
Senior Projects Spring 2020

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Softshell

Jamie Gray Chandler Gillette
Bard College

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Softshell

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Jamie Gray Chandler Gillette

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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*For mom.
You are not only the subject of this project,
but its origin, its breath, and its heart.*



a gesture not yet carried out, gently stirring
with no way of knowing what will become of it

— Cecilia Vicuña

I am standing in front of the lobster tank inside Zeek's Creek Bait and Tackle, the spiritual and geographic center of the one-by-nine-mile island of Jamestown, Rhode Island, formally nicknamed The Ocean State. Zeek's is hunkered in the Jamestown reservoir, the wet valley that divides town from out. *Town* breaks off at Island Scoops, and *out* begins with a stretch of farmland to the North, leading up to the exit for the bridge to the West, the bridge to the rest of America. The sagging purgatory between these two points lasts the length of a song's chorus if you are driving the forty miles per hour speed limit, bounded by neon-chalked signs for lobster rolls where Coach buses unload their tourists in July, and stretches of milky roaming cattle. You can see the Bay to the East from the reservoir, but not Newport on the other side, and so from Zeek's Creek Bait and Tackle, this is the entire world. Newport Bridge arcs in the distance, a bridge to nowhere. Everywhere you look, more water.

An osprey nest is skewered twenty feet above the parking lot. The patch of dirt that passes for a parking lot holds three cars at a time. Osprey watch as overflow patrons leave their engines running in the six-inch margin of North Road and rush in to claim their dinner — winter flounder, a bag of Dutch Harbor oysters, or two soft shell lobsters, one for a mother and one for her daughter. You don't browse at Zeek's, you arrive with a plan, desired poundage, and cash in hand. Precarity is the soul of the system. Ever-teetering on the tide, somehow Zeek's keeps its salt-reeking head above water. Everywhere you look, more water, more and more.

Zeek's clings to an outcropping of dry land in the center of the reservoir. If the shack belonged to a cartoon, it would tremble every time someone stepped inside. The local joke is that you catch the fish yourself through the floorboards, which give each other such a wide berth that you can nearly see down to the water below. This is how I remember the joke anyway, but standing in front of the lobster tank now, I realize the floor is concrete. Were the floorboards replaced last year, after the flood? Like a

reupholstered couch, made brown and slick and leather where there used to be familiar, stained polyester. Like the lobster, who sheds and rebuilds her exoskeleton from the inside out, the same flesh contained inside an alien shell. The former intimacy of the landmark marks its estrangement.

The flood that dismantled Zeek's took with it a wall of photographs: hundreds of children grinning beside flounder and fluke twice their size, and one, the owner's daughter, infamously panicking in the face of her fish's demise, inconsolable on the bloody deck of a boat. While the particularities of every other image were lost on me as soon as they were lost to the reservoir, I remember her distinctly: an honest rupture in an otherwise congruent photographic narrative of briney conquest, a brief moment of questioning in a yellow life jacket.



A mile South of Zeek's, up North Road and towards town, sits Lawn Avenue Middle School, where every year the swim tracks of a Paleolithic lobster are projected at the front of a sixth grade science classroom. The slide is followed by other examples: a bird's nest with three egg-shaped welts, footprints left by a giant sloth, the stomach stone of a sea lion. Such fossils are not made by petrification, by the encasement of a body in tar or resin, or its carbon imprint into shale, but by gestures — feeding, burrowing, excreting, walking, swimming — recorded in the earth. And thus their title: *trace fossil*. One animal can leave behind thousands of traces in its lifetime. Each testifies to an instant, a stride towards food or away from a predator, of hunger, fear, home-making, persistence. Two kneecaps impress upon the soil as a mother plants black-eyed Susans in her garden. A daughter leaves her teeth behind on a lobster's walking leg, in the opening where she sucked out the meat. A single stroke forward creases the mud in a river delta. The still frame is immortalized, discovered,

re-recorded in a photograph, illuminated above a dark classroom on the island of Jamestown, and called evidence.

Perhaps the floorboards left behind similar tracks as they floated off, or splinted under the weight of water, or never existed at all. Perhaps the reservoir holds, in its thick silt, a memory of Zeek's body, recalled as exactly as the photograph recalls the image of a child, the bloody deck of a boat. In the absence of such evidence the floorboards in my memory widen. Every precarity exaggerates itself. Customers line up for salmon with their legs straddling the water, one loses balance, and everyone falls in.

Standing in front of the lobster tank in Zeek's Creek Bait and Tackle, staring down at the concrete floor, everything before the flood folds and reassembles. The floorboards gape, wider and wider. Every child hanging beside the lobster tank empties into shape: an unfilled form, made refillable. The images lost to the reservoir regrow their particularities, until all of the children hoisting flounder reincarnate entirely. I remember an *inconsolable child*, and the image reinscribes itself around the modifier. I repeat it: *there she was, inconsolable on the bloody deck of a boat*, and thus a new truth swells in the space, until the air turns lifejacket yellow under a foamy, blistering sun. The island is changing. The water is rising. But there are the lobsters still, each huddled forever in the den of her own ruddy body, forever at least until dinner time.

*TRACE FOSSIL: MOTHER AND DAUGHTER SIT DOWN FOR
LOBSTER DINNER*

One mother and one daughter are together-at-the-table in the house where they live, on the North end of the island called Jamestown, past the stretch of farmland called *out* where a few streets tangle together before the island breaks off into rock, then water. Called water. Here they are, with sleeves rolled up over their elbows. Here they are, each with a steaming lobster in front of her. Here is the table, set with two shallow dishes of butter and lemon, a steel mixing bowl in the center to hold discarded shells, and a roll of paper towels, one square tucked into each collar, two disposable bibs. Here are two cobs of corn, jeweled in salt. Both Mother and Daughter are prepared with an arsenal of picks and crushers that they will inevitably forgo in favor of hands and teeth. Father at the head of the table, eating lobster dinner with his legs splayed as if giving birth, does not exist.

Here is the killing that must be done. Here are the lobsters they chose, two blue-brown marbled bodies turned red and still in the pot.

Three hours earlier, Mother and Daughter stand in Zeek's Creek, beloved bait and tackle shop in the drooping heart of their narrow island, and peer into the lobster tank. From the inside, the lobsters watch their human heads buoy back and forth as they try to glimpse each one. All the bodies are piled in competition for shade, deciphering boundaries between them is impossible — which claw belongs to which thorax, which pair of antennae to which pair of eyes, and so on. If Mother and Daughter let their vision blur, one single lobster forms in the tank, massive and undulating.

Daughter is ten years old in a wet rash guard that she hates; her nipples have newly broken ground, and she is hungry. Mother is hungry too, has an aching knee that needs replacement. Mother and Daughter have survived the day: a foam ball lost to the sea, a tantrum over leaving or going, and now, a lobster dinner to salve their wounds. Rhubarb from the morning softens in the hot car, crouched in the impossible margin of North Road. They need to select quickly. Here, in Zeek's Creek, in the belly of one stinking desire, Mother and Daughter want to eat.

When they get the lobsters home to their small, quiet kitchen, Mother puts the brown paper bag on the counter. It twitches, walks two paces toward the sink. The lobsters sense the lip of the metal gorge and stop before they fall in.

The most humane way to kill a lobster is to plunge the tip of a sharp knife into the lobster's head, just behind her eyes. This is not the way Mother will do it. Instead, the most passive and most cruel technique: to drop the lobsters headfirst into the pot of boiling water, still alive. Not for the sake of cruelty, but under the weight of Daughter-eyes in the kitchen. She knows the former will teach the harder and kinder lesson, but the latter is easier. She is tired and aching and, like any animal, she chooses easier. For herself and her daughter she chooses cruelty.

A lobster takes two minutes to die in boiling water. In ten minutes Mother will lift the lid.

When the lobsters are dead and cooked through and the table prepared, Mother pulls the first lobster from the pot. Out she comes, red and slick in the kitchen. Here she is, lobster birthed for the final time, dripping onto the tile. And then the second—*twins!* Glistening in the air above the pot, the lobster's machinery stills. In Mother's hand, the lobster reincarnates for a last moment in her final shell.

When the lobster is intact and alive, her blood is clear. Exposed to oxygen, her body cut open or cannibalized, her blood turns blue. Boiling curdles her blood into a white paste. It collects in the rivets of her meat. Here at the table sit four skeletons: two alive, two steaming. Two pumping red, two with blood congealed like cold butter.

Here are the bones of the family, one mother and one daughter. Here are the bones of the table, four legs with the middle pulled out for the occasion. The bones of the house, built on a hill, one floor and an overhanging loft, two wooden beams running above the living room, fireplace unkindled for the summer, screened-in back porch. The bones of the island South-to-North: *in*, sunken heart, *out*. Nine miles holds it all.

A year later, Mother will sell the house and a new family will gut the kitchen. Mother will replace her knee. Zeek's Creek will flood, all the pictures lost. Seven years from this lobster dinner, Mother and Daughter will each live in a body made entirely of new cells. Seven years from this lobster dinner, Daughter will ache to shed all of herself, to rupture at the hinge between torso and hips and crawl out. Here is Daughter's body, heading towards danger. Here are Mother's bones, silently leaching calcium. Here are Mother's bones, growing porous, as if preparing for flight. If she holds her tailbone above her head, will light filter through? Will water?

