

THE WORLD IS WATER

by Heather Raffo

A family sits on a small boat in the middle of a small lake. They float in stillness, each looking out in a different direction. The pine tree needles whisper something in the wind. If we listen closely, we can almost make out what they're saying.

The mom throws a small stone into the water. Or is it an olive pit?

MOM: See that?

Watch.

She throws another one.

That's us. That's every thought you ever thought. It starts small.

She holds up another pit, after eating the olive of course.

Minuscule in comparison to the size of the water. Are you watching Harold? The consecutive circles. Watch.

She throws something bigger this time, maybe an apple core.

Now watch them all the way to the end.

HAROLD: There is no end mommy.

MOM: I know, I know.

SASHA: Look. It ends there at the beach.

MOM: Does it?

HAROLD: It lands on the beach.

SASHA: Then what?

HAROLD: It lands on the beach, then because ideas are amphibious, the thought gets up out of the water and walks away.

SASHA: Can ideas walk?

MOM: Hmmm.

SASHA: They can travel.

HAROLD: How far?

MOM: I wonder.

SASHA: Where does it go once it starts walking? Does it make a life for itself? A home?

HAROLD: You mean shelter.

SASHA: Does it get a taco? A burger?

HAROLD: All the things I'm looking for.

MOM: Here have some more olives. You're not exactly starving.

SASHA: We're refugees.

MOM: Hardly.

SASHA: We're homeless.

MOM: Hardly.

HAROLD: I miss New York.

SASHA: I don't.

MOM: What do you miss?

SASHA: My friends.

HAROLD: I miss school...

SASHA: I don't. I miss myself.

HAROLD: What?

MOM: How can you miss yourself?

SASHA: No independence, no freedom, no being understood.

MOM: You have so much freedom here. If you have nothing else, you have freedom here, space, you're outside, you're on a boat.

SASHA: I hate this.

HAROLD: I 'knuckle shuffle' you.

SASHA: I hate you more.

Henry pretend grabs his sister, it's mostly playful not murderous, the boat rocks.

MOM: Shhh. Enough.

SASHA: He's always wrestling and you never correct/ him when he's...

HAROLD: It's called a 'tomb stone pile driver'!

SASHA: Practicing wrestling moves on me but you never/ see it.

MOM: Never say you hate/each other.

SASHA: I'm allowed to be mad.

Mom throws another olive pit into the water.

They all watch the ripples.

SASHA: I'm allowed to be mad.

MOM: Of course you are. But look how far it reaches, and then it's all the way over there, magnified, amphibious, living its best life, prowling the planet.

SASHA: Mom, olive pits don't live their best life.

HAROLD: It's mom's birthday. Let her have it.

Harold eats another olive and practices spitting the pit out of the boat.

HAROLD: I want the WWE back.

SASHA: As far as I'm concerned, it never left and I wish it would.

MOM: The WWE's gonna open!

HAROLD: What do you mean open?

MOM: I mean they're gonna play a match, or whatever, it's gonna be back, on TV, just no audience.

HAROLD: When? how?

MOM: It's been declared essential.

SASHA: It's not even a real sport mom.

HAROLD: Wrestling is essential?!

MOM: In Florida.

HAROLD: O.M.G.

MOM: Tells you something about Florida.

HAROLD: What does it tell you?

MOM: What's essential to them.

HAROLD: Can we move to Florida?

Harold gets excited and starts to enact moves in the wind.

HAROLD: Sheamus goes for Big Show's beard and in one, swift, signature move he 'broke kick's'/ his

SASHA: I'm his human punching bag.

MOM: Why are we the loudest family ever invented?

A duck or loon suddenly ruffles and flies overhead. It startles or intrigues them. Silence, as they watch. Harold snuggles into his mom. Sasha sees this and resists responding.

HAROLD: Are there alligators/in there?

SASHA: Are you an idiot?

MOM: No. No alligators.

SASHA: Snakes.

HAROLD: It's a swamp.

MOM: It's a marsh, or, really, it's a marshy lake. There are no alligators in Michigan.

