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## What Lies Below

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## WHAT LIES BELOW

Renée Beaudoin

She stands at the pier's end, watching the waves roil below her. The water throws itself around the rigid poles, trying to stay aloft, trying to hold onto some shred of land before getting drawn back out to open sea. The wooden planks snag at her bare soles as she totters back and forth on the balls of her feet, eyeing the distance between her wriggling toes and the surface of the water. How high up is she? Twenty-five feet? Thirty-five? How high does the drop have to be before she plummets and smacks against the water and doesn't resurface? Forty? Fifty? More? She's never been good at judging distances

even as a child. She hadn't known the height of the trees in her backyard. The flat leaves of the northern white cedars brushed against her chubby pink cheeks as she scaled the thin branches, hoisting herself as far into the frigid air as she dared to go. The softness of the leaves always surprised her; the wild leaves soothed and tickled. Birds flitted and hid in the shadowy boughs as the large pinkish land animal fumbled for a handhold and lumbered into their world; she didn't belong

in his bedroom. She didn't plan on winding up there. They had been hanging out, watching movies, when their lips somehow locked with each other. She didn't really mind—he was attractive and kind—so she let him kiss her. She let his fingers wander, let them brush against her in places she barely knew she had, squirming at the unfamiliarity but letting him continue. He directed her hands to sooth him, showed her how to move, to make the most of it, to flow and ebb

against the pier, was that movement? She squints and sees nothing but the dark water throbbing below, trying to hoist itself up into the air, onto the land, away from the currents trying to drag it away, to make it come

one branch at a time, keep climbing. Ice glazed the bark but she and the neighbor boy didn't pay any attention as they scrambled up the branches. Mittens stuck to frost fractals, boots squeaked as they ascended, but bulky winter coats held the cold at bay. Her neighbor was high above her, laughing as he reached the tippy top of the tree, and she frowned as she tried to figure out which branch to step on. Above, branches swayed violently and a scream shook the air and something heavy and warm fell onto her and

she jumped in surprise and pressed her hands against him, wanting him off, get off, I don't like this anymore. He moved harder, faster, urgently, not able to hear her above his own moans, frantic, get off, muffling her protests with his lips and trying to hold her with his body as she stared wide-eyed

at the sudden frothing in the water below as reptilian heads break through the crest of the waves. Long snouts open, teeth flash, gaping chasms hiss, ready to

clamp down and drag her away from land, drag her down beneath the waves until she drowns, then swallow her whole, but she just needs to fall

like her neighbor, who crashed through the branches and thudded onto the cold ground with a wail of pain. He lay still, crying for anyone to help him, to lift him up and take him someplace safe. High in the air, she gripped her branch for dear life, her muscles aching as gravity beckoned her down, screaming for help, help, he fell, help, I'm going to fall, he fell, help, I'm

hurt, but nothing can be done now. He turned on the TV and sat on the couch as she gathered her clothes and left. She kept her head down as she hurried back to her apartment. She leaned over the edge of her balcony, gasping for air but getting dizzy and backing away because she doesn't like heights

since she can only be hurt when she falls.