

A Few Feet Away

My sister and I stand, side-by-side, on the rocky beach. Below us, the clear water of Garrett Bay gathers speed, crashing to the shore, splashing surf over the wooden boat ramp.

Blending with the Michigan horizon, the sky— gray and fuzzy— solidifies in memory. We amble our way down the lakefront, trespassing onto private property. The wind picks up her hair and holds it behind her, a veil. I follow the procession. My foot slips between jagged rocks on the sandless beach, but I remain in balance. A few pieces of field grass break through the hard pieces of earth, wedging themselves against stone. *We're here*, they say.

Rachel points slightly north, and I nod. I remember.

“They’re still here, you know. The water ghosts,” she says.

The spirits were born years earlier. We were in our father’s boat, kneeling in the bow, on triangular cushions that always stuck to the back of our legs, clinging with sweat.

The sky that day was ominous. A line of darkness divided it into opposite halves: above and below, before and after. For some reason, we meandered to the dock, wanting the memory to stay alive forever, and our creations came to be. Their ethereal forms would be marooned to the shapeless depths of the Green Bay forever.

“Let’s look for sunken treasure,” Rachel said, all those summers ago as we scanned beneath the surface. The motor behind us muffled our parents’ discussion. We were at the point of childhood when imagination begins to dry, but that day, we splashed our visions, grasping, cupping the liquid of them one more time. Two girls, their heads still wet from Ellison Bay Beach, leaned over the bow, searching the shallows. Dried sand tickled my toes, but I didn’t dare pull my attention from the water as it slapped the starboard below.

“There!” I said, pointing. “It looks like a ladder. Something’s there.” Wooden planks lay on the sandy floor. The water was clear enough to see perfectly through its depths. Rachel’s fingers made three lines on the surface, but immediately, she pulled them back. The shipwreck’s corpse, its poles and their shadows, darkened with our awareness of their presence.

“I see it! It’s a ship! What’s left of one. Wonder if someone died here.”

“Possible,” I said. “We’re so close to Death’s Door. Maybe they got lost in a fog, trying to cross through to Lake Michigan.” More of the wreckage revealed itself as we circled around. The carcass looked like a fish skeleton, large and looming. Lines, for bones and beams, crossed each other and connected at sharp angles. The hull’s edge grimaced with sharp teeth, staring up at us from the depths. *How many feet?* We both wondered, but neither of us spoke for waves of time.

“Water ghosts,” she whispered. I felt them then, and realized their presence. The boulders at the water’s edge, the shot rock, the rubble, seemed to acknowledge the existence of spirits, their realness.

“We can’t swim here. They’ll grab our legs because we still walk the earth’s surface.” When she spoke, I felt the first cold drop. It landed on my arm, lowering my temperature, and I was thankful for the weighty warmth of my life jacket. Rain began to hit the lake. Violent punches. Vertical lines of rain closed the memory.

We watch for our former selves out there. We want to see the ghosts of who we were when we discovered the schooner Fleetwing.

“Let’s walk out there,” I say. I enjoy getting a reaction out of her. But Rachel doesn’t respond. She gives me a look, telling me she doesn’t find my ironic suggestion humorous. So I

kick off a shoe, continuing my performance. I am not laughing, and neither is she. Waiting for her to call my bluff, I let my other sandal fall between the sharp concrete angles of white stones, those celestial boulders. She rolls her eyes, and that is enough of a dare. It is the extra encouragement I need.

“You’re not really doing that!” she calls when my toes first touch the icy water. The waves, frigid and hungry for land, splash my knees and bite with rawness. It must have always been this cold, even in June. Either time erased that detail, or our tolerance had waned.

Probably both, I think as I wade further out. *Probably both. It should be both of us.*

“Come on! Do this with me,” I shout over my shoulder, my eyes focused on my footpath, green and magnified under the water. I want to turn around and face my sister on the shore, to see her expression as I move closer to our dreaded history. But I don’t. Instead, I simply keep going. I hadn’t really planned on swimming out there. I only wanted to put my feet in the water and frighten her, a childish habit.

Once I become acclimated to the temperature, the heaviness around me-- the slippery, mossy, sandy floor-- it calms me. It doesn’t feel as if angry arms are waiting, wanting to steal my legs for their own extensions. But I am aware that the vessel and its double masts lay only a few meters deep. The only other time I had been this close to the wreckage remains decades in the past, when we floated over it.

The shift from walking to treading is both gradual and sudden. The constant movement, the up and down stirring makes it impossible to see what resides beneath my weightless feet. My shadows must overlap the warping ship. I imagine myself, as an angel to spirits below, floating, hovering slowly, with nowhere else to be.

“You’re a water ghost,” she says, her long hair trailing in a silky line behind her. It reaches for the shore as she lowers herself and swims, slowly into deeper water. She follows me, staying only a few feet away for the entire journey.

“No,” I say. “We both are.”