What the Living Do

ERICA CAVANAGH

The first time my daughter walked toward an ocean, all on her own, not carried in my arms, she was three, in Norfolk, Virginia, tentatively stepping through a tunnel of tall seagrasses until the grasses broke open. Ah! she gasped and bound off laughing, running straight into the water, splashing, and running out as the sea chased her until she turned around and chased the sea back.

I remember this chase from the first time I saw the ocean, too, at three years old, in Pemaquid, Maine. Don't go out of my sight, said Grandma, and I bound off to the tide, amazed at the sea pouring up the shore and pulling back, pouring up and pulling back, ringing around my ankles, and then my stomach as I sat in the rush and retreat of the tide.

I wandered all over that pocket beach, all the way to a seawall of rocks, jutting out into the ocean, and before I climbed, I looked back to see if Grandma could see me. No one else was there, so it was easy to spot her reading the paper, legs crossed at the ankles, and my big brother in red trunks building sandcastles beside her.

I clambered onto the craggy rocks. They were all pocked with puddles, and one puddle that turned out not to be a puddle at all but a deep hollow with barnacles and snails studding the walls and two plum-colored starfish lying on the sandy bottom like sleepy children. I squatted closer. I had never seen starfish before. Something moved in the shadows. I stared at the pool, trying to be still, wondering if I'd seen anything at all, when a crab inched into the light. One step. Two. He seemed to teeter toward a third step, but held still, fixed in a fuzzy sliver of light, the pause pregnant

with energy, this way or that way, as if all the stakes in life rested on turning away or venturing forth.

Don't be afraid, I said telepathically. But the crab was wound tight, as guarded as my brother. Slowly, I reached a finger toward the surface to say, See? I'm okay. I won't hurt you. But the crab leapt back into the shadows.

I stared at the pool for a long time, peering into its dark places for a sign of the crab, wanting him to come back, wondering how far the shadows stretched. Maybe there was a tunnel. What if the tunnel stretched all the way to the ocean? I understood the crab had reasons for hiding. To him, I was an invader, and so I lay down, my back against the craggy rocks, imagining secret worlds. A seagull glided in figure eights against the pale sky, and the waves in the rocks echoed through my body. A kind of cathedral calm took over. I was inside the earth's breathing. I was me and more than me. I was small and not small. I had a place in the care of the world, and for a three-year-old girl, that meant *Don't scare the crabs, and if you thought about poking the starfish, don't do that either.*

Grandma got cross when I stayed away too long, so I climbed down and followed the tideline toward the middle of the beach where they sat. I didn't want to leave, and Grandma and Jim didn't appear to be in a hurry, so I stopped along the way, relishing the rush of the waters, waters that held me and let go, held me and let go. I wanted to bring the ocean home and began picking up shells, rinsing each one, and running my finger along the ridges. When an emptied crab shell washed up, face down in the sand, I couldn't quite grasp what it was. Where was the crab? It may have been my first notion of death as meaning *gone,* and I didn't want a single crab, even a dead one, to feel abandoned, so I brought him home.

When Grandma took me into the changing area, helping me out of my wet bathing suit, she scowled. How many times do I have to tell you not to sit in the tide? It's unladylike. She said I got sand in places she wouldn't mention by name. You'll get the car dirty, and your poor grandmother has to clean it up. Once Grandma got going, it was difficult for her to stop. Back in the car she referred to my brother as her prince. He didn't cause her nearly as much trouble, she said. And don't collect crab shells. They stink up the car.

She would really cut into you, my father once said of her.

I grew up at home in nature because whatever nature did, it wasn't personal. Nature was just being itself. Nature did not possess the faculties of

reason or prejudice, as humans did, or the ability to reflect on and govern how they treated others. I became a wanderer. Wandering nourished me. Wandering enabled me to cultivate an inner life apart that I carry with me. Almost anywhere, when I am alone and lying still, the ocean rocks me. I am rooted to a place inside me, and that place and I are rooted to Pemaquid and to Grandma, too, as complicated as that may be, and Grandma, or Ruby, as I think of her now, was rooted to Pemaquid, but mostly western Massachusetts, where she lived almost her entire life. Ruby knew the names of all the flowers in Emily Dickinson's garden—lady slippers, foxgloves, zinnias, hollyhocks—and she was proud to live in rural Monson, where Dickinson's mother, Emily Norcross, once lived, and where the Norcross descendants established a wildlife sanctuary, and she, Ruby, established a sanctuary out of the fifteen acres of woods her father bequeathed to her, turning away developers whenever they pressured her to sell the land. She bequeathed these values to her children and grandchildren. Nature tied her to herself. Nature offered her a sense of security that marriage could not, marriage being tied, not to security, but dependence and the degradations of having to ask her husband for money. Nature offered her greater security than being born before women could vote, when a man her young husband admired, a *Mr. Whitney,* she once said bitterly to me, told her husband women couldn't be trusted and to keep her on a short leash. Nature offered her the chance to be unbound, ageless, married to the seasons, making her life larger and more expansive. I carry that too.

In 2003, when I was twenty-nine, I returned to Pemaquid for the first time in two dozen years. I'd lived in many places by then, as far away as Benin as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was having trouble coming back. It was a difficult time to be from here, right after 9/11, when I wished, along with Representative Barbara Lee, "Let us not become the evil we deplore," and instead the U.S. reacted with blind and sweeping vengeance. I wondered if I ever would find a home in this country. Dislocated and heartbroken, I returned to a place I trusted.

