

"On sunscreen and memory"

As a girl, my mother applied my sunscreen for me. Today the smell of SPF, chlorine and saltwater find me in the dry Chicago neighborhood of Albany Park where I'm staying this summer. I can hear her still. The bottle is a baby, cheerful pink color. A slight click followed by a sucking sound tell me she's nearly ready. She rubs. On my back. Under the rolls of fat that linger from birth but will turn to muscle the year I first put my soccer cleats to grass. She makes sure to get along my cheek bones and jawline and behind my ears. Was there a section of skin she ever forgot?

She says, "Come here, Margalee. Rub in your nose." She tells me to wait at least 10 minutes before entering the water. We're at the beach. Probably Sanibel Island in this memory or Naples, FL. The summers of childhood blur together, are collected in random bits like a string of popcorn with just a few kernels left.

I think of beaches and pools and all the bodies of water we swam in together. I leave Sanibel and remember the two days we spent at Virginia Beach on a road trip from Saint Louis to Washington D.C. Dad is a happy seal. He dives head-first into the waves with all of his gut that 50-something years of life and 25 years of offices have gradually piled on. He looks back at mom and I sitting on the beach. The sun is lowering, coloring the waters darker shades by the minute. He disappears. We wait. His head emerges and we laugh. This goes on for a bit. I think we're amused at his amusement with himself, and he seems to be amused that he has an audience.

The weather in Virginia is neutral in June. There's no difference in temperature between the water and the open air on the beach. I'm content. If heaven is a place on earth it must look like this: a scene in which laughter and play are constant for oneself and one's family. I think of family.

In Chicago, unforgiving winters bring ice and frost-burn and roommates that prefer i-phones and Netflix to the outdoors. During January and February I thought of summers in Saint Louis and on beaches across the country. I remembered swimming pools and sunscreen and my mother's scent while walking to campus in two pairs of long underwear and a ski mask in the biting cold. Mom buys the highest SPF at Walgreens, tells me to "let it soak in" and "wait ten minutes, Margalee." And I wait but

not without kicking up sand and pulling at my swimsuit lining. I probably cried, we were so spoiled.

Last winter, my skin cracked. My lips bled. I forgot to apply lotion in the cold months at college. I had to call dad to ask how to start a fire in the apartment without fucking something up. The older I am, the more I see, the less I know, all of that. I'm more insecure than I used to be. I'm more fragile. I forget the feel of my pup's ears, which although most puppy ears feel similar, caused me to sob suddenly in the showers at 8 am my sophomore year. She is far from puppy-hood now and walks with a limp in her right leg. I remember only her obvious qualities. I know for certain that she is a pure-bred German Shepherd with honey brown eyes and a long, draping tail that has gives her a regal look, but not much else. More kernels have disappeared from the strings of popcorn hanging in my crowded brain.

We lose old memories to newer memories. We can only remember fragments of the deeper past as fresher, newer pasts constantly come into being.

I carry memories of winter like baggage. I'm weighed down by the ice Chicago left hanging from the gutters in February and continued to leave hanging in March. Those memories haunt. I see the ugly. I see the elderly, grey-faced woman outside of Panera talking to herself, blinking rapidly, dressed in pearls and fur on a Monday at noon, demonstrating a psychology affected, perhaps irreversibly, by speed and other drugs. I see crippled men begging outside of bars and Whole Foods and diners where couples laugh and order steak burgers. I'm drunk again and passed out naked in the dormitory showers.

I release baggage. I remember winters but not without remembering beaches and taking on the dark green waves with dad. The sand suction-cups our heels and big toes as we step further towards the horizon line. Time expands with each step we assert. He smiles and counts to three. We dive. I somersault beneath the wave and forget the way up while laughing in my head. The wave passes and I follow the shafts of light reaching their hands down to pull me out. There is a moment, a precise moment, dad tells me, when to dive. If you go too early, there's no challenge. If you're late, you'll miss the rock of the wave.

I compare now to then, Chicago to Virginia, busy-city -bustle to the quieter moments with familiar bodies and scents. I slip. I float through time. I lie belly-up on the water, suspended. Dad and I let the ocean carry us where it will. The sound of slapping waves and gull take the place of the laughter and human voices back on shore. We've all but disappeared, and soon he'll tell me we've let the waves take us too far. But before such a transition happens, we're silent. We breathe and smell salt. I close my eyes and open them to notice the moon telling the sun to lower himself already. I remember what it feels like to be present and alive without excuse. I re-enter memories. I re-create, perhaps exaggerate, the smells, the way the sunset lit up the shoreline. At its best, my imagination has no filter. Some call this a coping mechanism, and I confess it's exactly that. It's for this reason that the water has never lifted me more tenderly.

Mom hums. She shakes the bottle upside-down so that all the lotion goes to the opening. She taught me the art of applying sunscreen, but multiple summers I let my shoulders burn and even the coldest showers made me yell. I reminisce yet can't remember my age or if any of us were happy, but I can imagine and so we were and so I'm a little less lonely in my single flat in winter.