

I Hold My Mother's Bones up to the Sun

Here's how you make life from death: wait until the fisherman leaves with his icebox full, and find the spot where he cleaned his catch. Cup a fish scale between your hands and whisper a secret that you've told no one else. The scale will become whole again, and you will watch it swim away with a piece of you.



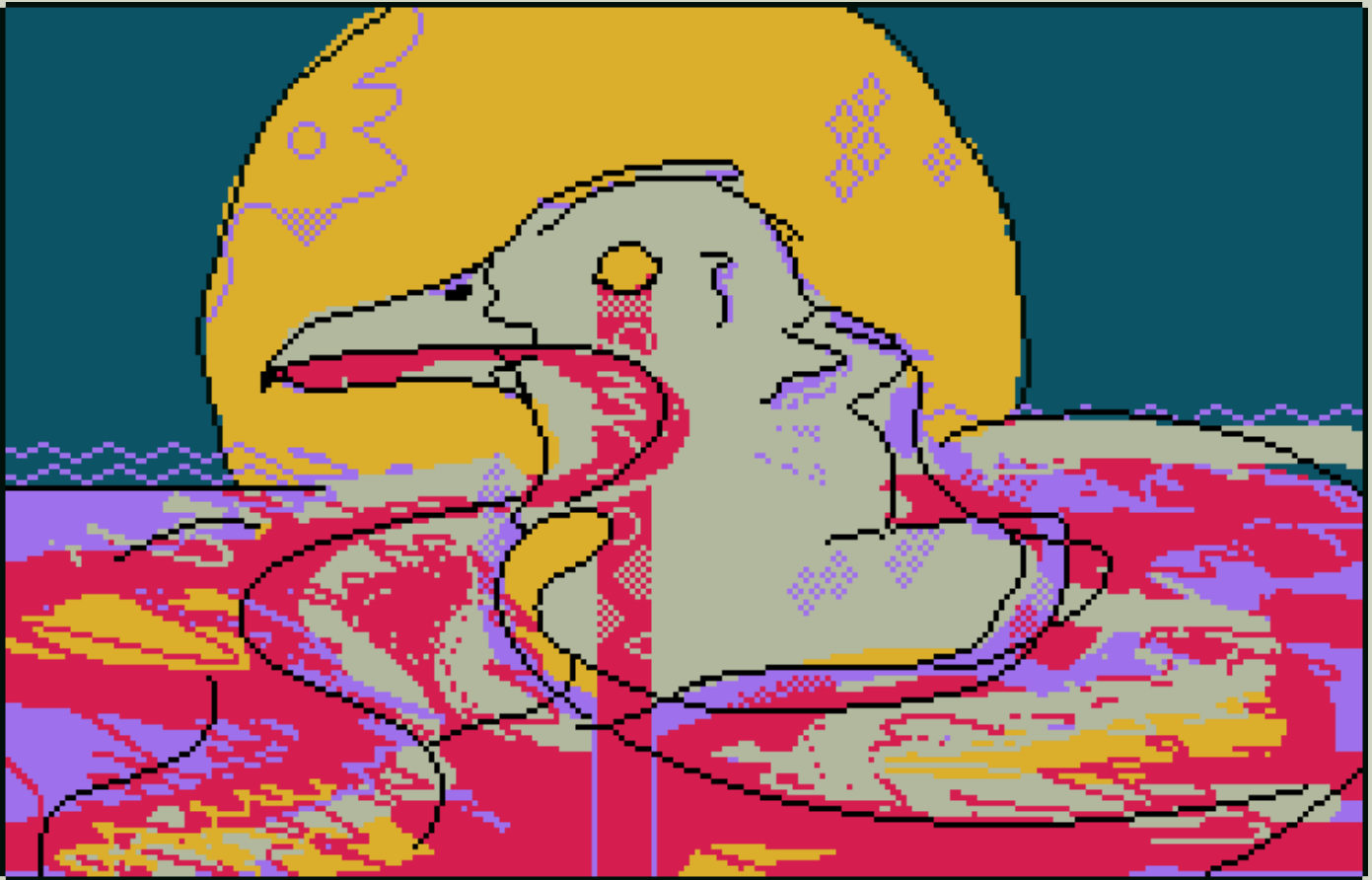
Not many of Mom's lessons stuck after she threw me out. I still leave keys on the table even though it's bad luck, I still forget to close my notebooks before bed even though it means all my knowledge will fly out, and I still grow my hair long even though it makes me look like a

girl. But every time I get myself into some new heap of trouble, I share it with the rock pools just like she taught me. I whisper my petty crime or heartbreak to the fish scales and then watch them wriggle out from between my fingers and disappear into the sea, and I know some part of her might be proud.

