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This Gift of Rocks

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THIS GIFT OF ROCKS

On our last morning together, I'm brushing my teeth when you emerge from the shower, your hand cupped like you've brought water for me to drink. You beckon me closer, invert your palm over mine, and smile, expectant. I clench the toothbrush between my teeth and squint at the small piece of metal, jewel-sharp and red with blood. These fragments of galvanized steel work their way out from under your skin while you bathe. They are a record of you, 15, turning your back to a pipe bomb, of you, young, testing your limits.

It's a tradition we established, this gift of rocks. Moonstones from my race in San Luis Obispo. Lapis lazuli from your deployment in Afghanistan. Gravel from a helmetless ride to Milwaukee. This shard from beneath your skin— the closest I've ever been to you.

I spit into the sink and meet your eyes in the mirror, hoping to see regret for that night we swatted mosquitoes on the patio and listed all the reasons I should follow the job. *Come with*, I say, though I know the reasons you can't: your daughter, your service, your home. Still, I need to hear it again— that syllable as rice-small as the metal in my palm: *No*. You're not unkind when you say it, though you continue toweling yourself, under the armpits, between the legs, behind the neck.

The first time I touched your back, I recoiled. The hills of your flesh were waxy and hard. Boils, I thought. Something arcane, Biblical. When I gathered the courage to ask, you laughed, easy as that *no*. This, despite what your mother told me later: your skin didn't grow back easily. It took years of dermatologists and ointments, and still the repair isn't finished. Still, there is a piece of not-you in my hand.

You disappear into the bedroom to dress, and I close my fist, the fragment knuckling the flesh where my head line and fate line meet. In college, I told the palm reader that I didn't believe in destiny or soul mates, and she traced those lines with a shake of her head meaning, *you fool* or maybe *you liar*.

I carry the tiny fleck to the back patio and imagine you in the house behind me: the army t-shirt you've pulled over your head, the blood

dotting the collar. I'm hurt by your refusal, and perhaps you're hurt I'm leaving. Perhaps it's a lesson: we break our own hearts.

With my eyes closed, I blow the metal into the garden like a dandelion seed. I wish—not with words so much as with feeling—for the last piece to nose through your skin tomorrow, for the scars to be petal-soft and pink. For dry riverbeds of limestone, quartz, and shale along my drive south. For the courage to skip these rocks across July-boiled blacktop, my back to you.