

Richard Stimac

Fireflies

When Rickie was young, the evening air hung thick with fireflies, as if a sea of stars fell from the sky. One could stand on the earth and touch heaven at the same time.

He'd lay on the ground, face up, his arms outstretched, and imagine he rested on the ocean floor. The fireflies would alight on his arms, his legs, his face, as he breathed, submerged, far beneath the waves. He let himself inhale the imagined water, fill his lungs with fluid, and drift into a starless sleep.

One night, his eyes half-closed and the actual night sky blurred above him, his mother slid along his side. Time washed over them. How many minutes, neither could say. They, the mother and the child, let the endless rhythm of the tides rise and ebb, the moon, wax and wane, in the marrow of their bones.

At last, her hand cradled his, like a shell giving protection to a soft body within.

"On the farm," she said, "before the county made us put up the halogen lamp, the fireflies would be thick as mud along the creek that cut the far fields in half. My brother, your uncle, and me would take mason jars and hammer holes in the lids with nails. We didn't even have to catch the fireflies by hand. We'd scoop the jars through the air then quickly screw on the lids. In a few passes, we'd have so many that we used the jars like soft-lit lamps to walk back to the house."

Though the sun had not fully set, the streetlight came on and the subaqueous air of backyard diffused with a jaundiced hue.

"When you were born," the woman holding the boy's hand said, "you wouldn't believe it, but there were almost that many fireflies in our backyard here. They're slowly disappearing. Like the crickets. And the birds.

When they take out that plot of trees and build on that empty field, there won't be any more nature left around here."

Far above them, in the dim blue of dusk, clouds rolled over each other, like waves, but never crashed onto a silent sand beach or a submerged coral reef.

"Look at that cloud." She pointed, as if her human finger could plot the vast and silent sky.

"You know, your father and I both love you. We'll stay here. Your dad is only moving across town. You'll see him a lot."

She squeezed his hand with a soft, slow rhythm.

Rickie began to feel the weight of the ocean press upon his chest. He breathed deep, then deeper, taking in the salt water, swallowing until his stomach nearly bust. He retched and gasped for breath. His mother towed him close until he sunk into the giving flesh of her arms, her stomach, her breasts. He floated, effortlessly, as if on a great salt sea.