

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

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WAKING WATER

*Everything in front of you is blue and you're a little girl again happy in Grandma Flossie's blue house. You're walking into the color blue that births the blue doves and blue hummingbirds and you're singing the day up. And from the blue of the sky come the trees and grass and Grandma telling you that the first man had been broken from a blue crab, and the first woman got a baby in her belly from swallowing blue corn. Then all goes black in the blue house. The storm comes and you see trees in the water and an old woman hanging onto a branch. Her mouth open like a gutted trout. Neighbor houses are loose in the flood, blocks of shotguns and camelbacks. Misty yellow clots of souls. Maybe they've always been there, but now without electricity you really see them. What the slaves made their light from bobbing in the darkness: flickering grease lamps, iron bowls filled with lard and burning rags, hundreds of them.*

"Sunrise, you're walking in your sleep again," Jamer yelled. "One more step and you're going to go swimming in the bayou."

Mosquitoes began to bite. I blinked. The sun was about to smack my face.

He called again from his bunk, all trussed up in the sheets.

I guess I was sleepwalking. Why else would I be standing on the houseboat deck in my ribbed T-shirt and bunny slippers gawking at the dawn? A tear of sweat trickled from my forehead over my eyelid, trembling there. Sunrise, a silly name. I'd begged Grandma to change my name to Bluebird, but she turned her nose up and said Sunrise was just fine because I was born as the sun was coming up. We didn't talk about my mother. Period. But we talked about my sleepwalking and Grandma sometimes tied me down in my bed.

"Wake up." Jamer's squeaky voice went soft. "Get inside. I hear something. A boat." His head popped up, smooth with the shave I gave him yesterday. He hugged a pillow under his chin and another in his arms, but they didn't keep him calm because when he got up the bed looked like a brawl, the sheets clawed and twisted. "I have the listening ears, right? That's my job."

"That's your job, honey Jamer. You have the listening ears."

I held onto the rail looking over the brokenness of the Bayou Lafitte. I had the looking eyes. The small fry hadn't been right since the big one and neither had the crawfish. The storm hurt more than people, and you could hear trees scrambling to get their branches back, and sunfish trying to breathe and not finding any air below popping their mouths out of the bayou. The water smelled mucky like fish innards. I shuffled to the door of the houseboat where Jamer, Baby Desiree and I had been squatting. We

didn't have a calendar and the days were all mixed up.

Today felt like a yearning, like a Thursday. Thursday was always little ring spaghetti for school lunch and my mouth stayed wet all morning waiting for the first bites. I kissed the palms of my hands and lifted my arms over my head giving love to the morning, love to the water and sun.

The houseboat's real owner had named these shellacked boards and slabs of fiberglass. We'd been here awhile before I discovered the faded red lettering. I was crawling on the ladder reaching down to rescue a water lily. I didn't hurt the lily to take its blossom; it just got itself tangled. I would have bawled myself out if I'd grabbed something living and made it dead, but that's when I saw the name like a secret message. Two words: *Waking Water*.

We were storm orphans. Baby Desiree didn't belong to anyone when we found her on Desire Street like baby Moses in the reeds. Jamer's mother escaped to Lowell, Massachusetts, where the town bought her and her husband and their toddler a house. Because he was thirteen and big for his age and had a different father, his mother's new husband didn't want Jamer. Every so often he'd call her from Pepaw's Pier 90, and she'd complain about the cold up there. It had even snowed. When I was awake and tried to remember Grandma Flossie all I could see was myself in the little blue house taking long hot baths and unfolding her favorite cotillion gown. "This fat ass can't fit anymore in that thing. You go on, baby, and play in it," she'd say.

"Sunrise," Jamer hissed, "a boat's coming. I hear the water shaking."

I felt the water quivering too, a fierce hum on the far side of the island. The shivers started in my toes. "Good Jamer, no one has ears like you. Yes, there's a boat. Not the whole thing yet."

The boat bounced through its own wake around the tip of the island, toward us, waves of gray water rippling out among the cypress knees.

I shut the door to the houseboat from the outside, jammed two sawed off pieces of broomstick into hinges on either side of the door so that it looked boarded up, and then I thought myself small. At fifteen, I was a shrimp weighing eighty-nine pounds. I stepped on a stool and wiggled inside through a window. If I let out my breath I'd be stuck.

Inside was tight. The crib took up one wall, and crammed into a corner, a bookshelf held an old set of World Books. The ones I used to teach Jamer from. Paperbacks rubbed against each other. My favorite was *Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship: The Art of Winning*. Copyright 1937. I'd laugh, reading aloud about playing croquet in a world where they used words like lady and gentleman. There was a dead old-fashioned icebox we used as a cupboard, mostly empty, and a gas stove.

Jamer waited for me.

"It's out there. A bad boat." He gnawed on a piece of the pillow and whenever I made his bed I could see his teeth marks in it. His lashes, long as mockingbird tails and almost as big as the rest of him, were vibrating. His left eye rolled while his right eye kept

looking at me. "They're coming closer."

I squeezed his hand. "It's probably just the water police looking for drugs. No one cares about us." I looked on him like a little brother, although he was six feet tall and could pass for sixteen or seventeen. I was underdeveloped for fifteen, my behind a high tiny apricot. But my mind was strong. Grandma Flossie's two boyfriends used to tease me all the time. They whistled when I wore jeans and T-shirts and started to grow buds. They'd call me so many names like "fat boy teats" and "split tail" that I begged Grandma to throw them out the window.

Jamer's eyes steadied in his head, flecked with fool's gold, like mica. "They'll take us for smugglers. They'll throw us into the water or give us up to fosters."

We were crouching under the table, holding our breath, just a deserted houseboat like lots of them around here. Then Baby Desiree woke, crying. It took two more steps to get to the blue crib, so old it wasn't held together with screws and hinges, but slats that fit into notches and lucky horseshoes. I swooped her up: her shining eyes and butterfly lips, all that nice sleep. "Hush, Desiree, you're a bird, don't you know. Hush," I cooed to her. In her pink T-shirt printed with a dirty but smiling dandelion, she was like those birds singing straight through rain and thunder. Then she kicked me in the chin.

"Here, Jamer, you take her." I groped for her bottle, a bit of stale formula, shook it. "Feed her, Jamer, and find her bippy."

Baby Desiree howled until Jamer had the bottle in his fingers. He couldn't keep his knees from knocking while he tried to fit the nipple into her mouth. A mosquito lit on her forehead and he bent over and blew the green sliver away.

"Keep her drinking, Jamer. Keep her quiet. Then let your mind go. Let's make ourselves quiet." I let out a deep breath, pulled the salmon-ruffle aside, looking out the window.

It was one of those patrol boats bought from the U.S. Coast Guard. Fast mean ones that frightened us most. The boat sidled up to us, splashing water onto the deck of the houseboat. The motor went silent and you could hear ducks quacking and then a muskrat slapped the water.

"I hear them talking," Jamer whispered. "They're going to find us. Haul us off."

"Hush." The boat was close enough for me to study the two officers who stood on deck. Dressed in official windbreakers, the white one had a shotgun crossed over his chest; the other, dark-skinned with a beard and a walkie-talkie at his hip, lifted binoculars and glassed the *Waking Water*.

"Nobody at home," the bearded officer said, letting the binoculars down. "Boarded up."

I wanted to drop my eyes, to bite the pillow like Jamer did, but I lifted my eyes.

Sun was breaking through the gray bowl of the sky. Up in the waterlogged trees on the tiny island two vultures roosted. Black vultures with their red gobbles and at their solemnest. All that sky and where heaven was supposed to be, those vultures sat.