down," he says. I move toward the light, but the man shuts his mouth and doesn't get knocked down. My father takes me out into the sun to show me the iridescent Harleys lined up like dominoes against the curb.

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Donald and Carla buy the white stucco house when Edith and Russell divorce in the late '60s. He adds a dining room and garage and puts up blue wooden siding. She plants marigolds and times our dinners to the hour he gets home. Grandpa Russell dies the year the water roars over the well-manicured lawn and into the basement. The foundation isn't damaged. The dike is built. I am born. Donald and Carla stop hating each other under the same roof when I am nine. He keeps the house. She wants it as payment for her bruises though she's never learned to swim. The waves change colors, but they're always on the walls.

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> *Anger will never disappear so long as thoughts of resentment are cherished in the mind. Anger will disappear just as soon as thoughts of resentment are forgotten.* —Buddha

He will never love another woman, though he will reminisce—the blood in the snow behind the high school, how both young men could hardly stand but wouldn't fall after forty-five minutes; the night he came home from Nam and watched his sister-in-law pummeled by her husband in a gravel parking lot;

his old friend, Lloyd Poole, who could knock out a cow or a bar full of men and once carried me and his daughter to the amusement park on his shoulders; the breath he once had and the rush he once felt knocking men down in taverns. If a man still makes love to his anger, he can only live quietly alone. He can make jam and bake bread and grow tomatoes that taste red. He cannot erase the cold room from the girl who aligned herself with power when it was the safest way to live, could not stop her from seeing strength in what he'd cherished for years. He has never put his hands on her, but this is not the same as mercy.

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The water continues to sink. Nothing short of a storm kaleidoscoping the still surface from the north can rile it. Whitecaps are few. Stagnant, shallow pools between sandbars ripen with algae. My father mows. The sod ramp that's become gravel will soon be concrete. It's the only way to get the lawnmower down the dike. He's a year from 60. I live 200 miles away. When I go home, I still run barefoot the half-acre from house to dike, as if I were five, the monster at my back driving me full force. It's been a year since I've put my toes in.

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Dad calls at night. He's had his Pabsts but not too many. He forgot to tell me something last time we talked—a memory a month and forty years old. The water was unusually low, still open due to a warm, dry winter. He had just mowed and was gathering debris when he saw it jutting up from the muck 100 yards from the dike. As he walked toward it, he started *grinnin' like a motherfucker* at the three inches of what he could see buried. He tried to pull it up but couldn't without a shovel. The tide was coming in. He ran to the garage and didn't stop despite his wheezing. He grinned and dug and heard Russell's voice echoing in his head, the advice he'd given about painting the black anchor his son was now pulling from the sand—an anchor he'd used on his small boat more than forty years ago. He hadn't remembered losing it, only his tiny, fiberglass boat peeling apart decades before. "It looked pretty much the same as it did the last time I saw it...it was pretty neat," he says with an audibly hot and swelling throat.

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I've spent much of my adult life cursing whichever factory or force was responsible for the water receding, for my childhood stillness scraping away. But the water recedes, reveals relics we've been swimming over for decades—bedrock—my father, who ran like a boy for a shovel and stood in the muck with the tide at his feet and the sun at the smoke and dug for an anchor once swallowed, gone. An anchor he brush-painted with black Rustoleum like Russell said. An anchor that began to rust the moment he pulled it up. He's going to have it sandblasted. He's going to hang it in the garage.