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Tilt

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HEATHER HECKMAN-MCKENNA

TILT

GREEN AND RED construction paper Christmas rings mom and I make together line the room. Hands sticky with glue stick. A surprise for dad when he gets home from work. We hang the rings around the room, mom and I. After, I pull out Candy Land. She draws away when I bring it over, but my longing look brings her back. Our pieces sprint around the board. I narrowly avoid Molasses Swamp. *I do not notice that I am winning today same as I do every other day.* I feel light as a cloud that could float right over Gumdrop Mountain, so buoyant I don't even need Ice Cream Floats to get across the wavy river. *I do not notice the lines of tension that must be etched in mom's face as she rises to go to the bathroom shortly after we start our second game.* I walk on all fours like a cat and play with our sweet black and grey tiger-stripe kitty, Nefertiti. After a while, after quite some time, after no time at all I tell Nef that I will be right back, that she should keep playing with the string on her own until I get back, that she should not let her brother Garc steal the string as he would take it as his own and he did not like to play with me. *I do not remember how long it is before I go to check.* I ask her please to not lose the string as I don't know where to find another. I remind her that I'm scared of Garc's scratches if he gets the string. I feel

slightly heavier as I walk like a cat to the bathroom door, almost as if I'm on a leash that pulls me down and down and down.

I hear a choking sound coming from the bathroom, a sound I have not heard before. I do not know if I should open the door. I do not know if I should open it.

I am proud of how quietly I open the door. Mom, curled in a tight ball on the floor. Mom, sobbing silently into the Charlie Brown towel she used earlier to dry me off. Mom, curled in a tight ball on the floor. Mom, choking that scary choke sound into the towel.

I look at her for a long time.

I am proud of how quiet I am.

I tiptoe inside. She startles, draws in a loud breath like a stuck vacuum. I curl up on the floor next to her. Her eyes shine sad. I am scared, but I reach out my hand and touch her. I do not know what I will find when I do, but she is still solid enough for now.

I curl closer. I hold her so tight my arms go numb.

Dad arrives some time later. Mom and I are on the couch. Mom watches TV and I watch her. I do not touch her. I do not think I can touch her. I wonder if I can touch her. She smiles at me. Dad cooks, and over dinner he marvels at my paper ring workmanship. Mom's eyes twinkle. I used to think this was happy, this familiar look, but now I think it is happy and sad in a way I've not noticed before.

"Mom?"

"Yes peaty?"

“Nothing.”

“What is it, honey?”

“It’s okay.”

• • •

I SIT ALONE in a dark room. Outside my one window, I watch coniferous branches swaggering in the dusk the way they do in winter, as if in lack of deference to all else surrounding them. I am alone, but I feel the sway of danger from below, downstairs. But perhaps the sway I sense is merely the rocking of my own body as I sit on this daybed, searching the world outside. I do not think. I do not feel. I rock and I watch. Even if I wanted to, I would not be able to stop the ceaseless rocking of my body. I do not try.

How long ago was it now? Five minutes? Twenty? Three hours? Seven? Time has little relevance to me since the moment, however long ago it was, that I told my husband to do it.

“Do it,” I said. “Pull the fucking trigger.” I remember saying it quietly. Soft, like you might sing a love song. But of course I can’t really know.

I remember his face, stunned. I remember the warm trickle of blood in my left ear from where he struck me with the side of the gun, the liquid sensation surprisingly warm and comforting in contrast to everything else. I remember the almost atavistic sense of loss I felt, and I remember the depth with which I accepted that loss. Nothing mattered. He would

do it or he wouldn't, and that's all there was in my world. Life or not life. The Kimber .45 pressed against my left cheek, and I, glaring at him, for the first time in my life entirely unworried about whether or not I would survive this moment.

I called him out. I told him to fucking do it. *I always told him to fucking do it.*

He always did.

For the first time. For the first time he didn't rise to it. My taunt.

