

And still, she beckons

As a girl, the bay enchanted me: the way your body would ripple like water when bare feet gripped the swaying floor of the boat, the way the other boaters were always smiling and waving their hats at you, the way the fish were plentiful. I loved to watch from the stern as the boat's wake bubbled up into a frothy stream, the shoreline slowly shrinking away.

I remember dropping the line with a flick of the wrist, a finger lifting off the whizzing nylon strand, a satisfying plunk into the bay. I never baited the rods myself, instead watching as my brothers sliced hooks through wriggling worms and wiped boyish hands on t-shirts.

I was desperate to play my part, to fit in with the boys, so I learned to watch the tips of the rods, to tell the difference between the gentle dip of the current tugging and the quick, sharp jerks of a fish nipping at the bait.

We would dip and bob over the waves on the way back to the certainty of the shoreline, counting the fish in our bucket and bickering over who caught which one and how we'd cook them for dinner: grilled over charcoal in the backyard, a sprinkle of seasoning, a lemon squeezed over top the flaky white chunks.

We played *I Spy* with the buoys that marked where crab pots had been dropped. On the bay, they were handmade: a milk jug with holes poked in the sides, a red cloth flag cut from an old shirt. We took naps in the cabin below, our sun-kissed skin hot against the cool sheets.

Now, when my father and I fish, the humidity is relentless, the air capable of drowning you in its thickness. Sometimes you have to dip your face under the water just to breathe.

Instead of buoys, we count houses on the now impermanent shoreline; some days the yards flood and the waterfront in-ground swimming pools are overtaken by the brine of our estuary's tides: freshwater mixed with saltwater mixed with chlorine. No matter how much sand they dredge up to replenish the beaches that serve as front porches for the new homes with too many floors stacked atop foundational stilts, the thirsty bay laps it all back up.

My father is a man of few words but the ones he speaks most often these days are: *I miss your mother*, *the fish aren't biting*, and *I love you*. We anchor near a sand bar and chum; we drift near the harbor's dry docks and try peelers for bait; we slip bloodworms onto hooks near Pooles Island. Most days, we turn back with empty buckets.

And still, the Chesapeake beckons, the eroding shoreline slipping from her fingertips, her unpredictable churn pulling us in. From her belly, we look back towards the land and she

grounds us. Away from the stillness of the shore, she moves beneath us, reminding us she is still here, still breathing, still bleeding.