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Self-Portrait

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Like veins, vines link the dunes.
You comb the sand for flawless shells.
The fragments are what I gather,
their rough and sharpened edges.
I find one that troubles me.

We dredge wet sand and sift it in the sea.
Coquinas glint in the net like bits of agate and opal.
Inside a cup, they release their sheer siphons.
A washed-up wine bottle, no cryptic message inside,
crusted with orange-rimmed barnacles.

Deer flies bite the backs of our necks
leaving beaded red welts.
Pelicans skim, out where the sea
turns a deeper algae, then plunge
like failed kites.

I tow you out, one of my hands pulling
a corner of the raft, the other forcing
through water that turns dark and cold
as it gets deeper. When I touch
the sandbar, something scuttles

across my foot. Standing in the mushy sand,
this far from shore, I stare at the illusion
of horizon. Behind bleached clots of dunes
stubbled with sea oats, slash pines
lean inland from the constant wind.

Back on the beach, while you're napping,
I read your journal:
*I've been feeling worse each day, but
once we're lying on the beach in the sun
I feel a bit better. I don't want to ruin our vacation.*

Guilty, I fall asleep to the rush and release,
sun burning my skin, steady ticking
of windblown sand. When I wake
gulls have gathered, waiting
for whatever we might give or leave behind.

After the shower that stings
our sunburns, after dinner,
we clear the table for a word game.
We don't bother to keep score,
just pull letters from the velvet pouch,

lining tiles into a crossword on the board.
I tell myself not to worry. At least
you've been honest with yourself.
How much longer can I pretend
not to know what's being spelled out?

At night, behind the beach house we're renting,
the dunes glow as if dusted with fresh snow.
And the mosquitoes become voracious.
As we walk along the moonlit beach,
they manage to bite through your clothes.

When the bites swell I worry about West Nile virus.
I paint the welts with Mercurochrome to ease
the itching. Each afternoon a white truck drives slowly
down the one lane sandy road spraying gray clouds
of pesticide. It doesn't seem to help.

The day it rains, we take turns reading aloud
 and laughing at the entries in the guest book,
 until we get to Mrs. M. who writes of the ghost
 crabs inching from their holes, and how she prays
 each morning on the deck, thanking God

for this time with her sons since she knows
This heaven will pass away and the one above it will pass away.
 She describes how her boys catch blue crabs
 with pieces of raw chicken tied to a rope,
 how the crabs cling to the rope as they're being hauled in,

and how, walking one night, they see
 baby turtles struggling down the beach –
 she had to stop her sons from helping them
 to the water because she knew
 the turtles might never make it back

to this beach to lay their eggs.
 Near the end of her long entry she writes:
My doctor has given me six months. . . .
 She adds that she left two photographs
 in the scrapbook. We flip until we find

her blond sons holding up a string of fish,
 then one of her in closeup –
 smiling, slightly blurred –
 that looks as if she took it herself.
 So there is no way to get enough distance.