I remember his face, open-mouthed, stunned. I remember his big wide eyes, like a cartoon Daffy Duck. He lowered the .45. He tossed it on my childhood bed the way you might toss an errant sock. He walked out the door of my childhood bedroom. He closed the door softly behind him. The lacquered wood grain patterns on the door looked like they shimmered for minutes.

Now I sit, rocking and watching the world outside my window. Nothing matters, with the possible exception of those quivering pines. It is irrelevant to me whether the trees are quivering, or I am. The perceived beauty is the one thing in all the world that matters to me now.

I can see it, I think. I can see how pretty it is. For the first time in days or weeks or months. I see color. My world no longer gray and flat. I did not know I ceased to see. Those pines. The only green in an otherwise sparse and beautiful world of white. If I could only stop rocking for even a moment I might be able to cry. Because how beautiful. Because how vibrant. Because how alive.

Because I did not know I had lost it. In these months of violence and terror.

What else have I lost, I think. What else have I lost that I do not even see?

• • •

I FIND MOM in the closet again, wrapped in blankets up to her neck. It is a good sign that today her face is uncovered.

“Are you hungry?” I whisper into the dark space.

She doesn’t respond.

“Thirsty?”

She nods. A thrill rushes through me at this level of responsiveness, and I sprint fast as I can down those tan-carpeted stairs, Scooby-Doo my way around the oak-floored corner, mad-dash to the blue-stenciled kitchen, and nearly drop the glass I select in my rush to get water inside of it. The glass tinkers off the faucet, but it does not chip. I run back upstairs, fast as I can without spilling.

I hold the water out to her, an offering outstretched.

“Can I come in?”

“I don’t know. Can you?” Her voice is steadier than I expect. Then I realize I have this thought every time I find her in here.

“May I come in?”

She shrugs. I hand her the glass and slip in beside her. It’s a tight fit,

even though, as mom reminds me all the time, I haven't even yet hit the doctor's growth chart for seven-year-olds.

"I think we need bigger closets."

She laughs, soprano voice rising and falling in her pretty melody, but I realize I do not know why she laughs. *I don't know yet that everyone's mothers don't hide in their closets. I don't know this, though I've somehow instinctually known never to tell a single person.*

"I'm sorry today is hard." I feel embarrassed when I say this. Like I don't understand something I should, and I just failed the test.

"Every day is hard."

"Why?" *I almost don't ask. I almost know there's no answer. Or at least no answer I'm ready to hear.*

She makes that choking sound that happens sometimes. I can tell she would push further inside the closet, if there were more to push into. She wants me to leave, I know.

"I'm sorry today is so hard." I speak louder than I mean to. She pauses. Looks at me.

"I would if it wouldn't hurt you so much." Her voice a stuttered reluctance.

I still don't understand, and I feel my face grow hot, because it's clear now that I really should. I can tell she would say more, but her hysterics rise, a pitchy keen. Usually this is a good thing. Usually it means there are only a few hours left before she emerges from her cave.

Today it does not feel like a good thing.

I wait for seconds or minutes.

I allow myself a noisy breath in. I sip at air.

I finally ask. "Hurt me?"

"I should never have had children. I knew I shouldn't." Her voice an echoing descant in its common refrain. A refrain that hardly registers anymore, though the familiar sting prickles like when I stepped on that sea urchin on the Rhode Island ocean floor. The hot sting rises from the pit of my stomach into my chest.

This time she continues past the refrain: "I knew better."

I feel like I might get sick on the floor. "Knew what?" I finally ask.

"I'm sick, peaty."

I know she's not saying she's got cancer or anything, but I get a little shaky all the same. I try to stop the shaking, gripping my hands harder, tensing my body tighter, but I notice that my body starts to curl inward, and she always cries harder when I curl up.

"I know how I'd do it," she says.

Do what?" I'm shaking now, hard, and I acquiesce to my body's inward coil.

"There are two ways."

