

Kelly Grogan

With the Depth of a Thousand Waters

Chihiro told me she didn't know what made her wake up that night. A dream perhaps, or the wind wrapping around the leaves of the acacias, the sound of whispers through her window. She'd sat up in the darkness, listening.

I felt like something was out there, she said. Like someone was calling my name.

We were sitting on the roof of my apartment building when Chihiro told me the story. A low mist hung over Hilo, droplets of water clinging to our hair and our skin. We leaned against the ledge where the bay windows hung over the street and watched the tiny cars crawling below us, the painted lines of colorful umbrellas winding over the sidewalks.

I walked to the window. There was a warm breeze. I felt the curtains brushing against my legs.

Here, Chihiro paused. Her eyes half-closed with the memory and her

hand stretched out in front of her, as though tracing the soft folds of the curtains there.

I thought I could hear music.

She'd been thirteen at the time, and had just moved in with her grandfather, Aki. Her parents had drowned, a storm that came from nowhere; she said she'd waited up for them all night, alone, listening to the sound of rain on the roof. By morning they still had not returned, and within a week grandfather Aki arrived in his old brown pickup truck and drove her up the Big Island to his house in Waipio Valley. His was a small and weather-worn home tucked into a glen just north of the valley, a quarter-mile from the beach, surrounded by a wild and fragrant garden.

Gardenias, she said. And listening to her tell the story with the damp scent of the city all around us, a mix of rain and concrete and car exhaust, I could almost smell the soft, sweet blossoms.

I'd never heard Chihiro talk about any place like she talked about her grandfather's. She had a special smile for the memory of those tangled forests, the changing mood of the tides ebbing out and rushing back in, the steady drumbeat of the waves against the sand. When she talked about Aki's house and her eyes shone with that sad and beautiful light,

I couldn't help but think of my own home, the contrast of my finally-fractured family across the ocean, so distant from our space on the roof. Perhaps, in that moment, I fell in love with her a little bit more — seeing the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the way her fingers intertwined together while she talked. The way she seemed so whole, so complete; and yet, so empty.

I don't tell any of this to the dean when he calls me to his office to talk about Chihiro. He doesn't ask. He wants to know when I last saw Chihiro, how she'd seemed, if she'd called recently.

"Why, what's wrong?" I ask him. He tells me she hasn't been in class in days, no one's seen her on campus, she hasn't been to her dorm.

"Do you know her roommate?" he asks.

"We've met," I say. Nani. She must have been the one to alert him.

"She said Chihiro spent a lot of time at your apartment."

"We're classmates. We study together."

"Would you say you and Chihiro are close friends?"

“Yes.” I try not to sound defensive. One word and so many feelings tangled up in how I say it. He’s not asking if I love her; but I’m convinced he’s looking for the answer, waiting for me to trip up and reveal something. I do my best to stay neutral throughout the interview. I tell the dean I don’t know where Chihiro could be, but in my mind, I replay the story she told me on the roof, all the details, the way they add up.

When I finally leave his office, I walk slowly back to my apartment, deep in thought. I open my door, fumbling with the keys, then lay down on my couch. I reach for my phone and call Chihiro, but she doesn’t answer. She hasn’t answered in two weeks.

Sometimes she’d appear every morning like clockwork, standing in my hallway out of breath and smiling, two steaming coffees in her hands. Other times she’d ignore me for days. We’d get into an argument or I would ask a question she didn’t want to answer, and then we’d drift through a sea of silence until enough time had passed to forget. But she always came back. She was never gone for too long.

I asked her, once, why she disappeared that way. *I am like the moon, she said, and spun off down the road, calling backward. Sometimes full and round, sometimes hidden in shadow.* Laughing. Dancing. Brighter than the orange streetlights that dotted the sidewalk, the flickering neon

signs in the restaurant windows.

I call Chihiro again. Just the sound of ringing unanswered, the searching call of a satellite through all that empty space.

I didn't tell the dean, but I do remember the last time I spoke to Chihiro. We talked on the phone, the day after she told me the story on the roof. In retrospect, she had seemed off somehow. Distant. Asking me questions without answers like she was searching for something. Trailing off mid-sentence into silences so long I thought she'd hung up on me. And then, at the end of the call, static settled between us and I said her name and heard her voice weakly through the other end.

Listen. Can you hear that? It's music.

A humming, a click, and we were disconnected.