SASHA: There are alligators in Chicago.

HAROLD: An alligator ate that kid at Disneyland.

SASHA: Disney WORLD. That's why we never went. But it's true, there was an alligator in Chicago, in Lake Michigan.

MOM: Sasha.

SASHA: I'm serious, somebody's pet they think, or they didn't want, got too big, or hard to feed, so they threw it in/ the lake.

MOM: Alligators aren't ever gonna be, I mean Lake Michigan is fresh water/ so

HAROLD: Mom, alligators in Florida, they actually prefer fresh water /to

SASHA: The Gator Boys came up from Florida/ just to trap it and

HAROLD: Gator Boys seriously?!

SASHA: Seriously, proven fact. Imagine someone dumping their pet in the water, imagine!

HAROLD: I'm imagining, that's the problem. I can almost see a hungry alligator/ ready to

SASHA: Can you please not say the word hungry?

Silence.

They're all hungry now.

MOM: You won't get eaten, nothing in here will eat you.

HAROLD: That's not what she meant mom.

MOM: Yeah. Okay.

Sasha wants to snuggle now as well. There is a kid wrapped around each side of mom, their arms, even gently, fight over what could be called "the middle of mom". How can a family hug ever be exactly equal in every way?

MOM: Oh my god. Seriously. Even while hugging? What chance does this family have if even love is competitive?

They all tuck in. The kids might as well be a pile of puppies. This is everything.

SASHA: Why did we come here?

HAROLD: Nature I think.

MOM: Water. I needed water.

SASHA: It's murky water mom.

MOM: I was born here. Well not exactly here. At the hospital a few miles away.

HAROLD: That was a long time ago

MOM: Thank you. Yes. But I was brought home here, my first home, my childhood home, I was conceived here.

HAROLD: Conceived? Like someone thought of you?

MOM: Sort of. Someone did think of me. At least in theory. Or I thought of myself, then I came to be.

SASHA: She means sex.

HAROLD: She said "conceived".

SASHA: So?

HAROLD: Conceived means sex?

MOM: Yes, my parents had sex. And I came to be.

HAROLD: Here?

MOM: Here in this place.

HAROLD: On this boat?

MOM: No! I mean, I don't think so.

HAROLD: At the lake house?

MOM: The lake house was where I lived when I was your age. It was my childhood home. It's where I learned so many things, where I learned to walk, to swim, to water ski, where I first encountered leeches/ racoons, snakes.

HAROLD: Water ski!

SASHA: What?! I have to!

HAROLD: Can we?

SASHA: Yes! too much fun!

HAROLD: You barely get off your butt to do dishes, let alone ski.

SASHA: Can't ski if you're too afraid to swim, sucker.

HAROLD: Stop it!

SASHA: You stop!

Shove, push, splash. Sasha falls in the lake.

HAROLD: Oh snap!

There are real ripples now, the boat rocks. Mom watches the ripples all the way to shore. Sasha chooses between swimming back to shore or back to the boat. She floats for a bit. She is a natural swimmer.

MOM: You see what I mean about how your thoughts travel. How far they reach. How powerful they are. If we only lived on the water it would be the most/ obvious...

SASHA: What?

MOM: It would be apparent.

SASHA: What?

MOM: We would understand. Be better humans.

SASHA: *(to Harold)* I dare you Harold!

MOM: Sasha.

SASHA: He pushed me in the water. The least he can do is get in.

MOM: The water's warm.

SASHA: Why don't you get in then?

Mom thinks about it. If only they all had swimsuits. She decides to dive in. It's a pretty great dive off the side of the boat. Mom's still got it. Ripples like waves now. Harold is left watching them. He watches out for the alligators. The two girls swim.

HAROLD: I know how to swim. You know I know.

SASHA: Then show mom what you're made of.

MOM: Can you two, stop tearing each other down? It's exhausting. For just five minutes I would like to feel the peace of being together.

Silence.

HAROLD: I miss....

The girls float peacefully.

