Hand, Shoulder, Mouth, Blood

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IT ALL COMES DOWN TO this: me holding my finger in the hole I shot in her neck, the gun on the floorboard of the Chevy pickup, and the key chain that says Karen in gold curly letters dangling from the ignition. I didn’t mean to shoot her, but she said I was just a girl and she could no longer make me out to be the boy I’m not. She said I was young and a girl and she shouldn’t be messing with me and her husband was onto us. And she laughed when I pointed the gun at her. She laughed.

She said to me once that I reminded her of her high school love, a boy she’d kissed behind her father’s shed and loved until he died two years later from an overdose of sleeping pills. *He was a tragic soul,* she said, and so called me one, too. *Tragic soul,* I laughed, *isn’t that a band?* But I couldn’t make it go away. I think now I was like him, trapped in her mind, revised, regurgitated, born too late to understand that this was fate, this was my world: a memory conjured of soft flesh and breasts, a memory born wrong, a traitor masquerading as her lover.

You will remember it this way, if you remember it at all: I mowed her lawn. It will seem to you now like a twisted version of Anne Bancroft and Dustin Hoffman. You will imagine it as a coming-of-age, but do not believe that, ever. It was never roses and lavender and lace sheets. Quick grabs in the hall, knowing glances in the kitchen, hot breath and sweaty legs in the bedroom. I will be here to tell you the sound her fingernails made against the buttons on my Levi’s as she undressed me for the first time, the clink of her acrylic nails against the metal, the sound of her breath in my ear, soft and hard all at once, the perfume she wore, like thistles, I thought then, prickly and soft.

It was my sixteenth birthday and I remember only this—hands, small hands full of lotion. *Your feet,* she said, *your poor feet.* And I smile, because she is touching me, skin on skin, for the first time ever, and I laugh, because it is my life come to a halt, a sense even
then that I would stop there, in her house, in her hands, and spin around these moments for the rest of my life. A sense that the feel of her skin against mine would wipe us out, erase us from the skyline, two figures trapped in a held breath.

She showed me the gun one afternoon as we drove to the mountains. *Away on business,* she said. *Alone,* she said. *Trees, water, food,* she said. We drove up the road, winding, paved in black and gray and patches of nothing. The water bordering the road, a man-made dam holding it back, a force contained with concrete and girders, white streams of minerals stuck to the side like ghosts of water, phantoms of wetness. We sat in the truck near the dam and she held my hand, enclosed it with both of hers, told me she wanted to leave him, wanted to be free, she said. *Life,* she said. *Love,* she said. And she opened the glove box for napkins as we ate peanut butter sandwiches, fumbled around and let out a scream: small, shy, startled. She pulled out a gun, a small one, a soft white handle that looked like lotion swirled in her palm. *.380 automatic,* she said. *Darren bought it,* she said, *I almost forgot.* We stared at it for a while, a thing settling into her hand, our eyes watching it as though it might jump, might swim for the water, might sprout gills and slither away, a fish out of water, a homeless piece of muscle covered in scales, breathing in bursts, in the palm of her hand.

You will say she was crazy and had it coming. You will say I did too. *Divine vengeance,* you’ll call it. These are the words you will always associate with her: whore, cheap, dirty. You will say I was too young to know better, confused in my own body, driven by her breasts in my face at every turn. What was I to do with such a woman? But you know this: I was the thing you all knew and didn’t say—a silence dangling off the end of your tongues until a gunshot shook it loose and sprayed it everywhere.

I still smell her here, in this cell, and I remember the hot chocolate she would make for me that winter—*with cinnamon,* she said. I can smell the lawn the first time I cut it, green and bursting with the hot dry June air, a scent I could almost see in the air, small green bubbles of life. She walked to me from the porch
and asked me in, told me she had tea or water or beer, whatever I wanted. *Whatever*, I replayed in my head as I walked to the door, then to the couch, sat there as she sat close and angled her body to face me, a beautiful diagonal line looming before me—curves and hair and lips. What I remember is this: she laughed and looked at me like I was real and she touched my knee, the sound of her skin scratching against the rough denim of my Levi’s. My memories of that day, small glimpses that never equal the feeling I recall: overwhelming, heavy, humid like our town never is, like I hear the south is in the middle of July, like I hear the tropics are—lush and moist and weighty.