I thought I could hear music, Chihiro said, shivering in the cool night air. Something playing out on the water, so I only caught pieces of it between the sets of waves. Hilo was spread beneath us, windows glittering with lamplight, apartments standing tall and over there, a line of blackness where the Wailuku River flowed towards the sea. Night fell quickly under the cover of clouds, and the streetlights flickered on along the roads.

Chihiro said her grandfather was used to her waking in the middle of the night, thrashing with nightmares. He half-slept most nights, alert to sounds from her room. Night terrors, he called them. Memories that threatened to pull her under, and he'd turn on the light and hold Chihiro close to his chest until she fell asleep again.

But that night, Chihiro could hear Aki snoring through the thin wall between their rooms, asleep. She opened the window inch by inch, cringing as the wood creaked, then ducked through and landed quietly on the damp leaves below. She paused for a moment, listening. There was no movement, so she padded barefoot through the garden towards the beach, her path illuminated by a slant of moonlight.

It was high tide, she said. The waves were splashing up against the rocks, and a cold mist hung over the sand.

I could almost see the wisps and clouds, the tendrils of dew dancing through the air, kissing Chihiro's brow as she moved through it. The same kind of heavy fog that encircled us on the roof, a low cloud that made all the familiar places seem far away and dreamlike.

I couldn't figure out where the music was coming from. I thought maybe a boat had moored along the beach, and its owners fell asleep with the radio playing.

But there was no one else out there. No lights, no voices. Just the black water, the reflection of the moon upside down.

I was scared, she said. I felt like I was the only person in the world, like I was completely alone.

I understood. The feeling of darkness settling, the grasping at air and finding nothing. I used to feel it when I was younger. I'd wake in the middle of the night and hear the wind pouring through the vents in the attic, and I'd wonder if I was the only one home, the only one there to hear the wind sing.

By mid-afternoon, I decide she must have gone back to her grandfather's old house. I think that in telling me her story, she was saying the story wasn't finished, that there was a goodbye that she never had the chance to say or she'd left something behind, something she needed. I can't find any other explanation for her disappearance, and the timing, right after telling me about the night at Aki's, can't be a coincidence. I call the bus station and book a ticket to Honokaa, a small town only a short shuttle ride away from Waipio Valley trailhead, and find a room to spend the night in. The hike into the valley is steep and long, and I have to dig through the still-unpacked boxes in my closet to find a pair of old hiking boots and thick socks.

While I pack, I imagine finding Chihiro in the valley, her amazement when she sees me. *How did you know where to look?* she would ask, and I'd smile and say, *Because you're like the moon.*

I keep my backpack light, taking only enough for the weekend. From my desk, I pick up a picture of Chihiro and I study it for a long moment. She'd only ever let me take one picture of her, just one. When I look at it, I can remember holding my breath and pressing down on the shutter, the way it felt like I'd captured a tiny piece of her. She looks defiant in the picture, her chin stuck forward and her gaze directed unflinchingly into the lens.

I tuck the photo carefully into the front pocket of my backpack, and I wait, watching the clock tick closer to seven. The shadows stretch longer beyond my window, lights flickering on in the hotel windows across the street. At dusk, I walk to the bus station along crowded sidewalks, weaving between strangers and ducking under umbrellas. The clouds churn overhead and a few droplets of rain speckle my glasses.

It's the last bus to Honokaa, and there are only two other passengers sitting lonely in their rows, their eyes already closed. I wobble as the bus lurches forward and climb into the back corner seat, leaning my forehead against the window. Outside, the rains come pouring down,

as though the sky had been waiting for this moment to let go, and the lights of the cars we pass are distant yellow orbs through the water.

I thought maybe I was dreaming, Chihiro continued. I thought I'd wake up any second and Aki would be standing over me, turning on the light. We sat up from our spot on the edge of the roof and leaned against the railing, stretching the stiffness out of our legs. Far below us, I heard the wailing of a siren, rising and falling as it passed the building.

But it wasn't a dream, and I wasn't alone.

She said at first, all she saw was a shadow in the fog, a smudge so faint she thought she'd imagined it. But then it darkened, taking shape. A figure. A person. A girl, walking along the edge of the water. Chihiro panicked; was the girl coming for her? Was she hurt? But just as quickly she realized the girl did not see her at all.

She was staring out at the ocean while she walked, and I got the feeling that even if I yelled she wouldn't notice. That was when Chihiro should have turned back. She said she wished she'd walked away and gone back to bed, forgetting any of it ever happened. Instead, she walked closer to the girl, pulled by some invisible thread. It was strange, she said. I felt like the girl, whoever she was, could hear the same music I heard.