I look at her. My eyes feel too big for my head and too thick to keep open. I keep looking at her as I rub them.

"It depends on if it's here or somewhere else." She pauses. She waits. I don't know what she waits for. I feel my heartbeat in my palms so hard they hurt. I sip again at air.

“I hurt, peaty.” Usually this term of endearment tells me she loves me, this inversion of “sweetie peaches” to “peaty sweeches.” Today it feels strangely barbed. My palm hurts so much I turn my hand to look at it.

“What can I do?” I ask.

Another long pause.

“If it were here, I’d do it with no mess.”

“No mess?”

“If it were here, it would probably be my pills. But I couldn’t. You couldn’t find me. I couldn’t. Don’t worry. I couldn’t.”

She is not the one crying anymore.

It is hard to keep my head raised. I stare at her face. I stare so long it hurts.

“And anyway it would take too long.”

I reach out to grasp her hand, but she is wrapped tight as a corset. I pull on her blanket, but she doesn’t release an inch.

“It would be at a hotel, I think. I would buy a big shower curtain and lie on it in a bathtub.”

Here I go blank. I don’t remember more from this moment. I recall too much from others.

• • •

MY FACE TINGED red and hot from impact and warm gobs of berries. I feel heat grow on my skin like a burgeoning field of poppies, smudges

of red here, globs of it there, predominantly converged around my right ear. The ear took the brunt of the impact when I saw what was happening and turned my face fast to the side. Looking at the spectacle around me, one might wonder why I felt less protective toward my ear and right-side-hairline than I did, say, my nose or my mouth or my front cheek. My ear certainly doesn't seem to appreciate the underlying sentiment of its less-than-front-of-face worth. There is a single blueberry crushed in the ear, popped inside out like a tiny stepped-on cockroach.

My left hand remains out before me, as if still holding the plate with my breakfast. Embarrassed, I draw it down into my lap. I jab myself in the thigh with a fork I didn't know I was still holding, more out of curiosity than anything else. The pain throbs a dull, far-away sensation, like sympathetic pangs I might feel if I watched someone else jab at their own leg with a fork.

I glance around. Remnants of smushed blueberry pancake and maple syrup stick to the wall, dark and thick and sparkly in sunlight. Probably fortunate that the drywall is burgundy. Shattered remains of a ceramic plate lie behind the couch. The plate had enough speed toward my face to leave a not insignificant confluence of green and blue and white ceramic daggers in the drywall, and I wonder if my astrophysicist father would be able to determine the plate's top velocity based on the mass of the plate and the mass of my face and the mass of the drywall and the mass en-total of the shards. The etched-in-wall evidence (not yet memory, still quite there in the real world) ricochets me back to the time he smashed

my forehead off the B&H Oil wall-hanging calendar. Stars glittered in my vision's periphery for hours after. I wonder, does he consciously look for such places in which evidence remains clandestine, or is it merely to his fortune that his destruction tends to be so well hidden? To be sure, remains of violence have always been detected so much later that those discovering it shake their heads in perplexity. *"Anders, have you noticed this circular indentation in the wall here?"* dad asks, *lifting the calendar and pointing.* *"Hub! I guess I coulda smashed a SCUBA tank without knowing it?"* Anders answers.

Of course you did. A SCUBA tank carried at my skull's precise height.

I find myself standing, though I don't recall having risen from the couch. Berries and shattered ceramic fall to the woven rug. I wonder if I'll be able to remove all of the brittle fragments from the rug's thousand little crevices. I don't want the cats to get cut. He falls to his knees, wincing, reaching up to touch many tiny wounds on my face, and I almost laugh at the drama of it before I stumble away. I don't remember walking to the bathroom, but that's where I find myself, door latch locked, curled on the deliciously cool tile floor, head wrapped in arms, ears making "Waaoh, waaoh, waaoh" sounds in a decidedly beautiful rhythm, almost as if I have my very own tiny drummer trapped inside my head.

