

Benthic Zones

By Alexandra Kessler

My brother Roy has been exchanging punches with a tall blonde boy from Hog Creek for twenty minutes, and he seems to be winning. The blonde boy's face goes a shade paler every time Roy hits him—in the stomach, the chest, and then a backhand across the face. In a moment of strength he reaches to take a swipe at Roy, but Roy ducks and the blonde boy's knuckles graze his ear and the side of his hair, almost tender, like the tentative way our mother touches us, like we'll burst into flames at any second.

Roy and the blonde boy are balancing on a rusted metal ledge that separates the bay from the marina. On one side of the ledge, where me and the seven or eight other boys who are watching stand, is the Clearwater Bay docking where people's boats are tied up. There are big sailboats with shiny chrome clips and finished wood floors that have motors in the back, in case the wind isn't good. There are also old dinghies and kayaks that people have tied up and left, bought on a whim at a yard sale or won at the Fisherman's Fair, used once for a paddle around the creek and then left to barnacle up and drift away. On the other side of the marina ledge is a drop down of about five feet—depending on the tide—into the bay. If one of Roy's punches causes the Blonde boy to

lose his balance on the wall and fall into the bay, then Roy wins. These are the rules of the game. Roy always wins, just like our dead brother, Caleb, used to.

My brother's been fighting all summer and so far he's beaten everyone. The game's been going on every summer since I can remember. It's guys only, obviously, and under no circumstances is anyone to tell their parents anything—if they inquire about injuries, you'd better make something up and make it good. There was never a time when the peeling rusty marina ledge wasn't splotted with the blood of any boy who ever played. Caleb's blood is on there somewhere, bleached pearly pink by the sun.

Once when nobody was there I crouched down to smell the blood droplets to see if I could find Caleb's. I thought his blood would smell different than the others—like rotted wood, maybe—but old blood can't know if its owner's dead or not.

The game starts the first week of June and cumulates in a final tournament the last week of August. Any boy who lives from Kings Point Road to Hog Creek can fight, but you have to be at least sixteen. I'm fourteen, old enough to watch but nothing else. Roy turned sixteen on June first. He's been training all year.

"I'm going to win it all," he said. "You'll see. I'm not going down into the bay, not even once." I nodded and told him good luck. But looking at him, with arms and legs spindly like winter tree branches, it was hard to believe.

By now, the blonde boy has given up. You can tell because instead of trying to hit Roy, he's just trying to stay upright on the ledge. His fists are balled up in front of his face and his eyes are squeezed shut—a big mistake. Roy always says that if you can't see someone's eyes you can hit them harder. Roy arches his back and wipes the sweat off his

forehead with the back of his hand. The blonde boy holds his breath and waits for my brother's kill shot.

At the beginning of the summer, nobody thought much of Roy because he was a new sixteen and it was his first year in the game. Now that August's almost over, they're scared of him. They call him Red Roy, because he's always the first to draw blood in a fight. He wants to be better than Caleb was, and I think that's stupid, because Caleb isn't here to see it.

The blonde boy hits the water with a slap, bay punishing him for losing. We all run to the ledge and look over the side to make sure his blonde head breaks through the murky blue-green. It does, and he swims around the corner where we meet him at the edge of the dock and pull him out. My brother's done a number on him, his face looks like ground beef.

All the boys clap my brother on the back and agree to meet same time same place tomorrow, for round two.

He's getting closer to the final tournament. He's been waiting and training all summer.

Roy and I bicycle home. He's taller than me, but besides that we could be twins. We both have inky black hair and pale skin that never gets tan, even though we live on the beach. Our mother and father are both dark haired, too. Only Caleb was different, with thick hair the color of a honeycomb and eyes like a watered lawn. My mother used to say that Caleb was the earth and Roy and I were the sea.

Roy leans over his handlebars and shakes sweat out of his hair.

“God, Mason. I was so on today. From the moment I got up there I knew I was gonna win. I felt it from the top of my head to the tip of my dick.”

“You were rough on him. When he went down I didn’t know if he’d ever come up.”

“That’s the point. You can’t go soft.” Roy lifted his arm from his handlebar and slapped a mosquito dead against his thigh. Blood oozed out of the tiny carcass. Roy groaned.

“Fuck, he already got me.”

Even though we were far down the road, I could see my house because my mother was renovating it and the whole left side was wall-less and covered in thick, shiny construction plastic that glinted hard in the summer sun. After Caleb’s death, my mother began finding errors in the architecture of the house that she never noticed before. She claimed the dining room was rectangular instead of square, the ceiling in the guest room sloped, the windows on each wall weren’t an equal distance from each other. She would stop mid-sentence and press her hand and ear to any given wall and say she could hear the plaster crumbling. She started moving furniture out of rooms and into the attic and basement, ripping wallpaper off in jagged whale-shaped swaths. She called in construction workers, a team of ruddy, local men who showed up with tools in the back of pickup trucks. The landscaper was tall and thin, with eyes like watery eggs and a beard like steel wool. He never smiled but he let the neighbor’s kids play with his dog. Our mother said everything had to go—that the left side of the house needed to be built from the ground up all over again. It made my father angry, he said she was fixing things that

had no reason to be fixed. Regardless of the construction, Roy and I aren't displaced. The only bedroom on the left side had been Caleb's.