HAROLD: Will somebody get back in the boat please?

SASHA: You get in the water. Come on Harold, you're a good swimmer. Try your 'diving elbow drop' in here.

HAROLD: Will somebody just get back in the boat?

They girls swim on. They float. Eventually, mom gets back in the boat for Harold but she'd rather swim across the lake.

HAROLD: If I could walk on water I would. I would walk and step on your head Sasha.

MOM: If you could walk on water, that's what you would do?

HAROLD: I would 'power bomb' her.

MOM: If you could walk on water, would it ripple I wonder?

HAROLD: Like the olive pit?

MOM: Yeah.

SASHA: We're not God.

HAROLD: You mean Jesus.

SASHA: It would be a miracle.

MOM: Do miracles ripple?

SASHA: His footsteps floated, I bet he didn't even create a ripple.

MOM: I think most people would say that Jesus did create ripples. But would our footsteps?

HAROLD: Footprints can last a while.

MOM: What's beneath us, our feet anyway? Is it sturdy?

SASHA: Is it ever?

HAROLD: 'Sweet chin music'.

MOM: What kind of music?

SASHA: It's a wrestling move/ mom.

HAROLD: When you kick 'em right in the chin.

MOM: Oh my God.

SASHA: This is what it feels like.

MOM: What?

SASHA: Living with my brother. You just haven't seen it.

MOM: Why haven't I seen it? I live with him too.

SASHA: Because you're always working or whatever. You only see things now because your job isn't anymore, so you finally see/ what it feels like.

MOM: Can we please, not on my birthday.

SASHA: See that my 5th grade just got taken away. That nothing's sturdy. It's not sturdy mom. The earth is water now and nothing is beneath my feet. So just stop. Everybody stop.

It's quiet in the boat. But the quieter it is in the boat. The louder the sound of frogs. You can feel the intensity of life buzzing all around them. It's alive. So alive.

HAROLD: Are we homeless?

MOM: No.

SASHA: Yes we are. We are homeless, tell him the truth.

MOM: We're uprooted, not homeless.

SASHA: We're refugees.

MOM: Homeless is without a home. We're here at the lake house. And that's a home, My childhood home.

SASHA: It's kind of a shack.

MOM: It's where I grew up. Not everybody grows up – in a – never mind.

A moment passes.

HAROLD: Why are we here?

MOM: It's safer.

HAROLD: Than what?

MOM: Than anywhere I can think of.

SASHA: I thought I was safe in 5th grade.

MOM: It's safe to know, when the world is water, and there's nothing solid to stand on/

SASHA: She takes us to a lake house?

MOM: You're gonna need to learn to find your footing no matter/ what.

SASHA: Please mom/no

MOM: Without sinking, without drowning.

HAROLD: The water's murky.

SASHA: It's a lake.

MOM: Without seeing what's beneath you. Without knowing what's next.

HAROLD: Mom, this is not school.

SASHA: She's trying too hard.

MOM: I'm not schooling, I'm sharing. What I'm thinking. Who I am. What's going on inside of me. Do you care to listen?

They take that in.

HAROLD: Yes.

SASHA: Of course mom.

MOM: I feel like my heart has cleaved open. And what was solid and accepted is no longer. And it feels big, sometimes scary. But mostly like it's important, like it could become more right. Anyway, I'm in motion. Always have been, but maybe I didn't realize it as much before when I was working hard, around, going and doing. But in this stillness, I see that everything is in motion. Our blood, our planet, solidity is an illusion. I never thought I would turn 50 in Michigan. Be returned to something. Feels naked, feels like being thrust back into my birthday suit.

The boat starts to rock significantly, as if from waves.

SASHA: Can't have a 'Mamma Mia Disco Dress Up Party' in your birthday suit.

HAROLD: Can't have one by ourselves.

MOM: I never thought this is where I would find myself. Back in my child hood bedroom. Back where I was conceived.

HAROLD: Gross, mom.

MOM: But it feels like something. This birthday feels like something.

A bigger wave hits and rocks the boat.

