



Safe Harbor

Elizabeth J. Mitchell

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In memory of Louise D. Green

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In search of water

Sable Beach, Upper Peninsula, Michigan

In my most sacred photograph
of my grandmother, she is
adorned in yellow sunset.

Pink polka dots cover her
banana yellow cotton shirt
& matching pants.

Her white summer bonnet
covers her hair, a mixture
of white & soft seagull gray.

Her arm is draped across my back.
My grandmother & I
look towards my mother,

our faces obscured
by fading, brilliant light.
The lake behind us superior to all others.

We are here
because at Sable Falls,
my grandmother could not

climb stairs
to see water cascade from rock.
We sought out water she could see.

We are here— my grandmother,
mother, sister, brother, & I—
because of love, a desire to travel,

to visit new shorelines together.
This miracle we were given—
Sable Beach, our last summer together.

Safe Harbor

When I was eleven years old
my bed was a safe harbor.
In my nook next to the bookcase
I used a sheet to create sails above.
I would curl up with a book in my corner
and know no one would bother me.

My grandmother's home was a safe shore
that year. Until my aunt kicked us out
after my grandmother broke her hip.
A fall that was no one's fault
but reason for my aunt to take advantage
and move herself in.

During a year I needed safe space the most,
my grandmother's house was a safe harbor
until my grandmother's home
was not my grandmother's home
and instead became a place
we were rarely welcome to visit.

My grandmother's old room upstairs
and my bed in her light-filled room
were my safe harbor. Until.
And I've been searching
for safe harbor ever since.

Grandmother

Winter / Christmas

We remember late December,
the large, green tree in the corner.
Stored in your maze of a basement
for the time of its adornment.

We helped decorate. My brother
gave the tree its final blessing:
pale, pious angel, rosy cheeked.

We stood dazzled at tree's brightness.
White cat that curled underneath it.
Grandchildren who danced around it.

Does a tree reserve memories?
The large, brown box, like a coffin,
is still somewhere in your basement.
But of late, it has not been seen.

Spring / Easter

I remember days in April.
Your birthday. Sound of heavy rain
falling down the sides of your home.

I remember Easter. You were
in the kitchen boiling eggs.
Painting them with some concoction
to make them blue, green, purple, pink.

You hid them. Invited cousins.
We ran to find as many as
we could. Eggs cracked, peeled, stuffed in mouths.
Ears nibbled off chocolate rabbits.

I remember your smile, soft, thin,
lost. The strange sadness in your eyes.

Summer / Childhood

In summer, you planted flowers,
pruned trees, placed stones with care to make
flower beds. I learned how to grow,
take care of things. You collected
bricks from burnt and broken buildings.
When we had enough red rubble,
we built the patio. On it
we sat on plastic corded chairs.

Each year after winter, we placed
sand in the crevices so weeds
wouldn't grow in the cracks. I on
hands and knees to watch the ants creep
through the sand, small things full of life.

Summers, we dug holes in the grass
to look for worms and make mud pies.
Ran through the sprinkler on hot days,
observed mini-rainbows of mist.

Laid among mint patches, breathed in
the scent, gathered plants for your tea.
Sat among three-leaf clovers to
find good luck. I was already
blessed to have you in my life. But

Fall / Fading

I cannot remember autumns.
Leaves falling, plants shrinking in cold.
Unable to grasp full details,
memories, only small glimpses:
green walnuts that lost their coating,
the squirrels that carried them away,
raking leaves, helicopter seeds,
and green silver dollars
fading to a white gray.

Trumpets

Belle Isle, near Sunset Point

The shadow of the city across the water,
we were greeted by trumpeter swans
at Detroit's riverbank the week she left.

My mother climbed close to the rocky shore

placed Easter lily blooms in the river,
white trumpets silently floating away
into the gray, choppy waters of spring.

Blackstone

In the spring of my thirteenth year, my mother bought a house off of Grand River in Detroit. It was across the street from a library and next door to a laundromat.

There was a half-moon of a red door, diamond-shaped lead windows, and in autumn, a row of bushes that would set fire to the ground.

Inside, I would lay on my belly reading in front of all of the books that we owned.

On Saturdays, I would watch my brother's skill at racing games. I would plug in the second controller to become a flying fox in a pixelated forest.

On Saturdays, I would listen to my sister's latest album. *Hybrid Theory*, *Tragic Kingdom*, *Marshall Mathers LP*. Her room a stack of library books and a wall of wide, bright windows.

This was home.

We helped my mother paint our bedroom walls. It had been years since I had seen my mother paint or draw or sculpt, but here she crafted beauty above our heads. My mother hand-painted my brother's ceiling with a bronze compass and mine with a pink daisy. From my loft bed, I could look up to the light, the center of her daisy, and know that I was loved.

We never hung up the daisy border to match. Instead a space of uneven white a foot from the ceiling, the space between the pink of my walls and the sun-colored upper wall and ceiling. We left it like that when we left.

