

Lowcountry Haibun

When mud greases the wetlands near our home, sulfuric odor trickles into our veranda. Bacteria fizzes underground; dirt clumps on my teeth. April's different now—the tide's risen two feet more. More weeding, less bowling. I knock down Ma's tower of sweetgrass baskets by accident. Nod to longer favors. Errands at Publix: sour cream, jelly, butter.

For supper, Ma prepares chicken bog. Sells my lovely Mary Janes when no one's looking. I can't dress up as city girl anymore. I look at the slow cooker and wonder why Ma doesn't have my peat-colored hair, my nose freckles. Wonder if her silence is translation for anosmia. In the powder room, I memorize the nomenclature of herbs, only to spit out indigo. When Ma's last batch of honeycups and echinacea goes bad, I change my breathing pace and tarnish too easily. I scrub out Thursday's do-si-dos and place a wet sponge by my bed, its pores slicked with dandruff. Shower after shower, water uncleans my body. I crave the feeling of erasure. All sorts of baths: fresh paint, Epsom salt, Spanish moss. The greener, the better.

Down 344,500 acres of salt marshes, reed beds settle into freshwater for fishing season. Today, I sneak out and convince some boy to borrow his boat. Forging ancestry of how my grandfathers managed the old lighthouse. Pretending how the willet I saw during Ma's birthday was a spoonbill. Paying him with a bag of tea leaves, I skip the part where I dried them in the microwave. Talk about the recent migration of swamp sparrows. Shorter tails, thinner soil. How the South Carolina shore collapses too early.

When the coastline looks ready, I push my body to the water. Silt ground, shallow edge. Sailing through tidal creek, I chase after what is slippery—swimming marsh rabbits, rubber fur; drifting crab shells, elastic chitin; skoosh and splash. Up North,

pocosins burn from unnatural causes. Wiping organic soot on my knees, I pull out strands of spartina. Believe Ma can grasp this smell.

Reaching the inlet, fireworks from the nearby beach house. Sparks of neon blue stick onto puddles, waves, and my hands: bioluminescence. Sundown and the boat jerks sideways; my phone slides out, drops into bog, sinking and sinking. Splashes and rings, splishes and dings. Ma? She must be driving the red Buick by now, the shape of her face unrecognizable. I scoop out water in frantic arpeggios, deep in trouble. My bloodline fades into dark matter. Once, I dreamed of fire.

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Ma: spit my unclean
body matter down the shore—
bioluminescence