Our father doesn't have much to say about the construction because he's in Santa Fe for the summer at an art show. He's a sculptor. He met my mother when he was at art school in Amagansett, and she was a part-time waitress and part-time nude model. He always said that the second she disrobed under the buzzing fluorescent lights, his block of clay molded itself. Over the years, a few of his pieces showed at Ashawagh Hall, a green-and-white clapboard gallery nestled between Fireplace Road and Old Stone Highway. He sold a few sculptures to local collectors, but made most of his money from owning the Springs General Store, selling overpriced produce, newspapers, duraflame logs, and fried baloney sandwiches. Before the summer started, he got a postcard from an artist's forum he subscribed to inviting him to an intensive sculpture workshop. Even though he barely sculpts anymore, I think he went because being away is better than being here and knowing something's missing.

Roy stands up on his bike pedals and peels away from me.

"Race you back to the house, home stretch."

Roy always wants to race, and I always race him back, because either way he rides away from me and I don't like being left behind.

I'm on his tail until he takes a sharp right turn into our driveway and cuts me off. I speed onto the lawn, and jerk my handlebars to avoid the newly landscaped row of potted mini pine trees. I tumble off my bike seat, face-first onto the sliver of soil between where the lawn ends and the gravel driveway begins. My bike lies on its side, front tire still spinning.

Roy laughs from the driveway. “Jesus, you all right?”

I sit up and spit out dirt. My teeth and hair feel gritty. I wonder what all right is supposed to feel like.

Caleb died last summer, almost exactly a year ago. During the winter it was easier not to think about it because there was a chill in the air and the bay was covered in snow so cold it numbed us. But when the snow melted and the water once again reflected sunsets back into the sky, we started to remember what had happened, that a year had passed since we heard Caleb’s voice or smelled his smell. People say that grief fades with time, but for us grief is seasonal, like an allergy.

On the last day of his life, Caleb was researching Benthic Organisms for an article he was writing. When the summer ended he was going to college to study marine biology at East Hampton Community College. He asked me and Roy to come to the bay with him to help collect samples. We rode our bikes—I balanced nets across my handlebars, Roy wore a fanny pack that Caleb had packed with three magnifying glasses and tissue paper, and Caleb wore a special scientific backpack that had compartments for tiny glass jars and pipettes.

Once we got to the bay, we each took a net and a magnifying glass and waded up to our knees. Caleb explained that ‘Benthos’ was just another word for the creatures that live at the bottom of the sea or in any sedimentary marine environment. For now, Caleb said, he only had access to organisms that lived in tidal pools and along the foreshore, but

his greatest wish was to take a submarine down to the Benthic Zone, the deepest region of the sea.

“The Abyssal Plain has a complete absence of light and warmth. It’s like being stripped of all your senses. But things *live* down there.”

I nodded my head as Roy thrust his net into a pool of glinting minnows, watching them scatter into shadow shards.

“Why don’t you want to study something cool, like sharks? I read somewhere they have three-thousand teeth, like tiny fucking knives.”

Caleb didn’t answer, he just nudged Roy’s shoulder. “Stop trying to catch minnows. I need shrimp.”

After a couple of hours the sky started graying and Roy and I got hungry. We decided to go back to the house for easy mac and Oreos and television. Caleb told us to go ahead without him, because he wanted to take a kayak to the other side of the bay. He said he was looking for a specific species, and he’d be back in an hour.

Three hours later, he wasn’t back. After five, my father went down to the bay to look for him and my mother called the coast guards. He next morning, they found him. His kayak had drifted across the bay and tangled up in seaweed close to shore. Caleb was inside it, but he was dead, lying with his arms outstretched and hanging over either side. He had cut his wrists open and emptied his body out into the water. His body was surrounded by little glass jars of confused, scuttling shrimps. All of them had survived.

If Roy wins today's fight, he goes into the final round. Before he goes up onto the ledge, he punches the air and jumps around on the balls of his feet. He murmurs things to himself as he does this.

"Fuck everybody. This is mine."

His opponent is a guy I recognize as an Atlantic Beach lifeguard. I wonder how many people will drown if Roy beats him up so bad he can't work.

They shake hands, and Roy starts in on him. He punches the lifeguard like he's trying to break right through him. His fists make a sound when they land on the lifeguard's bare skin, and it's sick and wet and I can hear what I think is bone cracking under layers of flesh. The lifeguard tries to fight back, to steer his way through Roy's hailstorm of punches. He's not giving up yet.

While they fight I think about the human body, how it has all these layers, like if you strip away skin there's still muscle and then raw bone. We were built not to wither. But there are places on the body that if you open up, everything comes rushing out, fast.