We left many books and many things. I don't remember what. A half-finished water garden I dug in our backyard. The tulips that someone else had planted before we ever lived there. The massive tree whose spine was flat enough to sit inside and read.

I was already gone away at college when my family left this home for good.

This home my mother lost to foreclosure. And as the country went through a depression, I watched my mother whirl into the deepest depression I had ever seen her in.

After jobs became hard to find, after she lost our home, she moved away. Moved to the Appalachian Mountains, to the land of her mother and grandmother and great grandmother, in search of a sustainable life she could not find here.

Black girl dreams

a wooden boat on which to lay—
soaks in sun, soft sounds of waves
brush beneath her.

books. some worn, yellowed dears.
others crisp breaths. her mother gifted
her keys to new worlds

& she's been collecting keys
ever since. she opens portals
to healing streams.

she gifts herself words
as a gardener tending
a beloved patch of wildflowers.

she believes herself beautiful—
mind fierce & full
of cherishable things.

wolves wither
under the glare of her eyes
& do not harm her.

rain touches her forehead,
slides through her curls— free
falls down her neck.

sunlight fills the places harm entered.
rainbows pour from her palms—
taste of new beginnings & forgiveness.

her body is her own safe harbor
where she gifts herself

permission to dream
permission to be

Shorebirds

1.

My brother digs down into tan sand.
Only two and a half feet, he declares,

to find water. I help him grab wet earth—
slap it back into unstable mounds,

use my palms to make balls of heavy fragile.
Given flight, the sand balls collapse at my fingertips.

My brother shivers as his brown arms reach in
to reveal the tiny white river beneath.

My mother brings us a heart-shaped piece of glass,
white cloud refined by Lake Michigan waves.

2.

My brother and I toss
a frisbee disc to each other,

a shock of teal hitting our palms
as we dive into sand.

As the shore receives
the sun's whispered goodbyes,

gulls alight into lake
sister to ocean.

Their calls
and the crash of waves
a symphony.

3.

At Perdido Key, a blue heron takes flight
to follow us from the north side of the strait

to the south. It propels itself from the shoreline
that greets Old River, Alabama, Florida—

its slow air march with us— as we walk
across white sand, a small road,

new shore. The heron stands near us.
Funny bird, my brother proclaims.

4.

In Pensacola,
my mother rests
listening to night's shore.

It is that rise and fall,
she whispers, *for which I yearn—*
to hear this crashing filled with grace.

5.

I go to the water to cover my shoulders with sky.
To rest these limbs, this heart, against the sand.

I go to the water's edge for the birds,
the gulls laughing together. The herons

tucking themselves in during flight.
Geese lifting their legs in arabesques.

Gift of Flight

My ballet teacher asks me
to grasp the hand of the struggling

adult dancer beside me,
to seek partners who need the most

help. That way we all grow. Together
we are light dispersed

through crystal chandelier
radiant and glowing

covered in the dew of hard work.
Silver hair, freckled shoulders,

well-worn canvas shoes.
Sometimes we are a jumble

of ankles and arms, off-beat feet.
Yet we yearn to learn these steps.

With joined hands, we begin
grounded— toes pressed into floorboards

and when we are ready—
together we soar towards joy.

Chronic Illness Arabesque

It is a miracle to dance—
foot raised above hip,
toes pointed to sky.

This body delights
in breath, sweat, movement.
To express sorrow, love,
peach-colored joy,
gratitude for life.

When able to move
my limbs & mind know
what will be lost
when my illness returns.
Dance becomes dormant.
Dazed days, dizzy haze.

When given back strength
I radiate joy. My arms carry
baskets of blessings above
my head. My feet make light,
soft, quick steps to mirror
the kindness life has shown.

I am here now. My body can
do whatever it does
whenever it is able.

Visiting the UP

The last time I remember my grandmother at any shore
was a trip up the Michigan coast ending at Sable Beach.

It took 16 years
to see the picturesque lakeshore again.

This time we made it further west
down the rabbit's spine.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, gorgeous
view I know my grandmother would have enjoyed.

Cliffs and sunset colored rock.
Me, tired, out of breath, making sense

of chronic illness and the ways this body can't
maneuver so easily everywhere,

yet thankful to take in
the beauty of this place all the same.

Playing cards

On our 11th wedding anniversary, 20 years since my grandmother passed,
I tell my partner, “my grandmother would have loved Phase 10,”
remembering how she was the first to teach me about runs
& matching numbers to each other through rummy & Go Fish
when I was not yet 10 & just learning the thrill
of time spent with a loved one over a game of cards.

Our Neighbors Are Not Happy People

Into the quiet evening his voice yells,
“I’m the one in control,” and she responds
with silence, her hand on brass doorknob.
“Have a good time,” he tells her. And yet
how can anyone have a good time after that.

When I anger you to the rare moment your voice rises,
I am ashamed. This rage inside of me
overwhelming. “It is this job,” I tell you.
And you believe me, but you still don’t think
it should affect me this much.
“Let it go,” you say. But I can’t.

