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LESLIE WALKER WILLIAMS

## Salvage

Aligned with me against my mother, my father was like another of her children. In the late evening we snuck outside to smoke. She had forbidden him to smoke indoors, whereas I, of course, was forbidden to smoke at all. To appease her, he pretended he was trying to quit. Our crime was twofold: the smoking itself, and encouraging the other. He had always been deeply susceptible to encouragement. "Don't encourage him," my mother would groan in mock dismay, when my sister and I laughed at his pranks and dirty jokes. She spoke as if he were a puppy being taught incurable bad habits, like chewing shoes or begging at the dinner table, whereas in fact his habits, such as they were — mischievousness, and a cavernous need for attention — had long since been established.

We convened on the bluff, beneath the rustling magnolia, where, should my mother look out, our silhouettes would not disclose us. Before I saw him I heard the ice cubes jangling in his drink, that sound like something always on the verge of breaking. He stood flush against the trunk, facing the river. Gallantly he snapped his wrist, so that a single Carleton slid from the pack, proffering itself to me. Like him I squeezed hard right above the filter, blocking the vents of the low-tar, low-nicotine brand he'd conceded to buy. From our expressions you might have thought we were gaining oxygen, not depleting it, although even with the vents pressed closed the rush was nowhere near as good as with the Salems we had bummed from his mother, who before she died lived in our garage apartment, lighting her cigarettes off the electric range.

Sometimes on clear nights we studied the sky. *Cassiopeia*, he would say, gesturing between drags with his cigarette hand, or *Orion's Belt*, depending on the season. He took great comfort in the stars. When my sister and I were small he would carry us outside, still sleeping, then wake us for a meteor shower, an event we'd recall nothing of in the morning. While sailing he'd taught me the North Star, toward which I gravitated, for its fixedness. Stepping briefly from the magnolia's shelter, I would search it out.

But we spoke only rarely. We didn't want to spoil it. I understood that smoking was what you did when you didn't want to do anything, when it was more than enough to pay attention and be still. At the time it seemed neither ruinous nor reckless, but rather a form

of concentration. We no longer simply breathed. It was more deliberate, more momentous than that: we inhaled, we exhaled.

I heard things then that I couldn't have — a tree frog's sigh before it sang, the passing of otters beneath the dock. The reek of the marsh seemed like something that should have been visible, as a luminous haze over the reeds. It was a smell I loved, of things breaking down, being broken down. Across the river I thought I could see the white specks of egrets, roosting high in the boughs on Cat Island. Why was it called that? There wasn't a cat to be found there. Some days I rowed out and wafted in the shallows. Rarely did I go on shore, dense as it was with ticks and snakes and chiggers, and the birds above you never silent.

When we reached the filter, we walked to the edge of the bluff and flicked the butts into the marsh. At low tide, the white stubs in the mud glowed for a moment, as phosphorescence did when lapped against the keel of a boat or your bare legs dangling in the water. But we didn't worry we'd be found out. "The tide will take them," my father said. He trusted the river's ability to carry things away. "Fish palace," he retorted against my protests, whenever he tossed a beer can overboard. Bent nails, chicken bones, and the rusted jungle gym were likewise disposed of. Occasionally, as if in exchange, he salvaged something he could use — a crab trap not too mangled to be repaired, or a plastic kayak oar. But usually what washed against our bluff was trash: spongy 2x4's, soda bottles, slabs of styrofoam from underneath other people's docks.

Only once that I remember did we smoke together in the daytime. But it hardly felt like day, as the approaching hurricane seemed intent on pressing all light from the sky. "Batten down the hatches," he exclaimed, with the particular glee he reserved for calamities not of his making. We proceeded to the dock. He wore his wading shoes, sneakers with holes cut above the big toes for drainage, although there was only fierce wind as yet. A half mile to the south, where the rain began, the world divided into dark and darker — not some gradual progression from drizzle to sprinkle to shower, but an abrupt and absolute deluge.

We were lashing the ramp and floating dock to the pilings when we saw an empty bateau heading upriver. It drifted against the current, propelled towards us by the wind. We stopped what we were doing and watched it. Where had it come from, and whom had it lost? My father straightened on the pitching dock and sang out:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!

He turned to me and grinned his rakish charmer's grin. I shook my head and rolled my eyes heavenward, as my mother would have

done. I was used to such recitations. He seized any opportunity to quote what fragments he could recall of poems memorized years before in school. During night watch on sailing trips he dredged up bits from Kipling and Shakespeare, and this, his favorite, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In my own head I had only random first lines, as when learning by heart all that ever stuck with me was the beginning.

The bateau came to a standstill a few yards away, stalled on the lee side of the neighboring dock. I ran to get our longest oars. Still the bateau remained out of reach. Bobbing there forlornly it seemed, if a boat could do such a thing, to gaze back at us, as though considering our potential as prospective passengers.

A sudden gust sent it closer, mere tempting inches from the ends of our oars. With our toes jutting past the rim of the lurching dock, my father and I strained over the water, like shipwrecked sailors just sighting land. Another gust blew the bow to face the opposite shore. It seemed an ultimatum. With a grunt my father cast our dinghy's anchor into the stern. Then gently, so as not to dislodge the anchor, he hauled the bateau in. She was battered but sound, empty except for half a foot of water. He moored her to a piling while I fetched the bailers, milk jugs severed at the shoulder. We stepped aboard. Bubbles rose from the holes in my father's shoes. We bent and scooped the water out.

After securing what else we could, we climbed the undulating ramp to the main dock. My father glanced toward the house. He was looking, I could tell, for my mother. The only sign of her was the huge X's she had taped across the picture windows. This was to prevent their shattering, but it seemed as well a stern warning to the wind, to mind its manners and not plow rudely through.

From his pocket my father took his pack, tapped it, and extended it to me. I was surprised, although not enough to hesitate. My mother would have seen us had she looked our way, but something — the violence of the weather, or how the lost boat had seemed to scrutinize and, finally, choose us — made such a risk inconsequential. We worked with the dedication of the freezing over a fire, huddling so close my bangs singed. In the dockhouse we could have lit our cigarettes easily, had it occurred to us to go there.

Leaning our forearms on the railing, we faced the incoming storm and took deep, searing drags. The bateau banged against the piling, while the sky, no longer divided, swung shut overhead. Above the wind my father cried:

Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink!

This time I neither shook my head nor rolled my eyes. Not that it would've mattered. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the sky, but as if he thought its darkness might, like during an eclipse, briefly reveal stars. Had he hidden such yearning from me for all my seventeen years, or had I simply failed to notice it? Abruptly it was pouring. He squinted and looked down, the last smoke from his mouth unfurling. He stretched his arm over the riddled, surging river, his drenched cigarette clasped like a wand. Then he loosened his fingers and let it go.



"Every people have gods to suit their circumstances."

— *Simplify, Simplify and Other Quotations from Henry David Thoreau*. Edited by K.P. Van Anglen. Columbia University Press, 1996 (\$23.00) See review on page 222.