I float on a paddleboard converted to a kayak with a simple web seat and O rings. Decades ago I vowed never to bring my children, or me, to this reservoir again, dredged out of the floodplains that mark the confluence of Plum Creek and the South Platte River below the foothills southwest of Denver and my suburban home. And yet, here I am, my daughters long grown and living two mountain passes away and me a good decade past menopause. Cool reservoir water, the same water from when I was a young mother, or possibly, worse, drips across my thighs as I paddle, smoke draping itself along the hogback to the west—another summer of fire to weather. This is not the first time I have floated here behind the warning signs to alert pleasure boats and ski jets of the dangers of submerged objects.

“A creek,” my mother, a transplant from Ohio who mourned for the sprawling deep river arteries she left behind to be near me, always pronounced the South Platte. Early Spanish explorers called it the Rio Chato or “calm river,” a moniker that did not quite describe its propensity for flooding. And the Indians warned the white
settlers who displaced them of “bad medicine.” In 1965, before the construction of the Chatfield Dam, this behemoth of concrete and steel that stops the river, the bad medicine erupted: epic storms engorging streams and creeks from their banks, all bearing down onto this riparian basin, where sits this reservoir, where I float.

“A knife of mud,” one photographer described the flood waters, which unleashed a battering ram of abandoned cars, refrigerators, and broken appliances junked for years along the riverside, and smashed twenty-eight bridges and innumerable houses between Littleton and Denver, the destruction lethal and pervasive. Despite fifty-seven years of progressive riverside beautification and the sweet spring buzz of crabapple blooming like choreographed parasols, I can sometimes smell the smoldering garbage pits beyond the charming wood bridges and the bike paths and the ducks that pinball through the kayak shoots.

For years, in summer, Chatfield reservoir has periodically been sealed off from bather and boater because of high E. coli counts. Poop. This was the water hazard I discovered myself, long before I happened upon the official newspaper warnings. I took my young daughters to wade with friends near the mouth of Plum Creek where it empties into the reservoir, and waded, joyous as my daughters, barefooted across the creek’s lunar bottom until I scraped my leg on a jagged raft of saplings. Beaver-gnawed, my friend pointed out in alarm as a trickle of blood sent me to the emergency room when I called a nurse asking if I should be worried.

“Nobody knows how filthy this water is,” she said those twenty-five years ago, and I spent four hours on an emergency room bed, the tiny puckered wound on my leg systematically flushed clean and injected with antibiotics, some that I swallowed, my leg finally so muffled in gauze and ace bandages and a splint that it looked broken.

Never again, I said.

There are few warnings when we enter bliss. When I first floated here, it was spring, late, in the trickle-down of a lavish months-long spate of rain and snow unrecorded in Denver for some eighty years. I had borrowed a paddleboard from Juliet, my ex-colleague from the community
And an extra fifteen to catch her last breath.

I said we would not despair. How is retirement?

I discovered I was allotted just fifteen minutes could somehow wheedle him out of anything I could not see, and my husband icing a bad knee at random events. It was the tag-end of that first year of dying and grief, the word, pandemic, triggering images of the Black Plague and the carrion-beaked masks that the doctors in the 1900s stuffed with lavender and camphor, aromatics that they thought dispelled the stink of disease and its certain death. By that spring, we were vaccinated and maskless, but Juliet and I had both lost mothers, hers in the summer before the first winter tweets of pangolins and secret labs and mine in that apex of panic and quarantine when I found myself banished to the asphalt of a hospice parking lot. Eight years I had taken care of my mother and, now, because I offered to name my visiting Kansas sister the “designated” visitor, I discovered I was allotted just fifteen minutes every twenty-four hours to sit at my mother’s side. And an extra fifteen to catch her last breath.

The year had been long and lonely. Juliet and I said we would not despair. How is retirement? friends asked me early on. Perfect, I would say, but already guessing then how fleeting, I liked it, I did, the paddleboarding and my body’s rickety unfolding above the spine of a sinking board I must balance. Ringed by pop-up shelters and signs for sunrise yoga, the gravel pits offered a wedge of sand at the edges, a velvety platform we could kneel-off onto our paddleboards, our paddles trailing dazzled wakes while swimmers in wetsuits stroked alongside a line of buoys, and small shouting boys teetered wet and glistening on their ankle-cuffed boards.

The boats’ constant plowing and circling jostles me. Their motor buzz cascades and recedes like the cicadas’ I heard beneath a wild tree in a midwestern zoo once, seventeen years the cicadas like buttocks burrowed beneath the black soil, ghosts of themselves pinned bubble-eyed to the bark, the tree swelling and receding like a heart in the tick of their desire. I have not been out on water like this since I was a girl, dog-paddling in midwestern ponds and old cow holes, once water skiing on a slow Ohio river, decades before we learned to fear what can spill into one, its gas and its oil leaks. I skinny-dipped in the black pitch of a quarry after a late-night one star-chipped night in college, I liked it, I did, the paddleboarding. The boats’ constant plowing and circling jostles me. Their motor buzz cascades and recedes like the cicadas’ I heard beneath a wild tree in a midwestern zoo once, seventeen years the cicadas like buttocks burrowed beneath the black soil, ghosts of themselves pinned bubble-eyed to the bark, the tree swelling and receding like a heart in the tick of their desire. I have not been out on water like this since I was a girl, dog-paddling in midwestern ponds and old cow holes, once water skiing on a slow Ohio river, decades before we learned to fear what can spill into one, its gas and its oil leaks. I skinny-dipped in the black pitch of a quarry after a late-night party, none of us knowing each other but shedding our clothes outside of our cars’ high beams to race drunk and laughing through the midnight air until we floated, moon-scorched and alone.