At Pemaquid, I couldn't wait to walk out on the rocky outcroppings that bookend the beach only to be surprised to find them covered in massive mops of seaweed. It wasn't like this before, I thought and walked all over the kelp-carpeted rocks, worried I might crush something hiding underneath. There were only a few narrow bald spots where the seaweed parted, but not

a single tidepool, only shallow crevices studded with barnacles. I got down and walked along the sides of the rocks, too, looking for starfish and crabs, then crab shells, and found none. It was like arriving at a once-beloved village only to find it abandoned. I returned to the shallow pools with the barnacles and squatted down to look at them. I had never really looked at them before. I'd thought they were inanimate, but they were alive. They moved. The white craters opened and closed like an old man's eyelids, and when they opened, little eyelashes swept out and withdrew, tiny eyelashes, fragile and determined to find food.

We were at the beginning of a massive starfish die-off, mostly on the Pacific coast, but in Rhode Island and Maine, too, from an infectious wasting disease. In the history of the world, disease come and go, but in some areas, this disease hasn't abated for nearly twenty years, killing more stars than previous epidemics. Asked why, scientist Joe Gaydos of University of California, Davis, said, "What we think is that the warm water anomalies made these starfish more susceptible to the disease that was already out there."

In 2020, a *Bangor Daily News* article reported that starfish are making a comeback in Blue Hill, over one hundred miles north of Pemaquid. Scientists wanted citizens' help in counting them. The news should have made me hopeful, but the green crabs and purple starfish that once populated Pemaquid's tidepools remain gone, existing only in my imagination, and as our climate warms, I fear the starfish north of Pemaquid will die again and again only to reappear farther and farther north, gone from the homes that had once been habitable.

I live in Virginia now with my four-year-old daughter. Each summer I take her to Assateague Island off the Eastern Shore. When the waves are long and low, we sit in the tide together, and when we need a break from the sun, we retreat to our beach tent and watch the nickel-sized holes in the sand. Those holes are where ghost crabs have burrowed long, slender tunnels. We watch from off to the side, so we can see how they come out, cautiously, first, as one protruding eye, like an alien periscope, and then two eyes and a few fingerling legs edging out like a child half-hiding behind a door. The crab scuttles back and forth, hide-and-seek style, now you see me, now you don't. My daughter giggles. Why don't the baby crabs come out? she asks. I tell her they're small and we're big. They know they could be trampled or plucked up by a seagull, so they're being careful.

I don't know how she hears the things I say, but I do know, in the words of botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer, that "Being a good mother means teaching your children to care for the world." Observe each life as having a purpose and each life as having something to teach us. My hope is that she'll come to understand that the fate of our mutual lives resides in possessing the humility to measure our scale and possible impact on one another and govern ourselves accordingly.

Back home, after a bath, my daughter plucks her plastic toy crab from the drained tub, puts the crab in a cup, and fills it with water.

"Crabs can't live without water for very long," she tells me.

I smile at my little animist. She's practicing the art of what she could save through care. I wonder a lot about what's salvageable. I wonder if Assateague, a wildlife refuge, will ever be uninhabitable for the creatures who live there now, in its relatively protected terrain, or if its waters will ever be unswimmable, as they were in 2020, our first venture out in the pandemic. I had just stepped from the parking lot onto the beach, pulling my daughter in a thick-wheeled wagon, when an old woman turned from her beach chair and said to me, "Don't go out into the water with her. There's sea lice." My grandmother often warned of undertows and child abductors, so I wasn't sure whether to believe her, and what was sea lice anyway? That night, googling at the Airbnb, I learned that sea lice is a common name for jellyfish larvae, and indeed, there was an outbreak of jellyfish larvae close to shore from Maryland down to the Carolinas. Jellyfish are the only sea creatures that thrive in warming waters. All week, I saw beachgoers who presumably did not know, swim out to the shoals, happy, seemingly untouched and basking in the warm August waters, then panicked, rushing back to shore, some of them screaming as they tried to bat the stinging larvae from their bodies.

It is one year later, and I am writing this in the summer when record heat took over the Pacific Northwest. Dead mussels, clams, sea stars, snails, and barnacles blanketed sea rocks from Canada down to Oregon; the mussels split open, their flesh cooked to death. I am writing this the summer when a red tide from fertilizer runoff made the Florida Gulf Coast toxic. Dead fish washed up on shore, an estimated six hundred tons of dead marine life, and a stench that made it difficult for humans and fish alike to breathe. I am writing to you from the summer a friend had to evacuate her kids from camp in Northern California because the Air Quality Index rose over three hundred from a nearby fire. She wrote, "Most of the kids vomited from the smoke." I am writing this from the summer I traveled to Denver to see family. A hazy scrim obscured the Rockies. There were blazes everywhere. The *Denver Post* reported that for the past two years ozone levels have been 48 percent over the federal limit. Dr. James Crooks, a Denver-based climate researcher, said the ozone makes it "relatively dangerous" to go outside from July through October.

On a cool day, when the Colorado fires seemed at bay, my daughter and I walked a wooded trail in the foothills of Conifer with my partner and his family. As we stopped to look at each wildflower, I typed their names in my Notes app: asters, goldenrod, bluebells, yellow snapdragons, yarrow, lupine, buttercups, Indian paintbrush. We used another app to identify the wildflowers we had yet to learn: fireweed, arnica, butter and eggs, nodding onions, wild buckwheat, mariposa lily, wild blanket flower. Grandma Ruby would be right at home in this activity. To document is to cherish. I think of Marie Howe, who, after her brother died, catches a glimpse of her reflection in the window of a store and is "gripped by a cherishing so deep" for her own face. "I am living, I remember you," she says. My cherishing is like that. I record the names to say these flowers were here; we were here—as if that could preserve them—because I know this place could burn.