He speaks through the locked door: "Babe. I need to see your face." "Babe. You're bleeding." "Babe. I need to see how bad it is." "Babe. I need to know you're okay." "Babe. Babe. Your face. Your poor face." "Babe." "Babe." "Babe."

I turn my blueberry-blocked right ear in his direction. His rising shouts morph into a fringed buzzing. It's like listening to a fly struggle against a window. My face warms from a rogue stream of sunlight slipping through the shuttered window. I feel wasps sting wet on my face. I open clenched eyes to warm red pools growing beneath my face. The cool tile soothes my body, and I decide I will rest for a long while. Rest until I am no longer tired. Rest for a long, long time. I will rest.

But then I remember. I remember what happened. I remember how it started. And because I have to, I rise.

I will call my grandfather. At this moment, he drives from Rhode Island with my uncle. He is probably already on Interstate 95 heading into Maine. I will call him soon, before he gets too much further away from home. I cannot leave the house in this condition. Today's home inspection in Damariscotta will have to be rescheduled.

Cool porcelain sink. Crushed blueberry juices drip down my ear canal. I touch inside my ear. I look at it in the mirror. Dark purple/blue melds with fresh blood bubbles creating a new color I've never quite seen before. (Berry-Blue-Blood? Very-Berry-Blue-Blood? Very-Berry-Blue-Blood-with-Flecks-of-Off-Yellow-Ear-Wax? Perhaps I'll take a photo and make a new color suggestion to the folks at Crayola.) I turn my face to the mirror. It reflects back pink and red. I am more grateful than ever for my hockey goalie reactions and my instinct to turn my face as I did. I bleed heavily from a few spots, and I don't know yet what to do about that, but the bruising will mostly surround my jaw and hairline. It will be easy enough

to cover with my two-foot-long hair.

I pluck the berry from my ear. It makes a sloshing sound, as if juice squished from a fresh, ripe lemon. Some internal pressure sucks the stinging juices deeper into my ear. Anders still speaks, more quietly now, outside of the door. I unlatch it, then grab a yellow facecloth from the cupboard, one of the ones the neighbors gave us after the house fire. I have to think my parents won't notice just the one gone. I wet it with cool water from the sink, compressing it to the side of my head as I hear the doorknob turn. Large looming presence behind. I do not look in his direction, but I feel him staring at the red pools on the floor. He approaches. I watch through the mirror. The waaoh, waaoh, waaoh heavier in my head. He takes the now-orangish facecloth from me. His touch gentle. He washes blood from my face.

I cry. I nuzzle. I collapse into his big, hard chest.

• • •

STOP. STOP! *STOP!* Everything stops. The world stops with the final wisping thread of a scream (a wisp of a scream turned whisper, yet still that wisp lengthens and widens, a penetrating gray, perpetual and ceaseless, and I don't believe it will ever end). (The endless rotating tilt of the world—or is that merely the tilt of the globe in dad's library?—permanently ends, for us at least.) They don't know how to help her anymore, her providers. The med cocktails didn't work. The hospitalizations didn't work. The many

rounds of ECT didn't work. Mom urgently yearns for a freedom I can only imagine.

I can only imagine.

• • •

THERE ARE STILL times, many, despite the days and weeks and months and years since I last saw him, when I want to find him, when I want to pull back on the days and the layers and scratch at his stupid skin, when I want to scream FUCK YOU right in his fucking ear, when I want to tell him of all the confusion and pain and exhaustion he's caused me. I feel, I feel, I feel, but perhaps I can't quite define it, perhaps I don't know how I feel, or what I feel, or maybe there just isn't a word for it, maybe there isn't a word to describe the utter loss and confusion I still feel when I think of what he took from me. Or, maybe better described, when I think of what I allowed him to take from me. Because I did, I allowed it, so maybe I want to scream FUCK ME too, maybe I feel that I'm more to blame than anyone else, him included, maybe I wonder why I'm even here now, why I let myself be so humiliated and then when it was far too late fought back and screamed no and screamed why and screamed and screamed but even that didn't really happen even that was in my head. I walked out the door, that was it, a simple moment, with him begging me not to go to work, and I could tell that if dad hadn't still been home he would have grabbed me and forced me, but he couldn't because dad was nearby, and I took the

