

Deck

A beam, alone, is nothing: a panel beneath your feet. Like an object in isolation--it's just a handprint in cement, a deck of cards rubber banded in a silverware drawer. Your aunt's anchor-shaped ash tray: a polyester sleeping bag folded fat atop a sandy shelf. But pile them beside one another, the memories that surround them, they become an inexplicable sum. It holds you somewhere high above, extends your peripheral beyond the streetlights and houses and the sun that sets pink, burns your eyes from way up here, as the blue of bay and sky collide.

I am still, backside against the mesh of a plastic chair, tracing the panels left and right, that have held up my life, that creak and moan and sigh with my steps. The horizontal rail whose bars line my view of the green thicket wetlands, their reeds that bang and battle against the wind. Strokes of cocoa-colored brown and hazel, warped and faded, the knotted pine planks and rusted nails my father spent hours

hammering back into the wood one by one.

I am five, knowing not to climb the ledge of the bannister as my brother and I stand with a loaf, breaking each slice into wadded-up pieces and shooting them towards the sky, the lightness a surprise every time our arms wind back and throw, the spot between our elbows sore. The first gull swoops and the bread vanishes with its pass, then ca-caw ca-caw caws until they gather from all ends of sky, balloons of white and grey, floating and flapping still, black feet hanging, frantic screams. We throw and throw and throw and cackle with them, our own collection dotting the sea-dipped air. Until they drop a white stain onto the wood and we run, frantic, chuckling, knowing later we will swear it wasn't us.

I am eight, the back of my head just below my nana's breast, her olive skin and thick knuckles needled through a silver scissors on the verge of rust. A towel clipped with a hairpin at the nape of my neck, as

she pulls the wet strands taut to my scalp between a fine-tooth comb, snip, snip. Small quarter-moons of black hair forming circles on the ground around me. Bent lines. It will be years until I'll lose her--the woman who bought this home with hairdressing money collected in jars--until her memories would flood the halls of this house like shadows and ghosts, sitting on the toilet with a swimsuit bunched around her ankles, standing at the kitchen with a yellow sponge propped against the screen, Pavarotti spinning from a Compact Disc as she hummed out of tune, grabbing fistfuls of fettuccini from a pot with bare hands. When we'd return from the marshes with oily, mud-stained calves, she'd take her tongs and pull the crabs out one by one, the blues of their backs and bubbling breath. She'd throw them in the open freezer and slam the door. *Oh these are going to be scrumptious*, as the banging and clobbering would slow against the freezer

walls, until eventually silence, still.

I am 13, my brother hovering with a backwards fitted cap and peeling nose, we hold on the railing and watch the clouds of smoke billow above the small shed he'd just left with his cigarettes, the neighbors come out to their porches, the firetrucks line the beds of reeds. He speaks less and less these days, as he teaches me how to put my finger through the tip of lighter flame, to lie, fill a body with resentful rage. And then, to kill: to throw the bread up first, and then the pennies-- I'd watch the gulls swoop down and swallow, squealing as they'd fly away.

Twenty-something, wrapped around the glass table with strangers from the bar, our voices echoing up and down the streets and into windows with open screens. My nana's boombox blasting Biggie as they carve out lines onto my mother's placemats, roll and sniff and lick and laugh. *The noise really travels, Emily*, my mother tells me days

later after neighbor complaints. *This is a family town.* We drag blankets down the dark street and lay them over cold sand that squeaks beneath our feet, ocean warm and boundless with freedom. And then, with a stranger in the outside shower as the sun rises through the grates, the same spiders I used to fear crouched high in cornered webs above the towel hooks and bars of soap, watching, as water rushes off our bodies into cracks between the beams below.

I am 30, holding my newborn on the white stacking patio chairs, midsection sore and throbbing, weeks from a surgery that almost took my life, left me with strangers' blood dripping into me from above my right shoulder for days upon days. Her tiny lips and fingers, so fragile but not willing to break, her skin a yellowish white beneath the backdrop of the sunset skies, the wetlands holding up the colors as they seep into the horizon. Impatiens spill out of stone pots, ferns stand tall behind them

shuddering in the salty wind. And in my bicep, this new heart to love, weight to hold, something more to keep me closer to the ground.

20 coastal New Jersey towns will be under water by the next century. Gone, ocean has met bay, waves crashing over dismembered roofs, bannisters floating like sea logs towards a distant shore. Clothespins and rusted bike wheels, seashells in shoeboxes waiting to be painted will meet their still natural matches. I picture the people who spent their early mornings on these decks, with nothing but coffee and seagulls and silence, sun rays crawling up the backs of the siding, if they would float too, in-tact, limp-limbed and soundless, eyes dead and open, the shadows of their dreams of past and future a big, dark seaweed swirl.

I am here, mismatched rainbows of beach towels dangle over crooked rails, tiny bathing suit bottoms line backs of chairs. My children run and turn and twist,

stomping over bubble wands and lifeless jump-ropes, heels collecting splinters, the light from the green wetlands glows their sunburnt skin. The deck that holds them 50 feet into the air, gives them height beyond their years, beyond mine too, to see the houses curl their way around the bay, ospreys still standing in the distance, seagulls coast and flap and soar. She walks the plastic kiddy chair over next to me, holding it to her backside and small-stepping with bent knees. Her tanned feet dangle as she sits, chipped pink polish on the tiny toes, and in the space they leave above the wood, I see it all: who I was and who I am, all the rows and rows of memories I will leave her when I'm gone.