Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

Anderson, Idris

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THE MARSH

Wherever the great water rolls in
pulled by the moon
   over broad flat lands
you will find my father in August
casting his net at the sun,
at the moon, up the mouths of saltcreeks,
at the edges of marsh grasses
   where shrimp run
just under shallow water.
In the South’s hottest month, you learn to swim
like fish through air
   heavy with water.
Fishermen find a shade to mend their nets.
But the sun doesn’t matter to my father,
who does as he pleases in August.
He sleeps by the moon,
   between tides,
six hours in, six hours out.
Neither he nor the ocean can be held longer
from the pull of the moon on the earth,
from whatever it is that draws him to his dock.
This is the land we came from,
half mud, half water, open to the sky.
The salt in our blood
   is the salt in this air.
Diving home we hear: the ocean still sings
like a shell
   one perfect note.
We were the sheephead, sly bait-taker
with rows of human teeth.
We were the crab
   crawling out of the tide,
heavy and awkward with armor,
sputtering a threat of water, raising a claw.
Our eyes on stalks, we saw
the distant islands of palmettos we came to.
This is the land my father shares with salt creatures,
each subject to the whim
of the moon,
the ravages of spring tides:
bluecrabs, stonecrabs, fiddlercrabs,
mullet and redfish and croakers,
flounders and flats of oysters,
and the rolling schools of blue porpoises.

But the mysterious creekshrimp is his god,
no bigger than his thumb. The transparent head
breathes water,
pulsing the length of his back.
The double flip of the tail lets him run
faster than fish, the long needle horn of his head
jabs painfully
whatever arrogantly holds him.

Over a cold night in November they vanish
to the colder sea.

But in August, they run with the tides,
filling saltcreeks from the rivers,
feeding at the edges
of grasses where the white crane waits,
regal and motionless near my father,
poised above water,
steady on the bow
of his boat. The rhythm of his back
is the rhythm of the moon
pulling the sea out
and letting it go,
turning his net out in one motion,
letting the cords slip from his teeth
through the bone-white
horn of his net, opening above water so easily,
so lightly
the shrimp do not know to leap
until caught, pushing the mesh out
alive and growing heavy with water.

In August, in the humid salt air of the night
or the heat of noon, my father knows
the sun going down or rising

  is red
over the eastmarsh, over the westmarsh.