

Spiritus Mundi

By Leah Bailly

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

From "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats

It was the summer of the fires. They hung over us like something you could taste; charred branches and blackened needles and stumps seeping amber all over the hot ground. During the day, the sun beat red in the sky. When we washed our faces before bed, there was soot left wrinkled onto our facecloths. Our eyes stung. Our throats felt scratchy all summer long.

Before that year, none of our cabins had televisions; we would crack pistachios and play cards and read thick mysteries every summer night. But that year, our parents lugged their old sets out from the city and plugged them in around our living rooms, and after dinner they'd tune to the CBC for news of the fires. We hated the televisions; they were cartoon-less, cranky. We retreated to the lake, but that felt strange too.

Helicopters would buzz over us unpredictably, the horizon would glow in the wrong spots, nowhere near where the sun was supposed to rise and set. Some of us wanted the

fires to come, our only chance at a military operation, at being refugees, of losing something. Others knew that if the fires came to our lake, we'd never get it back.

That was the first summer we swam at night, unsupervised. It was a wicked feeling, the water biting at us with night chill, the unseen reeds brushing our ankles in a new, living way. We tried to kiss, a few of us, with open mouths. We'd be terrified to do it on land, during the day, but shrouded under the low smoke, only our heads bobbing out over the starless surface, our parents huddled in their lit living rooms, sipping unsweetened tea and charting the winds—it was just another new thing for us to taste: the smoke, the hot sap, the inside of someone's mouth. Every night, we pressed mouths. We dipped underwater and pressed mouths some more.

The night it all came apart, one of us literally got hooked. It was the ugliest one of us, a girl— and it was through the ear, with a real fishing hook, rusted and barbed and impossibly thrust right through her flesh. She was also the bravest of us, and could dive right into the black hole, a spot past the floating dock with a huge inky middle that seemed to swirl. The water there was so cold it would collapse your chest when you kicked down. Despite being the ugliest, she had the most satiny mouth of us all. Her lips wouldn't mash against yours; her tongue wouldn't flounder around between your teeth. She'd just press, and move her lips so lightly it was like she was spelling your name. Sometimes you'd open your eyes and her hand would be nearly touching your cheek, her fingertips tracing the invisible border between you. Under water our legs would beat and our small arms would pump, just to keep our heads above the surface. After she'd pull away, it took a second to gulp enough breath before diving under, the lake water cooling our hot cheeks.

The night she was snared by that fishing hook, she didn't even scream. She just waded up to the beach, and at first we called out, then we splashed after her. In the dim light, we could see the gash, her ear pierced twice, in and out. It was bleeding, the dark of it dripping down her neck with her streaming hair. There was still a bit of black string attached to the hook's rusty eye. We knew we'd have to plod up to someone's cabin and tell someone's parents. No one said it, but we knew: It would be the end of night swimming, of pressing mouths. Resigned, we dried off with our T-shirts. Her hands shook, and we had to help her pull her shirt over her head without touching the ear. Blood and lake water immediately stained her shoulder. Her hands were trembling so hard she couldn't pull up her jean shorts so we helped her with that too, tugging the little shorts up over each foot, up each leg, slipping the button through the slit around her waist. We hated her then, for creating a thing we wanted so bad and then taking it from us, just as fast.

Eventually we ended up in her cabin, the yellow light of the front hall on all the rows of gumboots and raincoats and musty toques and sweaters. Her mother shrieked at us and stared, the ear swelling now, still leaking blood. Our friend stood still, except for the shivering. Her face was hollow, washed out. In that light, she looked more like a boy than a girl, skinny everywhere but the parts that had grown first, her knobby knees and hands and bony shoulders. She was a head taller than the rest of us, but the same age. Her mother looked nothing like her, her jeans hiked up over a bulging waist and a huge bosom that wobbled whenever she spoke. Our friend would never end up like this, we thought. She only had two little soft nubs that wouldn't swell. We had stared at them through her frayed bathing suit all summer long.

From inside the cabin, we could hear the television crackling with news. Her mother had disappeared in a wash of telephone calls and shouting, and left us to watch the punctured ear drip blood onto the rug. We wanted to help, in a way that was controlled, nothing like her shrieking mother. Her brat brother galloped towards us and we kicked him away. One of us grabbed a scratchy sweater from the closet and wrapped it around her shoulders. And we waited, our impotence wafting around us like the smell of old wool.

Slowly our parents arrived, one by one, to cart us away. One by one, they peeled us from her yellow front hall, and as we left, each of us got a look from her that said, Thanks, and I'm sorry, both. We marched behind our stern fathers along the paths towards our cabins, past our mother's flowerbeds and our brother's ancient swing sets. Our fathers growled at us and listed the many reasons why swimming at night was a cardinal sin, punishable by throttling, by maimed ears. Our eyes watered; the smoke a real thing that night, almost visible around us. That's what you get, they told us. She got what she deserved.

Inside our own cabins, everything was off kilter. Years worth of winter coats had been piled haphazardly by the door. On our beds, our suitcases were flayed open. Pictures were wrested from the walls. The news was forbidding, blaring now through every room. Our parents, too busy to explain, left us to collect details in short, stoic bursts from the loathsome TV: The fires were cresting over the pass, to the opposite shore. The evacuation is in progress. We were in the midst of it now. The emergency was ours.

Our sisters wailed, and needed help packing their dolls, their pajamas. Our mothers needed us to empty the fridge, to run back and forth between our mud-rooms

and our station wagons, while our fathers loaded their trunks. There were old books to stockpile, photo albums and heirloom tea sets to box, to tie to roof racks. We all secretly thumbed our damp bathing suits under our clothes, unwilling to change. There were so few moments left. We walked around our doomed cabins, and we touched things: a lamp, an afghan, a yellowed curtain.

In those final minutes, our suitcases stowed, our parents locking up just like the end of every summer – we could do nothing but sit on our porches and press our burning cheeks to our cabin’s walls, knowing they would be charred like the forest, disappeared, the contents melted into the ground like bubbling sap. They were wrong, we thought for the first time in our lives. This is not what we should get. This is not what we deserved. The sky throbbed over us with orange light; one neighbour’s car pulled away, then another.

It wasn’t until we piled into our own back seats that we could see the first lick of flame over the shore. The helicopters swarmed like wasps over it, our lake reflecting their little buzzing lights. Almost all of the cabins had gone dark. We searched for her yellow front hall light, but it had been snuffed too. Our ears pulsed with a new aching, like something we could taste. We pressed our faces to the car windows. We gulped for breath. And rather than watch our cabins disappear, we dipped under water – our fingertips tracing the borders between us, our lips moving so lightly it was like spelling her name.