

Waves

She finds herself at the bottom of a lake.

Rays of early September sunlight stretch over the grass. Mist seeps in between ashy tree trunks, rolling in wisps toward the lake. A thrush, perched high on a nearby branch, sings to the rhythmic lull of the waves, and she listens, enchanted by nature's aubade.

The only blemishes marking the sand are her own doing, but even these wash away as the water pulls in, pulls out. She ponders this, the finite existence of her footprints on the beach, and walks, the tide tugging at her ankles with each sinking step.

She stops when she sees a single stone. It is gray, speckled with flecks of white; edges rounded and made gentle with war waged against the waves — beautiful.

A timid breeze tugs at loose strands of her hair. The waves pull at her feet. Together they draw her to the water with a soundless call, and she listens.

She thinks of the stone as she takes the first step, then the second. Steps pile up, the push of the frothing-white waves against her knees and then her waist warning her to turn back — but she keeps going, step upon step, feet sinking into the sandy floor until there is no longer a floor to touch —

The lake stretches to meet the sky in every direction except that from which she came. It is clear, cold — her teeth are close to the point of chattering. Still, the trees wait behind her, fortified and patient, and eventually she will be warm and dry again — but for now she must trudge on, against the waves.

Her arms tire. The sun gleams white on the water's mirrored surface — blinding, if she tilts her head the wrong way. Her legs tire, next — they turn heavy like the bags of soil she had helped unload from Drew's car after his trip to the gardening store.

Her heart thumps *hard*, once, twice — *Drew*.

She forgets about the heaviness. Keeps swimming.

When she looks over her shoulder, just once, to ensure that the shore remains, the trees have become only blurred shadows against the lightening horizon.

She exhales, content. This is far enough.

She has always had to turn in a doctor's note for the swimming unit at school.

Aquaphobia — or, a “skin condition,” as she and her mother fondly refer to it, because anything-phobia sounds either a lot worse or a lot more complicated than it usually is. Still, during those seemingly endless classes spent watching from a creaky, uncomfortable wooden bench, she had taken notes.

The tuck dive involves hugging one's knees to her chest, rolling into a head-first position, and then extending the legs so the weight propels the swimmer underwater.

A surface dive. She takes a breath in, a breath out, listens to the humming silence, and then tucks.

She had believed that the early-morning air was cold — the water is bitter like grief, merciless in comparison. Ice talons claw at her body and sends a tremor rippling through her chest, but she fights against it, pushing against instinct, struggling downward —

Once, she nearly takes in a breath. And then twice. Her eyes have long since shut against the pressure. All is dark, and nearly silent, except for a murmur in her ear — like a lullaby, something that she is not fully aware of but something that certainly exists. Low and quiet, but steady, this murmur. Like the brush of fingers on her hair while she sleeps, like steady breath and a thumping heartbeat that is not her own, but rises and falls underneath her ear —

Fire blazes in her throat, a stark contrast to the cold, cold that still racks her body. All at once she is tired and alive and dying and fighting, and it is *terrifying*, too, as she knew it would be. She is still unsure of what she wants to find, and then —

— and then she remembers the stone on the beach, with its eroded, gentle surface. In the face of adversity, in the face of change, it became beautiful. It changed, and she has changed, and she is sure to change again, but there are phases of beauty —

*Cold.* And the murmur, and the fire in her chest, and thoughts reeling, running rampant in her mind. Her heart stutters again, a seizure and then a shudder as it relaxes.

She kicks once more against the water, which is heavier than any sack of soil. The fire *sears* —

— and she finds it: the bottom.

The next moments are elusive when she tries to recall them later, but she remembers turning and kicking, and then *breathing*, finally, as the surface of the lake breaks before her and she flips her head back toward the sky in greeting; she is sputtering and coughing but smooth and *whole*.

For some time, her mouth moves in breathless litany. Alive. Terrified, chattering teeth and an aching heart that flutters weakly in her chest, but alive. And perhaps stupid, as well, but cautious people never open the most rewarding doors because they are the most dangerous to find.

She is crying — she thinks. It is hard to tell, because really everything is wet and how can she determine whether the trails on her cheeks are from tears or the lake. Still, she smiles, despite herself, and waits for her heart to slow.

She floats on her back. Returns to the shore, where, as promised, trees and warmth kindly wait for her.

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Later, her mother sighs. Most people, she says, do not court death so lightly.

But it was hardly courting, she thinks, one hand on the smooth stone in her pocket — more of a coquettish blush and a blown kiss to death, and a well-needed reminder of the persistence of sunrise.

He would be proud.