opportunity and I walked away, I walked and walked so far, I walked at least fifty feet to my car, and I got in and I drove away, drove and drove and drove so far, drove at least three miles to my job in the same town as my home, and I sat at my desk and I turned on my computer and I felt nothing and I started my work but that's not really true I stared at my email and I stared out the window and I stared at my work list and I shut my eyes for long moments and stared into myself and I didn't know what I was doing but I knew I had to keep walking, so I did, I left the office and I walked and walked and walked, walked into the woods behind the office, oh at least a hundred yards away, and I sat under a tree and I didn't cry I had no tears I had nothing left to give even to myself so I played with the brittle pine needles and I looked up into the tree and I listened to chirping birds and barking squirrels and I even broke some pine needles and put the sticky needles under my nose and tried to infuse my whole being with their sharp fragrance but that didn't work and nothing else worked either so I got up and I walked back into the office and I sat at my computer and I sat there and did nothing for minutes or hours I'm not sure but it really doesn't matter. So FUCK YOU that's what I have to say to him and I mean it more than anyone else in the history of the world has ever meant it. *Fuck you.*

But then of course I have to come back, I have to come back to me, to find me again, to realize that I didn't know what the hell I was doing, and I didn't understand, and I didn't mean to hurt anyone, least of all myself. And I walk the streets here at Webster Lake, and I watch the lake, I watch

the ripples rippling, and I watch a pair of ducks that glides across the ripples making new ripples, and then another pair of ducks gliding past those two intertwining sets of ripples creates yet more ripples in another direction and damn, it's dumb, it's a lame analogy, I know it is, but I sit on that dock and I cry because I see how easy it is for ripples to ripple one another, and man my life was easy to fuck up and man it was easy to fuck others' lives up. And then of course a stupid little tear drips into the water and ripples a new ripple and it starts the whole damn thing up again and I have to walk away. So I do I walk away just as resolutely as I walked away from him but that time I felt so empty and this time I feel so full and why do I feel more full now than I did then why do my boots feel so heavy my stomach sinking into them so I decide to sit down but then I look around and I realize I'm sitting in the street right in front of someone's lawn and I may be crazy but I don't need the neighborhood to think so too so I get up and I force my iron boots to walk a few hundred feet forward by where the dead-end road circles then I sit in a patch of trees in the shade where no one can see me and I sit there and I feel everything and I feel nothing and I wonder everything and I wonder nothing and I hug my arms around my neck but the pressure around my neck reminds me of how he put his arms around my neck but it wasn't a hug and my breathing would become so labored and my kicking and punching and panicking and I remove my arms from around my own neck because I can't even hug myself without remembering him choking me and the pain sears in waves then nothing and I feel the gravity of my own tide pulling me under and

I close my eyes and I don't know how long they're closed but a car honks at a passing pedestrian and they are talking and I rise and they nod to me but there is an odd look to their eyes and I can tell that I am on the inside now and unreachable and they are uncomfortable so I keep walking my boots heavy on the ground and I feel his heavy boots on the ground as they stomped toward me in his rage and I stop and I close my eyes and I hear the cars on the road but it doesn't matter and I see his stiff and brittle face rising toward me brittle with his razor edge and I would punch out at him but that never helped that always made it worse not that it made me stop trying to fight him off I always tried and always lost and he was sure to humiliate me in my loss me who was more than one hundred pounds lighter and a foot shorter but that made no difference to how hard he went and I am walking again and my thoughts rise and fall with my heavy boots and a tree branch whips across my face but actually my face walked into a tree branch because I am not looking where I'm going and I look up and I realize that I walked all the way around the island and now I'm walking through the woods on the other side of the island and I'm moments from being on the water again and I don't want to be on the water but apparently something in me does because here I am again by the water again so I sit in the dirt and play again with pine needles and I watch the ripples. I watch them.

