Trout

Once every two months, I receive an envelope in the mail from an address in Montana. Inside are two or three photographs of the largest fish my uncle has caught in the time since his last letter. Often there is a measuring tape lying beside the fish, or my unsmiling uncle is gripping the fish by its mouth. The tail fin reaches him somewhere between his waist and his thigh. On the back of the pictures, he writes some basic information about the fish—the day it was caught, how much it weighs, and which body of water it was caught in.

One of the most recent pictures had HAPPY BIRTHDAY written on the back, underneath the details about the fish. The picture was of my uncle’s fat hands gripping a trout, its black pupil pointed at the camera. I seemed to make eye contact with the fish no matter what position I viewed the picture from. I wondered if it was still alive, or if it knew that my uncle's fat fingers were digging into its gills. I could see dirt beneath his nails. I imagined his hands picking up earthworms and attaching them to fishing hooks. I threw the picture in the trash, then dug through potato skins and chicken bones to retrieve it two hours later. The mail came at the end of July, and my 17th birthday was at the beginning of June. The photo is sitting in my desk drawer, underneath five other fish pictures with HAPPY BIRTHDAYs on their backs. My uncle’s birthday wishes are the only non-fish-related communication we have.

The first picture he sent me six years ago said IM SORRY underneath the birthday wish. The fish in that picture was mustard yellow and measured fourteen inches long. Its body was glossy enough that I could see the reflection of my uncle taking the photo on its skin. His face was red and proud. I hung that picture above my bedroom door. The scotch tape on its back is losing its stick, and when I shut my door too hard the picture falls. I wipe lint and grime off the tape then press it hard against the wall until it stays again. I don’t want to peel the old tape off to put a new piece on. It’s stuck over my uncle’s note, and I might rip off some of the pen’s ink if I mess with it.

Uncle Henry’s family missed our fourth of July barbeque for the first time when I was nine. I couldn’t remember them ever not coming, and when I asked Aunt Jessica where they were, she told me to mind my business, that they just had some things to sort out. I missed my cousin Alex, who was a year older and played basketball with me in our driveway. The next year, Alex and his mom came to the barbeque without Uncle Henry. We were playing basketball when I asked him where his dad was. He clutched his chest and held up a finger, signaling he had to catch his breath before he answered. But after he caught his breath, he dribbled the basketball into the road and began throwing it at the hoop from increasingly longer distances. None of them went in, and when he ran back to where I was standing, flat-footed and anxious in the driveway, I asked him again, and he was again too out of breath to answer.

The next year there was no barbeque because the funeral was too close to the beginning of July. Alex and his mom were there, but not Uncle Henry. The day after Dad died, Mom said Uncle Henry called her on the phone when I wasn’t home to pay his condolences. Mom told me about the call two years later when I was prying about why he hadn’t come to the funeral. She told me that when he called, he had asked not to speak to me. I asked why he’d want that, and she told me he probably didn’t want me to hear him broken up. She told me his voice sounded just like Dad’s over the phone and that it’d made her feel more broken up than she already was. She said I would’ve ended up all broken up too if I’d heard how he sounded on the phone. It was better for all of us that I didn’t talk to him, Mom said.

 The following year there was again no fourth of July barbeque. Mom and I drove to a high school parking lot to watch fireworks instead. We sat next to each other on the hood of her minivan and when the show was over, I trapped lightning bugs between my cupped hands and stole glances at them from between my fingers until they escaped. Mom did the same. We stayed until we were the last car left. On the drive home, she cried. Hearing her like that was painful, and I remember wishing that she’d open the windows so that I could’ve heard anything else, maybe the sounds of some far-off fireworks show that hadn’t ended yet. But the windows stayed closed, and in the confines of the car, I turned my body as far from Mom as I could and pressed my forehead against the passenger window. I focused on the yellow windows of houses that had their blinds up and wondered if the people who I could see inside, who were eating their dinners or watching TV or having conversations, would ever have to feel as bad as we felt inside of our car that night. The next year, there was no barbeque or fireworks show, and then the next, and it became clear that we didn’t celebrate the fourth anymore.