The bus pulls into Honokaa at just past eight and I walk the half-mile to my rental, a shack along the beach. The room is small, just bare walls with a small twin bed and a chest, some netting draped across the window to keep the bugs out. I lie down on the thin mattress and within minutes I sink into a deep and forgetful sleep.

When I wake, the early morning sun slants orange and warm across my face, and I'm lost for a moment, unsure of where I am. But then Chihiro's laughter rings in my ears, an echo from a dream, and I remember: She is missing, I am here to find her. I step outside onto the sand. The air is fresh and alive here. Already the birds are calling across the hills, a chorus of songs and whistles in the treetops. I find a small café nearby and even though they don't open for another half-hour the waitress lets me in and makes me a steaming cup of coffee. She tells me to make myself comfortable and busies herself getting ready to open.

The town stirs while I sit at a table by the window, and everything is exactly as Chihiro described it. The small, winding roads leading to houses nestled between the steep hills. Tiny buildings, bleached white with salt and sun, cradled in a chaos of greenery. When the waitress stops by to check on me, I pull out the photo of Chihiro.

"No, I haven't seen her," the waitress says, barely glancing at the photo before she ducks her head and bustles away.

The shuttle to Waipio Valley is small and the air conditioner doesn't work, so by the time I reach the trailhead I'm already sweaty and sticky from the heat. The voices of other passengers, a family of four from the mainland fade behind me as I descend along the path, turning my feet to the side to keep from sliding through the mud. By the time I reach the fork that leads to the beach, I'm sweaty and exhausted, and I rest beside a creek and listen to the wind sing through the trees overhead. A hummingbird flits through the bushes beside me, its wings splashed with ruby and turquoise, chirruping into the folds of flowers. I begin to feel as though Chihiro is beside me, like I can hear her voice in the breeze. I imagine Chihiro running through these trees, young then, laughing and splashing in the water.

When I reach the cliffs and the ocean, I think, for a moment, that I see her, and my breath catches in my chest. But it isn't Chihiro. I step closer. It's an older woman, standing at the edge of the tide, staring out across the sea. The hem of her skirt trails scarlet in the tide that swirls at her feet. She doesn't notice me.

Chihiro's voice chimes soft in my ears: *I was maybe thirty feet away from her when the girl stopped walking. She turned to the sea and stared out at something, something I couldn't see.* She said the girl didn't move for several minutes, and she'd crept closer, trying to figure out if she knew

the girl from somewhere, if she'd ever seen in her Honokaa. But she didn't recognize the girl.

And then, she just started walking. Slow, measured steps into the water. Her feet, her ankles, her knees. Deeper and deeper.

She'd shouted at the girl to stop, but her voice was swallowed in the sound of the waves and the girl kept walking, disappearing into the ocean.

I look behind me before I round the bend, glancing at the woman, just to be sure. Her silhouette is faint against the sky, but I can see the red glimmer of her skirt billowing around her knees as she walks back into the foot of the valley, the sun glinting white in her hair.

I reached the edge of the tide when the girl's head disappeared.

Chihiro had run into the waves, water splashing up around her as she tumbled forward against the beating ocean. The swell took her feet from the sand and tugged her deeper, and she took a quick breath and slipped beneath the surface.

Down there, Chihiro said, and shivered — it was darker than anything I've ever known. I couldn't see anything at all. I held my breath as

she talked, trying to imagine the feeling of suffocating on the quiet darkness. *My lungs burned and my hands were stretched out in front of me, searching for something to grab onto.*

She said that the sound of the waves was a dull and constant roar from above. That she thought, for a moment, she was touching the girl's hand, only to realize she was clutching a cold and ropy stalk of seaweed.

Again and again she dove, kicking against the churning waters and coughing when she broke for air. She scanned the horizon, the dips in the waves, for any sign of the girl, then submerged again into the deep.

But the girl was gone, she said. Just...gone.

I arrive at the house out of breath and exhilarated, climbing out from the trees expecting to find Chihiro standing before me. But Aki's house, or what used to be his house, is empty. It clearly hasn't been lived in since Aki died — the porch is falling into the ground on one side, the windows are grimy and framed in cobwebs, and the dust is not disturbed. No one has been here in years. I walk around the yard, peering through the windows, the furniture inside indiscernible through the gauzy veil of white draped sheets. Two wicker rocking chairs sit on the back porch, a faded hammock swings empty between two trees. There's a shed in the back full of kayaks and snorkeling gear,

rusty beach chairs folded up along the wall. Bamboo wood chimes hanging crookedly by the back door, cracked and silent. I was certain Chihiro would be here, waiting for me. Instead, there's only silence. I call her name into the jungle and bursts of color flash through the foliage as startled birds erupt from the trees.

