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The Missouri Review, Volume 35, Number 2, Summer 2012, pp. 60-74 (Article)

Published by University of Missouri

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.2012.0033>



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The Queen of Pacific Tides

Rose Whitmore

Ten years ago today my father went overboard in a stern trawler fifty miles offshore, and I'm headed down to the breakers for an omen. It's early morning, and the clouds are cutting strips of the Pacific clean silver when I slip down the bluffs to the beach. It's a steep path, lined with ferns and trillium that bloom purple and white. The shore is dotted with the last of the night smelters hauling their loads into rust-checked pickups. The waves are out with the tide, leaving traces of foam on the shore like a comb over wet hair. The Eureka Fish Company lurks on the horizon, jutting out on barnacled pilings into the Pacific like an old ship on stilts, the aluminum roof reflecting patches of early light. Here, the stink and rot of the cannery fades into tufts of sea spray.

Photo by Nicholas Harris

I can see our fleet of purse seiners, trollers and old-time squid jiggers in the docks, idle and giant. From this distance, most people would mistake the cannery for the flotsam of development hanging over the ocean, an eyesore of industry, but to me it's more than just fish scales and mung. It's got a berth that holds vats of cod and the pulse of Eureka in its floors. Made of dusty redwood planks that creak in the tides, it's home: our airless, two-bedroom apartment saddles the scaling room. It's where Mama keeps the books and where, above a shipment of herring and sea bass, I was born.

I shoot down the beach and scan the tidal pools for bodies, then the Watson cove. Nothing. Just the lonely bleat of the foghorn and the crack and sizzle of wave break. On my way back to Smitty's truck, I find a collection of used condoms, the graying polyps of a seaweed mane and a few sheepish teenagers, shivering and guilty from a night spent on the beach. They're bleary-eyed and haphazardly alive but hold no interest for me. Every six months in Eureka, a fisherman overdoses, goes overboard or disappears for the dry land of the redwoods. Bodies come and go with the regularity of the tides, and occasionally, if it's a good and stubborn current, they'll even wash up on shore.

My first find was Smitty's brother Otto at high tide in a small cove north of the cannery. He was half mangled, with crab legs for eyelashes and pelucid skin. He looked relieved and terrified, which fueled the rumor that it was a planned death. When I found Otto all eaten and raw like that, I stuck a marble in my mouth. It was the only thing that made me feel like I wasn't dreaming, or dead myself. Since Otto, there have been others: two missing bodies from a yacht wreck, one teenager who disappeared somewhere off the Aleutians and an airline attendant recovered from the crash of a transatlantic flight. The scientists say it's something in the offshore Alaskan crests, and the locals say it's a sign of reckoning, but what no one understands is the quiet relief that settles on me when I find someone. The air of mystery that surrounds death is abated, at least a little, and I can't help but think I've formed a connection to the family, that I've somehow settled their grief and made the impossible leap of closure for them manageable. Nevertheless, people think it's strange. I've heard the gossip, suffered the vetting looks of shiny mothers at bake sales and kids in the schoolyard. Smitty calls it my "curious sense of duty," but I feel an obligation to the dead. I can't help but think about the day my father's body may have washed up, only to be dragged back out with the flotsam of the tides. If only there had been someone brave enough to look, I might have more than just an idea to call a father.

Smitty's Chevy hulks like a shipwrecked cruise-liner on the beach. Smoke trails out of his cigarette, and he sits in the bed like a deposed king, a pile of fishing net spread before him. A flock of anxious gulls eyes the barrel of smelt that sits in the back. As I approach, he doesn't look up but remains tenderly focused on a split seam at the base of his net.

"Gulls are soulless grunion hunters," he says as he flings a smelt at one of the seagulls.

He looks at me. Pale lines of sea salt have settled in the creases on his face, and dust on the tip of his mustache. "Ruby," he says, "you do know what a grunion hunter is, don't you?"

I consider what I know about fish anatomy, the pull of the tides, the words thrown in the dark by the night smelters. I don't know about grunion hunters, though.

