**Homesick**

Jacqueline Bédard

 I crave the sweet tang of the lake and the way it leaves soft traces on my skin. Each time I slip through the water I am home, every surfacing a tiny baptism. The current pulses gently against my closed eyelids and sometimes, if I float very still, I swear I can pick out a heartbeat way off in the deep. If the lake is home, it is time as well. Thick bands of different textures and temperatures all slabbed one on top of the other. Sun-warmed and wind-ruffled on top, cool and creamy below. Deeper still, and the world is heavy, dense, and slow. A deep breath held in. Shadows have heft down here, as though the weight of it all produces creatures purely from different shades of darkness. Wide shafts of light disappear, gulped down eagerly by the hard brightness at the surface.

 Some days I drift, others I swim. The lake eases tired muscles and sore souls and bruised minds. It buoys up leaden limbs and beaten spirits. Land-life has a way of making me feel weak but, slicing through the water, I am sleek and strong. It regulates my jangled breath, matching the strokes of my arms while my legs kick up a steady back beat. The world is alternately heat and light, liquid and gold, and the sun brands delicate patterns into my eyes.

 I am fearful of many things, but open water is not one of them. I choose a direction and strike out, soon lost in the motion.

 Coming back is more difficult. I pick out a point on shore to aim for, sighting it from time to time and course correcting as necessary. Sometimes I forget though, life once again shrinking and expanding at the rhythm of my lungs, the turn of my head, the pull of my body. When, at length, I do glance up, I realize that I’ve veered far off target. As though the land has been rearranged while I was away. I pause for a moment, suspended vertically. The delicious sensation of nothingness stretching far below my feet. I sink down so that only my eyes are visible, just above the water’s lip. It tastes ancient and green, thick with all the busy living and dying carrying on below the surface. I offer myself just a moment longer, watching. The people on the beach and among the trees, the dimpling of the lapping waves. The way my limbs look blurred and alien below, shining in the murk. And then I set off, again. The current is with me now, and I arch my body ever so slightly, cupping the cresting swell and picking up speed. I mean to look up, gauge my distance, make sure I’m on track, but I don’t. Just one more stroke, I think, and one more after that. And so I stop only when my fingertips suddenly drag through clay, not liquid, and send up festively silty ribbons.

 My arms are wrung out. A pleasant, earned heaviness that I notice when I stand up and slick back my hair. My mind is the same. Stilled, for the moment. The shore is starting to fill in earnest now, shrieking children and sweating coolers and old women in flowing floral dresses. The sun burns brighter. The last tendrils of mist are seared away.

 I gather up my things, towel off, and turn to leave.

 Yet even in the car I hug its edges, hard daylight shattered and rippling across the waves, glinting through the trees.