



By Daisy Hills

I was young when the sea first turned black, and I didn't really care¹. It'd be easy to say I didn't understand the ramifications, that I was sheltered, but the truth is that I just didn't care. It started a couple miles from my home, and I'd heard about it for so long that by the time they were saying it was serious, I was sick of hearing about it. It wasn't the sea at first, really, anyways; I lived on the west coast, next to the gulf where it started, and then it leaked around the peninsula into the Atlantic, then the Pacific and all the waters in between. I've heard some ponds up north are still clean and blue, the ones near Michigan where the ocean can't quite touch them. It'd be nice to visit sometime, see if they match what I remember or if they've started decaying too.

When the sea, well, the gulf at first, grew its first black spot a couple hundred miles out from land, we were all told to stay away, that it was toxic, the government was cleaning it quickly but they weren't sure what the side effects were. I wasn't bothered,

¹ "The object of writing is to write to yourself, to let your self know what you have been trying to avoid." (Kolk, 2014)

honestly. I remember we went to the beach anyways, explicitly told not to swim, but just to sit. I was disappointed, to be honest. This was the early days, the rot hadn't reached shoreline yet and was too far beyond the horizon to be visible. It made it seem less real to me, some sort of unseen monster hiding beneath the water, the same kind of monsters my grandma told me weren't real². What was real was the smell, rancid and acidic, the kind that follows you around for hours even after you leave it. Dead sea creatures littered the shallows when the tide went out, waiting for it to come in again and claim them back.

My sister and I made a game of wandering up and down the shore with sticks, poking at now opaque jellyfish and translucent fish, watching them fall apart with ease. Sometimes I would throw seaweed at her relentlessly, knowing the smell would cling to her for days. Other times I'd be kinder and sit with my mom and grandma and wonder why we came to this rank beach, not knowing we were attending the hospice service for the gulf. The last

² "You will ask yourself questions like: what is the history of wind? How did this gust arrive here? Where did it come from and who am I to be blown by it? The storm is blowing people back to their homes, blowing goods back to their factories, blowing factories back to their countries, blowing people back into their pasts." (Steyerl, 2014)

time we were there I laid on my front in the sand, apathetic, until something bit me hard on my stomach and I screamed. First it scabbed, then it turned into a shell, until months later the shell broke away to leave a strange freckly, mole, something, just to the left of my belly button. I was lucky. The black reached the coast a few hours later and others weren't so lucky³.

In the midst of a summer my cat got sick. His health had always been an anomaly, a stray kitten abandoned in a locked vehicle in the middle of an especially hot summer, windows all shut. We'd never expected him to last as long as he did, so to be bitter that he became ill seems a kind of cruel joke, but he did because it wasn't a joke anyways. After he went missing for a few hours, I found him across the street in a neighbour's garden, immobile, panting. I remember the coarse dirt in his fur as I picked him up, heavy in my arms, heavier than usual, and carried him back home.

I don't spend much time considering his last few days, the times he was sick and ill. I do often think about his last

³ "The End begins before you are ever aware of it. It passes as ordinary." (Ma, 2018)

good day though. He hauled his aching little body up in the backyard, forced a few sips of water, more than he'd managed in days, and laid again in the sun, absorbing its warmth into his black fur. I thought that he was getting better, this was it, we'd overcome the worst of it together and he was going to get better. I'll never forget his limp body in my room the day after, all the life and love sucked out of it. I won't forget how it felt to bury him, no fight, no hesitation, a full acceptance of the dirt being piled on top of him, suffocating. I'd later find out the owner of the house across the street went the same way, the same embrace of soil on flesh, a few days later than him. The neighbours had called the cops on a rotting stench coming from nearby, and her skin had melted off in a 3-day long shower.

It was like every cliché, like squeezing a zit, leaving a cup of tea out for too long so mold blossoms on top, the corners of windows growing bulbous and speckled with damp. All the rot began to crawl out⁴. It's still spreading.

⁴ "It's all rehearsed, in a weird way. People spend so much time dramatizing trivial bullshit that when an actual tragedy happens, I wonder how anyone could possibly act out their grief in a natural way. The tragedies we steel ourselves for never come for years and years, and our negative fantasies wear us down inch by inch, so that when the blow actually comes, there's little of us left to care." (Butler, 2019)

It's a wasteland down here, the land's origin as a hiding place for southern men dodging conscription absorbed into the soil and swamp, and cowardice leaking into those who hide here now. If I can get the TV to work, I usually hear about my home as a punchline instead of a place. Bad news comes from it, it clings to you like a love-handle, it's where you go to die. They're not wrong, and they're all pretty astute observations I suppose. The archetypes hold true, I see them on the side of the road when I drive, clear as day; sex workers, cultists, addicts, and victims. Mostly victims these days.

I grew up on a fault line between two districts, but learned which one to claim as a namesake fast⁵. My neighbours and the bus stop and my church may have resided in one, but it was better for status to state the other. It was never a big deal, of course, low stakes and varied with opinions, but worth the white lie. You learn to recognize this look that may flash across their face, a slight crinkle in their nose and squint in their eyes and their lips upturned

⁵ "To live in a city is to live the life that it was built for, to adapt to its schedule and rhythms...To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems... It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out?" (Ma, 2018)

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WITH THANKS TO

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, 2010

The Church of Scientology in Clearwater,
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Carole Baskin of Big Cat Rescue

The Miami Cannibal Attack of 2012

A&A Mobile RV Service

Tropical Storm Alex of 2010

Debra Lafave's 2005 Trial

In loving memory of my cat, Midnight