

ON WHICH SIDE WE SWAM

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Honorable Mention, Fiction

I SWIM IN DEEP WATER, it's bluer here and clear above the reef. The backs of the breakers roll away from me. My wife faces the sea, the breakers between us, her bikini as bright as mango slices. She complained about the Brazilian suit at first, the stretch of cloth that divided her backside and the small triangular patch she cursed each morning she grabbed my razor. Klippe didn't shave in the shower where the scrape of skin was drowned. She stood nude, facing herself in the mirror with her leg propped on the porcelain sink, a can of Nivea foam in one hand and my straight edge in the other. At the night's growth she swiped and I held my breath between sips of breakfast sangria which now burns in my gut, mixed with seawater. I've swum well passed the rolling sea backs. On the sugar sand of Copacabana Klippe stands, shading her eyes, her mango slices are humorless slashes.

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The monsoons started early in Arizona last year. It hailed in June, coming down in slivers rather than hard lumps the afternoon I discovered that my wife cut herself, with purpose. She was a surgeon at the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale and was paid to cut other people. Most days she carried home blood on her scrubs in purple splotches like spilled sangria. I had assumed it was their blood, not hers.

The day it hailed I had been drinking heavily in the reading chair in our son's bedroom. It overlooked the swimming pool. There I found perspective, although it could not have been described as quiet. The martinis brought the quiet to the half-packed boxes of our son Lim's Elementary Latin books and rudimentary tracings of women's haute couture. The dusty boxes gaped as if dumbfounded by their contents: petrified cholla cactus, the jawbone of a javelina, a tube of Paloma Picasso red lipstick, Athlete's Foot Powder, a model airplane kit yet to be assembled, an empty tube of glue, two balloons filled with KY Jelly, a bikini top, A CD of *Maximum Janet Jackson*, a pocket knife with nail file, Klippe's old anatomy book, a calligraphy pen, a bow and arrow, and a terrarium filled with quartzite and fool's gold.

Above Lim's desk hung a Map of The World in bas relief. A red thumb tack stuck dead center of Carefree, Arizona. Lim had marked Carefree, telling me he felt like where he came from. He tried to smile when he said it but only one corner of his mouth twitched up.

The martini glass warmed in my palm. Red pointed to Carefree. Double-pane rattled beneath the flap of awning like wings beating back gravity, like thin arms wrestling with a water-soaked jersey, hands groping for the solid side of the pool's Kool Deck, the edge Lim's hands had groped for last summer. Now Lim's wings beat gravely way above the chop of the pool water. I half expected to see him again, sinking with the dead leaves and fronds of young Queen Palms.

Instead, it was Klippe who kneeled near the deepest end, into the wind, her scrubs a familiar Rorschach of wine blood. I pulled myself up from the reading

chair and pressed my hand against the bedroom window, thick like the glass in the observation tower at Mayo Clinic where I had watched her, days after our son had drowned, open her patient's abdomen with one smooth swipe. I then knew permanent boundaries had been drawn, how Klippe compartmentalized herself into roles of surgeon, wife, and mother; yet, they no longer shared the same space. And now, she kneeled on the pool's deck, a scalpel resting in her hand which rested upon her bare thigh. I could not connect its surgical edge with my wife's flesh. She did. With a practiced grip Klippe drew a straight line across her upper thigh. At first I thought she had missed since she hadn't flinched, until the blood beaded along the slit before rivulets of red let loose in streams. This is how she distanced herself, behind a rolling line break. I hesitated to leave Lim's room, to leave the Map of The World, to cross what felt like an ocean to help my bleeding wife. I remained with the boxes in suspended disbelief, adrift with the continents in bas relief. That's when the hail started. It came down like limestone arrowheads.

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The sea's current pulls me back. I drift a few hundred yards from the beach burping copper and wishing for the taste of pool chlorine thinking that the deep would have been all of nine feet had I been home in Carefree.

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Within a month Klippe's thigh had scabbed. The pink ridge of scar jutted up like a reef separating the deep end from the abyss and I wasn't sure on which side we swam. Through a half pitcher already, my red thumbtack wavering between the Swiss Alps and Iceland. Klippe pushed through Lim's bedroom door. Her face, her skin gray against her scrubs. A pair of red heels hung from her fingertips.

"Going dancing?" I slurred.

"I found these a few months ago, when I started packing," the shoes dangled like bloody organs in the grip of a failed surgeon. Or like a couple of question marks, one for each of us. Her eyes settled on the pitcher behind me.

"Here?" I asked.

"Yeah, Harry. He had lipstick, too."

"I thought that was yours," I waved my martini toward the cardboard boxes. Klippe shook her head. She winced when she sat, keeping her hand on her thigh where a crease of wine red emerged.

"How much have you had today?" she asked. A pitcher, the slender one from IKEA, sweated new oceans onto the world map.

"I'm taking you on vacation," I said, closing my eyes, sticking it to Iceland. The pin didn't stick. Ice caps.

"I'll figure it out," I traced the continents in the air, "we'll get somewhere."

Lim's closet door was open. A goalie mask hung on a hockey stick. More books on Biology, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, inline skates with way-too-shiny

wheels, suits in dry cleaning bags, a hamper full of t-shirts and board shorts and something sequined.

"I don't know what to do with his clothes," Klippe said. They hung like expressions to be tried on but none of them would ever be. "I don't want to look through them," she said.

I nodded. Klippe limped out, heart in hand, and I looked back to the map knowing we would go somewhere tropical. We'd holiday in a climate where skin wasn't hidden.

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I can see the Copacabana Hotel from the water, see the sun reflected in our suite's window where Klippe scraped the nightly trouble from her bikini line. In Rio she dons strings and patches; her pink ridges faded white from months of sun. Klippe waves to me from the shoreline. From above the reef back of the breakers, I raise my hand. I spit more copper into the water, feeling relieved, like I could swim to the other side to greet my wife.

