

Bella Rastrelli

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Dream of the Drowned

You wake up in the mud again. It's caked absolutely everywhere. Under your tongue and between your teeth, under your eyelids. Matting your long hair floating around your head like a dark halo. Again, you jolt upright in the shallow water, hacking sludge out of your lungs. Water and spit seep out of your gills, which flare and then still. Something sticky clings to your teeth as you gasp open-mouthed, remembering how to breathe air. The taste is foul: sulfur, dead fish, bird shit. Marsh smell. Your waterlogged pajamas drag you back into your grave/bed in the ground, and slap wetly against your legs as you struggle to stand among the reeds.

A summer morning on the marsh is hot and damp. Seabirds squawk. The Florida sun beats mercilessly down from the moment it rises. Bright enough to burn. It's a horrific combination. Cold slimy saltwater and unbearable heat. You trudge along, barefoot, towards the mainland. Towards the bridge you woke up facing.

Most of the globs of mud have sloughed off by now, once you reach the shade of the bridge, and what's left has baked down into crispy flakes. You brush off the scales when they begin to itch. The tingle of morning light has chased your strangeness back into its corners. Gills clasp shut, transparent eyelids shrink back, nail-sharp teeth recede into sore gums. Instinctually, you run your teeth along the back of them. The brackish water has made your mouth dry.

You narrowly avoid slicing your feet open on a cluster of mussels climbing up onto the causeway, slipping face first into the gravel and Bermuda grass. Once again, you rise from the earth. You were too tired to even try catching yourself. You stumble along the bare road to the bike path along the bridge. It's a lot like the one the cross-country team runs over and back, over and back, on the other side of town. You think you hate this one more.

A car rushes by, occasionally. They don't notice you. They never do. Even when you linger at the peak for a few minutes, watching the tiny pastel town you call home half-naked and looking like the dead, they never seem to see you. Today is one of those days you stop, despite the heat. There's a lovely breeze up here, if you ignore the smell. You can see just where it is you woke up from up here. There's a lively heron snooping around the gravesite, snapping up crawfish.

It's been a year since you first woke up in the marsh.

It was the last day of junior year. Everyone ditched class and spent all day in the golden sand of the beach, in lovely blue water. A friend of a friend snagged some sunny d and vodka, and the afternoon passed in a pleasant, citrusy haze. A catnap and a thunderstorm later, you went out to dinner with the whole team at the best sushi spot in the next town over. Your car was in the shop for a hit and run. Gemma had to go to leave for the hospital. Her grandma had a stroke. So, you caught a ride home with Him. With Coach.

You trusted Him. You knew Him for years. His daughter graduated two years ago, and you knew her well. You thought you'd be safe with Him. It wasn't even weird, being in His beat-up pickup, low country music humming, windows down. You remember exactly what you talked about. He was taking his family on a cruise over the summer. You told Him you were going to

Louisiana, same as every year. The car stopped right there on top of the bridge. He said, “Something’s wrong with the engine, I’ll be right back.”

He said, “Can you help me hold the flashlight while I fix it? It’ll be just a second.”

He didn’t even have any tools. But you believed him. How could you not? You got out of the car.

There was nothing wrong with the engine.

He grabbed you by the throat. He didn’t do anything else. He just strangled you. On the asphalt, on your back. You looked right past his hands, past his face, past the glow of the headlights into moonless night before you passed out.

You woke up again on the way down. Right after he dropped you, you think. It really sucks, actually, that it felt so much like flying. Every time you thought about what wish you’d make on a shooting star, it was to fly. You used to dream of it. Now you only dream of this. Water yawning wide to swallow you whole, to snap your neck. It’s all you could see. All you could feel.

And then you woke up different, just like you did today. And you walked home. Just like you’re doing now. You know you died that night. You fell at least 50 feet headfirst. You felt it. But everyone just thinks he *tried* to kill you. And that’s what they’ve got him in jail for.

Your hometown sprawls before you, so walkable and sweet. Cute and touristy, frosted like a gingerbread house in pinks and blues. You drip slime and water down the sidewalk of main street. Past all the shops chock full of tourists and snowbirds at 8am. They look right through you.

You're not dead anymore. You know you're not dead. Even on these mornings where you look it and feel it, when you put two fingers to your jugular there's a pulse. Sometimes you have to remind yourself with the steady *thud, thud, thud* of your own heart. You hold your hand to your throat when you cross the street between cars that don't see you.

In the small-town silence, you press on. The ghosts are out today.

There are eight of them. When the water came up to meet you, in the darkness that followed, you saw them for the first time. Their faces pleading, their icy hands pushing you towards the surface and the silvery stars. You know their names from the posters. Some of them vanished long before you were born. One of them disappeared just two years before. No sweep of the marsh has ever found any sign of them.

You stand on your own front porch. Again, the door is locked. Around the side of the house, your window is always cracked.

You lie filthy in your bathtub, washing away the grime. It never really goes away. It just recedes under your skin like everything else.

You took your family vacation out to Louisiana after all. But by the end of the first week, you started to choke on water that wasn't there. Black blood poured from your mouth, but they all saw it red. The river didn't help. The bayou didn't help. You need the marsh. Your marsh.

They cannot leave. You cannot leave, at least not for long. They needed you to catch him, and you did. They can only keep you together here. You are forever tied to this place. You must shrink your aspirations to something more manageable. You sigh and towel off the bubbles.

Life goes on.