Roy wins the fight. The lifeguard had taken a misstep after a blow to the belly and fell off the ledge. Roy runs up to me and shakes me by the shoulders.

"I did it. I'm going to the final round."

I just smile because I'm scared if I don't, all of Roy will come rushing out all at once.

"I knew you could, bro. No question."

After Caleb's suicide, my parents searched for answers everywhere. They asked me and Roy the same questions again and again: did he seem depressed? Did he say anything disturbing? Was he losing interest in his activities? Did he say he wanted to die? Roy told my parents that it wasn't his job to notice these things, and our father shoved him into a wall so hard that his nose bled onto the dining room carpet. The spot is still there.

Our parents became less like a married couple and more like a detective team. Roy called them Sherlock and Watson. They ripped apart Caleb's room looking for old diaries that evidenced his depression. They looked for drugs and for notes in the margins of his school notebooks. They interrogated his teachers, his friends, the girls he had fucked behind the sand dunes at bond fires. Nobody had anything they could give my parents. Caleb had left a clean trail. My mother and father took to sleeping on separate ends of the living room couch, surrounded by Caleb's old yearbooks. They were mapping out his school-photo facial expressions year after year, hoping the answer would be in a curled lip or raised eyebrow.

I think what made my parents the most distraught was not the fact that Caleb killed himself, but that they didn't have a story to bury with him.

I was helping Roy train for the final round of the fighting in our backyard. During the winter, he found an old punching bag at a thrift shop. I was hugging it from behind to keep it upright, and Roy was kicking and punching the front of it. Roy was strong. I was feeling his punches through the bag and they still hurt.

“Do you know who you’re up against?”

“Some dude from Sag Harbor. I think his name is Basil. What a fag.” Roy punches the bag harder when he says Basil’s name, like he’s trying to voodoo him.

“Are you nervous?”

Roy stops punching and stares at me.

“Fuck no. Why should I be? Haven’t you watched me all summer?”

“I was just wondering.”

“Well fucking stop it. Do I seem nervous? Do I act nervous when I’m up there?”

I shake my head no.

Roy tears the bag away from me and comes right up to my face, so we were nose to nose. I brace myself for the hit, but it never comes.

“If I don’t seem nervous, that means I’m not.” Roy grits his teeth and spits on the ground, next to my shoes. He backs away and hoists the bag up, pushing it back at me.

“Sometimes things are exactly how they seem.”

I knew Caleb was strange. I loved him but he felt inconsistent to me, the way he could be so vulnerable and bookish about sea creatures one second and then go beat the shit out of somebody in the game. One evening, when we were sitting on the jetty with our fishing rods, he told me he felt like who he was went in and out with the tides. I thought it was funny that the child my mother called the earth felt more at home in the sea. I never told my parents he said this. I didn’t want it to be filed away and analyzed. I wanted it for me.

The day of the final fight, Roy and I meet up with the other guys at the marina ledge. Basil doesn't show. Roy kicks the rusted wall with his bare foot over and over until it bleeds, and yells at everybody.

“Just wait ten more fucking minutes, he'll show.”

We wait ten more minutes, and then an hour. Basil never comes. One of the guys tells Roy that his reputation probably scared him off.

“It's an official forfeit. Roy wins.”

All the guys lose interest and start to leave, and Roy calls after them.

“It's not ending like this. Come on. This isn't fair.”

The guys tell Roy to let it go. They say congratulations on winning, and that he fought a good summer. They say it's getting late and they're bored. They get on their bikes and leave, so that it's just me and Roy left. Roy sits down on the ledge and claws at his face with his hands. He starts to cry.

Roy didn't cry at Caleb's funeral. Both my parents did, and I did, but Roy just looked straight ahead, twisting his hands in his pockets. It was an open casket and Caleb's skin was grey and powdery. It made me remember that skin's only significance is to keep the parts inside.

I don't know what to do to make Roy stop crying. I touch his shoulder, but he slaps my hand away. I could tell him that he should be happy, that he won the game, but I

know that won't do anything. To him it's not real. I think about it for a minute—I could make it real. I could give him a reason for fighting in the first place.

I take off my shoes and my shirt, dropping it onto the sand. I climb onto the ledge and take a breath. I nudge Roy with my foot.

“Fight me.”

Roy looks up.

“Fuck off, Mason.”

He sits there for a little while longer, but I don't move. I outline the sun-faded blood splotches with my big toe.

Finally, when Roy sees I'm not leaving, he stands up on the ledge. He holds his hand out and I take it. We shake. I feel his tear-stained fingerprints smearing against me, like I'm cattle being marked.

“Fair fight.”

“Fair fight.

The air is cooler than it had been in past weeks. We are moving into autumn soon. The summer haze will fade into an orangey chill. The leaves will rust.

Roy arches his back and pulls his fist up behind his ear, shoulder blades clacking. I clamp my eyes shut and grip the ledge with my toes.