

DRINK

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Disaster

It's possible to lose keys or to set the phone in one room and beg a sister to call you so you can follow the noise to where it fell into the nest of bottles behind your desk. A bird can be lost, smashed into the windows behind the feeders and if not lost, stunned by a disabused belief of more places to fly. So many lost a house, doubling-up with extended family, extending their stay. The credit always accrues and we're all hungry for lunch. Japan lost itself, cities full of homes, coastal waters, only the ticking left to live among garbage, glass, and monsters. Elizabeth lost two rivers, a continent, even you. Why not lose something small to the drink, like a plane to water?

Discover Losing

Most didn't watch the news. Few sat in airport lounges where crystal screens offered a more interesting light than departures, a place where time waits on benches and Starbucks is always serving. Fewer took up chairs after supper with the paper folded to today's crossword or a new baby's quilt nearly-stitched on mermaid lore. Enough caught Comedy Central's spin, John Stewart's soft lines and grey curls, tapping blue sheets of paper. Others watched social media, the posts with typos, punctuation, emoticons, a generation's way to convey thoughts. The majority heard as anyone hears a jet's approach through a still morning, a sound that breaks the barrier of sky, a neighborhood in the lowlands above the water, an hour's task set aside to look.

On Vanishing

They are lost, that much is clear. CNN can't find them, can't find the black box, can't locate a plane once rolling 70 mph on blacktop before lifting off to nowhere. Tweets scroll the news. Some ask Bermuda Triangle, black hole, ransom, *Lost?* Someone says, *Mermaids*. Another says, *This is about lack of security, welfare moms. There's no such thing as mermaids.* Newsmen in suits tap blank papers, swipe empty hands across desks. Newswomen wear long snug skirts, coral hued blouses, makeup done as if startled, say, *I'm going to wish them well, offer a toast, a drink. Maybe they wanted to be lost.* The news people shrug at the sea, the agriculture of land, the golden red sky, a loss all seem to agree is uncanny, a plane gone, soft waving arms of water.

II

First Story

The mermaids breathe water. From their eyes something salty they blink. They sleep in the current, bed down on coral, swim among the shadows of the great oceanic divide. They listen to the laughter of sailors, fishermen, and boats of pleasure. They follow the lost as their planes sink. They drag bodies to shore. They scribble wishes, promises, and prayers in sand. The mermaids paint their lips with crushed anemones, their eyes with the inky night of squids. Their midriffs sparkle with the algae that glow in the dark. They are mythical and mercurial. They change with the stories that change us, twining like dancers, like silver schools of fish, they come in as the tide rises.

Shadows

The mermaids chase the shadows, billows of black under the pink rim of coral, the dark bellies of barges, the meandering hands of kelp called Cat Gut, called Mermaid Tresses, called Dead Men's Ropes. They call the shadow, *Desire for the one in ripped jeans*. They call it, *Our dead sister*. They call it, *What is killing you*. They roll through the shadows that print the waves. They lay in shadows of shark, krill, shrimp. They let shadows follow them through eddies, torrents, washouts across the shallow coastal sands. They watch the shadows fall from freighters, planes, passenger fish, garbage descending from above. They feel the thrum of impact as shadows hit rock, feel the hairs on their neck rise. Every day there are shadows of letters, bottles, crew, every week black barrels sealed and labeled WARNING in every language but theirs. They don't call the shadow *Suicide Pact*, *Half-lives*, or *The Last Words You Wrote*. They let the shadows fall through the water and watch them drown. They fear nothing. The only thing to fear is mermaids.

Unfathomable View

Note how many rectangles and squares, the mermaids murmur from Boston Harbor as they examine the city from the vantage of full tide spills and swells. Note how bricks climb, windows square, roofs rise at a slant even in the enclaves of Beacon Hill. Note how the world in that world is ordered, contained by iron fences, divided by doors closed to foot traffic, secured like boot scrapers to cement. The mermaids listen to the fast talk of Southies, to the cordial calm of transit drivers, to the tourists' tongues that squawk, gush photos, and follow the freedom line rush of teens on a senior high school trip from the east side of Des Moines. The mermaids worry over women in red dresses who tinker on pianos set with music without notes and the men who read blank newspapers and drink from empty bottles. They rub their face when they see the men who shudder unshaven, sleeping in city parks, or when they see the girls alone on corners in the red of glooming. Sometimes they invite them to water. They almost always drown. Note how the roads refuse the grid. Note how the ocean is taking back the coast. Note how every path ends in drink.

Water Wars

The mermaids are concerned about the female body, their breasts, the uteri. If wombs aren't clocks, if hands are in boxes, must we all be watercolor, washing off? Must we ride in your cart, driver? What does a mere maid do about gender roles, hunger, the dark blues? It's everywhere. The mermaids breathe it. It presses in—jets of heat from the coasts, rivers of cold that stroke from currents and undertows. It's more dense than ice, why heavy things float—icebergs, ships, but not planes or messages, no SOS, no hope. No true color, more like the wings of jays. But out there, no storks deliver bundles. No babies arrive with white cardboard signs from the city hospital to tape to apartment windows and tie to the railing of apartment porches, *It's a pink! It's a blue!* Out there, below the fathoms, we listen to echoes of warship cannons, watching what falls—hulls, engines, trash, the young. We learn from the WWII broadcasts still rolling on the combers, the sea people still whispering on breakers, the land-bound of surge: *female* ships are American, *male* ships are Allied, and all the enemies are *it*.