

## Beginning of Pond

There's something down there, she said, and pointed a glitter blue fingernail at the lapping pond scum. It eats people.

A wide-eyed child followed the hand with a scrupulous gaze, scanning the green horizon for a broken line, the ripple of a fin, picturing what it would feel like to see the slow surfacing of something mangled. Perhaps a lone sandal would float mournfully into view as they gulped down bites of banana honey nutters.

The child with the blue nails was slightly older than her companion, well versed already in the secret language of girlhood: the manipulation of hair; taking baths; which TV shows to commit to memory; jeans that bore a certain inexactitude of color. She tossed her hair as if ridding herself of a thought and steered them into an eddy.

The second child remained silent and listened to the dragonflies whisking overhead. This one was new to the solitude of American driveways and the casting aside of children in suburbia. She followed the other reverently, dowdy and un-matching. Her mother gave them free rein from a wine dark absence, the door to her room perpetually shut. They were happy to be left alone. It meant watching rated R horror movies, and stealing sparkling mouthfuls of Bud Light, one can between them by the sand hill at the edge of the woods. There, they could see the whole neighborhood gathered solemnly before the cloudy green water, as if in worship.

They had packed sandwiches and dragged an old paddle boat from the lawn into the pond. It looked as if it may have once been painted red, now a mere suggestion of its former hue, smeared and flaking like lipstick worn too long.

The child painted her fingers across the surface of the dark, green water curiously, but ready to draw back.

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Down below, the Carp listened to the pendulum of feet kicking sleeping water into a somnambulant drift. When two pairs of legs dropped over the side of the dark shadow to cool from the August sun, she would send up a well-fed cousin to slide its quilled spine across the sensitive skin above their heels, making them draw up their limbs like a painted turtle retreating into the safety of his shell. This pleased the Carp in the way it pleases a puppeteer to see objects respond obediently to their tethers, or a conductor to procure the intended ripple of awe across an audience at the precise ignition of notes, though the Carp would not have used either comparison.

She was not exactly happy, an isolated specimen in the murky bottoms, where her scales were dulled for the clouds of algae perpetually drifting about. She groaned and pressed the great rope of her muscles into the yellow mud. And yet she was also not unhappy, for she enjoyed her company.

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Such a repugnant shade for silt, the Carp had thought upon the first encounter all those years ago. A slim and nimble fry, she had wriggled her way into the cattails from the prim, overwatered Kentucky bluegrass. She had slipped from a gardener's bucket as it was emptied, with all her siblings, into a shallow

stone fountain. That was a fate she was glad to have escaped. Despite her newfound freedom, the young Carp sometimes felt the panic of her brothers and sisters as if it were her own; the walls that pressed in on all sides, the torrential mingling of bodies. The feeling had faded, with age, she supposed. Or, perhaps they were not there anymore.

For all the space she enjoyed - especially in those early years, tumbling about the pondweed, darting between stems of wool grass and bulrush, skimming solitary water spiders from their dance across the sky with her upper lip - still she was alone. She learned the strange guttural language of the Rock Bass, and from their slow, measured tones, all the history of the Pond for as long as it could be remembered. In the brisk, chirping staccato of the Bluegill Sunfish, she discerned and memorized great epics they sang to one another, stories to pass the time.

There was one they liked to tell in the cold dark months, about the Beginning of Pond, a long time ago.

There had been a man, they twittered, with the power to move land and water like they were nothing more than milky algal blooms. They said he was a digger of great holes, probing the earth's crust for a mineral that could fill his tired, hollow body. Something not too hard, not too soft. For although the man had been born with insides, he had sold them in exchange for these abilities.

But the land had turned up nothing to his liking, revealing only porous materials, bog mud and gravel, and so he allowed the largest hole to fill by diverting a creek where his children liked to catch frogs and collect stones. As the hole filled, the creatures from the creek followed, making their homes on its banks, beneath mounds and piles of debris. This delighted the children so much, the man found himself filled up with the crystalline tones of their laughter, as these were not too hard, but not too soft. For many years he was happy. Then one day, the children grew old and moved away to search for minerals, and the man

became hollow once more. Sometimes, chirped the Sunfish, a glimpse of him can be seen through the hole he cuts in the Surface during winter. He leans his face over the dark water, waiting for something to appear.