When the man from the registry of Births and Deaths called me, he apologized for taking so long. *It's because you changed your name, ma'am*, he said — *you weren't so easy to find*. He said that having no contactable family members, Mom was given a pauper's funeral. Buried in an unmarked grave, no coffin. I told him that's not how she wanted to go, so he ran me through their exhumation package. I hung up when he named the starting price.

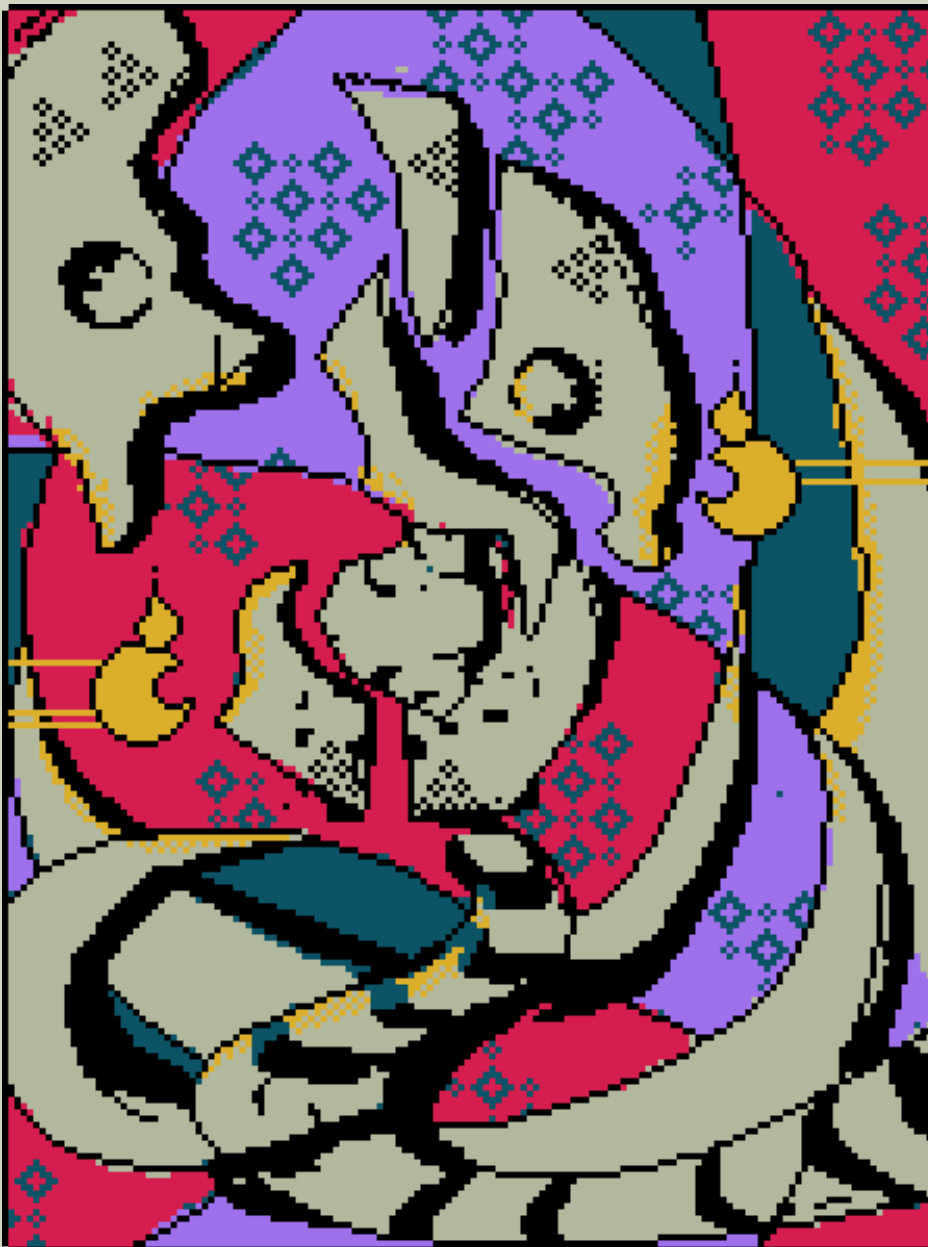
When the scale becomes life again, it's not always the same life. Sometimes a salmon becomes an angelfish, or a bream becomes a blue-ring octopus. Sometimes a little burrowing frillgoby, its corpse barely peaking out from the sand, will with a touch and a whisper become an iridescent parrotfish and bask its colors in the sun.

