

*Terra Cotta Beach*

In this life, I am centered by a piece of land that is as homely as it is small. Sifting through daily happenings, prioritizing what matters to me, and relearning daily to discard what matters to others, comes easier to me when I seek out this shabby plot of land. The land is in the process of dying and being reborn. It wears the struggle that beauty and ugliness weave together when nature and man exist in the same space. Wild grasses, spring flowers and patches of green clover grow boldly on the back of a rotting furnace, while pilings pocked with barnacles, twisted rebar and slabs of concrete sink slowly into the sand.

A hundred years ago a lumber mill sat on this land and was fed from lumber that was shaved from the surrounding hills like whiskers from a man's face. Fifty years ago the hills were plucked clean and the mill, its gluttonous frenzy over, was closed. The laborers moved on while the mill was left behind to feed and fold into itself. Now the land is awkward and unkempt. A manicured park abuts my refuge. I think the tight-knit lawn with trees spaced like fence posts and sidewalks that hem the border like cement ribbon would like to shake my spot like a wrinkled rug and brush it neatly clean of its debris. Perhaps if the trees that are tipped with puffy caterpillar nests were pared like fingernails or the grasses—bold hippie grasses that dance in the breeze were shorn of their fluffy seed wigs—there might be an easier blending of the two.

In front of me, grass shimmies up a small hill, bends over the crest and dangles upside down, peering into the front of the hill that stares out over the water. I step down the rocks, lurching; my ankles pop like bubble packing material and the rubber soles of my shoes fold over the rocks. I turn towards the face of the hill and peer inside. It keeps no secrets. It is a brick furnace that, at one time, was a main artery of the mill. Now the furnace bleeds slowly into the sand, in terms of seasons and years, offering itself in bits and pieces to the body of water before it.

If I were to tag this beach with a color, it would be terra cotta. Terra cotta has the freedom to roam and blend. It can become pink, orange, copper, and even brown while still being terra cotta. Terra cotta smudged across broken glass, reflecting and distorting the color of the day, becomes coral when held aloft. Creamy terra cotta spread thinly across the back of a shell becomes bubble gum pink. Terra cotta flakes rusting and breaking from rebar becomes cinnamon stick brown; terra cotta bricks sucked smooth by the salty mouth of Commencement Bay become horehound salmonberry. Yet, at the end of the day, no matter who terra cotta has bedded down with, it remains true to itself and is simply, terra cotta.

My heart beats to the rhythm of the water. My thoughts, pearls on a string, roll free. I discard this one, then that one. Hurt feelings from earlier in the day, anger at a spilled glass of milk. Worries about a job, a deflated bank balance. I pause, and hold the next pearl to the light. It is the image of a cedar chest that sits within my home. In the tenth year of my father's death, I wonder why a cedar chest he built has followed me to the water's edge.

The chest is the color of red velvet terra cotta blended with blonde and golden highlights. Black thickens and thins throughout the wood. The chest is high and long—the length of my father's hands ten times over and the height of my father's hands five times. The lid has a heavy lipped trim that circles it. A brass lock is centered on the lid like a golden ring perched on a woman's finger winking in the sun. With fingers my thoughts have formed, I lift the lid; sunlight sparks off the brass lock and objects rest quietly within the tray. I pull out three. A black wallet, a red spiral notebook and a photograph. I take a deep breath; salt air fades and cedar sways. They spin together and memories loosen, break free and rise. Memories within the wood.

The photo within my father's things captures a second, lost in a minute, tucked within an hour that passed quickly in a day, thirty-four years ago. I am smiling into the camera. Under my father's care, my hair is ostrich wild. I am wearing a white skirt, pulled too high with sticky candy smears, a wrinkled blue shirt, and scuffed tennis shoes with no socks and untied laces. My belly is protruding from endless bags of cheese puffs and I am smiling from ear to ear. I am six years old. My father has taken me to Disneyland. We zipped down the

Washington coast in a banana-cream yellow 1969 Impala with a rag top and an AM radio that sputtered and waned as we raced through one county then gained a whiney strength as we entered the next.

My memory coaxes me into the back seat of my father's car. I see my knees, scabby and dirty. I run my hands, small hands that fit tight within my father's hands, across the pokey-hole pattern of the seats and pick at the leather wrapped cording when my father isn't looking. The wind from the open window blends with my father's cigarettes and I breathe deep. I have yet to learn that hearts, like this land under my feet, do not break. They stretch. They bend, lose their shape, and then grow humpy over scar tissue and festering wounds.

