Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

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KAYAKS

A kayak again. A double-ended paddle in my hands. Blue Tahoe this time. A crisp light cool on silk. The color and shimmer of a dress my mother once wore to a dance with a man she wanted to marry. Easy, currentless water near shore. Big boats far out. We are looking at docks and brown-shingled houses, and imagine views of the water from kitchen windows, people together in yet another variety of domestic life. A good life, if people aren't quarreling and money doesn't run out. I know you know what it's like. You would like this life. I'm following your kayak along the shore. The rise and dip of the paddle. Water slides cold to my hands. I drift, farther out, drawn by big space of nothing but water. Sun burns a good heat, a good ache in my shoulders. I don't feel much anymore.

Once I saw in dry dock: an axe had broken through the bottom of a big pleasure boat, the blond wood perfect, the varnish gleaming, except for the splintered hole, a raw opening ripped into the ruined hull's pitch. Envy? Rage? Self-loathing? What would it take? The day of the axe.

Kauai, that time. Words in the morning, quietly—you were sure. Language of tenderness drained to thinness. A brutal act, unexpected. The cancelled kiss. We didn't eat, didn't move that long afternoon into evening.

I was looking at the sea from a window of the room where we'd slept, how each wave sent up a wisp of spray
at the top of each muscular curl. A roiling surf.
Warnings we’d seen posted. Yet this delicacy thrown off.

The next day you might say was a miracle,
the hard work of just going on. A kayak,
a double kayak. Up the muddy river, a firm
but not impossible current, the forest steaming
green after the rain. All we could do was
paddle the river—the steady beating of heart work.
Tropical. It had stopped raining. Mud dribbled in rivulets,
bled red. The forest a tangle of black vines like thick arms
of a great water animal reaching down.
A long way in from the river, I kept slipping in the slick
clay muck, catching swinging vines, crawling
under, over. Couples on the trail wore expensive
boat shoes, new-gear shorts, designer shirts with big flowers,
birds painted on. Feet sucked in and out
of red mud. Someone with a ukulele was singing
about a little grass shack. The noise of it
thrumming the nerves. The slow trudge. The dripping
trees. The ruined shoes. The ugliness of it all
and the ache. Petals of plumeria scattered
on the wet ground, bruised, rust-blotched.

And then the waterfall and the rocks.
A loud loveliness unexpected, the tall light of it
washing out speech. I leaned on a rock
and watched you swim in the cold pool.

A kayak again. Blue Tahoe. Deep and so clean
I see green rocks on the bottom. Tomorrow
we’ll hike the dry hills and look back,
the lake a lapis stone in a green wilderness.
We’ll climb and circle down to the car,
a fine red dust hanging in alpine light,
the rare high air we breathe tingling
with the life we have. Here and now.
What we have come to.