Connection Is a Sea Urchin

I snorkeled for the first time last summer, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The water was a pleasant temperature, and the sea was clearer and brighter and bluer than any sea I had ever seen. Thirty feet below me, the ocean floor was a shadowy landscape, barren except for a massive olive-colored stingray that nosed through the sand in the ship's huge grey shadow. With clumsy kicks, I struggled to swim deeper for a closer look, but my breath failed me and the rising pressure dug knives into my ears. The water to my inexperienced efforts was an impenetrable barrier, pushing me back to the surface, holding me at the rippling boundary of sea and air.

I swam closer to shore instead, and snorkeled back and forth along the edge of the nearby island, an edge not of soft sand and shoreline but of coral. The island extended beyond the tide line as a shelf of reef, pockmarked and pale, adorned with lacy lavender fans and wrinkled brain corals. All along the edge of the shelf swarmed tiny fish that ought to have been mounted on crowns and scepters, so jewel-like and lustrous were they: tangs, parrotfish, groupers, more. In the crevices of the shelf, ink-black sea urchins wafted their delicate, eight-inch spines in deadly aureoles. One had to be wary of snorkeling over the reef itself, where the water was shallow and the current might pull a weak swimmer directly into a sea urchin, there to be impaled on those microscopically barbed needles.

With their bold patterns, the fish stood out starkly against the pale hues of the reef. Much of the coral was chalky white or dull taupe, a colorless ghost of the reefs in the photographs I had pored over as a child. Bleached corals are a consequence of atypical water temperatures–the stress of higher ocean temperatures, as it turns out, causes the coral to eject the microorganisms living within their tissues. These organisms, protozoans known as zooxanthellae, provide not only food for the coral colonies but also the vivid color of a reef. In 2005, half of the reefs in the Caribbean had died off when the water temperatures rose those few crucial degrees, and ten

years later the underwater landscape had still not recovered. Without their symbiotic partners corals are weaker and more susceptible to disease, and they appear, as I was discovering, as monochrome imitations of their former selves, faded and feeble amid the glorious fish.

I stared at the dying reef, off the shore of that steaming, beautiful tropical island. I knew the warming sea in which I swam was to blame; I knew of climate change's effects on reefs, how the higher water temperatures caused corals to expel the zooxanthellae. I knew these facts abstractedly, as part of a longer list which I kept in the back of my mind whenever I mourned the onslaught of global warming. My sadness had been rational, theoretical, a sadness I chose to take upon myself because I wanted to shoulder the cause.

Now, though, I hovered above the pallid corals and found myself confronted with the truths which I had made such efforts to understand while keeping intangible. *This will not last forever*. I felt the reality of climate change, thirty feet from my downturned face, a sharp blow, a sudden punch to the gut, unavoidable, accusatory. What had I ever done to combat global warming, to slow environmental degradation? What right had I to mourn detachedly, to eschew connection, to feel sadness without understanding? It had been a concept perceived from a distance. It was an issue for which I could argue while remaining untouched. Now here was this ghost reef showing me what had been lost.

The colors of the coral were no longer something lost by the world as a whole; they were something *I* had lost, something that had been stolen from the world, from me, from every individual who would never see them now. What could I do but grieve? Before that day it had been my choice, deliberately, reservedly, to mourn the warming planet, but now I exhaled slowly through my breathing tube and mourned without willing it, gripped by a grief that I had not chosen and could not deny.

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Seeing the reef frightened me, not merely because it was a potent reminder of the warming planet, but also because it forced me to realize that my fear of loss had caused me to distance myself from the very things that stood to be lost in the first place. Because I was afraid of the final consequences of planetary warming, I had kept the planet at a distance; because I feared the loss of the coral reefs and other fragile ecosystems, I had never truly looked at them. Perhaps it had been out of a reluctance to become attached, since I knew a loss was imminent. Or perhaps it was out of some mistaken instinct for ignorance, some remnant of belief that the world would be safe if I never let myself find out how unsecure it all was.

I once made a tiny cinnamon-scented bird by dipping a twisted scrap of tissue repeatedly into the pool of melted wax around the wick of one of my mother's apple-cinnamon jar candles. The bird was currant-red and no longer than the end of my thumb. I pared translucent shavings of wax away to create the contours of its wings and tail. I hid it in the back of the kitchen cabinet, behind the wine glasses, and eventually stopped checking that it was still there. As long as I did not find out otherwise, I could believe that it would be safe forever.