Here at the table, Mother and Daughter begin with the lobster's eight walking legs. They tear each at the knuckle and suck. They pull on the lever of the claw and twist the tail from the thorax. They say *more potato chips!* and bring over the bag. They are gluttons, finish everything, gnaw the corn bare, smile satisfied, the mixing bowl full of red husks. Butter and lemon stream into the divets of their elbows, collect into butter-and-lemon estuaries. Here, on this island town, in this house, one mother and one daughter lick their barbarian wounds and love each other.



In the car, mom tells me about her bones — the scans are back, and the verdict is so clear you can see right through it. She is filled with holes. To me, she looks as she always has, driving down I-95. Her elbows are cocked at the steering wheel, the tendon in her left arm pushes to the surface every time she flicks the turn signal, just like the tendon under her knee each time she presses on the brake. Her shoulder blades hold together, their soft hills reaching toward her ears, resolute and still. Her silver bracelets ring as she shifts lanes.

All of this scaffolding, from my view in the passenger's seat, doesn't give away any of its degradation. Her body has remained nearly the same my whole life. Although in photographs her hair is shorter and her skin is tighter then looser over her sternum, for all twenty-one years, this is the body that occupies every one of my memories. Lean, muscled calves, sunspots on the bridge of her nose, and one knee that causes her to limp after long periods of sitting. In many of these memories, framed from the top of the stairs where I stand in my pajamas, I watch this body enter through our front door in the early morning, returning from a walk along the beach at sunrise, and oftentimes wet with the ocean she could not resist entering.

What else is a body but a machine, oiled by the knowledge of the essential tension between *grasp* and *yield*. I imagine her body bent over the garden beds, plucking cherry tomatoes from the vine. Then, the implosion that comes when her hands forget themselves. Her thumb and pointer finger pinch down around the skin of the small tomato, and there is no yield at all. Her first failing erupts: an empty red membrane, leaking gel and seed. No tomatoes with dinner.

TRACE FOSSIL: On Interstate 95, one mother and one daughter sit side by side, swaddled in a machine hurdling them forward at eighty miles per hour over pot-holed pavement. Neither acknowledge the

smell of oil, burning under the hood. Mother dodges a small crater, swerving into the left lane without checking her rearview, and assures Daughter: *I've begun fermenting my own yogurt. The doctor has me on 10,000 units of vitamin D3 per day. I'm starting a routine of weight-bearing exercises.* Daughter tries to transform her disturbance into nonchalance before it catches in the air, a task much like culturing a saucepan of thin, tepid milk into labneh. Daughter spoons out the best she can do: *It's not true what they say about dairy and calcium, you know.* They can both hear the holes in Daughter's performance but she keeps going. *There's no rationale for drinking the milk of another species, unless you're also a calf trying to grow into a cow.* Mother misses the exit off I-95. She takes the next and doubles back through the city, swollen with traffic.

Mom's face is lit red by a ream of tail lights that stretch on for three intersections in front of us. Cars drive through green lights before there is room to accommodate their arrival on the other side, choking the crossing and pulling honks from the perpendicular street. Each insists on their own urgency, toward or away from home.

The setback will add twenty minutes to our trip if not more, but neither of us acknowledge her directional transgression. Under different circumstances I might capitalize on mom's mistake, take my head down against the glove compartment and groan, hoping for an unnecessary apology and the glee that comes from, momentarily, withholding forgiveness. Instead, I say, quietly and cruelly: *You know, one study that tracked hip fractures and dairy consumption found that drinking too much milk can actually leach calcium from your bones. Those doctors are working for the dairy industry, not for you.*

I fix my eyes on the intersection ahead. If I look at her, mom might begin to perforate right there in the driver's seat, just as any memory, dreamt or imagined, can remain real until you search for the photograph and find it missing; just as any memory can remain real until you look at the photograph and find one formerly certain detail out of place — the charred patch of carpet beside the

Christmas tree, the pink dress she wore to her wedding. Is it possible for a photograph to shift over time, as drying ligaments have been observed to do in the grave? The photograph falters, the body fills with holes. I keep my eyes on the road. I clench every muscle, trying to hold time still inside of me.

TRACE FOSSIL: The Nature Lab at the Rhode Island School of Design is thirty-five minutes up I-95 from Mother's house, fifty-five with a missed exit. The Lab consists of two rooms, each with floor-to-ceiling glass cases on all four walls. In each of the cases, there are hundreds of specimens: preserved insects, mammals, birds, and reptiles. The collection exists for the illustration students at the college to take out on loan, to learn their way around the contours of a marmoset skeleton, or the gradations of a white admiral butterfly's wings. There are drawers of whale vertebrae, a taxidermied puffer fish hanging from the ceiling, massive stag beetles, a shelf of skulls: coyote, pygmy hedgehog, platypus, red fox. Ears of taxidermied deer cup the air. There are mounds of paws, stacked like rubble. When Mother and Daughter arrive, they both stand in the center of the first room, stunned by mere accumulation, the brute weight of body matter. Mother ventures to a drawer, pulls out the vertebrae of a dwarf sperm whale and holds it with two palms. She raises it to her right eye like a telescope, watching Daughter through the center hole, where the spinal cord once held everything together. She wonders at the case of arthropods. She runs a finger over their slick, mounded shells. She crouches beside the skeleton of a marmoset and looks into its sockets. Daughter can't seem to venture beyond the tank of seahorses by the window, the only live animals in the room, sucking up tiny pellets of dinner.

A few weeks ago, its relevance not yet known to me, I came across an article: "Bone-derived hormone reverses age-related memory loss in mice." It reported: When researchers at Columbia University gave old mice infusions of osteocalcin, a hormone in the bones that decreases with age, the mice with increased levels of osteocalcin performed on memory tests with unprecedented success. This

outcome, scientists conclude, suggests a never-before demonstrated bone-mind connection. In other words, the old mouse, finding her way through the maze with a speed and accuracy barely achieved by her junior, is a body propelled by everything the bones can remember.

The condition responsible for mom's bones — porous, losing density, inching toward inevitable fracture — is profoundly common. *Especially in post-menopausal women with the right genetic predisposition*, she recites. As the seahorses suck on the surface of the water, their tails unfurling over and over to keep them in place, I remember the article with dread. The findings that, when inverted, conclude that as bones lose mass, so do the memories they contain. Was the missed exit the first in a series of forgotten gestures? Those movements imprinted into each of our physical lexicons that allow us to forget the names of streets, but still know the way there. That allows us to harvest a tomato, gentle enough to keep it intact, firm enough to pull the vine from its navel.

I think of the things that I already can't remember, but can only feel, dimly inside of me. Some memories are too amorphous to ever be held in their complete form, as one might wrap two hands around a whale vertebrae, or count the pearls on a butterfly wing. Some memories are not really memories at all, but familiar sensations. This is, in many ways, a relief. This, in many ways, horrifies me. Ironic, how many times I have asked to forget everything. Sometimes I do. But only in the way that vomit, covered over with rice, temporarily stops smelling like vomit. Or in the way that a decayed molar is caulked, the pain filled in with silver.

More often these memories exist in a series of disconnected images, that I can only intuit as belonging together in some obliterated chronology. No hard copies exist. There are no exact figures, no time-stamp in the bottom left corner. Still, I can see the lamp shade, pleated and yellow with small blue roses painted around the rim, as his hand reaches up under it, to take all the light out of the room.

I hear his hip socket click like a soda can, as he opens himself into me. I see, as if through water, a jar of parsley, violently out of place, on top of the dresser. I feel the sheets rub, synthetic and cloying, against my back. I smell them, the dried sweat of someone I don't know. Everything happens inside of a mouth. Sometimes I can't remember anything at all; sometimes I lie down on an exam table, and when the doctor places a hand on my belly, I begin to rattle.

When asked for testimony, a remembrance to be entered into one single record, a truth impossibly solid in its conviction, there were only these remnants: *there was a lamp, painted blue violets, there was a jar of parsley, I vomited on the floor and covered it with rice, a pop like a can of cold ginger ale but no sweetness at all, I don't know what he said or what I said or why I didn't say what I should have said, but the sheets did not smell like mine.* How could such a testimony resist the relief of these voids?

I wonder if mom has memories like this. I wonder what she looks forward to losing. I wonder if her body, too, can feel like a chasm — a place the light cannot breach, a place she can only grasp around inside of and touch the shapes of things. Perhaps forgetting is the only way to continue living inside ourselves. We can't walk around forever with open wounds on our knees. We can't continue to collect without letting go. And as the body grows weaker, it's only right to surrender some of its weight.

Still, I don't know if it's possible to lose what you most want to forget. As many times as I have tried to wash them away, the lampshade, the sheets, and the click of his hip persist in the places they were etched. Certain photographs are impervious to flood. These are the marks of a haunting, these are the footprints that do not corrode. I long to remember and to forget everything. I long for complete testimony, and I long for dissolution. If there was a room that contained every moment of our lives,

accumulated and preserved as perfectly as two hundred butterfly wings behind glass, could we bear to enter? Could we resist?

Mom slides the whale vertebrae back into the drawer and meets me by the seahorse tank. *I'm hungry*, she says. I am too. We leave the room of bones and drive South, faster than we came. I feel a slipping sensation from every surface of me, down my arms and legs, out of my nose and my ears and my mouth, like blood or oil, something slipping that I never knew I was holding still. Like skin over bone, I cannot wipe the feeling away.



