I’m seventeen years old, and I’m sitting at the kitchen table at my grandparents’ house. Everything in here is new in a ramshackle way. The table and chairs do not match. The cabinets, dark wood, make the already small kitchen look smaller. There’s no art on the walls anymore. My grandmother’s quirky gourd ducks are packed away. The big cardboard box contains the new dishwasher. Everything is a mix-match of newness and whatever could be salvaged from the storm.

Three months ago, the hurricane brought winds and water up through the house and destroyed everything. Pictures, older than me or my mother or my uncle or cousins, family heirlooms, the furniture - all in an instant swept away. They’re things I’ll never see again, never touch again or understand. There were people I never knew in those photographs. I feel grief for people I’ve never met.

I’m just getting back from a walk to the piers. The storm swelled the waters so now the fishing dock is warped upward then down again, like a wave. Wooden planks nailed across by the community board prevent anyone from walking across it and falling through into the chilled gray waters below. I was tempted, briefly, to try, or to climb through the wispy tan reeds and over the rocky storm barrier to collect glass off the beach. The cold bit at my cheeks and held me back. Instead I stood for a while at the gate
of the boat pier and looked outward at the fingers of the dock pulled away from the
center, the empty place where my grandfather’s boat once was.

I’m watching my grandmother pull three clear packs of pre-packaged, pre-frozen
fish - tilapia, which doesn’t grow here, Styrofoam-y and white. It gurgles when it hits the
pan. I already know it will taste like ice and freezer when it’s cooked. It’s inevitable. It’s
a dry, chewy, unfortunate taste for fish. I miss the salty, oily taste of belly lox on a slab of
cream cheese over a bagel, but like everything else, the price for that has gone up.

I stare downward through the glass surface of the kitchen table, listening as my
grandmother cooks that strange, tasteless fish that has no smell as it fries except for the
smell of oil. The football game is on in the next room, and I think my grandfather is
paying attention to it. White-haired and knobby-knuckled, he looks like an old man. My
grandmother fights to defy her age with dyed hair and makeup and fashionable clothes,
though the half a pack a day of orange Camel cigarettes isn’t helping. It won’t be long
until they move south now. I’m vaguely aware this is our last dinner together for a while.

I stare downward through the glass surface of the kitchen table, and my eyes feel
foggy. I remember the fresh cooked fish, straight from the oceans just a few miles off the
beach, brought in a bucket off choppy waves, so fresh. My grandmother was notorious
for the way she cooked it.

I’m five years old, and I’m sitting on my grandfather’s boat, bouncing on the
waves of other boats as they skate past. It’s a sunny day, and the white seat underneath
me is hot and sticky with sea spray. The air smells like salt and fish. My grandfather
stuffs a red life preserver over my head, and we cruise out off the bay into open waters
where you can barely see the other boaters waving at you, and the seagulls are circling in the sky.

My grandparents are both from Far Rockaway and have, as the locals say, saltwater in their blood. Grandfather has had more boats in his lifetime than he has cars. This one, the Magic Carpet, is the one I’ve always known, the one we’d take the dogs out onto and let jump into the ocean, the one my family would gather on the weekends to fish and drink beer on, the one with the undercarriage on it with a bed and a kitchen and a tiny bathroom.

I stick my hand in the killi trap, the fish we use for bait, and feel their tiny bodies flicker and slip against my fingers. We stab the fishhooks through their eyes and thread them with strips of squid and colorful fascinators and weights. I toss the dead ones to the gulls. They swoop and dive and fight each other for the snack. Their wings crash hard against the surface of the waves, and they float off dumbly when satiated.

I’m five years old, and I can barely hold the weight of the pole as it bobs up and then violently down again. There’s a fish at the end of the line, fighting and writhing and churning unseen in the water, but I can feel it in my hands. The pole shakes.

“Crank it, crank it,” my grandfather says, watching the reel spin out of control, an unwinding, rewinding disaster that’ll take hours to fix later. The fish rushes upwards out of the water, flopping back and forth helplessly in the air, cracking itself in half so fast it might break it’s own spine right down the middle. Grandfather lowers a net under it and pulls the hook from its gaping mouth.

“Just long enough,” he says. “We’ll have dinner.”
Unlike half a dozen other fish, this one doesn’t get tossed back into the water. Instead it goes in a bucket on the floor. The engines grind back to life, and we’re skipping back across the choppy waves again. I stick my hand in the bucket secretly and feel the fish’s skin, as coarse and gritty as the sandy seafloor it would otherwise call home. A fluke, maybe a flounder. White fleshted and tender, it will make a good meal.

We arrive back on land, swaying like waves when we walk until we’re used to the steadiness again. The soft spongy lawn of my grandparents’ yard is broken by a stone path to the garage where my grandfather’s workbench is. He heads that way with the bucket in his hand, tips it over to the let the water out. My mother, waiting for us on the back porch with a cold glass of iced tea in her hand, shuffles me inside, into the air conditioning and back to my coloring books.

Grandfather guts the fish. I get the feeling I’m not supposed to know about this part. Maybe it’s a little too gruesome. Maybe it’s a little too dangerous for me to be around the slick thin knives. He slices up into the belly and under the skin. The head comes off with a firm crack. It might’ve died in the bucket, thrashing itself around, but it’s definitely dead now. He picks out the delicate pin bones with years of experience in his old gnarled hands, as gnarled as my grandmother’s from years of knitting and sewing and kneading dough. Sometimes he might leave the skin, maybe if it were a salmon or a sea bass, but it’s harder to do with fluke or flounder. The skin, the fins, the delicate marble eyeballs all go with the bones in the trash, inedible.

He gives the remaining slabs of white, fresh flesh to my grandmother. The air still smells of salt and water but stained with iron and guts and something morbid like death. You can almost taste it in the cooking, under the oil and the pepper and the seasonings.
You can taste the life, the sea. Maybe today she’ll bread it. Or maybe today it’ll be fried or covered lightly in oil and served over rice with a bit of lemon. Grandpa drinks diet soda on the side, and grandma has a cup of straight black coffee. Her clothes smell like orange cigarettes again. Her hair is freshly dyed the reddish brown color she might’ve had when she was younger, but the photographs are all black and white so I can’t tell.

The sides are always the same, a lot of fresh or steamed vegetables, a lot of rice, a lot of pasta, a lot of everything. There’s always too much. There’s always some to be packed away in spare butter tubs and sent home with the family. But the fish there’s always just enough of. Never kill more than you can eat. Never let it go to waste. And to freeze the fish for another time it to take the flavor out of it, to remove it by one step. Even if grandma dresses the frozen fish up to the best of her ability, garnishing it with fresh fruit slices and cooking it with orange juice mixed with the oil and broth, it never tastes the same.

Suddenly I’m seventeen years old again, inching closer to eighteen, and I’m sitting at the new kitchen table eating the rubbery, freezer-burned fish my grandmother bought at the supermarket from the freezer aisle. It tastes like she tried, salt and pepper and a splash of orange juice with the spices, but it doesn’t taste fresh. This is going to be our last meal together for a long time, and not even the kitchen could be the same.

The storm had come and lifted my grandfather’s boat, thrown it against the pier and smashed it, tore it hull to keel. Motor oil turned the waters from grey like the stormy sky to the rainbow sheen of fish scales. Grandfather, the old fisherman with his gnarled fingers and the blade of his knife dulled with age, retreats to the living room to watch the game.
My grandparents flew south for the winter, like geese.