

Drowning in shallow water is our only escape

ERNESTINE SAANKALÁXT HAYES

One man stands on the deck of someone else's dream. The shore grows distant. He jumps into the water, meaning to drown. But fear overtakes him. His determined legs defy green-tinged water eager to embrace—whether to drown him or to save him, no one can say. He spends the next many lifetimes wondering if the water would still be kind should he wave to the seiners and dugouts and skiffs passing by, sometimes calling his name even now, these lifetimes later. “Friend!” they sometimes cry. “Delphin! Husband! Brother! Come back!” But he trembles in the shadows of his campsite under patient rustling trees not far from the shoreline and keeps watch on the inlet where his old friend Young Tom struggles for one last chance to make things right. Where, like Delphin, Young Tom fights for one last chance to love. Where, like everyone they both know, Young Tom grasps one last clumsy time for the chance of a better life. Where, swimming for shallow water, Young Tom surrenders to unwelcome rescue, and with uncrowned men and runaway boys and women wailing promises of good fortune, they wait. There in the spoken forest, they wait.

The days, weeks, years leading to that morning are full of sunlight, laughter,

pain. Delphin and Young Tom are both fully human then, full of vinegar, full of piss, full of need. Delphin makes his home on the side of a hill halfway to unfriendly streets, halfway to rows of houses into which he is not invited. Only one house on a low margin at the edge of a dirt-path village welcomes him, only one house where wait his mother, his wife, his friends, and his grandma, dressed in white cotton, all of them calling his name.

Delphin stands on the deck of a seine boat steaming south. Juneau harbor, Juneau town, Juneau mountains—all of it recedes. The memory of a girl he calls Dink waves constant goodbye from the city dock outside the cold storage where Big Jim Manning tosses gaping heads of salmon and halibut out the open doors. Bloody heads spin fast over slime and gut and slam loud against the pier. The girl laughs at her grandpa, hungover and stiff with dignity, as he walks past the wide cold storage doors. Delphin turns his gaze away from the diminishing girl, the fading mountain. He forgets the girl. He forgets mountains and harbor. He forgets his life.

He's fast with a knife on the street and clever with a knife in the galley. The whole crew on any fishing boat is always relieved when he's let out of jail in time to finish the grub list. When Captain sets the course toward Hoonah way, everyone looks forward to adobo.

Delphin's only a boy when white office people grab him off a dirt street on his way to Buzz and Skip's house and take him on the ferry boat to a three-story building in another town, where he is forced to sleep in a sparse room with other boys and to wake up tired and pray for breakfast and wipe tables and wipe floors and sit unmoving and silent on hard chairs in cold rooms and to stand up straight and flatten innocent hands over his despondent heart and recite allegiance to a drooping flag and pray please god let me go outside today and pray thank you for the birds that sing and pray let me go home let me go home and pray if I die before I wake and wake up anyway and pray for a good breakfast. Mostly he prays not to be pulled into the room the preacher calls his bible closet. When the big boys finally admit they can't fight him into the closet anymore the pastor stops forcing him to kneel in special prayer. The second time he fails tenth grade his prayers are answered and they send him back home to Juneau.

He cherishes Buzzy's niece and loves her as any uncle would. He grows up with Buzz and Skip, and his heart breaks again and again every time he catches her right before she walks into the jukebox-neon teenage club where he never stops spinning her on the smooth-moves dance floor in a jitterbug she remembers for the rest of her life, just as they both remember the moment he stops her there on the sidewalk, his heart breaking with bad news.

With the soft touch of calloused fisherman jailhouse hands he stops her before she steps toward the old building, where, as a ten-year-old, she attended fifth grade, already precocious, and where she now calls nine ball corner pocket and perfects her rock 'n' roll jitterbug moves.

"Go home," he tells her.

She laughs. "I'm going inside—you come too, maybe there's a table open!" Before she laughs again, she registers a new story telling itself on his face. "What's wrong?" she asks. When he struggles for words, she makes a joke of it. "What's wrong, did somebody die?" She laughs again.

Buzzy works a midnight shift at the newspaper, hoping whiteman's dollars might stretch far enough to buy pretty things for the woman who lets him live with her and for toys to give to her other-man's baby and for fines to stay out of whiteman's jail and for money to give to Dink's grandma to buy vodka for herself or wine for her friends or a pitcher of beer at the Indian bar out of which she staggers one night headed in the wrong direction and dies cold and alone in the city dump at the base of the steep climb to the gold mine that made all the whitemen show up in the first place. Buzzy pickets unfair treatment in front of the newspaper office on seaward street as though he knows what fair treatment is and he gets drunk and walks back and forth in the cold rain holding a sign that says Unfair! until he passes out half on the curb and half in the street and his lungs fill with rain and wine and vomit and grief and pain and devastated longing and he dies and Delphin stops the girl they both love and there on the sidewalk he gives her the news that her favorite uncle Buzz is dead and Delphin wants only to run.