"They're after only one thing," he says.

I pause again. When he's this serious, Smitty resembles a sea lion, snug in his skin, sandy-bearded, with scalloped, thick hands.

"You won't be a grunion hunter, will you?" he finally asks.

I shake my head but feel cloudy with confusion. He seems happy with this answer and goes back to the net. I climb into the bed and sit beside him.

"What's the sea telling you today?" he asks.

"I suppose it's telling me that it's high tide."

"Suppose I told you I got a snag last night."

"Suppose I told you it was my birthday."

His eyes roll up to meet mine, then go back to the net. "Like you told me all last week?"

"Yes, sir."

"And all the week before that?"

"Yes, sir."

He pauses. "Then I know it's not your birthday until tomorrow."

He's got me here, and I should know better. Smitty's a sharp one, even though between his day job at the cannery and night smelting, he never sleeps.

After he finishes mending the net, Smitty reaches into a bucket, pulls out a whitefish and swipes a clean cut across its belly. "I suppose that means you'll get your crack at the circus tonight," he says.

Although she probably forgot, Mama promised to take me to the Hattiesburg Circus that's camped in town. Its lollipop tents set up last week, and the scream and hiss of fireworks have kept me up at night. At odd intervals, above the low and methodical din of wave break, I also hear the wail

of elephants. It's a strangely mournful sound they make—shrill and triumphant, full of terrible sweetness, but also carrying a hint of admonition, not unlike Smitty's singing voice as he fillets in the mornings. It's as if they are calling out to an ancient elephant memory of warm grasses and wide plains, or announcing an outright rejection of Eureka and its fog and trailers and drunken fishermen. Ever since they came to town, I listen for them in the dark.

"So what can an old sailor get you for your real birthday?" he asks.

Mama's always telling me that twelve is an auspicious number, that it has something to do with the stars or the location of Venus on the line of sunset. I don't pander to her logic half the time, but I believe her when she says change is in my future; in fact I cling to that idea. It's no secret I'm not the best at making friends. I blame the genetic misfortune of my wobbly sailor's gait and orange curls. In spite of his offer, I can't make Smitty conjure a playmate, convince Mama to settle down or resurrect my father. I look at the net laid out before us; drops of seawater on it catch the light like diamonds. "For my birthday I would like to go night smelting with you," I say.

"I'm sure your mama wouldn't be keen on that: a little girl, strong currents. At night, no less."

I think about my mother, half succubus, half siren. She's known around town as a sedentary drifter. It's not uncommon for her to run away, slough off the responsibilities of keeping books at the cannery and head for the highlands. She'll show back up a few days later, messy in her thoughts and hair filled with cattail fuzz or dragonfly wings, or some incantation on her tongue. Once Smitty and I found her at the Baptist revival up near Happy Creek, half naked in the river. There are many ways in which I still cling to my mother like a guppy pup, but I also think that what Mama doesn't know won't hurt her.

"I'm sure she won't mind," I say.

Smitty shakes his head. "You don't want to be a smelter. You," he looks at me, "you should be a little girl. Forget all this dead-body business for a while."

A flush hits my cheeks. Smitty tends to me like he might a hot poker, with a gentle demeanor and hint of fear, but beneath the scaly exterior is the familiar softness of someone who has been cleaved by grief. And we don't talk about it, but he howled for weeks after Otto came up. I could hear his mournful wailing by the shore at night from my bed, echoing the sharp memory of something in my heart.

I sullenly nod, and swing my legs. The marbles in my pocket make a soothing clack.

“So,” he says, “no bodies today?” He slices the whitefish in two and holds out a fillet for me.

I shake my head and pop a small tiger-eye in my mouth.

“That’s good news, don’t you think?”

Over breakfast I spot a fish scale lodged in one of my potatoes. I pluck it, crank the window open and shuck it to the ocean. The scaling room vent system is a mash of old, deteriorating filament that lets loose in the night, and every morning we find fish scales on our pillows, netted in our hair and dusting our lashes. They’re small enough that we occasionally overlook them but numerous enough that they coat our apartment and make everything glisten.