The lobster spends her entire life preparing, undergoing, and recovering from ecdysis, derived from the Greek word *ekdysis*, which literally means *getting out*. The act is detailed in *Herodotus* as such: “The male viper dies in the described manner, but the female suffers retribution in turn for the male: the young, avenging him while still in the womb, eat through the mother, gnawing through her viscera [to make their way out].” In the case of the lobster, she is both her young and her mother. Once her shell cannot accommodate her size — which, in her first five years of life might happen twenty-five times over — she prepares to make her escape. For weeks she stores up calcium in the gastroliths on either side of her stomach wall. She builds a new self inside her shell, a soon-to-be exoskeleton that mirrors the old one but is created of new matter. When it is time, she forces her inner shell to swell by filling herself with water. The pressure causes the membrane between carapace and abdomen to split. She ruptures. One ecstatic moment of reincarnation, then six to eight weeks of hiding. A newly molted lobster, hiding in her den, will eat the shell she just escaped for the strength of her new body. She simultaneously destroys and reifies what is lost, a concurrent exhale and inhale, annihilation and fortification.

To yield to *the soft animal of your body* is to enter a new ocean entirely. Soft bodied lobsters are easy prey. They may be eaten by hard bodied lobsters, unable to defend themselves against such inviolable skin. For the first few weeks, after she breaks free of her old hard body, this exoskeleton will bend, pucker to touch. With each escape comes exposure where there was once an impenetrable shell, the soft lobster stripped naked in front of the predatory sea where there was once the promise of safety.

Only after molting can the female lobster mate. She is entirely tender; her partner must be careful not to tear her soft body in the process. Miraculously, it is unprecedented for a male lobster to eat a female who comes naked to the door of his den. We say *miraculously* because of course we know

how the system of vulnerability and consumption ticks forward as inevitably as time. But his desire to reproduce himself outweighs his hunger, and soon her pleopods thicken with dark, green eggs. Her underside blossoms tightly like a field of blackberries. Only now will she take a respite from the constant cycle of gnawing out and regrowing, softening and hardening, the rhythm of her life suspended above her pregnant body. She carries her eggs for twelve months and then, once she has claimed a burrow in warm, shallow waters, prepares to set them free. She might release 20,000 eggs when she is ready, but only a few will survive past the planktonic larvae stage, their tiny juvenile bodies prone to predation by eels, wolffish, and ocean pout.

*TRACE FOSSIL: DAUGHTER, SOFT SHELL, IN THE
BEDROOM*

And there is Daughter in the bedroom like a newly molted lobster out of hiding. How many times has she told this story and somehow it never comes out the same way. Sometimes she says, *There I was, as soft as a mango left to ripen on a sunlit window sill. There I was, like a large, coiled child.* In any case, there she is. In any case, there is her soft, animal body. And there he is like a lobster on the precipice of molt, his armor bearing insurmountable weight, filled with seawater. He never enters through any doorway, but simply appears and the memory goes porous in the corner-most chair,

where his hands his thighs.

purple lights shimmy overhead like sun on the skin of the ocean

he watches, waits for her to get drunk enough.

She sucks it all in, belly, neck

and never any deciding.

This is the simple war of hard body and soft body and which inevitably will win.

TRACE FOSSIL: DAUGHTER GNAWS IT CLEAN

It is late August, Daughter's twenty-first birthday. The air beads with water, her bones bloat under her skin. At dinner, Mother and Daughter order the goat ribs. Daughter's boyfriend orders a full mackerel. The fish's head arrives on a pillow of labneh and black quinoa. When the waitress offers him a filet knife, he takes it in his left hand. He looks down at the fish, packed with skeleton, as if waiting for his plate to liquefy, her body to reanimate, to swim away and leave him hungry in his seat. Boyfriend and mackerel stare at each other, paralyzed by the sum of the other's intactness. They stay this way until Mother and Daughter have gnawed the goat away and arranged each bone around the perimeter of their plates. Even with every power invested in his blade, he can't, God bless him, so much as cleave her spine. That night, Daughter falls asleep beside him, steeped in relief.

TRACE FOSSIL: DAUGHTER, HARDENING, LONGS TO BREACH

She tries to crack herself open in the shower, to loosen her encasing, to slide out. The shower head is too weak. There she is the same, her body hard and naked and droning in the bathroom mirror. For the third and fourth time she washes, scrubbing with the long-handled horse hair brush and Mother's lavender-thyme soap. *Here, are his hands around the thorax of a lobster*, she writes three days later, still in the same body.

Here, she writes, here here here,

there, undulating as if through water,

glass of parsley atop a wooden dresser.

like Mother always kept on the windowsill. How strange to find a glass of parsley on the seafloor. No, the bedroom. No, the bloody deck of a boat, and Daughter the slayed flounder.

parsley wilts as it would without a windowsill
water yellows around stems

, it is but not quite dead

raised letters on the jar don't signify,

and there is no sunlight thus no glint off the glass.

when her soft shell crumples like an old sweater around her shoulders, then shatters, like a jar of parsley would, knocked from a windowsill.

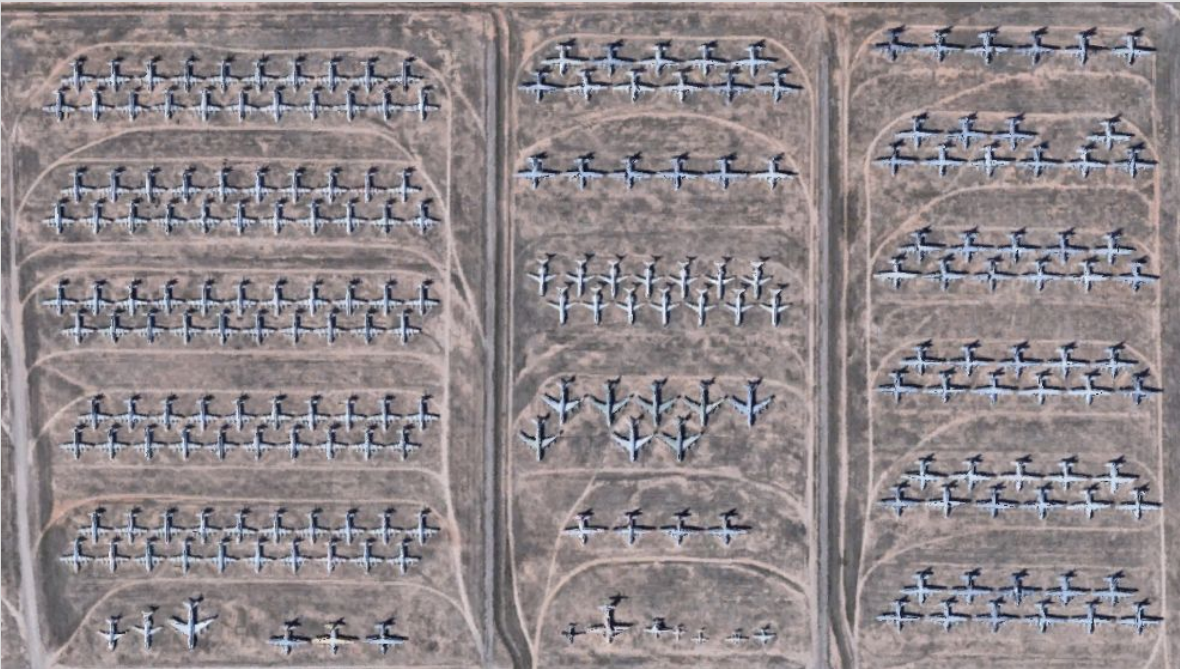
Daughter tells Mother about her desire to rupture like the lobster and Mother tells Daughter that every seven years their cells will have completely regenerated themselves. *We will be made of entirely new matter*, she says. This is not enough for Daughter. She wants to breach her body, ecstatically, and swim away. She wants to fill with water and erupt the membrane between her torso and hips. She wants to gestate

herself in herself again and again, getting farther away from her body each time. She wants to transform so completely that she becomes a new species: *Hardshell*. There she is, trembling girl, rattling bones. Not crustacean though she longs to be. What she remembers most is the way her hips ached in the morning. When memory fills with holes, what the bones know. These are the furrows carved by the sea floor. These are the furrows she left in the silt. These are the trace fossils, all that is left. Here is the salt water between skeleton and meat. Daughter hears it echo in waves and prays for it to flood out, as water does in the warm hours before birth.

I am standing in front of the lobster tank at Zeek's Creek, the holy-place for any bait and tackle necessity or desire that might arise while inhabiting or visiting or passing through (the sagging heart of) the island of Jamestown. The sagging heart, down which *TRACE: Daughter traipsed during science class, twice per week during the spring of sixth grade, to collect water and soil samples.* As I look out the window and over to the opposite side of North Road, a hoard of eleven-year-olds in waders form a line in the margin, one awkward rubber creature brandishing plastic buckets. Each approaching car veers across the yellow lines, offering a wide berth to account for any sudden movements. *TRACE: Daughter's nipples had just broken ground, but in the waders they could have dug a hole and it wouldn't have mattered. She was grateful for the reprieve of the rubber shell, that smoothed all of the pockmarks of her body, that made her into one sexless sheath.*

The lobsters look sedated in the tank. Their claws are rubber-banded. Their bodies, competing for shade, form one conglomerate mass that trembles thinly from outside the glass, as light and water filter through. Water, more and more. *TRACE: Daughter wished the lobster would leave a shell behind for her to crawl inside of, where finally she would make a home of her body.* The mega-lobster looks back at me, her vision propelled not by refraction (like human eyes), but by reflection, which can take in one hundred and eighty degrees at once: the entrance of Zeek's, my body (bent rudely forward), all the way to the wall where the photographs used to hang (now barren), each moment wider than any human moment, each still-frame of memory elongated. *TRACE: Water, like hunger, swells without end.* I stand outside the lobster tank. They look back at me, and wait for the water to swallow my sagging heart whole.