The Carp wondered if the man could see all the way to the yellow silt at the bottom, and if this was what he was looking for. She thought maybe if she circled it fast enough, she could churn it up to him. No, sang the Sunfish, it is not the bottom of the Pond he seeks, for all he sees is his reflection. He wants to find what he has lost, but it can never be replaced.

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It must be very tiring to be constantly in search of your insides, thought the Carp. At least I am unfettered here in the pond, with its myriad creatures and silent bustle, where you feel your neighbor's presence pushing past like a current, where I have found a solitude which was never available to me as a fry. Surely, the clean confines of the bucket where I spent my youth provided a basis for contemplative thought, an absence of texture and activity which begged the question "when." But with the lifting of that plastic manacle, and my descent into tepid liberty, I found the space for "why." I am pleased to circle the yellow mud, which I know is where the truth lies, and wait for answers to drop like the beak of a heron.

The mud was curious to the Carp indeed, for all day she would probe its depth and consistency, measuring qualities she could not describe other than by noting the presence of certain scents and sediments. And so, she quantified the mud to herself by saying, yes, today it feels like the wrinkled snout of a muskrat, firm but satin. Or, today it has an air of rebarbative defiance, prickled like a buckthorn branch.

At this the Sunfish snickered and knocked fins gleefully. Such histrionics, to herself and for herself. She must think highly of her own intelligence to draw meaning from gravel and sand, they teased, but the Carp paid no mind. Instead she drew further into her studies, away from the drivel of the stoneflies, and the daily cycling of currents.

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It really is an unnerving shade for silt, she thought as she paced her corner of the bottoms. It's almost sickly, not bright like the dandelions children throw into the water from the docks, but rather dim, with undertones of brown and green, like it's holding something back. Besides, I'm not the only one to notice, for the path around my plot is a well worn circle, a groove almost, into which my body fits nicely.

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The years passed and the carp grew to be larger than even the oldest Bass in the Pond, who measured over three feet in length. She fed on whatever she could find, groves of eggs nestled in the bulrush, the occasional lingering dragonfly, the soft remains of a finch after the red-tailed hawk had its fill. She searched and ate, all the while compounding her strength, flexing her braun during the daily perusing of underwater edges.

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It was cold and still the day the sky opened up above the frozen Surface through a circular incision, clinical and precise. A saw dipped its jagged, steel jaw over and over in ecstatic vertical plunges.

The creatures of the Pond knew what was to come; they had weathered it before. But they were hungry. It had been months since the last fat herd of plankton had drifted by their gaping mouths.

Some scraping and muffled humming echoed down into the black water. The fish, the algae, all hung silently and waited. Not even a snore was heard from the Bass where they huddled beneath rocks, thickly lethargic with cold-slowng blood, measuring out heartbeats.

Something splashed at the opening, sailing down like the leaves had done months prior, casting speckled shadows onto the sands and settling like corpses. But this was not a leaf for it smelled like food, something that had been living once but now hung limply suspended in the afternoon light.

There, floating just below the clouds of phytoplankton, a morsel hovered innocently in the upper strata of the Pond. The Carp had seen similar material descend with downy confidence before, from the sides of various shapes that would drift across the Surface during warm times, carrying muffled tones of conversation and music. These she had taken special delight in swallowing, for it felt like closeness to the people and their joy.

Now, the Carp felt her rib bones strain against her skin, reaching for the illuminated object.

Don't, hissed the Sunfish. It's one of the tricks.

The Bass sighed sleepily in agreement from the hollows.

Maybe so, thought the Carp, but I cannot afford to let it go to waste. I will die soon unless I eat.

She offered the closest thing a fish can offer to a shrug and sped abruptly toward the shimmering thing.

Such a shame, she heard the Sunfish sing, praising the beauty of her golden scales.

She closed her mouth around the prize and, for a moment, delighted in the ecstasy of capture. A warm reward spread throughout her fins. Then, sharp exquisite pain and the taste of rust. Something is wrong, she thought, and dove in panic, but found her body being pulled up toward the light.

What's happening, she cried silently. Up and up she went toward the circle where the sky had been, covered now by a shape taking form against the dark background, hunched and squinting over the hole. That lined, graying face, the bloodshot eyes and frazzled tufts of hair gathered at the very top.