Usually I’m the one to prep breakfast, but since it’s my birthday eve, Mama’s conjured up a wild assortment of food and piled it in heaps on two plates. She’s never been good at auguring a little kid’s hunger. She doesn’t believe in pictures, either—claims they can steal a soul. But I don’t care. A pamphlet for the circus is propped up against the window, and it sends shivers of excitement through my body.

Mama levels a meditative gaze on me, like she’s about to poke around for information. I finger my pocket for my stash of marbles.

“Do you have a friend you want to bring tonight?” she asks, her voice light enough to bounce around the room.

“Not tonight,” I say and stick a marble in my mouth. Onyx with purple storm clouds, a pacifying rounder.

She gives me a look. That I-don’t-know-why-you-do-that-marble-in-your-mouth-thing look—as if one small tic was worse, socially, than living above the bones of half the bluefins in the Pacific.

“You’ll ruin your teeth, and I won’t feel sorry when you’ve cracked a molar,” she says.

I slide the marble under my tongue and smile as it warms to my mouth.

“What about Ellie Gould?”

“Oh, no,” I say, moving the marble so it juts out of my cheek like a ball pin.

Eureka is a coastal town, a fishing village occluded from the inland by forests of giant sequoias. In the old days, there was logging and whispers of gold. Now the trees provide sanctuary to the itinerant, high and anarchistic. Gulls and kids flock the wharfs in the same haphazard and competitive communities, looking for something interesting. Ellie Gould is the cannery

owner's daughter, the leader of girls in my grade and by all accounts an enemy. My stock image of Ellie includes the frightening purse of her small lips as she forms the phrase "Ruby Potsdam is a mermaid freak" and whips a sardine skin at me in the play yard.

My mother voices her opinion again. "Mr. Gould said she was going tonight and would be happy to go with you on your birthday."

"Mr. Gould owns the cannery, of course he'd say that," I mumble. "And Mr. Gould doesn't seem to know his daughter too well." My words are choppy because of the marble, which prevents me from going on. What I don't tell my mother is that the Goulds live in a house that overlooks the ocean. I pass it every day on my way to the beach; I know its contours, its shingles and the pandemonium of toys in their front yard. I envy the conventional nature of the front door and even wish I had Ellie's three sticky brothers to climb all over me. I don't mention that Ellie's window doesn't overlook a warehouse full of coils and conveyors stained with bits of chum. The only thing we share is a keen familiarity with the smell of fish. I also know the sweet smell of redwood planks in the sun and the throaty giggling of cormorants in the bay, but I doubt she sees it that way. I doubt she sees the cannery as anything but a tin heap, a loud, hapless place filled with loud, strange, hapless people employed by her father.

"Besides," I add, "it's the last night of the circus, and everyone who's going has already gone. Ellie Gould's probably been at least three times."

Without another word about Ellie Gould, Mama sighs and pretends to study the Hattiesburg Circus history, though it's not long before she's withdrawn from me for the moment, looking out the window with a smile that implies she's gone to her dream world, rifling through her cache of secrets. I'm not privy to a lot of my mother's life, but I know she's been meeting the bearded lady from the circus on the beach for midnight strolls. I see them in the moonlight, their bodies shaking with laughter.

A heel of a seiner pushes against the frame of the building, and the whole contraption shudders on its pilings and yawns. The room trembles slightly; the spindly legs beneath us wobble like those of an old man, and Mama wakes up.

"What about Daddy?" I finally ask, hoping she'll produce a picture of him or some nugget of truth to get me through the last days of my childhood.

She reaches over in a wistful gesture and tucks some hair behind my ear. "Later," she says. "But not just yet." She looks at me, then out the window, and releases another sigh.