The papers showed a picture of me with my cracked and scabbed chin, my long hair and clean face. You will see it now as I tell you this. You will recall the news, national even. Your small growing town a word dropped off the tongues of men like Brokaw and Jennings and Leno. The jokes, you think, were hurtful. But not to me, to you. The lines about flannels and dykes and not just hating men, but women, too. And I will think, I shot her to shoot myself. In an instant I imagined the gun was at my head and at my heart and in my hands. And I try now, still, not to think of the way the gun kicked in my hand and the bullet ripped a hole in her neck and not her head or her chest and I screamed and that’s how they knew. I think they did not hear the shot— it was silent, silent and beautiful like a monologue in perfect sign language—all hand gestures and sweeping arms. They heard me and I screamed to save her, to save you, to save me. Who should save us but me?

The blood wouldn’t stop. I remember it now, remember this most, the feel of it on my finger: warm, heavy, like hot maple syrup, the feel of her neck closing in around my finger, like the first time we made love. The world stops here—spinning around the pickup until her head leans further back as I push my finger in, trying to stop the blood. Flashing heat in my head as her legs twitch against my knee. I feel her life soaking into my palm and I kiss her.

Think of the things the papers said: motive, affair, torrid, deadly.
Remember the things you said in your kitchen as you hugged your children to your breast: love, simple, clean, holy. Try to forget the image of me in my jeans and flannel shirt tucked into a braided leather belt that said Steve on it, my father's belt and almost too big, my body and clothes a sort of mismatch, my breasts hiding just underneath a shirt big enough to confuse. The first time she dressed me in one of her husband's shirts. The first time we kissed in her sun porch next to a pitcher of iced tea and lemon. The picture in the paper with my lip busted and scabbed, a line drawn down my face, it might seem like, now, in the haze of memory. The scabs like jagged proof that my blood did clot. Darren's fist across my face as he pulled up to us in the pickup, her head on my finger like a balloon.

Tuesdays Darren worked late and then went to play pool. You knew this, many of you. Think of it now, the way your husbands left home on Tuesday nights. It could have been you that called me over, could have been you holding onto my finger with the soft flesh of your aging necks, flaps of skin draped around my hand like jewelry. I do not wish this for you. I simply mean to say that we all make mistakes. We all suffer from time, which stores our hurt like a vacuum seal. Time that lets us grow into things we want not to be, things we can't stop and so we don't. Time that held still for a few hours every Tuesday night, at least, and allowed me to hold her palm and count the lines, make things up. *Long life,* I said. *Three kids,* I said. *A lover that will shine your skin from the outside in.*

There are dreams I have at night of us together and I am grown. It looks like this: a small house—white with green trim, no furniture but a mattress and a kitchen table littered with mail and cups, a lawn perfectly manicured, me mowing it every day, coming in to wash up and touch her, touch her face and her ears and her hips, taste the inside of her thighs like sweet, smooth glass. You do not know this, may never know this, may never care enough to listen to me. I am here now and I deserve it, but do not forget your role. You have one. You are the watchers, the ones who look at all of this and think you have something to say, that I have something to learn. You watch all of this and re-
count it, tell it your way, never mine, and claim it as your folklore, claim me as your anti-hero—a masquerading girl who wore her daddy's belt and her brother's jeans, a girl who seduced a loose married woman and made her pay for her sin, a scarlet hole in the middle of her neck, far from her palms.

Do not forget this about me: I loved her even then, even as I held her neck by a fingertip, even as I killed her in that pickup. Because you must remember this, too: you knew about us and said nothing, let it become talk in Foodland as your sons bagged her groceries. Know that your sons wanted what I got, and they hated me for it. Remember that you were once young and buried desires like the ones I lived. Remember those desires: lust, dampness, blood.