In May of 1946, the first batch of airplanes, over 600 B-29 Superfortresses and 200 C-47 Skytrains, were laid to rest in the custody of the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group, located in Tucson, Arizona, on the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, popularly known as The Boneyard. Today, it is the largest airplane boneyard in the world. This is due primarily to the dry climate, with low humidity, scant annual rainfall, and hard alkaline soil, which allows the planes to be preserved for cannibalization or reuse.

When each airplane arrives at The Boneyard, it is either disassembled or embalmed. If selected for the latter, the fuel system is drained and refilled with oil, and the husk is washed and sprayed with a vinyl plastic compound to guard against dust and sunlight. This cleansing is especially thorough for aircrafts that have served the country in wet, salty areas, as any brine that remains on the skeleton can cause corrosion beyond salvation. Dry soil alone cannot reverse what has been done by the ocean.

Aluminum and magnesium, the two metals best suited for airplane construction, are also those most susceptible to corrosion. And ocean is not the only culprit — countless other categories exist: dissimilar metal corrosion, intergranular corrosion, stress corrosion (to which clevis pin joints and shrink fits are especially prone), fretting corrosion, general, pitting, and crevice corrosion, and more, too many potential threats to name. Battery acid, rising temperatures, sloppy welding, mold, resting for too long at the coast, all these origins from which the machine, slowly, begins to forget itself.

The desert climate of Tucson not only offers protection against deterioration, but is necessary to support the weight of over 4,400 aircrafts, each up to 100,000 pounds of limp metal mass bearing down against the earth. A ground with any more water would bow under the pressure.

For safety, all explosive charges and ejection systems must be disarmed. Corpses, of course, cannot fight back. Fossilization requires stasis. Even as a monument, you concede power: submit to whoever chooses to hold you, to climb inside your cavity, to make out of you a symbol. Since planes are built for flight, each is lashed to the ground with cables. Without such a forcible laying down, unwanted take-offs have been known to occur. Perhaps this is not so much the corpse *fighting back*, as it is the nature of machine. The skeleton is formed in intentional degrees. Air slips off the curved face of the wing and catches under the bottom. The basin of the pelvis swings on the ball-and-socket of the hip; the pendulum of the leg steps forward. For a time, such cogs continue to turn toward their original purpose.

Researchers have observed that human remains often shift position, without external force, in the process of decomposition. As the ligaments dry out, the arms drift upwards.

In aerial shots of The Boneyard, the planes are aligned in vertebrae-perfect rows. With the edges of their wings touching, they appear to reach for each other, hold hands.

If the aircraft is disassembled, its parts may be deployed to create a new machine, or replace an injured limb of a warplane in service. Adapting technology grants the aging plane a new shell. Fighter jets become aerial target drones. Sometimes it's a knee replacement, sometimes it's a full molt. A single cannibalized body might yield over 43,000 pounds of viable aluminum. As the scrapped propellers of ninety B-36 bombers wait in line to be reallocated, they form one giant aluminum spine.

Two possibilities for the expired body: One, once the whole can no longer sustain mobility, its disparate parts are each set to a new use, conceding their ego for the thrill of second flight. Two, the body lives on in totality, a vinyl medicated husk strapped to the earth, a gloriously stiff body on the mountain.

Certain planes are, of course, destined for preservation. Before being transferred to the National Museum of the United States Airforce in Dayton, Ohio, one resident of The Boneyard was Bockscar, the plane that dropped the second atomic bomb over Japan. Its nose is painted with a cartoon of a winged railroad car flying above a cloud of smoke labeled, *Nagasaki*. The fossil of Bockscar, the B-29 bomber with every power invested in its belly, that hovered over Nagasaki in that cruel August noon, will remain gently oiled for the rest of human time.

In the National Museum of the United States Airforce, Bockscar is guarded by a perimeter of white painted metal railings. The aircraft menaces indoors. The spot lights catch its slick, seal-like body from behind. Its nose points upward, as if preparing for an even greater mission. Bockscar's toe tag reads:

Dropped the Fat Man atomic bomb on Nagasaki on Aug. 9, 1945, three days after the atomic attack against Hiroshima.

Maximum speed: 357 mph.

Weight: 133,500 lbs. maximum.

*Eight .50-cal. machine guns in remote controlled turrets plus
two .50-cal. machine guns and
one 20mm cannon in tail;*

20,000 lbs. of bombs.

Interested tourists can buy tickets to tour The Boneyard's "Celebrity Row," a mass grave of iconic mothballed aircrafts — where Bockscar once stood — that currently includes the F-100 Super Sabre, the country's first aircraft designed to break the sound barrier.

Occasionally, entire retired warplanes are resurrected and redeployed. One B-52 bomber was recently called into duty after years in storage. Over the course of four months, a team of twenty employees of the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group restored the plane's engines, rear landing gears, ejection seats, fuel cells, tires, and hoses, in a reincarnation effort of cryogenic proportions.

Some reincarnate machines become currency between the country and its allies. A transaction: six helicopters take flight out of Tucson, and head for Greece.

Many noses and cockpits are inscribed with nicknames, or messages from their final pilots, like *Ghost Rider* or, *thank you for your service ol' girl*. In the cockpit of the recently resuscitated B-52, called *Wise Guy*, one message reads: *a cold warrior that stood sentinel over America from the darkest days of the Cold War to the global fight against terror. Take good care of her... until we need her again.*

The singular sawed off airplane limb, the scrawled message, or the prestigious body swathed in vinyl, cannot alone preserve this history. If we are to call Bockscar a fossil of *man* or *war* or *excess* or *fear* or *triumph*, the evidence rests in the number of machines built for the same purpose, with muscles trained to perform the same act. It is never just one daughter or one mother, but the enumeration of skeletons with these names. One morning, Daughter wakes in the desert. Every morning, a daughter wakes in the desert. In cavities dug across the earth, Daughter lies among the rubble of daughters, all with soft shells torn, hips aching. In every town along the East Coast, the same daughters and mothers wrench lobsters from the sea when they are hungry. They feed and feed and feed without remorse. The archaeologist, cupping a lone corroded socket in his palm, doesn't yet understand. It is not the headstone but the aerial view — Can you see it from the window seat? Can you see it from space? — thousands of aluminum bones huddled in the desert, in the ocean, in a steel mixing bowl, that together chronicle a lineage of carnage. Like every mass grave, the memory exists in accumulation.



For three teenage summers, mom worked at the Robinson's Wharf lobster pound in the town of Southport, population: 606, part of Lincoln County in Maine, the state formally nicknamed: Vacationland. June through August, from her seat at the takeout window, mom listened for the call: *Table 6 needs Lobster Assistance*. Waiting for her at *Table 6* would be a set of newlyweds or a family from the middle of the country, somewhere with no rise or sink or sway, so landlocked they had never seen a lobster let alone tried to take one apart. All day long mom, Lobster Assistant, would take off down the dock to help *table 6* — or 7, or 8, or 9 — dismantle the body, right there at the table.

She was sixteen, and then seventeen, and her instructions were thick with Maine accent. She could move the meat from shell to butter in under three minutes. Some diners let her do it for them, but most wanted to learn, if only to spend a little longer with the girl from farther North, whose every R stretched into an even wider yawn than those of the fishermen who filled the harbor below. Like uncertain children in their lobster bibs, they asked again just to hear her say it: *Don't be afraid to let ya lobster tail soak a little longab in the buttah*. Glistening hands held out at their sides, they stared up at her, having never seen a specimen as calloused, and beautiful, and entirely non-rhotic.

Aside from her local upbringing, mom's expertise grew out of her other job at the pound. Most days, she arrived hours before the pound opened to salvage the flesh from a heap of severed claws and imperfect bodies, from those lobsters deemed unsuitable for whole consumption. The miscellaneous pieces, each formerly an essential part of the lobster's body, a body with a one in 1,000 chance of survival from the moment it was shaken from its mother's underbelly, a body that faced mortality with every molt, would finally be combined in light mayonnaise on a hot, buttered bun, the body made untraceable, reduced to brute weight.

With mom's guidance, the lobsters were disassembled each morning and the bibbed tourists not only extracted the bounty of their tail meat, but reckoned with its accompanying queasy substances. The digestive vein, the roe, the tomalley (the pancreas, a green pasty substance) — well, they're either a delicacy or poisonous depending on who you ask, mom would say.

If your particular lobster ingested an infected bivalve during its life, eating the pancreas could give you paralytic shellfish poisoning, she told me years later. I made a ritual of hiding it in my napkin, or under a pile of potato chips limp with melted butter. I received this and other lobster advice for free, sans Maine accent, which was tempered by a liberal arts education and years of teaching yoga in Rhode Island, The Ocean State, the state true to its title. Under mom's tutelage I learned to handle my own hard shell before the age of six. The joy of twisting off each walking leg one by one, drawing out the meat with my tongue. Then the claws, knuckles. The sweetest inside the flippers. And of course the tail, which she taught me to pry open at the seam where tail connects to thorax, the former site of the lobster's escape.

You can distinguish a hard shell from a soft shell, mom said, by the scars on her underside. Who has spent the longest roaming the seafloor in her body? The answer is carved into the bone.