When they're not out to sea, the boats sit idle in our docks, purged of their inventory. The crews carpet the town in the forlorn wanderings of soulless hobos. They get drunk, fill the streets with curse-filled rages, fall off cliffs, skinny-dip and poach abalone. Theirs is a hounded wanting, and it grates on the locals. No one is at ease. But when leave is up and the crews depart from port, gliding away in rust-splattered ships, I imagine the men on board resolute in their legs, with the soft roll of waves beneath them, comforted by the sharp, impersonal nature of the rigs. I imagine my father this way—strong and young and drawn to the water. I imagine he had a sailor's gait and a gentle tongue, and when the smell of salt air and sea-sweated rope filled his nostrils, whatever longing it was that drove him to sea to begin with was fulfilled.

That's just one possibility. Regardless of the circumstance, this thread of truth is constant: his body was never recovered, and his identity is always murky, which allows me certain fits of resentment and resolve with my mother, who claims he was a merman. Lately, he's taken the form of Triton, or a beast with the booms of shipwrecks for legs. As for me, I'm from the sea, part mythical creature, with limpets for eyes and a foamy, barnacled underbelly. She'll tell me she was tamed by this part-beast, part-man; that she was won over by his tidal charm, his soothing laugh. More than once she's pulled on the waxy mess of my curls and told me I belong to "out there," in the ocean, that I'm like a queen of the great tidal pools, ruling over a cranky following of urchins and abalone. And it burns me inside, but I have lived until now with the desire to believe her, to slough off the truth for one more year. I'm ready for something more than her glib half facts that overlook the litany of questions I have about my personality, the color of my hair or the way the tug of an albacore on the line sends an ancient thrill through my body.

A good Pacific storm is assailing the Hattiesburg Circus. Beneath the calls of the wearied ringleader, the great braided ropes of the big top strain in the wind. Ocean air whips under the canvas walls and mixes with the thick smell of animals. Outside, everything is subsumed in a gauzy, relentless fog, but the weather has not stopped the show. Blasts of color and light paint our faces, and the screams of riled tigers fill the tent.

Mama sits serenely in the stands while I watch the elephants parade around the ring, their wordlessly dancing trunks swinging with a joyful cadence. During their harnessed theatrics, a great ancient stink settles on my clothes and in my hair. In a different time, they might have been from

a world as old as the bottom of the sea. The winged flap and flutter of their ears remind me of the wings of stingrays, and the gray wrinkles of their skin make them look like dogged sea lions. In another world, I might have been their queen, scraping along on the dunes of the great ocean floor.

Across the tent, I'm not surprised to see Ellie Gould, wearing a petulant look. She's watching a loutish clown resist being shoved into a cannon. There is a group of other clowns heaving and falling in that drunken sort of way that amuses a crowd. When the clown is actually shot out of the cannon, there is a small vacuum of silence from the blast, and I realize Ellie isn't watching his arc but rather sizing me up with a sturdy gaze. She's probably surmised that I'm the only prospect of a friend this night, with the big top about to blow away like a pinwheel, that no other kids in town will bother to show. I look behind me and scan the faces in the crowd, the half-emptied wooden stands, the dull, achy expressions of teenagers from the inland, high as kites and fingering the scraps of their popcorn buckets. She's right.

As the clowns tumble in and out of hijinks, I pretend not to notice that she's inched her way around the ring and is standing next to me. My fingers shoot to my pocket for the safety of a marble.

She takes my hand without introduction and says, "The lions are behind the ringleader's tent. They rub their bodies against the railings of their cages."

I don't dare say anything, so she continues, "If you're lucky, you can get a handful of one of their tails."

I pretend to look at my feet for an answer, but it's more to cover my shock. "It's as if they're asking to be played with," she says and eyes me with a heavy-lidded satisfaction.

Wary of a test, I rifle through my store of emotions and identify a new one: an unbridled lightness that cracks through my body, my tiny arm registering connection to her hand.

Ellie pulls my face in close, her watermelon breath tickling my cheeks. "We can ride the Ferris wheel. My daddy gave me enough tickets for all the rides."

