After the divorce my mom was supposed to take us every other weekend and a month during summer break, and she did at first, but good intentions fall to the wayside once everyday living gets involved. I seem to remember her always living in some tiny basement apartment downtown, below some menopausal cat lady, and decrepit floorboards creaking above us with each fat step, the lady letting us know we were being too kid-like by either vacuuming the same spot aggressively or making what sounded like Appalachian clog dancing. At one time the places she rented were parts of bigger homes, marvels of Victorian architecture actually, but by the time my mom moved out of our house and into her own place in the early 1980s, those marvels of Victorian architecture had been split into four or five different apartments, each with an inoperable screen door and a gas stove that never lit—not unlike Cheyenne itself, which had lost most of its majesty since the days of the old west. Cheyenne was like the star quarterback in high school who inevitably grew up to work at the refinery and every time he gets drunk, which is quite often, he gets in your face all loudly and lets you know how great he used to be. He breaks out old newspaper photos of when the spotlight was on him and looked so old timey American back then. He ends up a grumpy old man on a rocking chair that won’t rock on a broken old porch from where he can’t see because his neighbors are building state of the art condos all around him. Cheyenne was hanging on to the past, terrified to let go and reach for something else. Anytime a lottery or casino, or a huge plant like Budweiser was interested in moving to Cheyenne the town’s council in their big white cowboy hats and their misguided pride shot such a blatant movement towards the 21st century down.

Mom had never lived on her own before. She married my dad at sixteen years old and before that lived with her parents and a bunch of brothers and sisters. When I think back I remember those days in Super 8 film–grainy, sped
up, no sound, scratched and burnt, and always Frontier Days, Cheyenne’s long running old west festival that had been around since the old west, always during the last full week in July. *The World’s Biggest Outdoor Rodeo!* The parade seemed to perpetually loop right down the street. I remember the sensations of marching band bass drum and tubas imploding like mushroom clouds inside my little girlish chest just as the sound of the blanks did, fired from replica Colt 45s in the mock gunfights along the route. Of course the guy in the white hat always won. Or the can-can girls getting drunk at nine in the morning, one of them wandering into the crowd and kissing me on the cheek and I still remember what she said to me: “Well aren’t you handsome,” and I also remember thinking, *this lady is just trying to be nice.* If I were handsome I wouldn’t be the kid picked last for everything at school. And there were the Shriners sweating clown make-up while crammed arthritically in miniature cars, but most of all I remember the smells, oh the smells—black powder, spilled beer and horse shit wind blown into the outer edges of Wyoming’s infinite sky. This, mingled with the scent of cotton candy and popcorn equaled an east coast tourist’s wet-dream—the rootin tootin wild west! And for some reason I especially remember tearing the petals off the bright orange and red poppies growing wildly in the yards of those old mansions. Pedaling my Big Wheel house to house collecting flora and fauna, the old hand-laid stone sidewalks stressed and split by the hearty roots reaching like tentacles out from the cottonwoods.

One Saturday afternoon, mom and the first decent boyfriend she had, Bob (who became her husband), took me and Jeremy to the beach at Sloan’s Lake. The lake or maybe even a large pond was situated in a park. There was a snack bar and sand brought in from somewhere else to make a beach on one end of the water. Across the parking lot from the beach was a softball field. Next to that, a “zoo” where one could walk up to the chain link fence and feed fast food to undernourished elk, buffalo and deer as they lay in their own shit, or as the sign said, *Their Natural Habitat.* (Years later my friend Justin climbed the fence and tried to bull fight the mother buffalo. The animal snorted and scraped the ground with his hoof like bulls in cartoons do. And he pulled this stunt off as we were all peaking on LSD.) On the other side of the lake was a small amusement park, called Kiddie Land. From where I stood I could see the Ferris wheel rise and fall all a total of ten or twelve feet.

The counterfeit sand burned the bottom of my toes. Jeremy was already in the water, splashing around like he wasn’t scared of anything, which he really wasn’t. He was playing with some other kids he didn’t know—something I never did, and he was almost three years younger than me. I was scared of a lot of things—other kids, water, especially lake water where I couldn’t see the bottom. My imagination was too active which created anxiety. I didn’t want to know what was down there. I envied people like my brother who could face the unknown and know they’d be okay.

My dad tried to teach me to swim once. “It’s how men learn to swim,” he said right before tossing me off the back of a boat. I kicked and screamed and gasped and grabbed for anything I could. Green was all I could see. I was sure I was going to drown until his hairy forearm swooped into the water like a back hoe and scooped me up. So a day at the beach wasn’t a day at the beach
to me, it was torture, but I was happy to be with my mom so I decided to play along and maybe see if I could go in over my head this time.

I'm pretty sure there were storm clouds all bunched up like dirty clothes in the sky. The scorching sand was replaced by the coolness of mud and then the bitter cold of the water as I waded in. I toddled out a little more—the cold water climbing up my body, my pride swelling with each step into the unknown. The further I went, the more it smelled like a carp decaying in the sun. Up to my knees now, calling towards the shore, “Mom! Mom! Look!” Jeremy was trying out his new goggles closer to shore. Sea weed was collecting around my legs. Now the water up to my balls—literally taking my breath away, “Mom. Mom. I’m doing it!”—bouncing and shivering. She looked up from her book I’m pretty sure it was something like *Christine* by Stephen King, nodded, took a drag of her cigarette then smiled in approval before looking back down. And I’m pretty sure Steve Perry was singing Oh Sherrie on the snack shack radio, then a DJ said, *Thank you for listening to Q98. Ninety-eight point six on your FM dial then blah blah blah, something about the weather.* The water was up to my chest now, lapping up into my mouth, green, dark and fishy—the horizon, eye level but tilting slightly. The ping of an aluminum bat rang out from the softball field and some guy yelled, “Take third,” followed by a bunch of people clapping. The volume of laughter from the Ferris wheel moved in a radius. Bobbing on my tip toes with each wave, trying to keep my mouth above water, I dunked my face in and just as swiftly pulled it out. “I did it!” I said out loud, looking towards shore to see if my mom was watching. “Mom! Mom!” I walked a few steps forward wiping the lake from my eyes, the silhouettes on the shoreline crested and fell then there was frantic splashing, a commotion stirring behind me.

“Get the fuck out!” Someone yelled. I turned around as best as I could, a kid in his teens, the lifeguard, dragging something behind him. He looked at me all serious, “Get the fuck out kid. Now!” My white legs, like the shiny underside of a fishing lure, sliced through the water. Squeals and screams and splashing. Parents were running towards the water to grab their kids. Finally I made it to the sand, the lifeguard out of breath right behind me, when I turned around I was able to fully see what he was pulling—a large man, bloated and beyond pale—almost translucent. He wore a gown of seaweed, soggy flesh peeling off in chunks like chum. Gawkers lifted their sunglasses and covered their mouths from the smell. Death was heavy in the air. The man’s body was bent in a riding position. The authorities would dive for the motorcycle later, but now, now there were CB radios crackling, uniforms, cop cars, sirens, thunderclouds splitting, my mom handed me a towel and told me not to look, but it was too late—I had looked death right in its water-logged face. They found the body inches from where I believed I was at my bravest, right where I went in up to my chest, where I believed I conquered my fear of water and where I was so proud of myself.

“Try not to get sand in the car,” mom said, drops of rain bouncing off of the drowned man’s chest.

The ump yelled “Steeerike!” from behind the plate.

Gravel crunched under the Subaru’s tires as we pulled out of the parking lot.
and headed home.