A lobster's teeth are located in her stomach, her brain in her throat, and taste receptors in her feet. Her shell is light and flexible but strong, composed of approximately twelve long chains of chitin and covered in a thin layer of protein, through which tiny pores transport nutrients and minerals. Eight pereopods, four on each side, thorax, uropods, crusher claw, pincer claw, all will blossom into themselves again and again, over twenty-five times before a lobster's fifth year.

The extraordinary technology of her body began to develop no later than the Paleozoic era, though the oldest known fossil is only 120 million years old, a relic from the Cretaceous period that was discovered in the mud of Chiapas, in Mexico. Her evolution into a family of nearly thirty species, seventy-five if you count spiny or rock lobsters, has bridged several continents. While the American lobster was most familiar to mom's tourists at Robinson's Wharf, there are yet many others: *Homarus gammarus*, European lobster; *Metanephrops*, or scampi, *Metanephrops mozambicus*, *Metanephrops australiensis*, *Metanephrops japonicus*; *Thaumastochelidae*, a family of deep-sea lobsters distinguished by their blindness.

Once named *cockroach of the sea*, the American lobster was formerly a symbol of poverty and destitution. Their meat was foisted off on prisoners and servants. Working Maine families swallowed the embarrassment of sending their children to school with lobster sandwiches. Soldiers ate it by the can in the trenches, when there was nothing else left. By the mid-nineteenth century, lobster had graduated to the salad bars of cheap restaurants. Eventually, in American dream fashion, rebranded by railroad dining cars who preyed on the ignorance of their non-coastal travelers, the lobster's lack of rationing restrictions during World War II, and the appetites of 1950's movie stars, the lobster ascended to bibbed delicacy.

This was never included in mom's spiel on the docks of Robinson's Wharf. It was fragile enough running public relations for the lobster's pancreas. Private coaching from a teenager who sounded like she, too, had just been pulled from the Maine waters, sold the sense of royalty, of alien, and of natural, carnal order simultaneously. Mom would not tell the inland tourists how nineteenth-century cooks discovered the culinary advantages of keeping the lobster alive right up until

boil. Instead, she looked down into eight eyes, two pairs human, two pairs boiled, and began her instructions: first, the eight walking legs, then the claws, just like a lever, the knuckles, yes, more lemon in the butter dish...

And quietly, all the history held inside her single, red body disassembled. Her mother, and her mother before her: husks in a steel pail.



When mom was twenty-eight, seven years older than I am now, she stood in line at the city hall of Portland, Maine, wearing a pink mini dress and waiting to marry the man who would become her first husband. There is an image of them, seated on a lacquered wooden pew, the pink mini dress creeping up to the bow of her groin. The photograph is tucked into a massive album that contains every picture of mom between the ages of twenty and forty, until the year she gave birth to me and subsequently began a new album.

Having recently entered my twenty-first year and thus the alleged golden era of my own photo album, I ask mom to bring her twenty-through-forty archive when she comes to visit me in Tivoli, a village in Dutchess County, five minutes from my college, in the state of New York, The Empire State, a four hour drive from the island of Jamestown, Rhode Island. We sit on my front porch together as I thumb through it, searching for the wedding photo.

I slow when I reach the first photograph of him. They are standing in front of what could only be my grandparent's book case, stacked with political memoirs and birding guides, a tiara on his head and a kazoo lolling like a cigarette under his mustache. There are a few, amber flushed images from the same New Year's Eve. They were taken at Strawberry Meadows, the house where mom grew up, she tells me when I ask. Then, it's the new year. The pair of them round a bend on cross-country skis, then collapse in the snow, skis and poles abandoned against a bare maple; his arm curls around her shoulder, they laugh with deep open mouths and heads thrown back against a wood panelled wall; he feeds ducks off a dock on Rangeley Lake; they string their underwear up to dry on twine over their campsite; their house is laminate-floored and increasingly cluttered, tomato sauce residue in a glass jar, an orange cat coiled in the foreground, and a braided rug I recognize, covered in orange fur.

But still, no imprint of the pink mini dress, no lacquered bench, no city hall, all the bones of the memory missing. Then I turn the page, and he is gone. She is alone for a while, spread eagle on a burnt mesa in Arizona. She's in a red windbreaker, her hair growing gracefully out of its pixie. Her whole family gathers around a mincemeat pie full of candles. All of them are wearing bird hats — chicken, flamingo, penguin, crow — for my grandfather's birthday. Then, it's her birthday, in new wire-rimmed glasses and a new apartment. She's with her sister, backbending on a stretch of wet sand, a frisbee hanging on her knee.

Soon another man replaces him. This man has a young daughter, who also lives in the album. I flip the page, and watch her play cello in her bedroom, watch soap steeply her hair in the bathtub, watch her tug a canoe full of firewood from the water — mom presumably helping from the back, just out of frame. This canoe trip produced more images of his daughter than of him: her, struggling out of a sweatshirt, the contours of her face pressing through gray jersey; her, zipped into a purple life-jacket with a stuffed bear zipped in too, its head nestling her chin. In each picture of his daughter, I see one of myself, in albums elsewhere, those familiar records through which I have come to know me in other, unremembered versions: me, playing violin; me, with a rubber blowfish in the bathtub; me, camping, wrapped in three colors of blue fleece. She, mom's first daughter, my predecessor.

In the last two pictures before he left mom and moved to Alaska and took his daughter with him, all three of them pose around a small boulder. They are upright in the first photograph, mom and daughter sitting atop it, him standing behind. In the second, they collapse: he sinks down to sit in the sand, his back against the rock, and mom lies on top of it, face up, extremities limp, as if slayed. The temporal limbo held in the image, forever teetering on the precipice of heartbreak, only augments its beauty.

When I come to the end of the album without any glimpse of the pink mini dress, I ask mom about it. Was it relocated to an album of its own, like the film from her second wedding? Mom takes the twenty-through-forty archive from my lap and flips through it, before pulling out the photograph of her first wedding: she is in a lace jumper and a wide-brimmed sun-hat, in the backyard of her childhood home that they all called Strawberry Meadows, her father next to her on crutches after his snowmobile accident. I must have misremembered the memory, she says, the image that I can still recall as if it is my own. Or a dream, or a fantasy fashioned into reality, or a derivation of some other memory, she laughs, never would have worn that to her own wedding are you joking. The singular mom beside me forms a plural. And my heart sags, silently, like the center of Jamestown, where the floorboards of Zeek's Creek have turned to concrete, and I'm not sure if they were ever wooden to begin with. But there she is, still, or there she never was, seated beside him, city hall empty except for their single pew, leaning over to someone off camera, to someone unpreserved by the image, orange peels of sun cast across her pink mini dress, the gaudy made clever in the morning light.

*TRACE FOSSIL: MOTHER, ON HONEYMOON, WONDERS
WHERE SHE WENT*

On a cherry or blood red Volvo with legs all denim

fork stands vertical in a wedge of leftover wedding cake, like a
tiny plastic monument, or a soldier, up to his ankles in the mud

She is not hungry, for once,

will it always be this way?

yes, a wife knows how to tuck it under
the waistband

a week since they cut it open, but still two tiers left of marbled
sponge; a week since but still she doesn't look like a wife

wind pulls her hair across her forehead
it sticks, like a girl's would if . She swallows

the lighthouse yields

He is behind the camera, filling the image like fog.

*TRACE FOSSIL: MOTHER, ELSEWHERE, IN PINK MINI
DRESS*

Rayon collects in the ravine of her
groin, a crease in the earth with lips to match. City hall is a dry escape
from summer, of many:

the Florida everglades, the first man she will marry.

elbow on his knee, she leans over him
someone off camera. pink-lips parted in silent response

he looks longingly but will not reel her back in. Let the
fish come to you, they always say — first, the fat worm, then, the steel
hook.

each in turn say, yes
to no one, or where, or ceremony.

All of the pews except one lacquer and sweat licked oak.

Beside her, his body is all water, a slim male form unfilled, refillable.



TRACE FOSSIL: DAUGHTER IMAGINES HERSELF AS THE LOBSTER

I spend my entire life preparing, undergoing, and recovering from ecdysis. I am a lobster and have not read Herodotus, so I don't call myself mother nor young. I don't call myself anything, I only experience what is constructed and destroyed by the simple mechanization of my body. After my old body ends, I eat the skeleton I have just escaped. I know I have not died because I am still animate, still reaching for survival in so much as I know to keep eating. When I eat my bones, they are broken down into disparate elements and repurposed. A tail, a severed claw. I process calcium and reallocate it to my new shell, my former body transforms into brute weight.

On the day of Lobster Dinner, Mother and Daughter stand outside of my tank, covered in sand that is still swollen with ocean. Do I (the lobster) mistake them for shoreline? No, they are neither still nor safe. I (the lobster) know the discerning squint, the gaze of choice that enters and leaves only as another body is removed from this pretend ocean. Their image blisters through the soft muddle of the water. Do I (the lobster) compare the grip of their forefinger and thumb to my claws? That is to say, that our bodies can go by the same name, *bodies*.

Can I imagine any other body than this? Do I envy the constant softness of their skin? Do I recognize Daughter as distinct from Mother? That is to say, that Mother gave birth to Daughter, a self giving birth to another self in the bathtub — in the bedroom — in a pale, sterile chamber. Yes, the lobster briefly considers her own birth, that thick field of blackberries. And the quake that sent her, alone, into the ocean.

