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Prayers for the Lost and for the Living

Not Ours

Sleek white hull parts the sea like Moses but the boy still daydreams his six-year-old boy dreams. Spindly arms and legs singed vacation-pink and fleeced with the same flaxen hair of his eyebrows. Lashes and buzz-cut bleached white in the sun. Wake from the speedboat slaps harder against his family's rented skiff. The boy's feet slipping, small O of his mouth when his skull hits the cleat, and he is tumbling, tumbling, the sea slapping harder. He thrashes, but angry blue-gray waves spread out forever, so he opens his mouth wider to call out to his parents and the ocean fills him. Coast Guard helicopter cleaves the August haze of saltmarsh.

Pleasure craft bob on the sound. At the dock, mothers and fathers gaze up to postcard-blue sky, air heavy as a womb, scent of pines and sand, harbinger of copter blades—and dread lodges deep in their throats, in their bellies. Did you hear? A little boy's gone missing. Tendrils of sea grass worry his sunburned limbs, brackish waves lapping the shoreline when they lift him from the waters—no woven basket of reeds, no surreptitious palace adoption, just plastic bottles and cigarette butts. Later, the stricken bob their heads. Yes. Islanded in grief, the parents shake and sob and blame, lassitude thick and murky as the swill where the current dragged their boy. They can't help but hear the others pray: Not ours, not ours, not ours.

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Strong Swimmer

Imagine a young woman. She is tall and slim. Her dark brown hair falls gently to her shoulders. The woman's eyes are blue and she shields them for a few moments from the sunlight—aligning her right hand to her forehead like a visor. Let's say this young woman—a woman not far beyond her girlhood—is

Jewish. This woman is not me, but she could be me, even though my eyes are brown. Let's say her name is Mariška and she plans to become a doctor one day in Vienna, the city of her birth. This young woman is not me. I have none of the requisite scientific aptitude to become a doctor. But let's say that Mariška's father is a doctor, a surgeon. She idolizes him. The woman is not me. I did not idolize my father, though I loved him. Let's say that it's 1938 and a man named Hitler is keen on killing Jews. In Austria, this fever dream is born. So, now, Mariška and her parents are in Brčko, a city in Bosnia where the river Sava runs beneath an iron bridge. Let's say it's 1941 and other—similar—monsters are keen on killing Jews and Serbs alike here. Let's say that Mariška's hands are bound with wire, that she casts her eyes downward to the bottle-green water as it rushes madly beneath the iron bridge. The river is crystalline and wild. Or it is placid and meager. Perhaps her right hand does not form a visor. Perhaps her eyes are not blue. The woman is not me, but she could be me. The woman is a strong swimmer, something I am not. Let's say the Ustaša carry out Hitler's savage deeds throughout the entire Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but in Brčko this work is especially precise and thorough. Perhaps one day in December, two-hundred Jews in Brčko are beaten with sledgehammers and scythes. They are slashed with knives and axes. They are bound with wire. They are shoved over the iron railing and into the water below, blood from their wounds the color of rust. This is not my blood but it

could be. Let's say that several days later, the Ustaše complete their task. Now another one-hundred-and-fifty Jews are bound and beaten and drowned. Or perhaps they are buried alive in deep pits, their screams silenced by earth the color of human waste. Or perhaps this is, in fact, what fills the pits. Let's say Mariška's fate belongs to the first group. Perhaps she is a strong swimmer. Perhaps she Houdini-s her hands free from their wired cage. Perhaps her strokes are long and graceful and powerful and when she raises her head from the water to draw a breath she prays her parents are alive. This woman is not me but she could be. I am not a strong swimmer but perhaps I could be. I rarely pray but perhaps I will begin.

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