So, anyway, we can't afford to live in New York anymore, that's a fact. Your grandpa was dying is another fact.

HAROLD: He did die.

MOM: Yes, he did.

SASHA: And now we live in his house?

MOM: I hope so, I hope we can live here. If they don't take it, we can live here.

A third wave.

HAROLD: Who's they?

MOM: It doesn't matter. We can live here until. Until we can't. And in that time. There is so much. So much I want to teach you. About everything.

SASHA: Mom's having an existential crisis because she's turning 50. And we left all our friends and she feels old.

A fourth wave.

MOM: If we had a three-bedroom house with a yard and a dog, it would be an illusion. If we were still in our neighborhood in New York, going to school, going to soccer, it's still not forever. It's in motion. Our lives are always in motion.

The boat suddenly rocks most violently. The kids hold on. What was that?

MOM: I'm thinking!

HAROLD: She's sad grandpa died.

MOM: I still feel him.

SASHA: You mean like a ghost? Walking the property, peaking in the windows?

MOM: No, in the trees. When the pine trees rustle, they sound like feathers in the wind.

HAROLD: Can you talk to dead people?

SASHA: You mean ghosts.

MOM: I don't talk to ghosts.

HAROLD: Will you talk to us when you die?

MOM: What?! I'm not planning on dying any time soon.

HAROLD: I just mean if you, when, will you, can you still be with me?

MOM: I am not planning on going anywhere.

SASHA: Everything dies.

MOM: It does. And I will too. I'm just saying, I'm not planning/ on

HAROLD: Can you stay with me after you die is what I mean?

SASHA: Dude, this conversation doesn't mean we can't go back to New York.

MOM: We're not going back to New York.

SASHA: Ever? You mean we live here now? No way. I am not living here, I am from/ the city.

MOM: I don't know. I don't know if I can talk to you after I die. I don't know. If I can, I will do everything I can to be with you, comfort you, help you feel loved, because my love is forever, my love is amphibious and everywhere, and will go on and on and on no matter what. It also might be the smallest, stillest voice you ever hear. So, you'll have to listen closely.

The lake gets quiet again. Very quiet. As they think about different things.

Mom reaches below the lip of the boat. We thought this was the smallest boat ever, and yet something comes from nothing. How did that get in there? How did that even fit? Like a magician's hat, she flips a motor over the side of the boat. Then water skis, a rope. Is it makeshift or professional? We hardly know. It wouldn't matter anyway.

MOM: Come here Harold. You first.

HAROLD: Why me? Oh my gosh.

MOM: You're always begging to get in the ring. Also, you're good on a skateboard, your balance is great. Just hang on and try to stay on your feet.

SASHA: O.M.G.

HAROLD: Mom.

MOM: You're gonna love it.

She straps him up with a life vest, and hooks his feet up to some skis. She starts the motor.

MOM: Biggest thing you need to know, and it is counter intuitive, when you're done, or you need to stop for any reason you have to let go of the rope. Otherwise it will pull you under. Okay. You can't be afraid to let go.

I'm gonna start pulling you gently. Bend your knees like you're sitting in a chair. You can kind of sit back on the skis. It's gonna drag you. Drag you up. You gotta hang on. Arms have to stay taunt so I can pull you up. Lean back a little once the boat speeds

up to keep the front of the skis out of the water. Never lean into the thing that is pulling you. And when you stand, stand into the chair position. Again, if you feel you are gonna fall or are going too fast, just let go. You can't be afraid to let go.

SASHA: Mom you know he won't swim/ in the lake.

MOM: He's a great swimmer, he's just afraid of seaweed, life is not a swimming pool Harold.

She starts the motor slowly, gently, the boat pulls ahead until it pulls Harold up on his feet. It is short lived, but for a first time, he must be a natural.

MOM: Okay, let's try this again. Hang on. Arms straight, strong. Knees bent. Sit back on the skis. It doesn't feel sturdy I know, until you find your legs, then you can go fast, eventually you can go on one foot even, jump through the wake, just hang on.