My childhood featured an ongoing quest for safe cache locations, for places where the treasures of youth, worthless to all other eyes, could be stored. I hid things in places I believed were safe–between mattresses, in a plastic bin under the bed, in a corner of my pillowcase. Half a dozen sunflower seeds wrapped in a ragged paper towel, tucked into the smallest pocket of a backpack, carefully hoarded for years. A cardboard box meant to hold a necklace, that when opened, released a motley shower of pressed flowers instead. A friend's guitar pick, tucked into the tiny, incredibly insecure gap between my wrist and a hair elastic.

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I was, of course, always losing items, or forgetting where I had hidden them, or simply finding that the storage locations were not as protected as I might have hoped. It was an interesting conundrum for a child, this challenge of storing and keeping and holding onto things. Because I was a girl, clothes with pockets were few and far between. In any case, pockets were not always to be trusted. A precious possession could slip out, or fall through a hole which I could have sworn did not exist before. I tried carrying a purse, but once when I brought it to church, where it sat beside me as a priest burbled enthusiastically about God's love for humanity, I accidentally left it behind in the pew–a terrible loss for my young self, costing me not only the purse but its contents in one fell swoop.

I could also hold things in my hand, but this was tiresome and occasionally unreliable. Once, in a patch of weeds at the edge of a mall parking lot, I saw a single fine Queen Anne's lace flower, which also goes by the less romantic name of wild carrot. Four years old, the owner of all I surveyed, I plucked the flower without hesitation. I held it in one hand, loosely so as not to crush it, and in my other hand I held two of my father's fingers as we walked up and down the vast corridors of the mall.

I had intended to save the Queen Anne's lace and to give it to my mother when we returned home, but as we left the mall I realized I was no longer holding it. At some point in our journey the flower had been lost. Despite the fact that I had been holding it, that it had been in my very hand, I had lost it. Perhaps it had slipped out, or perhaps I had set it down and forgotten to pick it up again, or perhaps I had simply opened my fingers and unconsciously released it. I did not know then and I still do not know, but I still remember the sharp sting of betrayal I felt, dismay at how my grasp had not been true, how my fingers had not guarded their charge. If my own hands were not secure, what was? That might have been the first time I realized that things

were never secure, that the world's fragility and my own carelessness could conspire to rob me, that what I considered precious could slip through my fingers like sand.

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My paternal grandfather had a white beard and bright dark birdlike eyes, and he died when I was seven years old. When I think of him, I remember his beard and his eyes and the sense of intimidation that my younger self often experienced around adults, but only a few of the actual sentences he spoke remain in my memory. "The kids are here," was one of them, something he said over his shoulder to my grandmother as my family and I showed up on their doorstep for a summer visit.

"Do you know what Mark Twain said about books?" he said to me another time, while I shifted awkwardly on an armchair, impatient to flee and play with my cousins. "Long books are too dull and exciting books are too short."

An unofficial Buddhist who probably had never shot an animal in his life, he also once asked me, "How do you shoot an elephant?" I didn't know the answer, nor did I realize that it was a riddle. The answer: "With an elephant gun." I found this suspiciously simple, but when he followed it up with, "How do you shoot a purple elephant?" that answer escaped me as well. "With a purple elephant gun." I felt tricked somehow, and was annoyed, but was too shy to tell him. How could I know that it was the last thing I would remember him saying to me?

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When I was thirteen I had a Siamese fighting fish–*betta splendens*, the scientific name goes, and *pla-kad* or *pla-kat* it is called in the Thai language. He lived in a two-gallon fish bowl on my desk and ate pellets of fish food with a fierce eagerness. I was reluctant to name him at first. I had read that a betta fish in captivity typically lives only a few weeks, and I felt that it was

foolish to develop an attachment before he had outlasted this statistic. My parents, for their part, felt I was being morbid.

I did name him finally, and he spent several months swimming in graceful spirals in the bowl on my desk. He had none of a goldfish's torpor: when I fed him he jumped for my hand, unwilling to wait for the food to hit the water. It was the most marvelous thing. For a split second he would be poised beneath the surface, his spine coiling like a steel spring, contorting, gathering strength and grace, before the leap, the explosion of motion. When I held a pencil to the glass he faced it head-on, hovering in the water, and flared his gills out in challenge. It was the second marvelous thing he could do. They made a dark ruff around his head, turned him a mystical creature, a dark piscine lion, an aquatic warrior.

In the summer my family went north to visit relatives, and again I was faced with the conundrum of safe spaces, of secure transportation. Because I could not leave him behind, I packed him carefully into a plastic jug of treated water and he rode the hundreds of miles in the trunk of our car. The journey itself he survived, but later, when we went to unload the car, we found him floating lifelessly in the water, shrunken, dull, boiled from within by the summer heat.