 Alex and his mom came to our Thanksgiving dinner this year. It was the first time I’d seen them since the funeral, and I wanted to ask him if he got letters too, if he also had a stack of pictures of fish with birthday wishes on their backs in his desk drawer. I wondered if he also didn’t really care about fishing. I wanted to ask if he wrote back and if he did, I wanted to ask if he ever got a response. But because I was older and better informed, I knew not to bring up Uncle Henry. Like Dad, Uncle Henry left because he said everything had become too much to bear, and he'd made clear he didn’t want to come back, at least not yet. Mom told me that she thinks the letters he sends are his way of letting us know he's at least still here. I’m jealous of Alex because his dad’s going away meant moving to Montana. My dad’s going away meant shutting the garage door with his car still running, leaving no possibility of return, no birthday wishes or pictures from fishing trips.

On the fourth of July this year, I tried to celebrate. My friend Marcus invited me out and we watched fireworks from the bleachers at our high school. He brought a water bottle full of his parents' vodka. We were supposed to walk to our friend's house at eleven, where there would be more alcohol and hopefully girls. The vodka made my skin hot and as we started to leave the bleachers, I told Marcus I needed to go home. Then I was kneeling over to vomit, everything happening so fast that I would have thrown up on Marcus’s shoes if he hadn’t had the reflexes to move. I think he said okay dude, be safe, or something like that before I stood up and left. Fireworks exploded above me on my walk home, the sound vibrating through my brain.

When I got home, I sat at my desk and thumbed through my stack of fish pictures, pulling out the one from my 13th birthday. Snot clogged my nose and forced me to take short sad breaths from my mouth. I'd been crying. In the picture, Uncle Henry is holding a trout and his face is turned to the side. He has Dad’s aquiline nose, which is like mine too. I assume his hands are calloused and sweaty like Dad’s were. I imagine that he’s like Dad in that he cracks his knuckles one by one when he’s nervous and that his laugh sounds like he’s gasping for air. I realize I’m angry. I’m angry that my uncle, who is the closest living person to my father, didn’t want to talk to me on the phone the one time he called. I’m angry for Alex, who should’ve had a father even when I didn’t. Unfairly, I’m angry at my dad for leaving at all, I’m angry at him and his brother for deciding the world was too much to bear and leaving Alex and me to bear it instead.

I fell asleep at my desk and woke up four hours later with a dry mouth and a strong urge to pee. I had a dream, one of the long ones that felt like it lasted the entire time I was asleep. In it, I was a fisherman alone on an island. The water was clear and had dozens of goldfish the size of trout. I picked them up with my hands in shallow water—they didn’t resist being caught as I imagine most fish would—then swam to shore with them. They were pulpous with no teeth and liked it when I lit cigarettes in their mouths. They made excellent pillows and when I cared for them well with plenty of cigarettes, they grew to the size of Labrador retrievers. The only problem on the island was that the skin on my back was stretched tight by a sunburn. I wondered if how I felt on the island is how Uncle Henry feels on his boat in Montana. I wondered if I, who with age was becoming strikingly similar to Dad and his brother (at least according to Mom) would also find a way to leave. I wished I could’ve re-entered that dream, but my muscles ached, and my head burned. On my phone, there was a text from Marcus asking if I got home safe. On my desk, the photo of Uncle Henry was still out and the drawer that it came from still open.

Mom has told me not to contact him. She says it won’t do anyone any good, that when he’s ready to reach out in a more serious way he will. But now, having turned 17, I’ve decided to make my own choices. I’m packaging my first letter to the address in Montana. It’s on loose-leaf paper. It says “410-385-2850, CALL ME, LOVE, LEO”. I signed it “BEST, LEO” on my first draft. As I lick the envelope’s bitter adhesive, I imagine what we’ll talk about if he calls. I’ll pick up the phone and say hello and he’ll say hello back, then he’ll ask if this is Leo. I’ll say it is and ask who’s there. He’ll say it’s your Uncle Henry. I’m not sure what I’ll say next. Maybe I’ll ask him what Dad was like as a kid. I’ll try and ask why he hasn’t called sooner. I’ll tell him he should come visit us, and he’ll tell me he can’t in the nicest way he can. Maybe to get the conversation going I’ll ask him to tell me how he got into fishing. That’ll make him talk for a while. That’s probably the way the conversation will end up, him rambling about his latest fishing trip and me silent and nodding on the other end, wondering what the stupid goldfish are doing on their island without me. I imagine he’s going to sound just like Dad. I’ll hang up the phone feeling broken, wondering if there was ever going to be a right time to get broken up like that.