

## Buoyancy

The fog clings to the lake at the south end of town long after the rising sun has burned it off the streets. Some days the fog never leaves the surface of the water, only thickens as the damp night falls. The fog is a pervasive problem in the valley, coming faithfully most mornings from November to March. Cars rear-end each other, and half a dozen people have hit the tree in the center of town, scarring its thick trunk.

Over those months the fog visits several times a week, quickening in the cool nights. “Better than snow,” many reckon, and they live by a curfew enforced by the weather. The townspeople get home at night before the fog is too dense—no one wants to add a gash to the tree. And in the morning they dress unable to look out the window, for there is nothing to greet them to the day.

This is the scene Emily met on Saturday morning. She peered out the window to the south, and realized she couldn’t see the horizon. The fog matched perfectly the pale colors of the cold water and the morning sky so that they transitioned seamlessly, one into the other.

Carrying her shoes, she tiptoed down the dark corridor in her home. She took the stairs one at a time, placing her toes carefully near the outsides to be quieter. Her cousin Nick and her parents dozed behind their closed doors. She didn’t want to wake them. As she entered the living room her cat raised his head and meowed. She patted his head, her fingers riffling his downy fur, then opened the back door. The cat rushed out and quickly disappeared from view, his gray body melding with the fog.

With her shoes now on, Emily walked over to the dock and gently placed her light blue kayak into the water. It made a gentle sound just shy of a splash. With one glance back at the house to make sure no lights had come on, she shoved off the faded wood of the dock with her paddle. Pushing the paddle against the water left small whirlpools alongside the kayak and sent ripples out to the middle of the lake where they joined one another before vanishing entirely.

Soon, she couldn’t see the house behind her. The fog surrounded her—she could see nothing beyond a short stretch of water all around. Nothing would indicate her presence to a person on shore. She breathed deeply, and as she settled into the hard plastic seat of the

kayak, it was as if the vessel itself disappeared. She felt suspended, held afloat by the water collected in the lowest part of the valley, buoyed by everything that had run downhill.

She remembered how one foggy morning she had come out on the lake without a compass. It seemed like she had paddled for hours before she found a shore, and when she did it wasn't the familiar one by her house. She tried to paddle back in a straight line, but it wasn't until the fog started to lift that she knew in which direction her home was. Now the gentle slope of the roof and the deck whose stain she had watched fade over the years were out of sight.

She sat in the kayak in the middle of the lake for an hour, watching the power of the sun grow. Its rays refracted in the water suspended in the air so that instead of an orb, she saw a misshapen blob. The sun through the fog never looked the same way twice.

Realizing her parents would soon be up and worry if she wasn't there, she turned back towards home. The fog absorbed completely the sound of her paddling.

The cat meowed as she came in his line of sight. She took off her shoes on the porch, carrying them so as to make less sound, then stepped inside. The television was on, just a little too loud to be courteous for this time of the morning.

Nick picked up his head to look at her. "Morning," he said with a raised eyebrow.

"Morning," she replied, her mouth tense. She expected him to be sleeping, to be able to have a few minutes alone in the house. Her cousin put his head back down on the couch and resumed ignoring her.

Ever since Nick had joined them, the routine of the day was unpredictable. The time her father used to spend in his home office he now spent trying to connect to Nick, to approximate a father for him. Her mother would come home early to make dinner, something she never did before her brother, Nick's father, died. And Nick was always there—the hours Emily used to be able to spend between school and her parents' arrivals home were now filled with the chatter of the television and the bulk of boy. When the day was clear and she was on the lake, she knew that the windows of her house weren't empty. She felt eyes on her, always.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized the coffee pot wasn't on—her parents must still be asleep. But as she climbed the stairs, her mother appeared at the top

of them. “Emily,” she said, grave. Her voice hummed, drawing out the “y” sound. Emily cringed. Her parents had forbidden from taking the kayak out alone, especially in the morning fog when no one would be able to see her on the lake.

“I was—,” she started, but her mother cut her off with a murmur of dissent.

“Not alone,” her mother said. Ever since Emily’s uncle had died, her mother had been attuned to even the smallest dangers. Things that were once innocuous were now disasters waiting to happen.

Emily spent her Saturday under eyes. Friendly eyes, but eyes all the same. The fog was off the streets, so her mom convinced Nick and Emily to accompany her to the farmers market. Nick knocked over a stack of cheeses in a display of his Midwest clumsiness. Even as she went to sleep that night, she could feel the looks of people embarrassed for them.

She laced up her shoes again the next morning, but when she went outside to slide the kayak into the water, the paddle was nowhere in sight. Her parents must have taken it. So instead, she stepped onto the nearby pavement of the street and began to run. The cool air hurt her lungs—running tired her much more than paddling leisurely around the lake. The omnipresent fog was like a wall she could never hit. For every step forward she took, the fog retreated a step. She felt as though she was chasing something she could never reach, racing something she could never beat.

She wound her way northeast through town, knowing exactly where she was although she couldn’t see more than a block at a time. With every step she revealed a little bit more of the world. Emily ran through the center of town, past the scarred tree, which, for a moment, filled her entire field of vision.

Gradually the upward slope of the ground increased, and Emily’s steps became smaller as she battled the land. Suddenly, the wall of fog ahead of her disintegrated, and the sun became bright. Emily could see far more than just a city block. The fog pooled behind her, just a few feet down into the valley. Only a few snaky tendrils seemed to reach out beyond it towards her still.

The flat expanse of fog beneath her stretched to the mountains in the west like a roiling sea, tumbling from air currents in the valley. For a moment she was looking across a white ocean. Then, continuing up, she was above the clouds, looking down.

She glanced to her right, where the path climbed another few hundred feet. A figure sat on a bench, looking across the valley, the sun hitting his back. She pushed herself up the slope finding that the air up here seemed much easier to breathe. It didn't catch in her throat or burn her lungs—it was warmer, thinner, less laden with water droplets.

The figure on the bench turned as the sound of her footsteps hit his ears. He raised an eyebrow. "I see you decided to outrun the fog."

Emily had nothing to say for a moment. She had assumed that Nick was at home, sleeping. She felt as if he had just cannonballed next to her kayak.

"I come up here some mornings. The fog is just suffocating. We never had that at home," Nick said.

He shrugged and looked back out at the valley, where all the water-laden air had collected. "I miss the snow."

Emily seated herself beside Nick on the bench. She imagined having to go live with Nick's family, in a reversal of circumstances. She could see herself staring out at the snow and ice, wishing the water would unfreeze to return the familiar weight to the air. She could imagine shielding her eyes from the glare of the winter, waiting for the weather to warm so she could go back to feeling her hands and her feet. And she could see how here everything seemed heavy to Nick, how everything slipped out of his hands and hit the ground. He couldn't see, he couldn't breathe with this unfamiliar air.

Now he turned his head towards Emily. His eyes, for a moment, were her mother's, the color of the fog, gray with flecks of gold.

"Come on, let's head back." Emily spoke softly, not convinced Nick would follow her as she stood up. But he did. They ran back together, disjointed at first, then matching their strides, the walls of gray retreating with each step forward, their spirits buoyed by everything that had run downhill.