• • •

THE CUSTOM KIMBER .45—the companion he bought and gave to me as a gift, one serial number away from the Kimber he threatened me with mere months ago—weighs heavy, cumbersome in my hand, warmth penetrating already searing skin. Its one cold eye stares from below into my face. I fold pale fingers around the grip of the .45 and lift.

I stop, hand enwrapping the pistol, lifted quarter-way to my face. I grip tighter still.

I remember mom's eyes, calm as old sticks floating.

I sit in my blue, blue room. Always my favorite color and now I surround myself in it. It does not make me feel better anymore. My blue room with blue ceiling and blue paintings and blue trash basket and blue stereo and blue clothes scattered, though admittedly the trim around the single window and the lacquered oak door with the crisscrossing grain is an off-white named “Autumnal Equinox.” I chose it not because of the color, but because I loved the name. Isn't that funny why we choose things. Autumnal equinox. Night crawling longer as it claims day's light.

Mom's eyes shimmered cold as calm.

Winter has always been my favorite season. I love the cold. I love that winter's arrival signifies that the cold will end again, some day, when chilled fractals drift imperceptibly into frigid drizzles.

I wish I could believe the cold will end again.

I have a glass painting, blue, directly in front of me. There's a purplish-blue tapestry that hangs to my left as I sit on my penguin-patterned blue-sheeted bed grasping my .45 so hard even my hand looks

like it might revert to the blueness surrounding me. I glance at my blue candle, burning low, overpowering me with a scent that seems now to underwhelm dulled sensibilities. *(Where was I supposed to turn when the problem-solving methods I'd always been exposed to all involved an ending. Or the threat of an ending. Always the threat of an ending. A permanency that cannot be mitigated or undone.)* My room has lost its soothing sway over me, yet I love my blue room.

He cried, my father, begging her. Closed door, but it made no matter. Such an insignificant barrier.

I grasp the grip of my .45 tightly. My sweaty palms make the grip slick. It is difficult to grasp. Self-loathing rises as lurid bile in the back of my throat.

I did not open the door to my parents' room. I rolled my eyes and turned away.

I clench my .45.

I imagine: the cartridge explodes in action as I pull the trigger, muzzle held directly to my overwarm face. As I pull on the large piece, my small index finger angles strangely on the stiff trigger, causing my hand to shift slightly upward. *(I felt it happening, as if a supernovic collision of my mother and the violence I survived. Violence I survived alone. Violence I survived because my parents sunk more than a hundred thousand dollars into us. Into him.)*

I imagine: the trigger releases the sear, which drops the hammer on the firing pin, and the pin punches the cartridge containing the powder

and the pretty metal projectile. Upon impact of the pin, the powder ignites. (*Violence I survived because it started two days after we were married, and what the hell else was I supposed to do. Violence I survived—silently—because my mother always spoke with such derision of “those women.” Violence I survived because I’d always survived before, alone, and I could do it again, surely, and I could not let my family down.*) I imagine: the energy, naturally seeking the path of least resistance, detonates toward the opening where the projectile is held ready in the chamber. The hollow point bullet fulminates outward through the barrel pointed just slightly diagonally upward in front of my nose. (*Since I didn’t know what else to do to reclaim myself and my spaces after such violence, I turned back to the places where violence occurred. I worked to reclaim those spaces precisely by returning to them.*)