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I wish my grandfather had not died. I could quote Twain back to him now, ask him better riddles than ones about purple elephants. There are things I would have loved about him if I had been old enough to understand him. There are things he would have loved about me if they had existed while he still did. I see, in myself, the same filaments of thought and interest that he had, the connections we could have made. We were simply separated by time. He overshot me by about ten years. He recedes into the past and time buoys me up, holds me thirty feet above the sandy seafloor from which his bright and bird-like eyes twinkle out.

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I might only remember a few words from him, but that is still more than I have of my maternal grandmother, though I was nearly a decade older when she died. She lived thousands of miles away, spoke a language that I barely understood, and only met me twice. I remember, instead, my mother appearing in a doorway, a phone in her hand, her face collapsing like the wings of a falcon in full stoop.

"My mother is dead!" she said, and burst into tears. Her words did not hold grief, not yet. They were spoken in disbelief, the words of someone who has just felt for something secure in the dark and found it missing, of someone who has reached into their pocket for something precious and found it gone.

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When my betta fish died I wept for him, out of sorrow and guilt. Then I wrapped him in layers of newspaper and plastic and hid him in the bottom shelf of my uncle's freezer: another safe place, another place to hide the things I felt were important. At the end of the week I carried him the long miles home, a sad, lifeless little packet on my lap, much more portable in death than he had been in life. I had intended to bury him in a shallow grave in our front yard, but I found that I could not bear to sequester him in the dark depths of the earth, a foreign element to him, he who had been a liquid creature of color and grace.

I put him in our own freezer instead, and spent a long time puzzling over how to dispose over the body. Flushing him down the toilet, I felt, was out of the question. But neither could I cast him into the ocean, knowing as I did that bettas are freshwater fish which in their original untamed state lived in the still pools and warm, stagnant waters surrounding the Mekong. Wild, he would have been a dull brown and would have hunted zooplankton and mosquito larvae amid the roots of plants, would have crafted foamy nests of tiny bubbles to house the eggs containing

his unhatched progeny. Tame, raised in a plastic cup, generations removed from that plain and voracious ancestor, he was still a creature of calm and quiet waters. How could I throw him to the crashing surf?

So in the back of the freezer he remained. Long months locked in the ice, suspended in thought and memory. Eventually I ceased to grieve. I bought another betta fish, which lived far longer, but never had the fire and vigor of the first, that tiny predator's instinct, that eagerness. Occasionally I ask myself why my first betta died, whether his fierce joie de vivre masked some secret weakness. I suppose I shall never know. Perhaps if I had opened him up that afternoon, dissected his limp form in search of rhyme or reason, I might have found the answers I sought. After, though, with him locked away in the cold, it seemed the bigger crime to disturb his rest, to intrude upon the clean, frozen repose to which I had consigned him. To invite rot. The back corners of freezers are for things meant to be safe yet forgotten. So I left him untouched, first out of grief, then out of indecision, and finally out of complacency.

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On different day of my Virgin Islands trip, while snorkeling at one end of a crescent-shaped beach, I had the chance to see the reef and its bright fish in closer detail. I again donned flippers and a snorkeling mask, but this time to swim in waters only a few feet deep. The tangs and small triggerfish darted just out of reach, almost glittering in the glassy water. There were no breakers; the sea was deceptively calm, the flat roll of the waves belying their strength.

I strayed toward the other arm of the beach, curious what I would find in the central region where children were splashing with their parents. Before I reached it, however, I quickly found myself in an area of even shallower water; here the coral shelf was much closer to the

surface, its crevices only a few handspans beneath me. The urchins with their long shivering spines transformed from distant seabed menaces to sudden dangers.

I tried to kick; my flippers struck the reef, useless. I was at the mercy of the current, which now dragged me ruthlessly toward shore. My fingers scrabbled at the slick, algae-coated rock, at the lumpy coral. The push and pull of the sea was inexorable. I passed over the largest sea urchin, twisting desperately to avoid the spines, my breath catching as I waited to feel them pierce my skin.

There turned out to be just enough depth to the water, though, and I passed over the urchin without injury, mere inches of margin between us. I finally found space to kick, overcame the current's attempt to yank me back over the sea urchin a second time, and swam hastily towards shore, relieved and trembling.

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Last spring, a few months before I would brush past a sea urchin with only the narrowest of breaths between us, I was at a concert when I received news that my mother's father, the third of my grandparents, had died. The concert was due to start in half an hour; my friends and I were about to line up to enter the venue. I took the terse phone call from my father in the handicapped stall of the nearest restroom, then hung up and leaned against the stall divider to shed a few confused, angry tears for a man I barely knew, a man about whom I cared, but not in any way I could name.

