

Transformations

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

Some nights now I sit at my window and watch the light out across the water flash. Marking the beginning of Boston Harbor, it flashes six times before a pause like a tiny red eye opening and closing. Sometimes it misses a beat even on clear nights and I know it's not only fog obscuring my view, but waves too. I like knowing about the black water out there. It's like driving through a city at night knowing in some of the dark houses people are making love.

I live in a house on a narrow street running toward the ocean. My apartment's on the third floor. From my windows I can see the water and the widow walks on the other houses. The house next door was the original one, an old summer place with a pool. The pool's still there. Brown and cracked, the bottom's covered with slime and leaves but I try to imagine what it was like here when the pool was new: one house on this tiny peninsula, no power plant across the way with its concrete buildings and stacks I have come to think of as beautiful. How dark it would have been then. No red eye to see the waves by. But the moonlight must have been something, shining in a path out there taking you as far as you could go.

Is anything ugly in moonlight? The truth is it wasn't so pretty back then. Garbage was dumped not far offshore and the water was a lot dirtier. Dead cats floated by I've heard. Why do you think the house next door had a pool?

Last summer I waited tables at a jazz club called Sandy's. It closed Labor Day and three days later they tore it down to make room for the tire company next door. The building, an old storefront added on to a little at a time, looked like a dive from the outside: sheets of plywood painted red and black covered old windows, three big air conditioners sticking through it. Still the place was so hot some nights we had to melt ice cubes on our wrists to get cool. I loved

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working there. We were all business before the music started: unstacking chairs, washing tables, shaking out tablecloths. Under the work lights the room looked shabby. Cobwebs draped the top of the walls and the ceiling. The carpet looked more stained than red and large patches of it around the coolers were wet and rotten. But when the overheads were turned off, when the bartender was polishing the bar one last time; after Sandy, the owner and host, had put on his dinner jacket and unlocked the front door, the place looked perfect. Cobwebs vanished in the candlelight, ashtrays glittered the rows of tables and I'd think how sudden transformations can be, even when they're a long time in the making.

I loved the pressure of the first couple of sets when people were pounding down the drinks. During breaks we'd sweep down the rows taking orders. We didn't use books, never wrote anything down which got us big tips. And we were snobs about the music, even rude when Sandy booked a band we hated in order to make money. "That fucking wedding band," we'd say and we wouldn't even smile.

But the nights the real guys were there, those nights were what I lived for. By the third or fourth set the audience would be thinned down to the serious drinkers and listeners. I remember late one night McCoy Tyner played "Contemplation," everybody swirled away by the melody and sitting there waiting for it to come around again. Tyner's hands moved as smooth as water over rocks, the notes as clear as water can be. A sea breeze coming on shore, Sandy opened the front door to cool the room down. From the waitress station at the bar I could see across the street where a stand of white lilacs had bloomed earlier in the summer in front of an old house. That empty house and the smell of the ocean, the music, even the sound of cars going by made me long in a real sweet way for something I can't name. It felt almost like a wish. But I wasn't wishing for anything except to go on longing, feeling the way I felt when I looked out that door.

These mornings I go down to the beach with my dog before sunrise. The sun is late this time of year and some days when it's raining or drizzling, I don't think it wants to come at all. It's like the black water has come right up on land, like you could drown in the smell of mussels and sea.

I listen for the foghorn out on Misery Island and I can hear it if the wind is blowing right. I think about the red eye on the other side of the waves and I tell myself that eye is a reason not to despair, that my life is like the movement of the water out there but hard for me to see because I'm in it.

At sunrise, if the tide's in, the seagulls stand on the jetty and show their interest just enough to keep their places. When the tide's out they scream and fly straight up to drop mussels on the rocks below.

In October there was a dead cat on the beach. Pure white and thin as paper, but lying on the sand like it was asleep. Someone had placed it there for kind of interment, to be taken by the tide. But the tide only nudged the body a little and floated it in pools like a ghost. Or an angel. I saw the bones for weeks.