He's up, he's flying, Harold is laughing, screaming, this is fun. Sasha is even loving it. Suddenly out of her shell she calls out: Faster mom! Faster!

The thrill of water skiing goes on for some time. Until they are all soaking wet, tired, refreshed, excited. They decide to dry out and sun themselves on the boat.

SASHA: Mom, I'm sorry to say this. But I'm hungry.

MOM: I know, I am too.

Hungry may be the new normal.

HAROLD: Will you tell us about dad?

MOM: Someday.

SASHA: When is someday?

MOM: Next year, or the year after.

HAROLD: When you turn 51?

MOM: Yes, okay, when I turn 51.

HAROLD: Mom, if you die will you come back?

MOM: Oh my god, I'm turning 50 today!! I'm not dying. You guys, 50 is not that old!

HAROLD: I just meant that when you die, will you come back as like a person or an animal?

MOM: I don't know Harold. Some people believe in reincarnation. Other's believe in heaven and other places.

HAROLD: Could you like wait a few years before you come back as something else, so you could like, still be mommy? Like stay close to me and watch over me and stuff?

SASHA: Where do you even go when you die?

MOM: That depends on what you believe.

A big wave comes out of nowhere. It hits the boat almost tipping it.

HAROLD: What's that?

MOM: A wave.

HAROLD: I'm scared.

MOM: Of what?

HAROLD: Alligators! And whatever is making that wave!

SASHA: It came out of nowhere. This is not natural.

MOM: It didn't come out of nowhere.

SASHA: Yes it did, a little lake like this doesn't go from being still to being an ocean.

MOM: It didn't come out of nowhere.

HAROLD: Then where did it come from?

MOM: Where many waves come from.

Sasha thinks about this. The city girl has suddenly had enough. Something in her was always destined to take charge.

SASHA: I don't want to learn how to ski mom.

MOM: Oh?

SASHA: I want to learn how to swim.

MOM: You know how to swim. You're a very good/ swimmer.

SASHA: I know it's your birthday, and you're feeling existential, but 5th grade is over, like forever over now, and safety isn't 'walking on water'. It seems to me it's just fun to walk on water, or ski, or whatever, it's a lot of fun, but what you really need is to learn how to breathe.

MOM: I try to breathe, every day, thank you for the reminder/ but I'm

SASHA: Harold?

HAROLD: Yeah?

SASHA: Harold!!!

HAROLD: I'm afraid of alligators!

SASHA: Seriously? Do you REALLY believe there are alligators in the lake?

HAROLD: No. I know there aren't alligators but...

SASHA: Then let's do this.

MOM: Do what?

SASHA: It's called 'home school' mommy.

HAROLD: Just 'cause you're 50 doesn't mean you have nothing more to learn.

MOM: I never said/

SASHA: Ready?

HAROLD: Yeah. I'm ready.

SASHA: Your best 'uso splash', your best 'code breaker' ever Harold. Make it fancy. Do it for mommy.

HAROLD: Yeah. I love you mom. Now, watch this!

The kids stand on the edge of the boat. Deep breaths. They are both standing, and yet the boat barely rocks. Simultaneously, they do the most glorious and unique dives off the boat. They go deep under water. When mom finally sees them closer to the surface they swim like they are other worldly creatures, agile, beautiful, profound. It goes on and on as mom grows curious, then worried, then full of wonder. They swim on endlessly underwater.

And as the story goes, the children dove off the boat, swam below the surface and were never heard from again.

With that thought in her mind, mom gave up looking into the water. Instead, she gazed across the lake and into the pine trees. She saw the kids crawl out of the lake and flop on the sand to catch some sun. As they rolled about, tussling, it crossed mom's mind they were not like puppies at all, more like alligators, adaptable, resilient, extraordinary in an ancient way. The wind rustled through the pine trees with an imperceptible softness.

Here's to everyone finding their sea legs in this time of turbulence, unknown depths and vast potential. Here's to new ways of breathing and new ways of knowing. Here's to the many ways kids are homeschooling parents too.