Jade and Juniper Bay

I

The early morning slanting sun
is already hot on our skin. We
buy fresh fruit at the market
on the way to the beach and
bring the old flannel quilt.

The one grandma and her friends made
before marriage and kids and
each had made a patch—
embroidered her signature onto it.
The signatures are gone now
and only straggling threads remain.

We ride our bikes through severe hills, down
into the juniper trees. Shadow and light
blink
cause a blindness. We
race through the snaking road to the park,
backpacks full of
lemonade and sandwiches and
books and journals and old towels. We
latch our bikes to the wooden posts and
run the last half a kilometre to the beach—
mindful of rattlers on the trail.

We settle near an ancient tree and
move with its shadow through the day.

The hills fold tightly around us:
hands cupping a grasshopper.
Aunty Jude picks me up in her Tercel. We're on our way to swim and we always laugh tongues falling over Jade and Juniper Jude and Jupiter June and Jude and Jude has lupus and is allergic to the sun. As a child her brown body slipped through this water, these hills but now she waits until the wink of gold-to-mauve-to-navy dusk.

The grass is thick and deep emerald under the trees. We tiptoe over polished, rounded stones slimy and then dive and cool cool into the green, the see-through beer bottle world. And if we crane our necks we see the gnarled trees looming high on the hill behind, the hill that is already deep in shadow.

Eyes peeled underwater we swim: clear and then murky the deeper we get. We see snakes but really branches. Sunken trees ripped from above are ground into the muddy lake bottom by the force of the fall.

I swim to shore on my back. I watch the stars peek out of the dusk. I swim back to Jude smiling on the beach.

We eat strawberries and blueberries, our fingers stained red and blue. Holding our hands up to the sky we are bruised.
And then once we swam past the farthest point of land and found a third bay.

Not Jade with its sand or Juniper with its stones but instead there was only land that reached right out into the water and dropped.

And behind was a house that looked like it was falling in on itself in the slowest motion possible. Everything pulled into the centre as if there was a knot there, tightening.

The outside was painted that kind of yellow you'd think should have faded with time but instead the spidery trees that slumped over the house had covered the paint in sap: made it look shiny like skin swollen with fever.