Do I recognize these likenesses and chasms between us? Claws to hands, skin to shell, local to local, predator to prey, water to land. I am the lobster who was shaken from my Mother's underside so early and soon became my own Mother. I have alone hidden my soft shell from ocean pout, have alone shed my shell, in seconds have given and then received birth.

This continual process of eating and building and eating is called remembering. The shell we call ourselves, the glowing body, is made through continual re-consumption. We eat what we can excavate from the archive, called the past, called our personal history, as if it were one stable skeleton, that was born and never moves. We swallow, and we are retold to ourselves by ourselves. Each time we disassemble and reassemble, the scaffolding of our body is impermanently changed. We eat and swallow and eat and swallow and digest. The memory disperses and hardens as calcium, each reallocation reinforcing the integrity of our current bodies, as we know them, our existing outerselves. And this is the simple mechanization of our lives, the brilliant mechanization, until we die.

On the Southeast end of Jamestown, just past Blueberry Lane where everyone learns to drive, an old artillery fort lines the edge of the island, and beyond it the land breaks into granite cliffs, and then water. Then more, and more, and more water, increasing in salinity as it turns into the Atlantic. Fort Wetherill, as it's now named, sits on the East passage of Narragansett Bay, across from Fort Adams on the other side. Today, Fort Wetherill is best known from the Wes Anderson film, *Moonrise Kingdom*, where a young boy and girl set up camp in one of its coves, dance to “Le temps de l’amour,” and kiss in white cotton briefs. While one cove tucked below the fort made it into the scene, the historic stretch of concrete itself — a complex of underground tunnels, barracks, stairs to nowhere, and stadium-like concentric circles, all quilted in graffiti — did not. The fort has been neither demolished nor preserved, but simply left, hanging at the edge of the island, turned over to the whims of local teenagers who make use of its dark spaces and tall cliffs.

Part of the site belonged to the former Fort Dumpling, where eight guns guarded the shoreline during the Revolutionary War, which was occupied in bouts by American, French, and British forces. Fort Wetherill was eventually built on top of Dumpling and expanded onto additional land purchased by the government at the turn of the twentieth century. Operations ran through both World Wars, when the fort was garrisoned by various companies of the National Guard, used briefly for German prisoners of war, then briefly for submarine mining, before being abandoned for a quarter century, then acquired as a national park.

To grow up on the island called Jamestown is to know your way to the darkest, most undiscoverable corner of the fort, and to the sharpest and clearest cliff, that juts out, jaw-like over the bay. And to know the second and third best, in case someone beats you to the first. Such a geography

is only available by the mouths of island-raised kids, fishermen, or scuba divers, who frequent the fort's surrounding coves.

In July and August, these island-raised kids pedal toward the best cliff in droves. There, they evade the tourists who suck up the beaches, and the eyes of every local who might report back to their parents. There they pedal, in squawking groups of five or seven or nine, with furious knees, moving South and then East. When they reach the fort, they turn away from the main entrance, away from the public restrooms, and pedal up and around a steep bend lined with signs that plead: *DIVING FROM ROCKS PROHIBITED*. At the top, they dismount their bikes and move on foot down into the rosehip bushes, towards the bay. The brush breaks open into a clearing that is barely big enough for all of them. A few feet ahead, the ground drops down sixty feet toward the bay's blue, lapping tongue. Sunbathers below are the size of salt shakers atop flat rocks that taper out on either side of the cliff. If the squadron of jumpers are lucky that day, they'll be joined by a few scuba divers, who can confirm a clear path under the surface.

All five, seven, or nine bodies need to leave the cliff in quick succession, before guards who patrol the coast in boats can spot them. They are fifteen or sixteen years old, and no more or less fearless than anyone else, merely accustomed to the ritual and hungry for an autonomy they have yet to obtain. At the top of the cliff they shriek and flirt and coax each other over the edge. They pull rosehips from the bushes, chew on the meat, and spit out the seeds. And then, finally, through a chorus of resistance, the first of them plummets. It is a boy, most likely, biting at the opportunity to distinguish himself, to be remarkable, or at least to rile some attention from a red bikinied girl one year his junior. He plummets deep deep deep until his body tears open the skin on the water. He emerges for air flooded with the thrill of his wet conquest. He turns over to float on his back as if his whole

body is not burning with glee, and calls for his friends to follow. It's easy, he taunts them. It's easy, as it always has been, as he knew it would be. All through the summer, an island of not-quite-children, not-quite-adults tout their barnacle-scabbed palms through town, the proof of their success, marked by the climb back up over the rocks and out of the water.

TRACE FOSSIL: It is another heavy, aching summer and Daughter is alone, tucked like a school bag into a cubby under the highest cliff on Jamestown. By springtime, her body had begun to push out against itself from the inside, and the pushing did not subside in time for her to make use of last year's swimsuit. Every slim, pliant piece of her gummed up. Skin rubbed on skin as she walked; sweat congealed in her newly formed estuaries, like lemon and butter. Everytime she stood from a chair or a patch of sand, the impression she left behind was wider and deeper and darker than before. And so this summer, she had made a habit of tucking away. Now, from the Southeast end of the island, she keeps watch on the bay as her peers dare to break it open, again and again. If it were not for her own constant, cloying gravity, this might have been the year she joined them. But watching as their limbs spread through the air like dandelion spores, all of them so cruelly supple and elastic, only solidifies Daughter's disbelief in her body's capability for flight. She settles into her little piece of land, and remains there for hours. Once the noise of the jumping children clears, their hollers and feet rattling North, she lowers herself into a shallow pool of water. She is a creature emerging in their wake, into a sanctuary carved out by their negative space. The water, warmed by its stillness under the sun, licks her mercifully. The light bends; her boundaries blur and dissolve; for a moment she sheds herself. When Daughter returns home for dinner, she leaves a wet heart behind in the place where she sat. The wind dries it quickly back to stone.

Annually, the Jamestown Herald logs another Fort Wetherill fatality. A teenager plummets deep deep deep down off the very best cliff on the island, and never resurfaces. They collide with a

jagged rock below, after it shifted in a hurricane, or are swept from the rocks by rough surf, or are taken in by the current and never returned. They are drowned, or killed on impact. They are wearing a blue one-piece embroidered with whales, a yellow rashguard, a pair of board shorts. They are tight-skinned, pink-lipped. They are shrieking, then silent. As silent and as beautiful as the fish, a few miles North, laid out over the ice in Zeek's Creek.

From the best cliff on Fort Wetherill the island kids tempt versions of the headline all summer long. What a privilege it is, to fly willingly and certainly over the precipice, filled up with bones still anticipating a lifetime of weight-bearing. To defy a body that has every intention of continuing. To head for an ocean that they believe is destined to receive them, to carry them back to shore, to be happily conquered and owned, and to hold them away from harm. To be fuller of this belief than any body is of water. How painless it is to die this way, with bones that are still so fortified, never having to grow old, never having to know it, to fill with holes, to watch helpless from the inside, and so slowly begin to die.

The former is called tragedy, the latter natural death. The ironic line between the two is clearest, perhaps, in the case of the lobster. The lobster takes two minutes to die in boiling water, but her natural death can last years. After years and years of expansion and renovation, she eventually outgrows the bounds of her stamina. She becomes too heavy to haul herself out of her massive skeleton, too heavy to take up the task of hiding her soft shell from predators, a compulsion she has abided ever since she was shaken from her mother's underbelly and against every odd, survived. Now, she is burdened by the weight of her armor. She accumulates bacteria, and then infection. Her swollen flesh adheres to her interior walls. Unable to shed, she rots, trapped inside of herself.

Myth used to call the lobster immortal. The myth cited an enzyme called telomerase, which protects the ends of chromosomes, guarding against degradation, senescence, and presumably death. Her body, it went, is immune to aging, and therefore the lobster's life ends only by outside intervention: cannibalism, maiming, fishing, lobster dinner, mother and daughter. Without the bounds of mortality, the lobster will continue to grow and reproduce and will do so forever. But this is the myth. As we now know, the lobster who eludes boil dies just as slowly as the human body ages out of life. No animal can escape the inevitable fact of her bones, except those who do: plunged into boiling water by a mother's hungry hand, or who themselves plunge, in a single, clean arc, up and away from the Southeast end of the earth.

TRACE FOSSIL: DAUGHTER GROWS TEETH IN HER BELLY

After Lobster Dinner, Mother and Daughter walk along the shore. The ocean spreads and swallows itself. It inscribes its edge in froth on the sand each time, until the next wave comes, like a palimpsest, traces of each movement rewritten over the last. Water knots Mother and Daughter into the land. Daughter steps over the body of a decanted horseshoe crab. She imagines herself shrinking beside Mother, her five fingers forming two, one pincer and one crusher claw, two legs multiplying into eight, belly to the sand, skin hardening into shell. Her feet taste the shore swollen with salt — that fleeting, dark patch of sand — and her teeth slip back into her belly. All the pokmarks of her body smooth, every pain and danger slips over her solid, curved torso. Mother and Daughter walk East. Their soles imprint and leaven once they are gone.



After mom was priced out of Jamestown a couple years ago, she moved across the bridge to nowhere and into a third-floor walk up apartment. Outside the island's one-by-nine perimeter, every landmark in her routine expanded. The grocery store gained in aisles, gas pumps and banks and liquor stores multiplied as if by binary fission, and every acute cove stretched into miles of sand, where the red algae is cleared each morning for beachgoers who buy day-passes and rent cabanas. And finally, Zeek's Creek Bait and Tackle became Anthony's Seafood, a part-market part-restaurant saddled between a dentist's office and a boutique fitness studio, with a parking lot paved and painted for thirty cars. A bloated cartoon crab brandishes its claws toward the restaurant entrance, where tourists shriek at the gritty bellies of clams and send back for strips. Across the bridge to nowhere, everyone pays for lobster rolls without ever glimpsing the tank.