Think back and remember before this, before that scream and your lies to yourselves and your children about what happened. Think back to the days I grew up in your neighborhood, rode a bike down your street. I was young and you whispered then about me needing to grow up. About hair pins and roller skates and Barbie dolls. You told me to brush my hair, chided my mother for letting me grow up like this, trailer trash who came into some, you said, too young and stupid to realize I looked like a boy. And as my hips spread you looked at me out of the sides of your eyes in the aisles at the grocery store, told your daughters never to let themselves go like I did, but I knew even then what you meant. Because you secretly wished you could be Karen, could be the older woman who unbuttoned my jeans, unbuttoned my shirt, felt below my belt to confirm the softness of skin, the folds that curved back around. Secretly curious, I would've said then. Liars, I say now.

You will scoff when I say this, but I miss her, miss her like never before. Two years she has been dead. I have my dreams and this room with a toilet, strangely warm at night, the hole in her neck still hurting my finger, like a phantom pain from a lost limb—an appendage I feel as pain shooting around the tip of my finger like fire, small licks of flame that taste like blood when I put my finger in my mouth to cool it off.
It is true that I should've known better. You will know this even now, will remind yourself of this each time you remember me. I should have known better and your children would, you tell yourself. A wrong turn here, a misstep there, a perfectly routed life of bad turns led me here, leads one here. A perfectly choreographed dance that you instruct your children never to do. A smile on a hot day full of cut grass and steeped tea. A small brush of her hair against my cheek as she leaned in to whisper. A night alone as her husband played pool, nine balls knocking together and dispersing. A girl lost and in need. A child without a mother like you, a father like you, a single soul around like you. You will say this as often as you can, will chant it, quietly and without words, motions your hands make as you kiss your child goodnight, the meeting of your lips: soft, quick, and instructional. Say this. Again. Now again. Say it until you believe it, until you can't see me in your child's face as you look out of the corner of your eye. As she sits outside on the grass, as you smell her growing up, a wash of skin and hair and pores exploding. Say it now, tomorrow, as she marries. Know that I am here, breathing the closed-in air of my cell, smelling cement and mattress and toilet water, and still I want her, all of her, bleeding neck and gasps of air.

I see your eyes, all of them, and they vanish. They vanish and talk to me like that: invisible, sultry, damp. They look like air and feel like air and sound like a screeching owl in my sleep. Like a woman murdered, like blood seeping out of your mouths and falling onto your chests, like your children playing outside, screaming, joyful, crying for fear of laughing. You are what I see, and do not let yourselves remember this, do not let yourselves hear this in your sleep, do not see my eyes, as circles, spinning, as dust or wind or air. I filter out easily, fall between the cracks in your sofa, laugh quietly as your husbands hold you, as you feel your own hand in your hair. Do not feel me, do not see me, do not hear the sound of a bullet traveling slowly and accidentally for your necks, do not feel my finger buried inside of you, stopping, stretching, trying to encompass all that bleeds, trying to heal flesh, trying to heal.
My eyes. My hands. My shoulder that kicks back. My hands. My eyes that twitch, close, open, cry. It is my shoulder that aches. They are my hands that exist. It is my hands that are helpless: ten fingers that cannot stop blood. Only my hands, only my eyes. I am only hands, eyes, shoulders, a mouth that does not exist until after the shot, a hole that opens up and bleeds my voice. It is only my hands that hurt now, my mouth tries not to exist.

Her head leaning against the back window. Pictures held by attorneys, splattered across the local paper, held in my face in court, slid to jurors. Here, here is what she did, this girl, this creature, of shame, of violence. Shots from the back of the truck show her hair pressed up against the window. It is the front shot that reverberates: a hole, flesh ragged and loose around it, a tentacle ill-formed, a tracheotomy with a jagged straw, an air-hole filled with blood. Her face frozen in a haphazard smile, her lips turned strangely up, crow’s feet working their way out from her eyes, cheeks swollen slightly, arms limp at her sides, her chest a wash of red over blue flowers, a Monet in spring, my Karen, crying through her skin in colors I never knew.

