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## Of Hands and Birds

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OF HANDS AND BIRDS

I had dreamed about fire again that night, slept fitfully, clutching my blankets around me in a cocoon, contorting my neck until it was sore in the morning when the alarm jarred me into a still-blurred world. A wildfire in the distance, its plume of smoke billowing darkly into the sky made both clear and hazy by my dream world. We knew it was coming, had to pack up our valuables, decide what to leave behind. Then, rain—a torrential flood that put out the fire but made me worry that the house would begin to leak and then cave in, that water would pool in the crevices of my grandmother’s Biedermeier desk, already fading from the harsh sunlight. In my dream the land shook and the sky was dark.

November in Los Angeles. The ocean flat and silver, a coffee haze of smog resting above it. The familiar curves of this highway I have driven, or been driven on, for twenty-five years. I know this road with my eyes closed. What it feels like to speed down it on a weekend morning flanked by hordes of bicyclists. What it feels like to be stuck behind a chorus of brake lights on the way home from work.

On the side of the road, a dead deer. Its neck ripped out, left broken and bloodied on the side of the snaking road by some coyote. It’s not the first I’ve seen but the image is always jarring. Makes my insides twist. What an animal can do to another animal.

I found the last one when it was already a skeleton. Bones picked clean by buzzards, entrails and heart placed neatly off to the side as if by the hand of some methodical serial killer. The ribcage as big as my own. The delicate hooves, patches of fur still clinging to the ankle bones. I was walking, watching my feet on the asphalt, my shadow stretching in front of me, and there it was.

A carcass lying on the side of the road under a vast blue sky that stretches over baked red cliffs. An ocean that lies flat and calm and steady

one day, threatens to overflow or break your neck or sweep you under the next. It all feels precarious. These roads that wind up and up and up, these dry canyons through which predators creep, their glossy eyes reflecting fear and headlights. These neon signs that hum and flicker over a silent street. A sky glowing orange after a rainstorm. A sky threaded with telephone wires. I imagine cutting through them with scissors.

How can a person be there one moment, laughing, drinking too much, brushing his teeth, making oatmeal, fighting with his wife—then broken on the driveway blooming blood. Squeezing his daughter's hand in the car on the way to school, then a shell in a white bed with a gaping hole for a mouth.

I am barefoot on the deck. Step in a certain place and the wood bends under your weight. *Dangerous*, they say. *Someone could fall through*. The wooden boards shed flakes of pale grey paint like skin. They stick to your heels. The deck slumps outwards towards the canyon, defeated, sighing on stilts over a garden my mother used to tend. The barren beds filled with hardened dust, rotten lemons that drop from the tree. A rusted spade. Fragments of broken glass left over from a harsh winter wind that shattered an outdoor table. A hose not used in years. The pool heater, encased in a stucco cubicle where I used to hide as a child when I did not want to be found.

I have my father's feet and my mother's hands.

A graying half-dead cactus reaches plaintively towards the sky with crooked arms.

My mother's roses are gone. The deer ate them all and she lost the energy it took to replant them. What would be the point. The deer would just eat them again.

The terracotta pots that flank the swimming pool are empty.

I try to think back to a time when lush green succulents grew in these pots. When the deck was firm and solid and could hold my weight. When the cushions on the chaise lounges were new and plush and did not spill stuffing like guts from open wounds. When African daisies grew wild and purple on the hillside. When the grass on the front lawn was green and healthy. I try to think back to roses and birds of paradise and eucalyptus trees.

I try to think back to a time before my father fell. Before wheelchairs and caregivers and hospitals and tracheotomies and tubes and machines and adult diapers. Before he coughed up his meals at the kitchen table and hung his head in shame.

His hands were once strong and warm and could grip yours tightly. His noble cheeks once ruddy.

We say we are going to clean out his clothes. Divide up his things. *One of these days.* But we never do. The idea terrifies me. My brother comes over with his new dog, shows me where Dad kept his pistol, his French fisherman's knives. Says I should take the Swiss Army knife engraved with Dad's nickname. Tells me about the time he saw a ghost walk through his living room wall. Drinks too much vodka, falls asleep on the trampoline. I go to sleep thinking about the pistol.