It was not grief that I felt, but some kind of precursor to grief–a realization of loss, a reaction of the mind rather than the soul. I had wept real tears for my dead betta, but for the loss of my grandfather, which was greater and yet more distant, I could only summon the knowledge that I ought to cry. It was a sadness I chose to feel, the way I had chosen to mourn the melting ice

caps and expanding deserts: from afar. I wallowed in it for a moment, then methodically washed my face and stepped back outside.

"My grandfather died," I said to my boyfriend. He said something sympathetic, and I shrugged and said, "I didn't really know him." With that calm sentence I severed the connection– no, I denied that there had ever been a connection. "I didn't really know him," I said, and became St. Peter, whose denial of Christ had been discussed at length during religion classes in the Catholic high school I had attended. "I didn't really know him," I said, and a rooster probably crowed somewhere. "I didn't really know him," I whispered, and I twisted and kicked with all my might and avoided that sea urchin's spines, because I knew I could not bear the barbs. And I went into the concert venue with my friends and danced to the upbeat music and said nothing about my grandfather to anyone ever again, because I had chosen not to take that sadness upon myself, and now I did not know how to face my lack of connection and turn it to vulnerability.

I never shed another tear for any of my dead grandparents, but one hot afternoon that July, on my way home from work, I hunched without warning over the steering wheel and sobbed, dry-eyed, miserable, unseamed by sudden grief. There it was, the vulnerability. Three months, three years, a decade in the making, here came the grief, because three out of my four grandparents were dead and I did not know them, and I would never know them. They were the coral reefs and ice caps, scoured and licked away by the sea before I ever arrived, and they were the flowers I tucked away and forgot, and they were the betta floating dead in the water when I opened the trunk of the car. They were my heritage, bitten out of my past by some devouring creature, all decay and pollution and snapping fangs, that chewed up my ancestors even as it chewed up the melting world.

And now I am terrified of my parents. I look at them and all I see is their mortality. I look at them and see their skulls beneath their smiles, hear age rasping in their breath. I see the past hospital visits, the daily medications, the vessels which grow frailer with time. I look at them and I am afraid, because I love them and because I cannot keep them safe. Every interaction with them, now, is a battle against a feral instinct of self-preservation, an instinct that screams *they will not last forever*. One day I will be the one standing in a doorway with a phone in my hand, with tears in my eyes and my face a diving falcon. One day I will reach into a pocket for something more precious than anything I have ever lost, and it will be gone. One day my parents will slip through my fingers, lacy flowers lost to the world.

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Years have passed and I have not looked for my betta. I live in a different house, now, with a different freezer. Yet as long as I do not search for my dead fighting fish, as long as I do not need to know with certainty that he still resides in his wrappings of newspaper, he still exists. I can allow myself to believe that he remains in the ice, that he has survived the moves and the years and awaits my decision on his fate, should I ever choose to make it.

Logically, I realize the Ziploc bag, being unlabeled and unnecessary, has long since been thrown out by my mother. But in my mind my betta survives, in my mind he is preserved in ice and not rotted in a landfill. And so as long as I do not open the door and check, he persists, the *possibility* of him persists, a sort of Schrödinger's fish in the timeless depths of my freezer.

I keep my late betta at arm's length. To seek him out, to feel again that connection I felt when I held a pencil to the glass and he flared to life behind it, would shatter the illusion that he still exists, that he was not boiled and destroyed and lost through my carelessness. In the same manner, I have rarely thought in an emotional light of my grandparents, or of the looming loss of

biodiversity that climate change will bring, or of the weariness in my parents' eyes. I have made a habit of thinking very rationally about these things: about how I will never hear my grandparents' stories of surviving war and upheaval in their country, about how I am not doing enough to combat global warming, about how one day I will bury my mother and father.

I think about these things and withdraw; I kick for the surface with all my might, to put thirty feet of the clear Caribbean between myself and the truth. The part of me that fears vulnerability, the part of me that hoards encounters and items like gold, the part of me that wept for a fish because it was a manageable blow but did not weep for my grandparents because it could not fathom a loss of such size, this part of me is all too aware of the price of connection.

