My mother became a scientist the day she took a screen door to the marshy part of the lake in her backyard. She thought it might hold her up. It didn’t. Pond muck oozed up through hundreds of tiny porch screen squares before her eyes and beneath her feet.

When the last of my pet fish passed, she dissected it on the back porch. I had named it after me, And inside all I could see was a heart and guts like pond muck.

As a child, she opened the front door to a man who asked for a glass of water. When she returned to the porch, Dixie cup in hand, he had taken my grandmother’s purse.

At her first job at the ecology lab, the same one where her wallet was stolen and found months later in the ceiling, she kept a wolf spider and its babies at her desk. She fed them tiny frogs and lizards and crickets and watched as the mother carried her children on her back every day.

She once pulled over the car, walked to a tree, plucked a leaf, and told us how the ginkgoes are so old they grow leaves straight off the branches.

She carried the box turtles across the road, always in the direction they were facing. There were so many one day.
it was as if they had fallen out of a tree all at once, like ginkgo leaves in autumn.

Coming out of T.J. Maxx one afternoon, she confided she was no longer confident in her own skin. The woman who came when you were sick, Dixie cup in hand, The woman who held up snakes for you to see even as they were biting her thumb, The woman who taught you how terribly dangerous but terribly wonderful the world is, becomes a woman who tells you she no longer feels beautiful as if that was ever the part of her that mattered.