

## The Lake

By Olivia Beno

When I was young my grandfather taught me how to fish. He woke me up early when the window panes were still cool to the touch and dewdrops beaded on the blades of the grass on the overgrown lawn. The half-globe of sun rose up, pale and yolky, through the thin spread of clouds overhead. We walked down to the lake on the strip of road that wrapped around it, potholed and worn down from the weather. In the deep winter it froze and swelled up and split but they never sent anybody out to fix it because it was an hour drive from the access road and nobody bothered to care about the residential streets, especially deep in the sticks the way we were. The cracks ran thin beneath my small sandaled feet. I imagined every step I took broke it further, tiny islands adrift. I was strong, I was God. One more step and I split the ground all the way down to the center of the earth, a foot on each side, straddling the world. My grandfather did not feel the earth crumbling under his feet, did not feel the power I held. He simply marched on.

As we made the trek, one car passed us, plastic kayak strapped to the roof like a Christmas tree. I watched its headlights slide across the asphalt and gravel and light up the sinewy left ankle of my grandfather. The driver shouted to my grandfather; he was a new neighbor, a half-mile up that broken road. My grandfather lifted his hand in acknowledgement. They had had many neighbors; families who moved in, newlyweds who moved out. My grandmother and grandfather were the only unchanging things. I did not believe they would ever die. Death was an amorphous concept, then; it was the listlessness of my great-aunts and the quiet upset in dining rooms, hanging in the air like a stewing storm cloud. I knew that death was in cigarettes and in nursing homes. But death was gone when I was there, and the people steeped in it would look at me from where I peered from the doorframe and cheer up their faces and

death would move on to somebody who had the time for it. Death had left us alone. The gravel bit into my heels. We watched the car drive down the path until it was swallowed by the foliage.

Still, my grandfather marched. The road seemed to stretch on for miles. In his broad fist, he held the metal fishing rod. I knew from the pictures on the fireplace mantel that he'd been in the army. I couldn't imagine it until I saw him holding that rod like the barrel of a rifle in his tough palm. After that I couldn't imagine him anywhere other than the battlefield. And, though I knew that death was in war, I did not believe that he was its agent. I did not think about it. I thought only of summer barbecues and Christmastime. When I looked at him then, I saw the wrinkles carved into a face that was, in part, my own. He looked back at me as I stumbled down the road. I carried the satchel he said had all we'd needed on my sagging shoulder. It pulled me down, down to the center of the earth. I said it wasn't heavy at all and he pretended he believed me. Through the trees, the lake glimmered invitingly.

The wood creaked beneath our weight when we stepped out onto the pier. Nothing has stuck as vividly with me now as the memory of that lake not yet warmed by the sun; the blue below and overhead, no beginning and no end, forever and ever. The pine trees swayed forward with the breeze, drawn toward the water the way we were. Their needles rattled dryly on their branches. It seemed to me that the lake had its own gravity that pulled everything into it. It seemed to me that I would one day be pulled into it, that my grandfather would, that it was the final locus at which we would all end up. I felt dread run down my spine, and I looked toward my grandfather's broad and stern face for his guidance, or to see if he saw it too. But he did not perceive the fear that I did. My senses were more acute.

He stopped at the pier's end and looked out across the water, glittering from shivers of wind. He pointed to a water strider resting on the water's surface off the edge of the dock. I

recall thinking that it must have been holy as Jesus. My grandmother said that nothing and nobody had ever walked on water except Jesus because he was the son of God. Here it was, performing a miracle for the sake of it, unaware of my eyes. We watched it for a moment, my grandfather and me, watched it dance on the water, and then the wind shifted and time began again. My grandfather sucked a whistling breath in. He pulled the bag from my shoulder, reached in deep with his tanned hand, and withdrew a little silver tin of bloodworms. On the lid, a blue-handled box-cutter, ruddy brown with rust or dried blood and guts or the two combined. Pinpricked metal shielded their wriggling bodies from the instrument of their death; the blindfold, removed moments before the executioner's blow.

He cut them straight on the dock. The blade went through and I learned then the meaning of the stains on the wood beneath my feet. I stood delicately on the small ring of bleached white wood a few steps behind him, where blood had not yet corrupted it. He dug the box-cutter in like the tip of a bayonet; took the horseshoed hook between two callused fingers and pushed the worm down onto the point. My grandmother cross-stitched; he pulled the hook through like needle through soft cloth. He sewed too. I never understood why they had loved each other; I never thought they were similar. They did not speak to each other very much save for remarks on their ailments. But they both found comfort in the pull of the needle. They were not so different.

When he had finished, he handed me the rod and I couldn't do it. I sat there for a half-hour, gangly legs thrown over the edge, waiting for a bite. Casting and recasting, different lures. They glowed vibrantly beneath the surface of the water. The line pulled taut only by maple leaves tangling on the hook. When he took it back I felt ashamed. He looked at my face, but he did not look me in the eye. He seemed to see straight through me.

He cast it out and the fish came, little soldiers eager to die. My grandfather told me about the kamikaze, the men who flew straight toward their deaths and burned in the crushed tin cans of their planes. I thought that this was what the fish were, except they did not die for any noble purpose; they died because they were tricked. I believed that if I thought hard enough, they would hear me and turn back in the water; I believed that if I prayed to God, they would sense danger. They did not. But I understood that I was praying to the wrong god, and that the god that could have stopped it had been swallowed whole by that opaque blue water. The god who could have stopped it was a waterlogged body in the belly of a beast. I did not ever swim again in that lake, though I had spent many summers on that shore. I waited at the water's edge and watched it ebb and flow. There was an immutable barrier between us that could not be surmounted. It was no longer beautiful.

I had heard once that worms could come back from the dead, even if you cut them up. The night that we returned from that fishing trip, I dreamed every worm that old knife had gone through had come back for me. They crawled out of the throats of fish, slippery bodies vomited up. They writhed at the base of my bed. I heard the slick sound of them sliding over each other, drowning each other. I felt them in my pajamas and my ears and tasted them briny in my mouth. They stuck to my teeth and clung to my throat so that I could not cry out. When I did, no one heard me. And when I woke, I looked through the bay window to the thin veil of trees and the vast gray water beyond and the road that threaded around the edge of it. The world seemed colorless, the air more still. I watched it from behind the glass. When my grandfather woke up he poured himself a cup of coffee and sat next to me in his wicker armchair without a word. We listened to the sound of silence.

I have not gone fishing since my grandfather passed and I will not go now. That world is his alone, a jungle of fishing line vines all his own, to defend and to dominate, and a place I cannot myself navigate. Sometimes I dream of that lake, and I dream that he is waiting at the dock for me, and I feel shame sink in the pit of my stomach like a stone. My boy is the age I was when my grandfather took me fishing that first time, and I cannot pass on the tradition. It was never mine to begin with. I took him to the lake and we watched the schools of trout together beneath that tepid water, muddier now than it had been then. Perhaps it was my aging eyes, and the cataracts that now cloud my vision, but no matter how hard I looked I could not find the stains on the pier. Time had washed it clean.