Eventually, I sit in one of the rocking chairs and take a long drink of water. A breeze stirs against the leaves and I catch the wild, musky scent of gardenias, their white petals dancing. Chihiro's scent, the ivory curve of her bare shoulders while she spun in the lamplight. But there's no music here, just the rustling of the canopy overhead, the calling of the birds. I close my eyes, willing my mind to stretch through all that distance, willing myself to find Chihiro. I can't understand why she isn't here.

I sit forward, suddenly, the forest stilled for a moment. I look around me, certain I'm being watched, or followed. I try to shake it off. I have to consider the facts. Chihiro is a missing person. People disappear. They leave, they look for new beginnings and they don't look back. It happens all the time. It happened to me all the time. I should have been used to it by now.

I stand from the chair and check my watch. It will be getting dark soon, and I have to hike back to the shuttle.

“Chihiro?” I call, one last time, my voice loud in the silence. There’s a flutter of leaves and a long high whistle as a bird takes flight. In the distance the gray clouds spell rain and an uneasy dusk settles over the valley.

Chihiro isn’t here. I was wrong.

By the time Chihiro had finished the story, dawn cast an early light on the rooftop and we’d watched the city fall asleep only to wake up again for another day. Our eyes were puffy and framed in dark circles. We would sleep, she told me, later. But she had to finish.

The girl was gone beneath the waves, and the ocean was stronger than Chihiro was. The tide pulled at her limbs and carried her further from shore, and she was crying, her tears mixing with the salt of the sea. The tossing waves were relentless, and she felt her energy ebbing, her legs trailing through the churning waters.

There was a moment, Chihiro said, when I was completely helpless. I knew I was going to drown.

That was the moment that she saw the girl — just as she’d given up. Or maybe not. She couldn’t be sure. It could have been anything.

Something drifted past her, beneath her, gleaming white in the water. But before she could touch it, before she could get closer, the girl, and Chihiro, were swallowed up in blackness.

The last thing I felt was something tugging at me. And then everything just disappeared. Like falling asleep.

When she woke up, her face was pressed against the sand and she was coughing water from her lungs. Everything burned with salt — her nose, her chest, her throat, her eyes. Grandfather Aki was pounding the flat of his hand against her back over and over again, forcing her to breathe.

“What were you doing, Chihiro?” he kept saying, over and over again. She rolled over onto her back and sat up on her elbows, looking at her grandfather. She said she would never forget the look on his face. His hands shook against her, he held her tight and would not let go.

I tried to tell him I was ok, she said, but I felt like my chest was caving in.

Aki carried Chihiro back to the house and dressed her in dry clothes, patting a towel over her hair. He tucked her into bed and when he rose to turn out the light, Chihiro held onto him, pulling him back.

He looked at me for a moment, then climbed in beside me, letting me rest my head on his chest. With sleep tugging at her eyelids, Chihiro found the last of her strength. "There was a girl," she whispered to her grandfather. "There was a girl in the water."

Aki stroked her hair and murmured, and at last Chihiro drifted to sleep.

The storm blows into the valley quickly, and by the time I make my way back to the creek the sky opens up in a downpour. I slip over the muddy rocks as I clamber back towards the trail, the air so thick with rain that I can barely see more than a few feet in front of me. When I reach the steep path leading up the side of the mountain, I scramble up the first switchback and discover a pile of fallen rocks and mud blocking the way, a heavy landslide turning plant roots up and tossing trees to the side. The sound of the rain on the leaves is thunderous. I can hear nothing else, and I know that even if I yell no one will be able to hear me, no one will find me down here. I glance up at the ridge, where the shuttle is parked, and back into the forest.

Continuing to the shuttle was too dangerous, the ground too unpredictable. I turn around and follow the path back to the beach. By the time I reach Aki's house my clothes are drenched and I'm shivering. I rummage through the shed and find an old tarp, covered in dirt, and I wrap it around myself like a blanket and climb up the steps to the

porch. Under the shelter of the roof, I listen to the pounding of the rain overhead and watch the wall of water that falls over the forest. My eyes get heavy. The last thing I remember is longing for Chihiro, imagining her sitting beside me, our fingers entwined.