It seems everything is fading, dying, breaking, rusting, peeling, cracking. This house is closing in on me. Collapsing piece by piece.

There are rooms which we do not go into.

The den. A room in which my friends and I watched movies and told ghost stories and fell asleep on the green leather couch with melting pints of ice cream. A room in which I found an email that made me hate my father for a few years. A room into which my brother snuck a girlfriend on a stormy night when my mother was pregnant with me. The room

where my father's hospital bed was set up. A room that smelled of baby powder and moisture and illness.

My father's office. A room which was the bedroom I grew up in. You can tell from the peach-pink walls. Daddy left the traces of his little girl on the walls: glow in the dark stars, exercises from my oil painting classes, faded Lion King stickers in a corner, a Balinese wooden angel in a pink sheath dress that hangs from the ceiling, missing one arm, standing guard over the room. Promising protection and pleasant dreams.

Sliding mirrored closet doors. Open them and sink your face into layers of heavy tweed, seersucker. Silk ties, mothballs. White buckskin shoes. The old cameras that you keep saying you're going to take in to Samy's and get fixed up. Leica, Nikon, Minolta, Hasselblad. On the desk, dozens of rolls of film. I wonder whether it's expired. My father's stationery, business cards, customized envelopes printed with his name and return address.

He is gone.

He is gone and we cannot bring ourselves to begin cleaning away the traces of him.

His ashes are sitting in a priority mail box on the dining room table.

The accident: it was as if I had always known it would come. It was almost a sick sort of relief that now it had happened and I didn't have to worry about whether it would happen anymore. Seventeen, in the middle of my senior year at boarding school across the country. I was sitting in a windowsill looking out at the snow and suddenly my heart dropped out of my body.

It was February. Bleak white. I was wearing a men's Ralph Lauren sweater Daddy bought for me in Boston. Several sizes too big. I held the

cell phone to my ear and shrank inside the sweater and everything else fell away and I didn't know how I would survive when this thing had happened. *Daddy had an accident.* Fell on the driveway and split his head open.

They flew me back to California where I sat in hot cars and cold hospitals and waited and waited and watched and held my breath.

At Cedars Sinai we had to put on masks and gowns and booties just to enter the room he was in. As if a brain injury was contagious. Later I realized it was because we might have infected him with germs from the outside world. Everything so cold and the doctor spoke without emotion. I just wanted to hug my dad but they said I couldn't touch him. He woke from time to time, eyes rolling back in his swollen head. Bruised and cracked and stitched back up. He mumbled little things, kept talking about oatmeal. His favorite breakfast. "A special treat," he called it, though he had it every morning with blueberries and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

I hated him for falling, for breaking himself, for breaking our lives. I hated the heaviness. How I couldn't find the words, or they were too sharp, coming out like plastic edges of board game pieces I had choked on now pressing their corners into my throat. The dull ache and sinking. That is what was there, no matter what other lightness lifted me.

*I am unfinished.*

*How can this happen before I am finished?*

My mother says he's in the birds. She sees him in each red tailed hawk, each crow, each buzzard. Calls his name through the canyons. Yesterday he was a blue jay, fluttering through dry brush like a heartbeat. Today, a bald eagle that soared above my mother on her hike. Following her. Gliding on pockets of air. *It was him,* she says. *I know it.*

Open the front door and stare at the spot where the grass is brown

and dead from his wooden wheelchair ramp, the one your brother built five years ago, the one your mother broke into pieces the day after he died. The day you and your mother held each other in bed for hours and hours. Unable to sleep. Drifting in and out of consciousness. The image of his body—that shell of him—hard and cold and sunken and gaping on a white hospital bed—seared into the space behind your eyes. It haunted you for months.

You are trying to hold onto the pieces of the life you had. The red playhouse Daddy built for you in the backyard. The lemon trees. The trampoline. The memory of a garden, of dogs and play dates and rising when it was still dark outside to practice violin with your father. The way he squeezed your hand when he picked you up from school, and called it your paw. *Hold my paw*, he'd say.

I see the ocean from above, as a hawk would. Warm wind blowing leaves into water. A tangle of cactus growing wild on the hillside. My father's hands, the way they could fold mine up in them. His blue eyes burning. The sky stretching out above me, strung with telephone wires.

I hope he is in the birds.