It was the Gardener, she realized. He had come for her.

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The Carp did not know if it was recognition that flickered across the Gardener's eyes when they met her own. The question lasted only a moment before the tug on her mouth increased forcefully. Terrified, she watched a small pink cloud escape the corner of her gape, and saw that the man was pulling on something that stretched down, down and was connected to her there. And she knew what it was she had seen.

You will not have me, she thought, and then bellowed:

“NO,” and the rage rose up and burst against the air and this surprised the man who was not used to fish resisting their fate. It was the price he exacted for free existence in a world of his creation, failing to

recognize it no longer belonged to him. And the Carp saw her chance and dove hard toward her home, her friends, and the yellow mud.

She dove with every muscle in her bulk, straining against the invisible line still attached to the gusset of her jaw. She dove and strained and willed herself down inch by inch until she felt the tension snap.

Thinking maybe she had freed the tether she spun to witness her victory just in time to avoid a thrashing form descending toward her.

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The shape kicked and bobbed and fought toward the hole at the surface, but the commotion had churned the dark water into a yellow haze and turned everything around. Only when the form slowed to a sporadic quiver did the Carp recognize the man's lined and paling face. And then, suddenly he was no longer moving at all, except laterally with the current, pinned like a befuddled catfish to the frozen ceiling of the Pond.

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They remained this way for a time, the man's lifeless form exploring the ceiling of what was once a floor. And the Carp remained dutifully by her tether, for they were still attached, she and him. When hunger gnawed she went nosing for bait and bread crusts in the wet flattened folds of his pockets, and in return she kept him company.

Eventually, the man began to sink, very slowly toward the bottoms, his face no longer lined like the rings of a tree, but round and blueing, his lips puffed up, the eyes bloodshot and wide. His clothes, skin, and



even hair shone in pale opalescent tones in the soft light filtering through the ice. The Carp would have savored the compositional beauty of the moment had she not been occupied with the gentle guiding of her charge. As she pulled, and he followed, the creatures of the Pond gathered solemnly to watch, and nobody spoke a word.

Finally, there was the mud and the familiar curves of her study. How she ached to scoot her belly along the smooth depression, to probe the welcoming grains and taste their mood.

But she was tired and needed rest. When she stopped, the man continued on with the momentum of direction common to those parts, and as he passed a small hook slipped out of the skin around the Carp's mouth. Then he sank and rested too, a coiled, peaceful thing, folded into the yellow bowl. Her perfect inverted dome.

She looked at him, feeling warmth toward the sleeping shape. She noticed, for the first time, what it was she had been digging.

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How do you know it eats people? asked one child to the other. I've never heard of a fish like that.

Because I saw it, that's why. They turned from each other, and stared intently at the water. One, as if pulling back a heavy curtain with her gaze; the other focused so as not to see anything at all. For a while they were silent while the pedals clucked absently and water pooled in meandering tides across their feet.

You know how they say Mr. Alm drowned?

*Beginning of Pond*

The child shook her head. Something about an accident.

It was not an accident. I saw the whole thing. Last winter. He was out fishing on the ice and... it pulled him in. And kept him there.

The child looked away.

You want to come over? We can watch Disturbia. It has Shia Labeouf.

Sure.

They pedaled hard, racing their knees and growling bellies toward a speed that strained the little vessel and disturbed a heron a quarter mile away. The pedals knocked and rattled obscenely like loose change in a washing machine. Panting and laughing they finally grounded and waded in, pulling the limp red hull out of the water.

Don't step on the nests.

The child looked down. All around her splayed toes, six inch diameter depressions peppered the bank silt. They look like bowls, she thought. As if somebody had dropped a truckload of grapefruits into the mud, and then picked them up.

When do you think your mom will be back?

*Beginning of Pond*

She doesn't care. I think she stayed home today.

Ok.

They walked barefoot across the lawn. Something hung between them, but the child wasn't sure what it was. It strained beneath the fertile breaths of switchgrass and goldenrod that coated every molecule in her sinuses. The sun prepared to tuck behind the canopy of beech and red maple that stretched and stretched, purring with sounds of creatures greeting her return. Beyond the stiff boundaries of daffodils and decorative hedges, the colors of the day began to melt. All around, pigment pulled at something which was no longer resisting.