It is like this: a dime. A dime that spins until it is a silver circle of lines, shadows stretched, shades made into motion. She is like this now to me, a spinning dime, a quarter shrunk and moved, spun and spun and spun. A hiccup in my eyes, a gray moving thing spinning into itself, always into itself, always spinning. I see circles everywhere now, holes in the wall, small gaping wounds in concrete, in plaster, in the metal bowl of the toilet, always holes spinning in on themselves, holes like eyes, like ears, like necks.

It is a lie that I say to myself. Lie. You do it. I watch the news and I hear the jurors echo in my mind. Guilty. Sin. Life. Prison. I hear her mother, her daughter, crying, screaming, shooting me in my dreams. Bullets are a slow motion thought. Spirals that follow me as I close my eyes, the one lodged in the frame of the Chevy. Extracted. Exit wound. Driver’s-side door. Culpable,
despite. Confused, not insane. Unnatural. Bars that cross my face now, lines that do not bleed, do not crack my flesh like Darren’s fist. Lines, straight as a pulled trigger.

Words you say still, now, forever: sanctity, harmony, shattered, restored. I am sorry. For more than you think. For being this thing, for being not this thing. I watch the news and still hear echoes, things I can’t recall, but they haunt me: gunshots, car chases, husbands arrested, things I don’t understand. Things that sting like dry ice: sticky, hot, and smoky.

A week before the blood, she held me close to her and whispered to me that life was mine and I should take it. And I laughed at her, I laughed the laugh of the damned—the ones lost to sunshine and mist, to strong winds and caught breath. I laughed to pretend not to care, I held my breath and let it out in bursts, little pretend laughs echoing off the walls in her bedroom.

*It’s Tuesday,* she said, *and you could be anywhere with anyone.* She touched my hair, followed it with her hands until her hand was cradled in my lower back. Circles, circles, she drew circles there, magic etchings on my skin: bare, warm, wet. *Why are you here with me?* she whispered. She moved her hand up my back and buried it in my hair, touching it, holding it all in her palm, wrapping it around her wrist, holding my head like that, angled back, a slave to her pull, a piece of string wound tight and moving. *Why me?*

Words: *kiss, smooth, soft, lips, heart, legs, hips, mouth, love.* Her breath in my ear, always in my ear, always trapped there, like a dove without bones, floundering, flapping, trying to escape but only floating, dissipating, escaping into the air, filtering out of me, away from, not me. I said, *stop.* I said, *love.* *Never anyone but you, ever; never life without you.*

*What if I couldn’t see you anymore?* she said and held me there, an extension of her arm, hair grown from herself attached to my head, an appendage worn thin, worn out, taut, pulled taut. No thoughts, only a neck bent, curving, a mercy pose, a pose that lasted until the air dissipated more, until the sound of her breath moved into the cab of that pickup truck, until a bone snapped in my hand and sent a bullet arching through the air, a soft-tipped kiss, a silent pirouette, a plea.
You like to think it doesn't happen here, not in your neighborhood, not in your town. And so when it did, you held your hands to your face and said things to the news like: *You think you're safe, you think your kids are safe, you think you teach them right.* And you think of my mother, hair askew as she talked to the news on our couch, as I sat in jail, as you checked your children late at night to make sure they were still there and they were yours, all clusters of blanket and love.

It is easy for you now. Do not forget that. Easy. To say you saw it coming. To say you knew better than to behave that way. A warning you heed. A warning whispered to you at night by your husbands, by your children, by your own lips detached, leaning into your ears, whispering things about desire, about harmony, about life. I am a lesson, never learned outright, creeping into your homes when you are not looking, an abomination of spirit, a girl who opens flesh in order to touch.