

**Redwood Ocean** by *Isaiah Everin*

*Published in Quarto Magazine ([link](#)) and its national consortium*

Feels like I've been afraid of the ocean my whole life, but it's been since my sister almost drowned under a wave—I was five when I first saw CPR; she was nine and didn't breathe so well after that. Now seeing bodies of water makes me anxious, want to move, have panic attacks. Unfortunately, the Pacific channels into Humboldt Bay, which can be seen from most points in the county; but my family was "situated" there, so my respite was the woods. I got to know the parks, the paths and the secret places no path could get to. Out there were the redwoods, the biggest living things except for whales, which are in the ocean, and can hold their breath, unlike my sister. I'd ride to the park on my bike—once among the trees, I'd imagine what the world could be to me... One day I move to a place in the middle of a place where I forget about the blue parts, cut them out of my maps and leave land-mass silhouettes on my walls.

I slam my brakes—Jake Meyers and Niles Brook are sitting at a picnic table. "Didn't see you in homeroom." "Wasn't there." "No shit." Friday afternoon, maybe a year since I saw them lighting up in the woods—we are all in seventh grade. "Ian brought the pipe." I nod; we were using sixth-grader Ian Morris for resources. It's not like we weren't his friends, but it's also not like we were. The playground is populated by small children and parents; a black Labrador marches past us with a Frisbee. Ian is rocking back and forth on the spring-mounted zebra, cackling to himself; Jake cuts "fucking pussy" into the table with a Swiss Army knife; Niles stares at his shoelaces; I wonder what we're doing here.

"Fuck this." We call Ian over. "We could go later?" We drag him along; my bike brings up the end of the pack. "It's got these swirls in the glass—my mom, like, just leaves it out...like, on the table." "No shit." He's a year younger than us, but our moms don't leave pipes out on the table—no harm, no foul.

Twenty feet into the forest and we're surrounded by auburn redwood bark and shadowed by emerald canopies two hundred feet high. With the concrete skies, it's a dreary scene of beauty. Fall here doesn't involve orange-brown leaves; the county is wrapped with rain and a curtain of evergreens. Seasons blend into one perpetual year while we go through lengths just to toke up—jump ferns and balance-beam on fallen trunks. A husk of a lightning-struck stump smells richly of our previous engagements; the insides are charcoal midnight. Ian shuffles his feet in the moist detritus, kicks up dirt; Jake crosses his arms and acts cool; Niles leans back and is cool; I wonder what we're doing here.

"Give it here." Ian sighs and takes the pipe out of his pocket; his averted eyes spell a smack upside the head waiting for him at dinner.

A click of a blue Bic has the herb glowing. The smoke is Humboldt-brand sex as it crawls the blown glass of the stolen pipe, past our preteen lips, dipping our brains in vibrating honey to make us forget math lessons we weren't paying attention to—we forget we weren't paying attention, we forget attention, we giggle and become our own innocence incarnate. Ian runs and hugs a redwood bare-chested, alabaster skin on burgundy chocolate; Jake smiles and nods, cuts "fucking pussy" into the hollowed-out trunk; Niles shuts his eyes and squeezes his fingers to his palms like he doesn't know he's doing it; I forget what I'm doing here.

I forget that my sister can't breathe so well and whales are bigger than redwoods. These trees speak land and ground me to the earth's core. I'm on my back and the ferns tickle my nose. "Woah, this is so high!" "No shit you're high." "No, *this* is so high!" Their voices beat against me in tremors as I'm pulled under the livid earth. The clay embraces me; decaying leaves churn

around my body as I sink further and further in; worms carve paths through my head; I descend into the midst of great roots, the coiling limbs of gods, and there I am held in the grasp of land's largest living things.

"Fucking idiot." My composting underworld spasms, spitting me out as a newborn to screaming—Ian's screaming. He's crying and I feel like crying, but I sit up in the dirt and learn to be sober as I make out the shouts. "The bone's poking through!" "No it's not." "Call an ambulance!" "We're in the middle of the woods." "Who's got a cell phone?" Niles is staring into space like an astronaut, Jake shrugs a shoulder. "Mine's for emergencies?" "This is an emergency!" I take control of my body and call home—my sister can't breathe so well, but she can drive fine. She has sympathy for our drugged state even though she doesn't know what smoking is like. "You owe me big time." We wait; Ian clutches his limb and squeezes his eyelids; Jake picks up the pipe like infected evidence, mutters "fucking pussy," and throws it in a creek; Niles stares at the broken arm like a resurrected Christ; I wonder what we're doing here.

She arrives quickly but it feels like forever. It takes her and Niles to carry Ian to the car, I have my bike, and we all pile in. My sister is nice, but she pulls out her full arsenal of curse words—it's bigger than any of ours because she's in high school.

My sister is a teenager and a hero—she can drive past Humboldt Bay and not care because it's just a big puddle; almost drowning never bothered her, she was determined in the face of it. For me, seeing the bay makes me anxious, want to move, have a panic attack. She reaches in the glove compartment for my pills, stops. "You can't take these when you're high." "It's okay, it's not that bad." Not that bad means hyperventilating for five-minutes while my friends learn that I'm a coward of the utmost degree. I can see Ian shake and sweat; I can feel Jake carving "fucking pussy" into everything I own, into the back of the leather seat, into my forehead; I can hear Niles dozing off into snores; I wish that none of them were here.

My rapid breathing puts the whole car on edge. A parking lot is salvation and the hospital is blinding after the cool embrace of the woods; it's not white like in the movies, but it's sterile and painful and worth escaping.

My sister never tells about how it really happened, but Ian isn't allowed around us anymore. We don't care, we hardly knew him; we sign his cast. Our parents set curfews and boundaries—mine don't want me wandering the forest. At first I'm angry. I run out one day, but then...well...the forest is dirty and windy, its beauty, dreary and grey; branches fall off and crack, leaving snapped limbs and broken trunks all around. Now seeing redwoods makes me anxious, want to move, have panic attacks; my parents buy me video games, which just makes me lonely. I saw a counselor, but they couldn't help. My parents weren't going to live anywhere else because they're "situated." I might be older now, but I don't know another home, and even though my sister is the one who almost drowned, and Ian is the one who fell off the tree trunk, I'm the one who has panic attacks. I smoked pot in the forest because it made me feel okay, and now it makes me sick. I tried living in a place in the middle of it all...but I missed the clouds, and I missed the ocean...I want the redwoods.