On the evening of my 10th birthday, I found a seagull's head.



I pictured it flying away, wings spread in the dusk sky. Mom said you can't turn something that big unless you've got a big secret, so I dipped the seagull's head into the waves and whispered that I wished the fire truck Aunt Maurie got me had been a pretty doll instead. The seagull's head melted into the water — beak and feather turned bubbling soup, a violent whirlpool bursting forth from my hands as claws and carapace. I reached out to touch the lobster-thing and it snipped my finger so hard that I bloodied the sand all the way back to our car. Mom bandaged my hand and said that change was a risk we had to take. That's how she was: she could say goodbye to pieces of herself to welcome a lobster, but couldn't say goodbye to a son to welcome a daughter.

When the sun sets, I buy a shovel from the hardware store. I dig from one unmarked grave to the next, tilling grass and dirt and bones. It turns out that *rest in peace* doesn't apply to the poor and lonely. Neither does *six feet under*, because my shovel cracks someone's skull barely a couple feet deep. I plant my knees into the dirt and start digging, digging, digging until I uncover Mom's ribcage with her pacemaker still inside, and find her favorite gold earrings by her cracked skull.



You'll give these to a beautiful girl someday, she always said. You'll have a great big wedding, and I'll make my famous baklava for all the guests, and I know you'll treat your children well, so much better than your Grandma treated me, and you'll give these earrings to a beautiful girl...

I'm not feeling like a beautiful girl after digging up graves all night. There's corpse dirt under my nails, and I think I just whiffed a cloud of someone's ashes. Still, I pocket the earrings and take some shards from her skull, dirt-caked pieces barely the size of my palm.

Trains don't run this late — or early — and I wonder if the hour-long walk to the beach is enough time for me to think of a secret. Amanda knows that I'm scared of the dark. Leslie knows my every curve. And when Asher was kicked out too, we downed twelve shots of fireball and spent the whole night talking about our fear, our grief, our hate, hate, hate.

What did I have left? What did I have to give that I had not already given?

I take my boots and socks off at the beach and feel the water of the rock pools, still cold from the night's chill. There's the big figure eight pool where Mom first taught me how to snorkel, how to peep under rocks without waking up the eels. There's the spot where she showed me how you can crack open a sea urchin and the pufferfish will eat the insides straight out of your hands, like puppies. And there's the breakwater where I turned my first fish scale, and jumped back in such shock that I twisted my ankle and had to be carried back.

The sky goes through a transformation of its own, rising from pink to orange to yellow as the sun dawns. I rinse the shards of skull until I've washed out all the dirt and death. I figure that to bring back such a big creature, I'm going to need a big secret, but she already knows my greatest one.

I scrub and scrub until I've scrubbed so hard that I can almost see my own reflection in the shards, but still I find no answer in them, no confession.

Then I think, maybe it doesn't have to be a big secret. Maybe it just has to be a risky one.

And then I think, of course the seagull's head couldn't fly — I had been holding it beneath the waves.

I roll the shards between the fabric of my shirt until they're dry, and then I hold my mother's bones up to the sun and whisper, *I forgive you. I forgive you.*