It's hard not to look at her tight-fitting red-hot skirt, hard not to imagine her funny laugh, hard not to savor the way she follows his lead against the flickering light of the club's donated jukebox. He only dances fast songs with her. He won't hold her in a slow dance. Whenever he catches a coastie or a tourist or anyone new in town giving her liquor or pills, he slings her over his

shoulders and delivers her to her always puzzled, uncomplaining mother. One night he slow-walks over playground gravel to a patrol car parked, lights off, near the edge of the big kids' swimming pool at evergreen bowl, and there she is, holding a beer and a cigarette and wiggling around in the back seat with officer munroe, the same guy who arrested him twice so far this year, the same guy who nudged Buzz's cold body with the tip of his polished, regulation-shined cop shoe in the stinging rain. Munroe rolls out of the paddy wagon, Dink right behind him.

Delphin reaches for Dink's arm. "Come on, Little One," he tells her. "I'll take you home."

"Hi you, handsome!" She balances a bottle of cheap beer in one hand, straightens her blouse with the other. Checks her hair. Laughs.

Officer munroe adjusts his belt. He adjusts his weapon. He closes the back door, opens the front side door. "Get in," he orders the girl.

"I'll take her home," Delphin tells munroe. "I'll go ahead and take her to her mother."

Munroe pushes Dink toward the open door. "I'll take her." He smiles. "She can go with me." He stares at Delphin. He smirks. He caresses his police special. He stares and smirks and waits for Delphin to make a move. He's already excited.

Dink climbs into the front seat, takes a sip, spins the warm bottle out the door. "Ugh! It's too warm!" She leans back, closes her eyes. "You're right. I need to go home." She grips the edge of the open door.

Munroe fits her back into the front seat, tucks her in, shuts the door. He turns again to Delphin. Touches his gun. "She's going with me," he warns. "You can leave now."

Delphin chokes on words he wants to say. Crack the bone, he tells himself. Suck the marrow, suck the fat, eat the words. Stay out of jail. Walk away. Run.

Delphin gets married the year Buzzy dies but that doesn't keep him out of jail and it doesn't keep Dink from being sent to boarding schools and it doesn't stop Dink's mom from taking her to california. Delphin never hears from them again. His wife wants him to stay in Juneau and get a regular job but no one will hire him except the newspaper and munroe keeps arresting him and every time they let him out he walks straight down to the harbor and signs on with the first boat that will take him even though he misses Buzz and he misses Young Tom

and he wishes only to forget this life and he wants only to run.

Delphin swims for shallow water. Young Tom swims for shallow water. Other men keep watch. Other men run into the forest. Boys and men run into cities, into streets, into forest, into tundra. When the urge to touch food overwhelms, they creep onto covered porches where shallow bowls of grease or broth or dryfish wait. Runaway men press cold lips on now cold bowls and dream they can still chew, can still savor. Can still taste the lives they lived before they were taken away, can spit out all the bile poured into them by all the munroes. Grief carries them to avenues, altars, counters, cells, sick rooms, empty heavens. Grief leads them to shallow papers, thin seasons, hunger, cold, tears, to concrete stories, unlighted windows, abandoned children, prisons. Sidewalks. Boardrooms. Dance floors.

Grandmas wear white cotton dresses that never keep them warm. Mothers get sick and fathers cry and friends die and church people take running boys and their running sisters to places where too many children learn how to do too many things the whiteman way—how to pour whiteman coffee how to wash whiteman dishes how to sweep whiteman floors how to wipe whiteman toilets. How to choke on whiteman rules. How to rejoice the costs of salvation—disease, alcohol, loss, pain, loss.

Delphin's sore heart will not let him dismiss the thought of companions who expect him to die, friends who believe he will never return, relatives who picture him alone on bare rock. Shoulders curved against his family's whitened hope, he sits with birds that are comforted by his presence, he eats their eggs and their flesh, he sucks brains and eyeballs from their cavities. He warms himself with feathers and vengeance. At the moment he convinces himself he can swim back to the shore where wait his grandma, his mother, his wife, his friends, he finds a patch of seaweed and then rocks and then sand and then shore, grass close by, willows, spruce, a spoken forest where running boys and their companions listen for loved ones calling their names.

Delphin sometimes runs again when the river's edge hardens. He sometimes stops at porches to touch and smell dried or fresh fish or cold broth. But what he needs most is not fish, not bread, not tea. What he needs most is not fresh water left on a porch or in a yard near a chained dog curled into a round rug. His

hungry feet no longer seek hard ground, his outstretched arms no longer glance the frozen brush, leaves no longer rustle at his pass. He simply watches, there in the spoken forest, waiting for the day our names are called. Waiting for the day we drown in shallow water.

