

Swan Pond

Mimi Rizo

I went on a camping trip with my family. This is something I need to get off of my chest. My family is usually drunk, usually laughing. My cousin used to, before she got drunk, tell me that she was a witch. After watching the Wizard of Oz, I wondered what kind of witch she was. I wondered what she might look like suspended in a bubble. She told me if I hung out with her long enough that I would also become a witch and she would be my witch mother. It took not long after the Santa Claus Hoax of 1999 to realize that she was not a witch, although my suspicion of witches in general lasted well into my teens.

My cousin uses Botox and has a big forehead.

The Botox has worn off now, but I know who she is and who she has been. The lines that creep around her eyes, brows, and mouth tell me as much. I never noticed when I was younger, back when her Botox was working. Her wrinkles form semi-circles around her eyes that are both exciting and concerning. She encourages me to use it as a preventative measure. She always has something to say.

She, my family, and I are sitting around the fire. I am down wind. It's late enough now that we ceremoniously roast marshmallows on metal sticks. My roasting pole gets caught between a crack in the wood, and I watch the metal turn bright red. I consider touching it, but upon remembering that I am too old to be curious about the feel of hot metal, I rest the stick on the rocks circling the fire. My cousin softly pulls a marshmallow from the bag and glides it onto the pole with which she twirls her dessert with care over the glowing pit. I stick my marshmallow straight into the flames of the pit and watch as the flames burn from purple to orange.

"You're charring your marshmallow."

She always has something to say. My goal was not to eat the marshmallow. I just wanted to watch it burn off the pole and into the fire where it would burn into the same texture of the wood, and I wouldn't be able to tell where the wood ended and the marshmallow began.

"I like my marshmallows burned, they fall off the stick easily this way." Earlier in the day I was offered to either cut a tomato, or wipe down the picnic table. I said I would do whatever was easier and got handed a rag.

"You always take the easy way out."

I don't take the easy way out. Why does she even care so much? Why are you so sad? You can't ask someone that. I mean, I wouldn't want someone to ask me. And so I don't ask her, but boy do I wonder. I'm sitting by the fire, down wind, and wiping my watering eyes.

"It's just a marshmallow." I wouldn't dare cry about marshmallows around my cousin.

"It's the smoke."

She buys it, and for that I am grateful. I like sitting by the smoke. The smell burrows into my skin. When I get home people will smell the smoke on me and they will know that I have been out camping with my family. My family is all drunk and laughing. I just sit there and observe the bruises on my knees and try not to make eye contact with my cousin.

"I'm going to sleep."

No, I am not. If I go to sleep, I will miss the fireside rituals that I usually hear from my tent, tucked away between two trees on an incline. For some reason I know that I am supposed to stay here downwind of this fire, sitting here indefinitely because no one told me how long they expect me to sit here. Family vacations are doing time for the crime of existence. Like original sin. Original sin is the being born part right? Meeting eyes with my brother on my left, I realize that I do not know how long I have been looking down. Nobody noticed anyway. They're not paying attention because they are all doing their best impression

of Batman. The neighbors who booked the campsites next to us are likely annoyed.

My older brother nudges me to let me know it's my turn to make an impression. I blabber something about being Batman and it gets a chuckle, but it's something I need to workshop. A familiar face, my father's, hands me a beer for participating. It's cold and blue. I get handed another one. You know this stuff really is not so bad. After about my third can, I am beginning to think about the absolute slander Bud Light receives. I disagree heavily and I don't think we should feel ashamed about it, I don't.

I feel lighter, better. A warm feeling floats me to my cousins' side. She is boasting about her trivia knowledge. This witch is oddly comforting, and I want to be near her. The fire is just embers now, and I am drunk. Before I know, it everyone is asleep and my cousin and I sit in the noise of the forest. The sky is so black I feel like I am trapped beneath a styrofoam cup. I can hear a frog in the distance.

"Why didn't you make your mother come?" Like I have the power to make anybody do anything.

"You know this isn't her thing. It was easier to just leave her alone."

Bowing my head, I am begging her to let me go to sleep. The worms on the floor are vibrating against each other, making waves that move east. I immediately regret squishing their pattern with my boot. Moving quickly, I remove my boot to find worm goo, but my boot is clean.

"That's not true, she just doesn't love her family."

I'm crying now, but it's not because of the fire because there are only embers. Through the legs of the trees I can see the rippling glimmer of moonlight on the black lake. I wander in the opposite direction. Beneath this styrofoam cup the only thing that is guiding me is the noise soft dirt and dehydrated leaves under my bare feet. The earth becomes marsh and I stop. The grime ebbs into my toes. I don't like it, but I allow it. There are definitely worms in this dirt. A frog with a familiar croak calls my name and I

am standing on the edge of a black lake. The black lake is small, depending on what you think small is. If a seven story building is small for you, then the lake might be very small. If you think swimming pools are large, then you might say that this lake is very large. To me, it is perfect.

Black glass shows me the upside down reflection of two stark white swans who casually float by. They are so casually in love. They are in love, but not because they think they are better than anyone. Although they are not better than anyone else, they are in love. As well as being in love, they know that they are just like everything else. Everything else, watching, knows that the two are not so much better than them, they are ordinary.

Although they are ordinary, they are different. Their difference is not in the way they float, because I can float too. Their difference is also not in the way they breathe, we all breathe. Well most of us breathe, some of us don't breathe. Some of us don't breathe anymore. Some people say they would rather not breathe than be ordinary. But that would mean that they would be dead. That would mean that they would rather be dead than be ordinary. But breathing and being ordinary are the same thing. The point is that the swans are in love.

We were not alone. Tadpoles are hugging my feet around the ankles, and although this would usually make me feel nervous I am incredibly at ease. Sleepy frog inhabited lily pads are a few shades lighter than the black surface of the water. Everyone is either asleep or pre-cautious about my presence. I whisper my apologies to them and creep my toes further into the soft mud. Although it is late, and very dark, the water feels like a warm bath that has just been drawn. I think that somehow I am at the bottom of this body of water. Above me I can see my reflection, as though I am looking up at a mirror. It really is unusually warm. I kick my feet and push the soft water beneath me, moving toward the wavering image of myself. I look pale. My fingertips reach the air and I am so

relieved to not be trapped or drowning in this warm, black, lake. The contrasting cold midnight air pricks my ears in an uncomfortable way. Looking west, the direction from which I came, the faintest, tiniest light is visible and I see my cousin sitting alone near the embers. She is hardly a shape anymore. Just a thing that is blocking the light of the embers to spread. What a strange time I find myself in, in the time of swans, and in the time of geese, and in the time of frogs that have not been touched by me. Have not been touched by the current of time that seems to buzz at the very tops of these birch trees.