

there and back again

(a fairytale in three parts)

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I.

This is the trouble with the bottom of the lake: once the silt settles in, there's hardly room for anything else. There's no light here—no shining moon, no swirling sunbeams, nothing to differentiate day from night from odd in-between times when the sun and stars coexist. I cannot tell you how long I've been here, nor can I tell you why; If I was someone somewhere before the lakebed, the memory has long since passed.

How long have I been here? I couldn't tell you that either, but I do know that I'm well preserved. I've always been the type to grow where I'm planted, but I don't think I'm meant for fertilizer. Not yet, anyway. I sit and unfurl folktales for the fish, who neither appreciate nor understand my stories. That is fine, for now. Everything is, for now.

You may ask: why haven't I tried to leave the lake?

I may answer: why leave?

I'm safe enough here, though I'd much rather a riverbed; there is no light there either but at least the water flows. I grow tired of stagnation, of clouds of mosquitos and muck and rot. Distantly, I can remember tales of people preserved for centuries in such stagnation; I try to tell the fish but they do not seem to care. They like the pond scum and dragonflies skimming the surface of the lake. I am happy for them, and were I not green with algae I'd be green with envy. I never breach the surface of contentment and it is my own doing but that does not mean I have to be thrilled with it.

II.

I never thought I'd miss the lakebed, but then again I never thought I'd leave. My newest (and only) friend has taken to calling me a mermaid; I do not tell him this is only half-true. I do not tell him that I am much more and much worse than he knows. I do not tell him that the only reason he sees me this way is through the force of my own will— who needs a sea witch to steal your voice when you can do the work yourself?

I did not know I had this power at the bottom of the lake, perhaps because I did not need it. I am not so convinced I need it now, but how could I know that when he offered me his hand and pulled me out of the water?

I thought the dryness of the air would wrench my discontent from my pruned fingers, that seeing the sun and moon and stars unobscured by ripples and reeds would cure the hollow searchlight in my chest.

When I leave, I do not say goodbye; he does not deserve it and the moon already knows.

III.

The crushing press of lake water is a welcoming embrace. This, this is what I know. I do not belong here any more than I belong up there, but here I know the rules. I know the fish and their silent schools, I know the steady hum of mosquitos and the froth of the water lapping against the shore. I know that I am not meant for more or less than this. I am content and I am free, and I will let that be enough.