Something wakes me up; quiet through my dreaming, a thump or a rustle, someone breathing. When I open my eyes the rains have passed. My clothes are damp and the air is cool. I stretch my neck, stiff from being slumped in the hard chair. The moon is a hazy disc behind the rolling mists, and I can barely make out the shape of the house when the clouds conceal the light. I stand slowly, unbalanced in the darkness, and walk along the porch. "Hello?" I whisper.

I step down from the porch and walk around the side of the house, passing beneath the window and around the corner before I notice it. The back window is half open, the curtains billowing like clouds through the windowsill.

I pull myself up and over the windowsill, dust rising in the air when I land inside. A kitchen. The sink is rusted out and the floor creaks as I walk to the closed doors at the end of the hallway. *I could hear Aki snoring through the wall between our rooms.* The walls are blank and dark, and the air feels as though it hasn't moved in years. But I know my way through the house. It's as though I've been here before. *I jumped*

through the window to the garden. I reach the doorway and turn the handle slowly, hearing the click as the latch releases.

I am standing, then, in Chihiro's bedroom. What used to be her bedroom. And yet, something of her spirit remains, a pale glow from the white walls, the dappled moonlight through the window. Chihiro dancing, a shadow flickering over the floor, the scent of her hair in the breeze — or was it the gardenias, the wild and fragrant blossoms like tiny lanterns in the night? The sound of her laughter, musical, tugging at a part of my chest and pulling me forward, through the room to the window where she must of have climbed out that night. The window, that I see now, is open too.

I thought I could hear music.

She'd said she could feel the ghosts of her past all the time. Sometimes they were far off and other times right behind her shoulder, tugging at her sleeves; but always there, always waiting. I could see them there too, in her eyes — and I knew what she was really telling me. That people are the ones haunted, not houses. Ghosts don't live in the high corners of attics or under the bed. They live in the hollows of the heart, and pace there, back and forth through the hole they left behind.

I feel Chihiro here, like she is standing just beyond what I can see. So

close my hand reaches out into the air and I half expect to feel warmth sparking across my fingertips. The wind drifts through the window, the sound of raindrops gathering and falling from the leaves of the trees.

I climb out the window, into the garden, and I walk towards the beach. The moon breaks through a cloud, and I take off my shoes, pressing my toes into the cool sand. I walk from the house to the edge of the water, where I gaze out over the ocean and watch the fog roll in.

That's when I see her. She's standing on the shore beyond the waterfall, looking out. A heartbeat, a frozen second while I stare at her.

"Chihiro," I yell, lunging forward. "Chihiro!"

But she doesn't hear me. I run forward, and, losing my footing, tumble into the sand. Grit fills my mouth. When I stand up, the water is up to Chihiro's waist, and she's walking forward, purposefully, deeper and deeper.

"Chihiro, wait," I yell, and I run into the ocean after her. A wave breaks over me and my body hits the sand and I stand up again, coughing and sputtering. I dive forward, clawing at the water, and her head slips beneath the surface.

“Chihiro,” I call, again and again, treading water between sets and peering over the swell for any glimpse of her. For every few strokes I am able to swim forward, a wave rises and hurls me backward. I fill my chest with air and dive beneath the biggest ones, feeling the weightless churning waters pulling me back and forth. Beneath the water, darkness in all directions, the light from the moon disintegrated and refracted into dust. I can’t see anything. I can’t feel the difference between up and down. Then my head breaks the surface and I gasp, nose burning with salt, and my voice echoes across the water carrying the sound of her name.

I slip beneath the waves again, and I see her, suddenly. Chihiro drifts beneath me, staring upwards, her hair spread like a fan through the water. Her skin is luminescent, pale and dappled with light and shadow from the surface of the sea. It’s impossible — I can’t even see my own hand in front of me — but I can somehow make out the angle of her cheekbones, the shape of her mouth. My lungs burn against my chest, but I kick harder, trying to reach her, pulling myself deeper. Her limbs waver and her face is a porcelain sculpture, perfect. I call her name, underwater, air pouring out of me and drifting to the surface in great round bubbles.

Then she fades, the light leaving, her body growing smaller and more distant as the current carries her away. Or maybe the shadows creep

in from the edges of my own vision, maybe I drift away, my chest
screaming against the depth of a thousand waters. The last thing I see
is her eyes, her green eyes, staring up at me through the growing space
between us. Staring up at me the way one looks at drowned people.