

“Wading”
Cooper Matuszak

“What’s ‘wading’ mean?”

“That’s what it’s called when you get in the water,” dad says. He slings his beach towel over his shoulder so he can use both hands to help me onto a rock.

“Then why do the signs say ‘no wading’?” I ask.

“They’re worried about a lawsuit if we get hurt, but we won’t sue anybody if we do.”

This is just another trip to the gorge with my dad the adventurer, who once pulled nine leaches from my skin as I cried in my swim diaper. He wants his ashes spread near here, two miles past a no trespassing sign.

My sister and I eat chicken nuggets with our feet in the water, packing our wrappers back in dad’s backpack like he taught us. He reads a wrinkled paperback and tells us to play a while. When we make our way back, he’s sunning like a lizard, sunglasses covering his closed eyes.

“When I was seventeen,” he tells us, “David and I ditched school and biked all the way here from Fremont. When we got down near the water, there was a bobcat standing just over there, watching us. We stayed still, and the bobcat looked me right in the eyes and started peeing. Then he turned around and ran away. I think I’ll always remember the color of his eyes.”

I gaze into the water as he speaks, down into a mermaid lagoon, toward a lost pirate’s treasure, wondering if I could squeeze between the rocks if I tried.

On our next visit to the gorge, a deer carcass lays cracked open on dad’s sunbathing rock.

“Let’s not get in the water here,” dad says. “We’ll go upstream.”

“That’s so sad,” I say.

“I don’t like it,” my sister says. We steal glances at the body as we pass.

“That’s somebody’s dinner,” dad says. “Maybe a family of coyotes! She has to hunt to feed her babies. They probably come here to drink when nobody’s around.”

That night, I’d fall asleep in my warm bed and open my eyes underwater. The walls of the gorge stretched up on either side and I tread water above dad’s sunbathing rock. The gorge was submerged, full to the brim with cold, glassy water, and the trees at the top seemed to bend and wiggle from my vantage point below.

I watched the powerful legs of a deer slice through the water at the surface, her hooves moving confidently as she crossed to the other side of the chasm.

Years later, I’d tell my dad, “You know, they don’t allow wading because endangered species live there. We can damage the streambed, which is bad for the plants and animals.”

“That’s probably true,” he says, tossing a french fry to the bird beneath our table.

“That’s not good for them,” I say.

“But they’re hungry,” he says.

Today, an older Nature Guide tells me, “The rules were different back then. We used to let kids eat all sorts of plants, and hike through the creek, even catch snakes. We want the spirit of that to live on, but in a way that’s safer for the kids and the environment.”

I gaze down into the creek where someone's dropped a can of Diet Coke. Can children learn the sanctity of water without ever getting their sneakers wet?

I take the kids down to the bank and we admire the tadpoles. We dip our fingers, then our hands, and I ask how it feels.

"Nice," a first grader replies.

I ask if they're ready to keep hiking, but they want to stay under the bridge. We hunt for treasure and pack out the Coke can, a plastic bag, a soggy coffee cup. We listen for birds and draw in our journals and two kids jump from one bank to the other. I chew my lip as dirt tumbles into the creek. Can kids care about mud before they've felt it between their fingers?