

## **The Selves We Keep**

There is a ship on the mountainside that washed up years when the tide was at the highest it's ever been. It is stuck there now, sutured to the rocks with salt and grime like an oversized barnacle that refuses to let go. Really, it is less of a ship and more of a small fishing boat, but it is positioned perfectly against the horizon so that it's silhouette appears startlingly large from miles away. So we have always called it a ship.

Avery and I have been coming here for ages to play in the rain like we are sailors tousling with a murderous storm or ship-wrecked merchants going mad from thirst on a dry summer day. We used to easily toss our arms around each other's shoulders and bolt out joyously to the cliffs against our parents' orders, but something has changed. Now Avery is quieter and looks at me secretively from under dark, heavy lids. He has taken to slicking back his overgrown hair with water and pausing for a moment when we meet up as if he is expecting me to say something.

It's not just him. Things have changed for me too. When I stand in my closet, so that I am sure no one is watching, and jump up and down with my hands in the air, I can feel the budding bits of flesh bounce against my ribcage. I sense that the blood will come for me soon and I am terrified as I watch the girls I know drop off one by one. My mother says it's nothing to be afraid of and that she will pull me out of school for the day and draw me a bath and read me stories. But I don't want that. I want it to stay the way it's always been: whispered and shushed behind barely cracked doorways.

These days, our mothers have been telling low voiced secrets about us in nearby rooms. Avery's mother has short hair and wears long dresses and grabs his head with both hands when she kisses him on the back of it. She looks at him with dewey eyes that betray her bemused pride. When my mother looks at me she calls me her girl and seems like she might cry.

The word *girl* has started to mean something different than it used to. Now people spit it out of their mouths as if it's a bit of phlegm left over from last week's cold. "Good luck with that, *girl*," they say, always to my father. He is the one they feel sorry for.

Avery talks about girls as we walk. The ones his older brother takes out in cars and what he does with them half a block from their houses with the watchful lights and half an hour before they're expected home. I don't let him see, but I am just as interested as he is.

A few days ago, Avery put his fingers in my mouth. I didn't know what to do, so I just smiled at him with a mouthful of his bony flesh. He suddenly looked scared and pulled away from me, wiping my spit on the back of his jeans.

When we reach the ship it has a thin layer of sand on it even though the closest sea bank is a steep drop to the right down the side of the cliff. The wind must have picked up overnight and blown the beach upwards in a flurry of gritty particles. Avery puts two hands on it's edge and

vaults over it as if he's been practicing. He turns and looks back at me, running a hand through his oiled hair.

He sits down on the bench of the boat with his back to me and reaches behind him to grab my hand and pull me over the edge towards him. I sit down next to him and we don't look at each other, but we hold hands loosely just like we used to do as we ran between the trees behind our houses. Avery's hand is moist and something stirs in his fingers and then his face is against mine, sighing hot breath into my mouth as he presses his cracked lips against it. For a moment I don't really know what is happening, but then I pull away, confused, because this isn't what he's supposed to do. Next to me, I can feel the hot shame wash over him as he takes his hand away from mine. Bits of sand stab my thighs and I am about to change the subject when he hits me flat with his palm, not so hard, but with enough force to make a sound. I turn to him, my hand against the place where it happened, but he is looking down and somewhere else. For a moment I don't move, but then I stand and climb awkwardly over the ship's side, hand on cheek, and make my way quickly down the hill.

When I look back, I can see him still sitting on the rotted slat and I think he's crying, but I don't stop.

We don't talk anymore and if we spot each other on the way to school, one of us crosses to the other side of the street and we walk like that, separate but parallel, our breath held until our paths finally diverge and we can inhale again in unison. In the hallways, where people hide the selves

they keep at home, we act like we've never known each other and turn quickly to join the correct gender.

I still go to the ship and sit alone in the curve of its bloated belly, running my hands over the crusted wood. The wind whips my hair into stringy ropes and I stay there for a long time while my cheeks get rubbed raw and the ocean drowns out the sound of voice.