I imagine: the bullet tears through the near-diaphanous layer of skin from my nose to the fringes of each upper cheek, ever-so-slightly rouged from the effort, mere seconds before, exerted to hold myself, if only for one more instant, from pulling that trigger. (*So I went back to the place in Rockport where he smashed my face against brick. I sat there, on the secluded side street sidewalk. I sat by the corner where he smashed my face, and I bounced a bouncy ball I bought in a gumdrop machine nearby off the brick, because I had to create some new memory there, but what the hell else was I supposed to do to reclaim a brick wall around the corner from a favorite restaurant?)* I imagine: the bullet erupts forward, mushrooming through everything in its path. The skin parts easily for the bullet, so readily in

fact as to be almost willing, as if a velvety red theater curtain opening to an excited audience packed tight in their seats at the season premier of some renowned Broadway musical (let's call it *Next to Normal*). The theater curtain provides a momentary red flicker, a pause before the show's beginning; the skin curtain opens ceaselessly. Ceaseless as far as the skin will be concerned. Viscous red pouring will be its last experience before the skin disintegrates into the nothingness it came from. Or is it the somethingness. But it won't matter to the skin anymore.

Mom lay prone again on old floor. I could not see her face. I dared not look further into the closet.

I imagine: the curtain opens to a skull that lacerates upon the bullet's impact. Fractured fragments levitate and separate only briefly before shattering entirely in the bullet's reverberations. The bullet receives the brain. It ribbons upon contact, ribbons then shrivels in a final defense against the unexpected blitz. (Unexpected? Is that even possible?) (*The next New Year's Eve, I watched the movie Miracle again, and I ordered from the same Chinese place, and I sat in the same seat on the same couch, and I opened the same DVD container, and I recreated everything just the same, but this time I watched it alone, and I cried again, and there was no violence, and I tried to reclaim this movie—an important one on levels far transcending my fucking ex-husband—and I cried this time for a different reason.*) I imagine: the brain ruptures and tatters, gaps in flesh overflowing with blood, but not in a defensive response. The blood has nowhere else to go after the bullet rips every vein and capillary in its path, brain matter choking,

spurting, drowning. The heart pumps, either unaware of the assault or in a final desperate measure for self-preservation (utterly unknowing of its owner's intentions—self-defense on the most primal level), but the frantic beating only forces blood through the gaping cavity faster and faster and faster (ironic considering the heart desperately attempts to hold its owner to life), cascading out of me until I'm all but crusty inside.

Eyes drawn down further, despite my efforts to the contrary, as if by magnet. Mom lay on the floor again. Recurrent. As if planned. This cycle. This cycle without end.

I can feel it, though I haven't yet pulled that trigger. Gratitude rushes, a sticky warmth like falling blood. The .45's weight substantive in my hand. *(And I nestled my face into the blue floral couch, the one directly in front of the fireplace dad installed just a few years before, and I held myself on that couch for long minutes, and this time I was not being shoved and choked and suffocated into it.)*

I grasp my .45 tightly once more, grasp and lift, lift to my face.

I saw no evidence of mom's breathing. No subtle rise and fall of the chest. I dared not yet draw closer.

I am parched. I need something to wet me. I need my room's blueness to cool me off. I need to feel saturated. Saturated with anything but these unbearably hot waves of dithyrambic stuffiness, congesting every empty cavity of my anatomy. Saturated with sticky warmth, like freshly baked cinnamon buns sliding down my lungs and receding further, from my heart and liver and into my stomach and through the large intestines,

ebbing into each organ, systematically, one by one. *(But what do I do with a gun and my own childhood bedroom? How does that space get reclaimed? Shower curtains in containers large enough for a body rise to mind. Because that's what happens with guns. You press them to your skull, or someone else does. It really doesn't matter. They're pressed against your head all the same.)* There's still a choice. The stainless barrel revolves subconsciously in my hand, and it catches a glint of sun from my open window. Its winked affirmation.

Sunlight through the window lit the calloused soles of mom's feet. The rest mere shape in shadow.

I will not shoot myself through the temple. I refuse to swallow down the muzzle. I will shoot myself straight on. My face will be obliterated into the nothingness it came from, to the nothingness mom almost went to, and I want to do it in my blue room. An echoing moment, though not for me. Mere triumph, ever unknown.