I focus on the present. I pick up a shell that is a cumin coral terra cotta. When I flip it over, it flashes white. My father had a white boat. It was made of wood and smelled of oil and gasoline. At full speed it made a smooth *chugga chugga chugga* sound. When the engine became tired, the smoothness erupted into *chug chugity chugs* punctuated with pops, lurches and deep sobbing gulps of air. In that year I threw aside fifteen years of living for sixteen, my father turned fifteen years of living left into fourteen. In that year when summer and spring stand so close together you can't stick a thumb between the two, my father became mine for a day. We spent the day boating from Bremerton to Tacoma. I see my father bent over the boat engine, coaxing it to stay awake, while a cigarette dangles from his mouth and the sun bakes his back bronze. I see the edges of my shorts, blue with white piping, legs browning in the sun, red tipped toes stretching over the side of the boat as if I could kick the sun sprinkles bouncing off the water back into the sky.

I turn the memory over like a page in a book and focus on a piling in front of me. It wears a cascading wig of seaweed poppits, its back is broken out in barnacles, and there is a smell, a stench that becomes stronger throughout the day as the seaweed stiffens and brittles, waiting for the water to return. My father's mother was a beautiful woman. She had a thick titian head of hair, a model figure and one designer black dress that she wore for special occasions. She was so proud of her beautiful son. When my father's physical perfection parted to reveal the flaw within, my grandmother no longer saw reflective beauty, but a stain she spent a lifetime trying to rub out and cover up. How easy life would be, I think if hatred wore a stench, if vanity walked with a limp and abuse wore a face of skin cancers and carbuncles.

Past the piling, a black half-submerged rock sits forgotten in the sand. It is smooth and wears the dull sheen of being more wet than dry. I am seventeen again. My father and I have gone Christmas shopping. It is crowded, hot, Christmas carols are blaring and I am thinking of a stereo for Christmas. My father stops. He hands me his wallet. "Hold this," he says. He walks away, lurches into a display, and falls to the ground. He is still. His eyes are centered on mine. Then the thrashing begins. I feel his wallet, warm within the cup of my hand. I watch my father's body betray him over and over again. Finally, it stops. He sits up awkwardly, stands slowly, then walks away, unsteady on his feet. He gains momentum, eager to lose himself within the throng of shoppers. He pulls a black comb out of his pocket and unshuffles his hair. I follow him, I know he hasn't forgotten me; it is only that he hasn't remembered me yet. When he finally hesitates and turns in my direction, I hand him his wallet.

Twenty-three years later, I stand awkwardly and walk slowly away. Some memories, like the tides, come in too high and damage frail structures.

On my right, a tree, deposited during a long-ago storm, is pinned between rocks and a wall of the furnace. The bark has been salt-water rubbed to a soft buttery sheen. I run my hand across it. It is firm yet soft, like toned flesh. The warmth of the day has soaked into the trunk. The roots of the tree are wild and stiff. Imbedded within the root ball are two rocks that remind me of barrettes. I wore barrettes when I was a child. My mother dug them into my head with hairspray and threats. The barrettes my father pinned to my hair were never secure. My father's fingers, so gifted at creating somethings from nothings, were like hooves at this simple task. He would attach the barrettes to my top hairs, never anchoring them deep enough so that they dug into my scalp hairs. They dangled and hung, ovals falling and becoming teardrops.

Crunching bits of brick, I climb up the sloped side of the furnace, center myself on the grass and sink deep. I cross my legs and stare outwards across the water. Beneath my fingers, grasses green with flicks of yellow and pointed tips adjust to my presence. Some poke through my fingers and stand straight; others bend deep and flatten. I tickle the belly of the grass, and small white flowers like goose down reveal themselves. There is a variety of green hues around me.

Yet the longer I sit the more I notice that all the greens trace their lineage to white. The grass, the leaves, all that is green shows white stripes, white splashes, yellowy greens that fade to white before turning to root that sinks into the depth of the ground. Even birds—whippoorwills, gulls, bald eagles—dabble in white. White feathers that arch and curl in the wind, white vests that thicken across plump breasts or even white caps that fit tightly over heads and come together tightly under yellowed beaks. I watch the gulls, beach beggars. They are flying high, their wings tighten and stretch: M's opening and closing on white bellies that tip to pink when the sun begins its downward slant. I think nature begins the threads of life with the color white and ends in white as well.