Although Anthony's Seafood is a five minute drive from her new address, mom and I sacrifice the bridge toll to choose our lobsters at Zeek's. It is Christmas Eve. I am twenty-one, and, home for a final school holiday, these new landmarks are no longer shared between us, but solely her own.

In this season, it is rare to fight for a space in front of Zeek's. By December, all of the summer houses are empty, the New York families long-reinstated in their regular lives. There is seldom any competition for right-of-way at the single blinking stoplight. All roads widen in the absence of tour buses and rental Jeeps. The thin, pebbled shore exhales in inches. As boats are hauled from the water and tarped, the marina softens its surveillance of the harbor. Children reclaim the docks after school to dare each other into the water. They emerge fully clothed and sopping, the island beating once again as their own.

At the bakery, sticky buns and tomato sandwiches last deep into Sunday afternoons. Everyone wakes late and still eats their share. A long-endured summer sweetens the bounty of their relief. Locals

smile at each other like a war is over. They erect a Christmas tree in the town center, and on the night of the lighting the ice cream shop reopens for one day to serve hot chocolate anchored with heavy scoops of vanilla. The school chorus sings Silent Night, because finally it is, and everyone counts down from ten until the tree erupts into a fury of red bulbs.

Here, inside the perimeter of land called Jamestown, an island inside of Rhode Island, nicknamed The Ocean State, smallest in the nation, the dead of winter comes on with the heat of its inverse. Only when the water is at its coldest is it ripe for swimming. When the dark falls early, the town tree forms a red winter sun. No longer vying for the money of docked cruise ships, the salon and the deli slacken their prices. Everyone is fuller than a mosquito's belly is of blood, after drinking long and deep from a fat ankle. In this silence there is an ownership that rises up, hot and alive in those bodies that occupy the small houses on the North end, that keeps them warm enough to venture into the vacant December water.

Jamestown floats in Narragansett Bay, a drowned river valley, named from the Algonquian word *Naiaganset*, meaning *people of the small point of land*. Jamestown, formerly known as Conanicut Island after Chief Canonicus of the Narragansett Tribe, is today built atop one of the largest Native American burial grounds in New England. Before the King Philip's War, when the large numbers of the Narragansett people were killed by colonial militia in the Great Swamp Massacre, or else driven into the forests and wetlands in the Southern-most parts of the state, many of them kept summer homes on the island. Once colonists declared the Tribe legally extinct, despite their continued albeit marginalized presence, it was renamed Jamestown, after James, Duke of New York, who later became King James II. The colonists erected a windmill to grind corn that turned with the sea breeze. A ferry service began between Jamestown and Newport. Fences claimed the dimensions of soil that belonged

to one man and those that belonged to another, and the land was never again called by any name other than property. They became its fathers, its origin and sole owner; they sat assured at the head of the table. And thus, the surrounding islands floating in the bay were also named by their new inhabitants: Prudence, Patience, Hope, Despair, and Hog.

A commemorative plaque dedicated to the Tribe sits at the intersection of Conanicus and Narragansett Avenue, though nobody has ever read it. In the town center we turn instead toward the Christmas tree, our mouths devour the silent night, and we tear into the harbor, reveling in our drowned street clothes, the transgression of wet skin through winter. We smile like a war is over, although it has been for hundreds of years: the war was waged on our behalf, the land conquered, and forcibly disremembered. We are already the winners, and thus the merry forgetters. We have more tomato sandwiches than we could ever need. We say, *As it should be. As it should be.*

At Lawn Avenue Middle School, where every year a projector resurrects the tracks of an ancient lobster over the heads of each sixth grader, a small, unmarked grave lies just beyond the playground. A century ago, a pair of men went digging for loam and their shovels split it wide open. The indigenous bones inside were soon looted or lost or desecrated. A collection of what remained, exhumed by an archaeologist in the 1960's, was exhibited in the library before being repatriated to its original grave, which we now call haunted.

But mostly, the bones lodged in the soil exist as narrative inconveniences for us, the residents in the smallest houses on the North end, who jump into the brackish water after the tourists have left, heated by the conviction that this *small point of land* is and has always been entirely our own. Such bones threaten the integrity of our misremembrances, the misremembrances from which we form ourselves: year-round, North end, small house, original. It is easier to press evidence otherwise farther

down into the earth. It is easier to call it baptism, the water only a purer, liquid version of ourselves, and never itself a body in pain. It is easier to be the creator of this world, the point from which all things either take root or feign root, easier to forget this impossibility.

TRACE FOSSIL: Mother and Daughter sit in the house on the North end of the island they call their own. Daughter tears apart the body of a lobster as her knees bleed under the table. How a body in danger endangers. Mother and Daughter float in the ocean with their backs to the earth, and look only upwards. The ocean swells with remnants of loss. They watch for forthcoming weather, and wonder if they will be saved from rain. With every step across the shore they inscribe themselves into the record, as though they were the land's first layer, and not it's near-last. How easily a body, stripped and pillaged and pained, reenacts her violences. How often she insists on her own vulnerability, believes in her place as the ravaged and never the ravager. How the memory selects, how it replaces and displaces. The lobster is dessicated, the house is staunch in its plot, the bellies are full, wounds temporarily soothed. And there are Mother and Daughter, loving each other. And there are Mother and Daughter, saving the world and destroying it.



The familiar hum of the Zeek's lobster tank, muffled through the outside wall, breaks open as we push through the screen door. Along the fish counter, Acadian red mullets and mackerel lay splayed over fields of ice, with eyes like black marbles and mouths gently parted. Fishing poles are mounted to the ceiling, threatening to hook customers who linger too long over the bait. There isn't a single life-vested child on the wall to display their catch. Each price per pound is written on a popsicle stick and wedged into the ice beside the corresponding specimen. Thick stalks of eels wrap around a metal bowl filled with butterfish. Mackerel and flounder lay tail-to-tail beside glossy baby octopi and

coils of shrimp. A row of salmon heads nestle into the negative space made by the tapered mouths of snapper. Inside the fish counter exists a new set of marine relations, a post-mortem community over ice.

Mom heads for the fish counter to pick out a pound of littlenecks, and I turn toward the lobster tank.

After college, mom worked at a fish packing plant in Portland, Maine, behind a chowder house off Commercial Street. She made twenty-five cents to the package, vacuum sealing filets of cod in an assembly line of other twenty-somethings, all of them chasing extra rent money for apartments on Munjoy Hill they would soon be priced out of. They worked fast, sometimes teasing sloppiness. Year round, mom woke early and sealed herself into fleece and rubber. She rode her bicycle a mile to the plant, an icebox that clung to a splinter generously called a dock, and arrived damp with sweat. The days were long and reeking, and she took pride in them. She had a four-year degree and no intention to make use of it. She kept her hair short. She lived in a house by the bay, and paid ninety dollars for it every month. On weekend nights her back porch filled with a collection of beautiful, equally irreverent friends. Her body was lean but hardy, powered by the thrill of transgression that kept her moving through the stretched-out hours and crude temperatures.

I watch mom pick out clams from my station at the lobster tank. Regardless of her trust in Zeek's selection, she still scours the pile for tightly sealed shells and a clean, briney smell. Like lobsters, it is crucial to buy clams while they are still alive. Once dead, they accumulate bacteria quickly and

become inedible. Mom scans for danger, which appears gently parted, like the mouths of mackerel. If their inhabitant is in fact still alive, the ajar shell will snap shut when touched.

Bent over the counter, her body forgets its former endurance. A shiver slips from her shoulders, where it hangs, suspended over ice.

It is easy to mistake the death that populates the fish counter for something else: a portrait of interspecies affection, a scaled collage, or a small ecosystem, like one you might build as a child inside of a water bottle. The fish reclining on their long beds of ice are not aged, dried out, and graying like so many human bodies when death comes, but as wet and brilliant as their animate form. Their death occurs without gradual decline, diagnosis, failing memory or spine. Just as Jamestown comes alive in the winter, every resident moved to song and the bare trees somehow more lush, these fish on the counter are not killed by the air but reborn. One does not mourn for the loved ones they leave behind, for those survivors who today may be swimming through the ocean without their mother. A fish lives for herself, and dies as such. She shirks tragedy. She is tender over a bed of labneh and black quinoa. It is the sweetness of her ignorance and the vibrance of her color that keeps her alive, because she remains desirable. As the net pulls her toward death her weight does not signal burden, but bounty. She is tight and lithe and slick with the oils of her skin. And most importantly, she is not lonely.