I don’t know exactly why this “clean” quarry wasn’t enough. I don’t know why I decided to not heed my own decades-old vow to not venture into a body of water evacuated uncountable times for reasons I don’t want to name again. I do know that my father’s pond where I sometimes swam was my mother, who died blind and alone, in a body of water evacuated uncountable times for reasons I don’t want to name again. I do know that my father’s pond where I sometimes swam was my mother, who died blind and alone, in a body of water evacuated uncountable times for reasons I don’t want to name again. I do know that my father’s pond where I sometimes swam was my mother, who died blind and alone, in a body of water evacuated uncountable times for reasons I don’t want to name again. I do know that my father’s pond where I sometimes swam was my mother, who died blind and alone, in a body of water evacuated uncountable times for reasons I don’t want to name again. 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long ago now that I had almost forgotten this: my father, an almost humorous figure, then, retired from medicine and sitting by himself on a stool in a deep rain-damp basement, trying to piece together a child’s plastic boat.

“He just couldn’t do it,” my mother said, and I am ashamed to say that I did not understand what that must have meant to my father. Even as I write these words, I feel the old ache as if my mother and father and I were walking still in the green dark of a woods, each of us alone, holding out our hands to catch like small blue plums the fleeing bird shadows.

“The trees will die,” I said to Juliet, death my go-to assessment for anything that year. Across the road from the quarry, the back inlet of the actual reservoir, muddied by fishermen and cobbled by goose poop, had flooded into the green belt of the riparian I float on now. Watermarks waist-high slashed the cottonwood grove water-buried from what the local weatherwomen had called “unprecedented” early summer storms, that same root of “river.”

Yesterday I read that scientists have perhaps proven that birds and animals, even down to the dung beetle, read the night sky for direction, the Milky Way a line straight across the curved universe, a roadmap in the cosmos that something of a half dollar, an inch across at my feet, the Milky Way a line straight across the curved universe, a roadmap in the cosmos that something the ties of Catholicism for us all decades past, lost.

I am remembering the wisps of cotton drifitng from the trees. And the river’s light. And the acrid smell of the asphalt rising from the streets like a small fever burn and driving us to this reservoir. I have never ridden the water like this, eye-level to the shore, buoyant as the paper boats my husband and I folded for our daughters to drift down tiny fissures of water. It feels right to float over this place of the riparian now, temporary as this flood may be, to feel the reservoir water wash over me, my paddleboard slash kayak a place of refuge beneath a sky of smoke. A middle-aged woman, a mother, stout, paddleboards past me into the wind like a statue off the prow of a sea- vessel, her husband and gaggle of kids shoveling the water after her. Then silence drops and I thread my paddle through the lily pads and their pink flower knots, silence, here, a gift, the still center like the eye of the hurricane I once rode out with my mother in a tiny garage apartment, my mother and I newly arrived to this city where I would last for only three years, the elderly homeowners staring at us through their closed car windows as they drove down the driveway to safety, leaving us, my mother sleeping through the push and pull of the wind while I watched over her, watched the night ticking through the leaves of a banana tree outside my window.

I don’t remember what all Juliet and I saw, just grinding rain against our basement windows that had swelled beneath the baseboards, my husband and I forced to clatter down the basement stairs and mop out the rising garden dirt. But Juliet and I could see leaves lemon and green, snowy egrets and pelicans stippling newly formed islets, and paper-thin heron stalking the water. In a cottonwood rookery, double-crested cormorants, levees of the shore, by fishermen in far countries to night dive for silver fish, preened in the sun. I thought it beautiful.

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I am remembering the wisps of cotton drifitng from the trees. And the river’s light. And the dripping line of a fly fisherman. The riparian takes you in softly if you think to float a river, to follow its hollows and gaps, its debris and fish eggs, its loam and gasoline. It is the felt green, the alluvial soil at the cleft of rivers where we die or we forget or the dead into whose mouths we placed our coins like bread are ferried from us to live changed and eternal, blessed or not. Our Eden before the forgetting or the woe or the fire.

A friend, who carries cancer within her, told me once that bliss was a moment stilled: her playing the keys of a keyboard she silences for the neighbors. My mother and father and I carrying my daughters to see a flurry of prehistoric footprints, my daughters’ shoes unbroken yet by the earth, and my father, afterwards, in a small Italian restaurant singing a song of tiny spiders.

“Sheer drops of heaven,” Juliet said—the goldfinch on the riverbank bathing small shining seconds.