Mom's dark profile. A puff of breath. My eyes widened. I inhaled sharply.

Over myself. Is it a triumph? My brain may passionately believe so, but every particle of my body vehemently disagrees. The moment that bullet rips through skin, every neuron instantaneously reverts to survival mode, regardless of what the brain thinks it wishes. Or wishes it thinks. The conscious brain does not control the body on that fundamentally basic level; on the contrary, the body's primary purpose, and the subconscious brain's role, is to ensure its own survival. *(I vacillate from light to dark. From reclaiming to wracking desolation. Euphoria to blanket*

closet hiding.) The brain's control centers compel us to breathe, for instance, even when we don't wish to, to maintain our hearts' rhythmic jigs long past when they should stop, a ship already half sunk beneath a tidal onslaught. My brain the same blood-and-oxygen-infused substance, the same dead star matter that constitutes the rest of my body. Despite trauma and fear, how can the brain *want* to end itself?

Mom puffed again, a startling gasp, as if pulling insignificant oxygen from an adamantine atmosphere.

But does my brain seek a self-inflicted end? The brain's neurons send messages of shock, the blood attempts to clot, chemicals release their signal of *painpainpainedangerdanger*, the brain attempts to scar, to heal itself. It doesn't know what you know, what you believe, what you've experienced, despite the fact that it holds this information and the means to process it. (*Can I only think of one thing to do to reclaim my bedroom because it is what I have long seen and lived in the shadow of? Or am I really so terribly sick, like my mother?*) The brain clings to its own life, a solitary mountaineer on some remote glacier clutching a lone handhold with seventy feet of empty air below. It is made of the same stardust as every other body system, yet the brain is the very cause of agony and strife that incited all this to begin with. Does the brain know what you know despite the body's ignorance? Or are you missing out on something the body knows by instinct?

I stared at mom. Only longing. Prone body quiet then. Still.

I lift the .45 and turn it to my face. I place my right thumb on the

trigger. I pull the trigger slightly, then release. A first real smile in weeks. I pull again and release the tension just before engaging the sear. I marvel at the balance of this pistol that so exquisitely fits my hand, despite its formidable size. I quiver slightly as I pull again, tenderly drawing toward me the immense power of the machine I grasp so tightly. Feel myself all the more powerful for controlling it. Controlling myself. Maybe for the first time.

Mom whispered something from shadow. I remained rooted as a redwood, and just as immovable.

Sleek flat black grip with a light aluminum trigger, stainless hammer and barrel, black Cyclops eye staring back into my own. Steel melts into the patterned black. The intricate crisscrossed pattern imprinted on the grip is slick from my sweaty palms, but this makes the pattern all the more prominent. The slide moves fluidly back and forth, though it takes a substantive effort to pull it back so it can chamber a round to ready the shot. The Kimber has thought of this and designed itself accordingly, the slide with six dull serrated edges, three to the front and three to the back, to ensure appropriate traction. The safety is off, red dot showing.

I sat nearby on the floor. I watched the quiet. I receded. In silence, I receded. I watched mom breathe and I receded.

The red dot is showing. I lift again, eyes closed now, and feel the barrel against my upper right cheek, the pistol suspended diagonally to ensure the bullet makes a jagged trajectory. Cold metal juts against hot skin, and the pressure on the trigger increases by the second. My blue room closes

in on me reassuringly, a soft cool blanket, heavy like a straitjacket. I grasp tighter. Shove it harder, feel a dark imprint of the muzzle growing on my cheek. Thumb pulsing with lactic acid as I hold, hold and pull, pull yet further. The trigger is almost to the point. The sear is just engaging. My grip tighter still. My blue all around me. I pull my trigger slightly more.

I release.

My .45 slips from my hands to floorboards with a resounding smash. Concussions course through me.

I lie on the wide pine floor.

My blue room encases me reassuringly.

I intake one more cool blue breath before I scream.