There is the stink and wail of the elephants, the grit of sand and earth beneath us and overhead, the great spiraling canopy of the big top. It's a dizzying lesson in joy for any kid, but here, with Ellie Gould's small hands wrapped around mine, I'm all quiver and pulse. She's looking for an answer.

I nod. I am hers.

And with that stroke between us, it is decided for the night how things stand.

Half the rides are shut down due to the winds, but it doesn't spoil our night. We shriek like banshees in the Tilt-o'-Whirl, find strands of stray lion hair and eat lemon taffy until our jaws are stiff. Somewhere in the night I catch a fleeting glimpse of Mama in the bearded lady's velvet boudoir, smoking a hookah, fluttering with ardor. But tonight not even my mother's preoccupations can distract me from my fun. Ellie and I ride the night sky in pirate ships, quiz the man who tames wild birds and have our handwriting deciphered.

Late in the evening, Ellie leads me in a frantic pace to watch the acrobats. During the show, she tells me that if we make a wish the exact second the trapeze artists are in the air, not touching anything, it is bound to come true. I pull my favorite marble from my pocket, a small scarlet popper, white-bellied and marbled with smooth red waves. I squeeze it so tight my knuckles turn white and think about how Mama says secrets are like bats that hang upside down in the cave of your heart, whispering in their own language. She says that if you free one bat, you run the risk of letting them all loose. But to me, secrets are more like sand fleas at low tide, swarming and chaotic, always attached to a gruesome piece of flotsam.

We watch the blur of acrobats twisting and flipping across the tent. During their midair contortions, I believe they've left their human forms and for a moment are the same as gulls hovering before a dive or leaves in the wind. When they meet, hand in hand, the sensation that ripples through me is more exciting than the precision of trust; it's being called back to the act of living.

"What'd you wish for?" Ellie asks after one especially theatrical flip.

"I wished for a bathtub of saltwater taffy," I say.

Ellie looks at me for a second, a piece of her blond hair stuck to a smear of cotton candy on the side of her mouth. "You did not."

I smile, caught in my lie. "A daddy," I say. "I wished for a daddy."

It's true, I wished for my father's delicate, sea-blown body to come ashore. To come home. I wished to see his face.

"What'd you wish for?" I ask.

She turns her head back to the show and answers, "A baby doll that cries when you leave it."

I tighten my grip on the marble. The rush to stick it in my mouth is too strange, but it's the only way I can think to contain the beat of happiness in my ears. I feel like a herd of night smelt running wild in phosphorescent streaks under the moonlight.

Mama contends that coincidence is better than prayer. When I wake up and stumble into the kitchen, I find her and the bearded lady smirking over a cup of orange juice, plucking fish scales from the tangles of each other's hair. I stand in the middle of the living room alone, riddled with words of fire. I had hoped I'd see her in the morning and that she'd steer clear of the politics of circus life, but I wasn't careful enough in my wishing.

I notice the window has been scrubbed clean of scale scum and breakfast is on the table. A candle burns on the stove, emitting lavender vapor, and something malleable and light in my mother has been replaced with a steely-eyed, straightforward drive.

"Happy birthday!" she says.

"Who is my father?"

"Honey . . ."

Mama places the cup of orange juice on the counter and looks at it. "I wish you would believe me when I say he loved you very much."

"Why are there no pictures of him? Of us?" I ask.

My mother fingers a thread on her sleeve and looks down. "You know how I feel about those things."

What's strange is that I'm not even mad at the bearded lady, whose tan, lithe arms keep crossing and uncrossing nervously. Her beard isn't wild or untamed, but filled with thick, copper-colored hairs that cling to her face in a memory of growth as natural as a cowlick.

"We've always been all right, haven't we?" my mother finally asks, her voice cracked with uncertainty.

"No," I say, "we haven't."