Connection: I crave it in theory but fear it in practice. Connection: my Catholic schoolteachers called it necessary for us, called it our covenant with God and with each other. Connection: I have often wondered if God craves it too, if the secret that my teachers never mentioned was that God, too, finds connection necessary. Perhaps they would not have liked that idea; perhaps they realized that there was an element of weakness in it, that a god who craves connection runs the danger of being hurt, and a vulnerable god was not something they were prepared to consider. Connection: it certainly involves danger. Why be exposed? Why risk the long spines and barbs? I cannot keep people safe. They will slip through my fingers; they will drop away through the holes in my pockets; they will appear in my doorway with brimming eyes and dead parents and grief so strong it pulls me inexorably toward shore.

I find myself seeking to remember and believe without connecting. I find myself attempting to preserve memories by never recalling them, by leaving them untouched in the back freezer of my mind, as I did with my poor fish. Each dredging up of the past, each hauling of the past into the light of focus, reshapes it, carves it into rebirth, makes of it a new animal. As long

as we never revisit our perception we can rest assured that it will never be affected, never be destroyed. That it will be preserved until such time as we choose to unearth it.

And then I find myself trying to do this with more than memory–with things, and people, and a planet. If I never know my parents, if I am never confronted with climate change, if I never check my hand for the Queen Anne's lace, surely these things will all exist safely, forever. Surely they will.

To maintain this strategy, we must never break the illusion, never check the freezer for the sandwich bag of our guilt, never revisit our memory lest we find it flawed and wanting. In order to protect myself from the grief that threatened me in the car on that hot July afternoon, I should forget that I did not keep my betta safe, should forget that my parents are dying before my eyes, should forget that I have only one grandmother left, should forget that I will never know my vanished ancestors.

This course of action is safe and secure and tempting. In many ways, I have not changed from the small child who placed flowers in the crevices of trees to be retrieved later, who thrust her hand into her pocket and then regretted it because if she had never checked, her favorite ring might still be there. I am still trying to hoard these moments, these objects and experiences. I am still trying to hoard people. My parents are lacy white flowers that I hold loosely in my hands. My grandparents are wrapped in newspaper in the back freezer of my mind. I tell myself not to think of these things, not to connect with them. I tell myself that faith is enough. That it is enough to believe these things are there, and not to look for them. And it *was* enough, in a way, until I snorkeled for the first time and I realized that faith without connection was empty, a bleached reef, a ghost in my head.

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I have come, since the Caribbean, to realize the value of transience. I have come to understand that things are worth having even if one cannot have them forever. I was wrong to ignore the world, wrong to focus on climate change only because I thought it was an issue I could hold beyond arm's length. I thought I could have faith that the world was there, as I had faith in the presence of my long-dead betta, and that I would never need to reach out and touch it. I did not realize, until I floated beside the dying reef and felt the sucking pull of the current, the water's comfortable and destructive warmth, what I was ignoring. I should have reached for the world, global temperature increases and all, pulled it close, swallowed it whole. I should have impaled myself on the world's barbed spines, cut myself on its jagged and bleaching edges.

I am afraid because my parents will die. I cannot unhook myself from the spines of their love. Connection is a messy, barbed affair. Other people sink their spines under my skin, catch at my flesh with their microscopic barbs. Connection demands weakness, demands vulnerability, but carries its own kind of strength: to accept people, spines and all, to acknowledge that loss is inevitable, and to invite connection anyway. I suspect that my Catholic schoolteachers would have shied away from that image: God in a garden with sea urchins hanging from his skin, God creating humans with long spines that hurt but cannot stand in the way of connection. God unafraid of the barbs, of us inevitably yanking free, falling away, shedding divine blood, leaving our detached spines hooked in the soles of divine feet, the palms of divine hands.

If I had reached for my grandparents before it was too late, every painful spine left in my palms would be a story of who they were and where I came from, and perhaps it would have been worth it. But they recede into the past and time buoys me mercilessly up to the surface, and I exhale with a sob into my breathing tube and realize that it is not too late for me to do this with

the world, with my parents, with the people I meet every day, with the pressed flowers in the top drawer of my dresser.

There is no storing the world, nor its inhabitants. It will not last forever unless we fight for it. We have no choice; we cannot keep it safe and frigid in the cold darkness. We must pore over every inch of it, feel every connection, seek out every moment, believe in transience with all our might. I tried for years to keep what I loved safe in my mind, while in reality it ghosted away into nothing. Then in the Caribbean I peered through water like glass, stared at fish like rainbow prisms and coral like crumbling chalk, and resolved to fling myself at my parents, spines and death be damned. Safe places so easily become crawl spaces and then hiding places and then huddling places. We must eschew safety, eschew the spaces that are secure, and cleave, instead, to the unbearable risk of the spaces between each other.