

We Were Our Age · Dawn Raffel

DUKE'S BROTHER DIED under the ice in spring, the season I met Duke. The other kid survived—shivering, fat-lipped, the instigator, littler. A miracle, the search team said. Just a hurt front tooth, a gash, a stitch. A boy's likely story. This is what I heard, but not from Duke.

Duke said, "Go."

Duke said, "Ladies first, please."

Rock, rock, gap, stone-cold to the lighthouse—Duke and I were spiny in the dark. Weeds swam up. Weak sunk stars, a lap, suck and bubble. The usual. Lake and pier. Us and us. Month after month.

Duke was always finding things to skip across to who knew where.

August.

Pinkness hovered.

A school was in the ebb of the tide, all bellied over easy.

"Ready or not," Duke said.

We were our age.

Fishing was the only sport in our town. How it was. Pick. Any house in our town was any house in our town. Any wind in our town was the wind in our town. Down was down. Queasy was a way of life. Bored to crackers, snap, *kerplunk*.

That Duke was smart. Had a flat-out daddy, elbow room. Had boxes worth of weatherproof clothes, size close enough. Had any-purpose pockets.

Maybe I obliged. The least I could do.

All the talk in our town was talk, talk, talk. That, no this. Rain, no shine. More, no less. Pardon me, ma'am.

Duke said, "No news is good news."

Quiet, that was me. To a fault. Sneakers on the rocks. A torn boy's poncho, blue, somebody else's breath in the hair. Braids—loose. Skin—pale.

Sky—slow and dangerous. The lighthouse was an eyesore. Fenced to match.

Wood—swollen. "Tender" is what I would have liked to have said. Gulls—posted.

Signs ignored by us.
Single file in the evening, Duke and I.
Ready and not.

No one was allowed to go beyond a certain point.

Certainly not with Duke.

Common—the names they had. The kid. The brother. *Had* had. Short.
Like “Duke.”

I was the kind of girl to write lists:

Tar.

Rope.

Bone.

Glass.

Hook, I think.

Nylon.

Sand.

Peau de soie.

Chunk.

In the night, on the skin, erasable, rinsible. Or only in the skull.

Imagine.

The smell of these things was a whole other story.

I could be that discreet.

Here is how it was another way in our town, in any icy season (puddly fall; the holidays—glint, glint and breakage, scouting for the egg in the shy grass): scraped and dug. Glare. Glare. Any house in our town was sealed. Any words in our town were used. Any sorrow underfoot.

On the lake: red right encrusted. Pier—tied off.

In the mud rooms: boots and salty rinds. Skin and wool, wet. The weight of skin and wool, wet. The feel of skin and wool, wet; not to mention the smell—pale nose scrunched and sunk in a crook, the way a girl would do.

News—dredged. Coffee—black.

Any window had somebody waiting behind it.

Wet air seeped.

In the square of our town: bank, bait and tackle. Gulls and bread. Rx.
The hill. The wayward strands of the light.

In the churchyard: Duke. Duke's sobered-up or any-wise daddy,
scrubbed. Chin—coarse, perhaps. A kid with a kid's common name. Me.

This could almost be a scene in our town.

Six in one—any scene in our town. Before.

The kind of girl I was, I could swallow ink. Paper too. A hangnail, laces,
possibly a fin, a dove, a jack in the box, cement, and, with a little urgent
purpose, someone's dry wrap, a buoy.

We had local standards. Had to.

I could have won a cup.

Six in one. After.

Any conversation could go like this:

“Go.

“Ladies first, please.”

Lapse.

Or this: “No news is good news.”

Lapse.

Or this: “Feel?”

Lapse.

Or this: Lapse.

Any lapse in our town was mine. Any pause. Any possible yes.

But only sort of.

Summer—easy. So much was obvious, stripped of the cloak of the ice, salt.
Duke was Duke. Fish washed up. I was a girl who could see through skin,
but only to the bones. Natural events took place. Bells rang. Supper
cooled. Corn turned sweet, got picked in another Middle West.

In the mudrooms: mud.

On the doors: screens, gripe in the hinges.

Someone on the pier hooked a sock — size boy's obvious, same as the one that got away.

Duke had a knack. He could tie a tourniquet. Said so.

Heat could wobble. Did so.

Lightning struck us dopey.

In the square of our town: speculation, counter-talk. Knee-bang on Formica. Anybody's saucer pooled.

By Fridays, anything a body could abide—by rasher, by platter, by bucket, by stretcher: potatoes, potatoes, slaw, slaw, slaw and something burning.

The keeper of the lighthouse drank. "According to the actual physical record," as Duke's daddy told it.

Duke said, "All you can. And after that, then some."

Duke's daddy by September got a gut.

I was a girl who wanted silk.

Our lake was great. Could have been an ocean.

Under the surface, everything shone.

Here is how it was in the night with Duke, alone on the pier, a stone's short throw from the world: We were ourselves. A keeper could blink. I could swallow gristle and muscle; oh, that bloody reek—my heart.

Fell in. Likely. Urge and rage, a boy and girl, and once in, over and over, rage and urge, diving for the thing that would not save us.