As she gathers herself, I can't help but hope for a real story of love, the tentative way he held me, how he picked my name. But what follows from my mother is a reluctant tale parsed with snippets of a man I've never heard of: a midwater longliner captain named Harper, portly visits and his untimely death involving a giant squid and a pelagic squall.

I shake my head, speechless and powerless. What's worst isn't the bearded lady's chagrin or my mother's need to soothe me—it's the ease behind the story, the way her face reflects a hoard of secrets. And for her, I realize, all this too is just a yarn, a place she goes in the night with her imagination: the mythical Harper might just be a face, or all the sailors in Eureka.

I feel like I'm tumbling through the air, my mother's grasp just slipping away from me. It's not just her I think I've lost; it's hope for a shelter from these calamities; it's my father's identity, and the tender belief that this day might have been different from all the others. But while I fight the voice

that suggests I have been formed from an ocean of coincidences, I notice the familiar air in the kitchen, just the right mixture of stridency and desperation that announces my mother is aiming to wander again, possibly on the back of a wizened elephant headed for some other town.

I watch the ceiling fan orbit in slow rotations and the next thing I know, I'm yanking my boots on and running out the door to find Smitty. Despite our differences, I've got to make sure the circus doesn't leave Eureka with my mother in tow.

Mrs. Gould is working in a patch of sunlight in her front yard, plucking sand spiders from azalea leaves. "Ruby?" she says.

I stand vacantly in front of her. She is a vision of maternal beauty that makes me ache. Her arms are dusted with dirt, and she's wearing an apron dotted with the painted handprints of children. She shades her eyes.

"Are you looking for Ellie? She's playing on the bluffs."

I nod and check my pocket for marbles. Only two in there. A blue one with tight, spiraling white clouds and a dull pink one. I slip the pink one into my mouth and scan the shores. There's a gathering of people in the distance, maybe a smelt run.

Mrs. Gould is giving me a pitying look, and I realize I've got fish scales in my hair and the harangued look of an orphaned mermaid baking in the Eureka sun.

I set off, heavy with all the things I thought I knew about love: its loveliness, its pivoting head and wandering eye. I thought I was aware of how improbable it can be, like the love I have for Smitty or the love I have for my father, but I hate the strange way my mother's improbable love has inserted itself into my life and how all the moments in which I've hoped for truth now seem stacked in my mind, endless and repetitive. I'm just about to cry when I see Ellie in the shadow of a pine, surrounded by her usual posse. I self-consciously run my fingers through my hair. I can still smell the elephants on them. Scales fall out like iridescent raindrops.

As I approach, I hear the squeaky drone of Kelly, Audra and Wendy Whip. Ellie's back is to me, and I only catch a few phrases: daddy, believed every word I said, the promises my father made, weirdo mother and the bearded lady. The squawk of laughter follows.

Then it happens in that quiet registry of thought: Ellie was a setup, a play date arranged by my mother. But more than hurt over the betrayal, something darker settles on my shoulders. My mother can produce a friend but not a photo, offer up a new beginning but only a foggy past. Still, watching

Ellie mock my mother's happiness, I get a peculiar knot in my stomach, a warm and cranky sort of beast, a hoary old thing that admonishes me to do something. I let out my own triumphant wail, a roar, a rejection of this moment, and run full force in Ellie's direction.

I hit her from behind with surprising force. Audra, Kelly and Wendy scream in unison and disperse among the shabby pines. I close my eyes and pull on a fistful of whatever I can grab. Before I know it, she's thrown her leg over my neck. We're tumbling down the bluffs, but I continue to pump my arms into the doughy mound of her stomach until I can feel the hollow of her ribs. She wails with blood rage, a precursor to the slow-motion widening of her mouth, the glint of her sharp little teeth like a zealous puppy's. When the bite comes, I feel the snap of my flesh on my forearm under the power of her jaw and taste dirt. Soon there's the warm flow of blood and a slackening in my resolve. When I start to go a little soft, a callused hand grips my free arm and whips it behind me. A three-count passes and Ellie unclamps her jaw and we're all knees and hair and breath across from each other, arms pulled behind our backs.