When I was thirty, my father took his life in a field where grasses wear white striping and bend backward into the ground, and leaves edged in white unfurl and stretch for the sky before dropping and fading into the soil. My father took control of his own actions on the last day of his life and accepted the ultimate responsibility. He parked his truck in a field and plugged the tail pipe with an oily rag. He outlined his decisions in a red spiral notebook that he left on the seat next to him. A flat pillow. Flat red. Terra cotta. Epilepsy, a demon he fought throughout his life, had joined forces with multiple sclerosis seven years earlier, and the two diseases had become allies, surging and ebbing in an effort to conquer my father's body. It became too much.

I look up at a tree filled with caterpillar nests. There is so much life fighting to be born within the branches. Life that will only succeed with the destruction of the leaves to which it is secured. My mother's mother had a tree in her backyard, a weeping willow that dripped with caterpillars when the season was ripe. I packed, brown-sugar packed, glass gallon jars with fuzzy worms until their scent, a rotting-molding leaf scent, clung to my hands. Unable to realize my goal to cleanse the yard of unborn butterflies, I capped the jars and parked them under the porch.

My grandmother died twenty-four years ago, her home was plowed over ten years ago. Yet in my mind her home is still alive; a two-story, two bedroom home infested with spiders, animal urine and empty whisky bottles complete with a rotting picket fence and an undersized red carport. Caterpillars are fermenting

under the porch. The nose of my grandmother's car wears the weather. My father sits in the kitchen having a scotch rocks-water with my grandmother. I am under the table. The linoleum beneath me is cold. I count the dull heads of the screws that bolt the belly of the table together. Ice cubes crack and pop in glasses above me. I lean up against my father's legs and pull his silky brown socks up and down his calves. Gold toe caterpillars. I tie his shoes together. He stands, takes a step and falls forward, joining me on the cool floor. I quiver with all the joy a six-year-old feels when besting a grownup.

My father spent his entire life falling down and getting up. He could coax any image from the bristles of a paintbrush. He had only to lick the tip of a lead pencil, place it to paper and wonderful characters would roll forth and dance across the page. He always drove a nice car but rarely had a phone. He loved women. He married four, and was faithful to none.

My thoughts are interrupted by a park employee straddling a riding lawnmower. He finishes one row of grass and then turns on another. The grass tamer takes no prisoners. When he is done, he parks the mower, marches to his truck and returns with an edger. With the edge of his foot he pushes the edger into the crevice between the sidewalk and the grass. Lowering his safety glasses, he flips a switch, and with a thick burning smell punctuated by screams of metal scraping against concrete, he neatly trims the sod.

My father was born in a time when having epilepsy was something to be ashamed of. His parents kept his illness a secret. He joined the Navy. The Navy cut his hair, gave him a uniform, sent him to boot camp, then sent him home after his first epilepsy attack.

The sun is falling. I see a cluster of sailboats with white-finned sails soaking in the last of the day. From this vantage point they circle a cargo ship. The front of the ship is pointed at me. Its bow stretches like the face of a great white shark with its teeth bared. The sun continues setting, the mountains turn pink, salmon pink, they are florid, ruddy cheeked, they hold their breath, turn blue and then fall back into the sun's trail. Blue, tranquil blue, water-blue fills the void, then begins to thicken to blue-black. I see two shapes swimming towards me. Squinting, I make out a length and a height; both have a fin that tips in the middle.

Two killer whales, they are swimming close to shore, in the inky dusk. I am spellbound, wondering how close they will come. They drift in closer, they make a sharp right. I have been holding my breath, my lungs sag, they are kayakers, wearing darkness and shadow. Humans are the tricksters, I think, not the gods.

Three ex-wives and numerous girlfriends attended my father's funeral. His third wife didn't come because she couldn't bear to see his fourth wife, and his son didn't come because he felt it was a bad time to meet the man he had heard so much about. A woman with a German accent called me months after the funeral to tell me how sorry she was about my father. His second wife calls me every year on his birthday. And his mother calls everyone, angry that the person who paid for the burial and the person who received the life insurance check was not one and the same.

My father did not find it easy to live. He left me a half brother I didn't meet until after his death, a cedar trunk, and five hundred dollars. My father, the man who was so late for my seventh birthday; I was ten when he knocked on Mother's door and left me a clock.

I stand and brush bits of grass from my pants. The cedar chest in my mind recedes. I can feel it balancing, settling evenly, my thoughts tucking square around it. I turn toward my car digging for my keys. Horns honk, stereos blare, and boys howl their appreciation for a pair of pants trying to squeeze a girl in half. I remember that I need milk and that I love my family. I start my car. I peer into the rear view mirror as I pull into traffic and see, I think I see, a figure of a man, turning towards me. He lifts a hand, turns towards the water and then the shadows carry him away.