Eventually, you are driving back home with your mother, two Christmas lobsters at your feet, when she says something that forces the first acknowledgement between you: she will die, is beginning to. Maybe you have witnessed the first act of dying: a shiver, quick enough to miss, as she selected the

clams that you now cradle on your lap. Maybe you have thought of this before, privately, after George the cat slumped into the woods behind your house and never came out, but it becomes a different kind of truth when held with two pairs of hands. You watch her dry winter knuckles on the steering wheel as she accelerates, and imagine a world in which those hands will no longer hold up the roof of your world. You realize that you have never considered any other infrastructure. And though you may have abstractly understood that this final destination is shared by everyone, you have yet to look at the hands of your mother and wonder what will happen to the roof. You have yet to look at her hands and see a pair of hands that will no longer tap each clam shell to make sure they are still breathing, no longer hold weight of your neck as you vomit, no longer cut plums around the pit when it is too hot to eat anything else, no longer catch her own forehead as folds it in exasperation at yet another one of your shortcomings for which she will unconditionally forgive you. These hands, that have again and again plunged the writhing bodies of lobsters into boiling water for your sake, are beginning to lose their grip. This body, that became your shield when you puckered to the touch, that could never protect you from every trespasser but by God did she try, now needs your defense, your fortification. Time passes like a drip from a tap floods a house. Your dread is not of death itself, but the anticipation of absence, the process of dying. The shiver. The scans that prove her porous backbone, hips like sieves. The record that skips, and drops off into silence. The promise of estrangement as the roles of nurture reverse. That slow drip, drip, drip, which now has only just filled a pot for boil. The first lobster that *you* will slaughter to feed *her*, your hands replacing hers around each red thorax.

To the bone, we say, as though everything will stop there, as though bone forms inside of us an unshakeable shield. But under the appropriate pressure, the bone gives way. Swaddled in perfectly

moist soil, all bone becomes marrow. When the heart stills inside skeleton walls and the body is buried by ocean floor, or by a ceremonial laying down, or simply left — deer at the edge of the highway, climber in the neck of the mountain — the soft tissue decomposes until all that is left are the bones. If the body rests in fertile soil, the skeleton will eventually dissolve, and, repurposed into the ecosystem, later that year will fall over Jamestown harbor as rain. But if the soil is just dry, just salty enough, if the body is taken in by the silt of a still lake, the bones persist into fossils.

Even if the bones don't petrify, each cell replaced one-by-one by mineral — how wood turns to stone — there are still many ways to leave yourself behind. Fossils also exist in the negative space. Most mollusk shells decompose too quickly to endure in their entirety, so instead, they leave behind a spoon-sized well, a cast to be read inside-out. They dissolve, and enter themselves into the record. Other times, a beetle slips into tree sap, quickly suffocates, and remains whole forever. The sap suspends and preserves her body exactly as it was on the day she fell, more perfect than the torso of a warplane encased in oil and vinyl. The sap eventually turns to amber. If a butterfly is caught suddenly under sediment, and pressed down for years and years by shale, the carbon she emits will create a blueprint of her heart-shaped wings: her network of tubular veins, her scales made by tiny, overlapping pieces of chitin. In the fossil, the history of a body secures its final form, or — in the trace fossil — leaves behind thousands of final forms, a tooth- or metacarpal- or animal-sized resistance against the circuitous nature of living and dying and living and dying.

And so you begin to dig. You dig down into the arid soil, your back scalded with sun. You dig for the fossils that make a narrative, called a life. This is a selfish excavation. You believe that if you collect enough evidence, you can arrange it into something true. This truth, you imagine, will be as

exact a translation of history as a marmoset skeleton, or a drawer full of whale vertebrae. It will be a truth firm and pliant enough to keep her hands in place, to keep the space between you from leaching, to keep both of your bodies caulked in the only realities they have ever known together.

As many daughters do, you have always and only seen yourself through the superimposed image of her. Not because she ever asked you to, but because she is the closest you'll ever come to another self, one that has lived every moment before you. When she was your age, just out of college, she worked in a fish packing plant. Her body was lean but hardy. There she is, encased in fleece and rubber. And here you, already more domesticated. You, idling at the tank. You, tender around the bone, in need of a harder shell. And in this way, the slow process of her bodily degradation that now scents the air like the clams on your lap, still clean and briney but nearing death with every mile driven, brings with it a rupture in your own image, your reflection warped in the mirror that is her. You know that neither of you can evade death. Still, you hunger for the stunning preservation afforded to the spottail bass, frozen into a perfect memory, that splice of red shimmering through the ice.



We drive back over the bridge to nowhere.

Three floors up and a bay's width away from our former house, I lay out the compulsory red placemats and paper napkins, decorated with tiny poinsettias. I set the table, for two as always, with a roll of paper towels, a steel mixing bowl, picks and crushers to be inevitably bypassed in favor of our hands, and two shallow dishes of lemon and butter. In the kitchen, mom sets the pot to boil. When bubbles the size of eyes swell at the surface, she forces the lobsters inside and closes the lid. So goes the killing that must be done.

At the table, we sit with two hard shells between us. Mom and I tuck the poinsettias into our shirts and push our sleeves back to our elbows, mouths forward. In winter, there is no corn. We begin with the clams. We pull the black skin off each neck, bathe their bellies in the water in which they were boiled, and submerge them in butter. Our bowls empty quickly. We move onto the lobsters. We are rusty. I forget the eight slim legs. I discard my abdomen prematurely. Mom corrects me, retrieves it from the mixing bowl to lift the cavity open on its hinges. All the meat I'd forgotten fills the butter dish one last time. Loneliness slips in.

This ritual, once so full with gluttony, simmers. Is it the corn we are missing, those beautiful jewels of salt? The table sits quieter between us. The silence breaks into self-conscious laughter when I forget my abdomen. Christmas music moves strangely in the air. The meal that used to feel like a feast is soon over, and when we finish, I am still hungry.

We don't linger long over the table after all the shells have been moved into the mixing bowl. I scrub the pan of melted butter while mom carries the decanted bodies out to the compost pile, to return them to the earth.

TRACE FOSSIL: MOTHER AND DAUGHTER RUN TOWARD WATER

All five hundred of Jamestown's winter residents would not have fit on the shore of Sheffield Cove except for the generosity of low-tide. Mother and Daughter are huddled among them, edged back against the dunes that separate beach from road, and dressed for the ritual in one-piece swimsuits, spongy water shoes, swim caps, and goosebumps. Both are unencumbered by embarrassment, Daughter holding to the unselfconsciousness of childhood and Mother made unabashed by motherhood. Both bodies, though shivering, are sure of themselves. Daughter is still mostly flat, and Mother is still impermeable, the muscles in her legs like roots under earth, reassuring her place wherever she stands.

It is the first day of January, the first day of the last year in which both Mother and Daughter will live easily inside of their bodies. Mother holds a tin of sardines between them, and Daughter a small canister of mayonnaise. They take turns plucking each smoked fish from its oil, and warming their mouths with fat.

On the cue of a noontime whistle, the island rushes toward the ocean. Mother and Daughter follow, meeting each other's pace as they pull themselves forward. Their feet plunge into piles of red seaweed, and sand fleas plume around their ankles. Their weight pushes everything deeper: all those bones they do not name, each dessicated layer, the years and years that precede them. The salt of the fish clings to their teeth. The front of the crowd hits the water, slowing their momentum as bodies struggle for vacant pockets of ocean. Piling on top of each other like lobsters in search of shade, the margins of Mother and Daughter slip into the body of bodies around them. They move as one massive, undulating anatomy, shrieking through the cold. A singularity hurtling towards the hope of rebirth, so often called water.

The ocean is hard and aching, but both Mother and Daughter honor their contract to submerge entirely. *No dry hair or you have to do it again*, each threatened the other before running. Daughter grips her nose, not yet having learned how to keep the water out, and thrusts herself forward. Inside, the ocean reinstates their boundaries. Mother

and Daughter feel each bend and crevice acutely, each armpit and arch, as the water occupies those hollows previously shared amongst the mass. These bodies are indisputably their own. With a conviction neither fully understands, they pull their scalps underneath, into darkness, wet as the fish in their bellies.



NOTES

My epigraph is an excerpt from a poem titled “Chance Encounter” by Cecilia Vicuña, which appears in the collection, *New and Selected Poems of Cecilia Vicuña*, translated and edited by Rosa Alcalá.

The study referenced on page 12, “Bone derived hormone reverses age related memory loss in mice,” was led by researchers at Columbia University Medical Center, and originally published in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine* under the title “Gpr158 mediates osteocalcin’s regulation of cognition,” in 2017.

The passage by Herodotus is excerpted from *The Histories*: 3.109.2. It was found and translated for me by my dear friend, Rachel Hodes.

All lobster research was sourced primarily from *Lobster: A Global History* by Elizabeth Townsend, Gulf of Maine Research Institute, The Maine Lobstermen’s Community Alliance, Oceana, research by biologist Helge Fabritus at Max-Planck-Institut, the Blue Planet series, and, of course, my mom, former employee at Robinson’s Wharf lobster pound.

The italicized line on page 16, “the soft animal of your body,” is excerpted from Mary Oliver’s poem, “Wild Geese.”

I used two images in this project from the Davis-Monthan Airforce Base that are not my own. The first, on page 23, is a satellite image of the base captured by Google Earth. The second, on page 30, was originally photographed by Bernie Sedley in 1958. I found it reprinted in the article, “70+ years of the boneyard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base” on Tucson.com.

Information on the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group was gathered thanks to the Davis-Monthan Airforce Base official website, Pima Air & Space Museum, as well as local and national news stories published on *Air Force Times*, *Desert Lightning News*, CNN, and BBC.

Information on Fort Wetherill’s history and development was compiled through *Jamestown Press* news stories, and through archives made available by the Jamestown Historical Society.

Indigenous history of Jamestown was researched thanks to the official website of the Narragansett Indian Tribe, “The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era” by Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau, “Applied Archaeology Influencing Native Traditions: A Case From Rhode Island” by Alan Leveillee, information available by way of the Jamestown Historical Society, The Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, and archived news stories published in *Jamestown Press*.