It's Smitty in a green wool sweater, redolent of Pall Malls and deliverance.

He doesn't say anything but looks at me softly, a bit surprised, a bit sad. He pulls us up and we stand there, the three of us, gauging the situation. Ellie looks at me. I try not to show how cut up I am, how good she got me, how I wasn't hoping to fight. But I feel a sense of loss that must be visible on my face.

Smitty breaks the silence. "A body's come ashore. I thought you would want to know."

As he leads me and Ellie down the beach, I hold my hand over the waffled teeth marks in my arm. A shiver of pain shoots waves through my body. I know I will have to go to the hospital and then, after she answers to me, answer to Mama. But as we walk away I replay the moment just after Ellie sank her teeth in. That was when I felt it, the final betrayal, etched in a thin, cottony line across her shoulder. A bra strap. My feet drag heavily in the sand, and as each step sinks, I fall into the space between us—the one I thought didn't exist back there amid the wails of elephants and palpitations of trapeze artists. But now I realize that here is the truth: she is a woman. She belongs to that secret and mysterious club, filed with strange plucking practices, perfumes and tales of unrequited loves lost at sea. It all makes me feel as though I have been living the life of a sand flea while everyone in

their great costumes of adulthood have been parading on the dunes above my head.

A crowd has gathered on the slope of the shore where the thin fingers of exhausted waves form streams of icy water. They stand hushed, hands held to their mouths. As we approach, I recognize something delicate and hunched in their shoulders. I know it when I see it. This body is different. She is a child. She lies in the sand, at an irregular angle, her arms draped across her face like a bloated doll, no underpants, no trace of happiness. We stand in silence until someone threatens to disembowel a wandering seagull.

I'm out of marbles, and my tongue seems to fill my mouth. Down the beach a smelter yelps, and the trawlers idle at the wharf, their massive hulls empty and waiting. Somewhere on the winding highway out of town, I imagine, the elephants stand like soldiers in their trailers, their trunks stilled in apprehension. The air is light. The stink of decay has been cleaned away by the salt and brine of the currents.

I feel the warm pressure of Smitty's hand on my shoulder.

Ellie begins to cry, and it occurs to someone what's happening—that death is inching its profound way around the crowd. A weak voice calls out, "Get those girls out of here; they shouldn't have to see this." Save Smitty, no one in the crowd knows that I've seen it before, the vacancy of the dead, that I've communed for long hours with their unsettling silences and that the lament welling up in everyone's chest is as familiar to me as my own skin. What they don't know is that there are no girls in this crowd—just a body on the shore that we once could have called a girl, and me.

M E E T T H E A U T H O R



Rose Whitmore

“My family used to follow the runs of smelt along the northern coast of California. We camped in dunes, watched the slow release of the tides and fought the ocean with our nets. At the end of the day, I would stand by my bucket of fish and sell it to a cannery filled with men in yellow rubber suits, men with toothpicks in their mouths and fish beneath

their fingernails. I have wondered since what sort of girl might live over a cannery if circumstances allowed.

“I’ve always been interested in how we deal with our solitude in the world, how we create it and survive in it. Ruby had been sticking marbles in her mouth for a long time before I realized she was downwind from the Eureka Fish Company, alone in more ways than one. It was no accident, then, that the transience of Eureka, the cannery itself, the tides, the circus, the wandering crews, a flighty mother and the bodies on shore became naturally isolating forces that she survived by using bits of a magical world, a child-like optimism. It is what allowed her to decipher the frequencies that adults sometimes avoid: grief, truth, the desire to shed it all and the need to start again. This magical trust in the universe is what drove the sincerity of her efforts for closure, to find bodies, to unearth, inexplicably, a world of answers in a place that so readily denied them to her.

“Womanhood, working by its own mysterious internal clock, was the last obstacle for her to naturally encounter, one that might allow her to understand her isolation, not only as a little girl in a world of fish and fog but also as a person in the world.”

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