The ceiling splinters under the weight
of two running children. On Saturdays,
erratic sounds emerge from the keyboard above our heads.
I laugh at the absurdity of “My Heart Will Go On”
at 9 in the morning and cannot fall back asleep.

When I have hurt you
with a slew of slippery words,
it takes hours, days, to return to that peace,
for you to feel safe again.

One afternoon, a rare explosion of my neighbor’s voice.
His Arabic, her silence, their baby crying beneath my feet.
They moved soon after that, drilling beneath us,
unscrewing their lives from the walls.

Burdens

Soundtrack:

“Burden Down” by Jennifer Hudson

We Carry Us by bell’s roar

1.

Jennifer Hudson’s voice is clematis blooming—
deep purple fireworks tinged with burgundy sorrow.

Who will take up our burdens? As black women
we are taught to carry everyone else’s worries

but not to tend to our own needs.

It took me 30 years of unlearning
to learn that I am no one’s hero

and no one’s scapegoat or mule.
I am more than the emotional burdens

I carry for someone else.

2.

Black folks know, especially black trans folks,
black nonbinary folks, & black women,
that we carry us because who else will.

Lately, I carry me, unable to let others in.
Let me be called cold. In distance I learned
to heal— not look to others to bear my burdens.

My winters have grown in me teal seeds of hope.

3.

I try to get my partner to listen to “Burden Down,”
use Hudson’s words to convey what I know:
I used to take on other’s burdens. I did not know balance.

My partner moves our home towards a safer, stable place.
Each time I enter home, the things he does that show me
he has my back. The laundry, the dishes,

putting displaced objects back into place.
Tears in my eyes, I whisper my appreciation
and he tells me it’s because of all I give.

Love in healthy hum, a give and take,
a bearing each other’s burdens.
A listening grace.

Home is a safe place I am happy to return to

We've built sanctuary together
3 loving cats waiting for us

The you at 17 is honored by these walls
painted your favorite shade of green.

The me I knew at 12 feels at home
in this room of weather and sea.

We learned how to love
after living in environments that did not love us.

We unlearned what it means to unlove,
learned to let go

of the harsh words from our mouths,
the need to control what occurs

because what was around us could not be controlled
but we are safe now, as the years grow us

as the years pull us closer.
I learned what I needed

demanded it from my lover
and gained a partner

who knows how to love me
in the ways I need to be loved.

Let us unlearn all the ways
we were taught to love that were not love

let us unlearn all the ways
we were taught to be who we are not

To demand quiet sanctuary at home
two introverts living their best lives

in love with each other,
in love with ourselves

Polyamorous

When I heard the word, it was a needed puzzle piece falling from the sky.
Understanding my capacity to love more than one person,
to imagine building a life with more than one partner.

And yes, telling my husband of my capacity to love
another was hard. And yes, being vulnerable was an uncertain cliff
but he knew how to catch my fears and love me through it.

Maybe the other person I love will never become a partner,
but it was worth the journey of trusting my heart.

Dreaming of You

There are people we dream of
before we meet them
& people we can't stop dreaming of
once we know them.

Love Existing

I was looking for someone
inside my dreams
forgetting
I dream of you
almost every night.

Sometimes I am attracted to people

Five years ago on a bus ride home
I realized that sometimes
I am attracted to women-presenting people

And two years ago at a friend's gathering
I realized that sometimes I am attracted
to nonbinary-presenting people

It has taken me 3 decades
to not look at who I am attracted to
with worry or sadness or guilt,

to accept attraction as an oh—
this is just another part of me
to love and discover

Sanctuary

I moved a lot when I was young
and found a partner who craves stability
and is jostled by change.

But the years have changed us.
These days, change grows him
and I've found permanent sanctuary

inside myself. The home we've built
may one day cease to be our home.
But the home I've made

is eternal and all I need.

Our home is white sails & safe harbor

warmth, like a fireplace on a frozen winter night
after you've been walking in the cold for hours.
The heat touches something inside first,
then melts the rest of you.

Our bed is blanket forts & quiet
conversations about what matters, what hurts.
Where we are unafraid to name our fears,
able to admit & make peace with our mistakes.

When the power goes out

watch the sunset pour
its last rays of light,
fill the sky with brilliance.

Admire your neighbor
who rides a bike alongside her son,
enjoys summer even though the night is dark.

Be thankful for the last bit of light,
the stretches when your home is filled
by passing cars.

Open your blinds for a night,
watch the stars grow brighter,
the fireflies waltzing outside your window.

Light a few candles. Appreciate
that so little flame can illuminate a room.
Be thankful

that you are rarely without electricity,
that your water is still running,
that in the morning

you will have a warm shower in a candlelit room.
Be thankful for this temperate summer
and cool night.

Run down the hallway with your cat.
Admire their lack of fear of the dark,
their comfort in the quiet evening.

Go to sleep thankful for breath,
for every night you have been given,
for light hidden in unexpected places.

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