Dangle

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DANGLE

The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths.

—Herman Melville

HIGH BEAMS, cursing, tail-gating; I speed home in the powder-blue 3/4 ton that's pretty well paid off and I crave the roughhouse with my kids. The RPM seems precisely right, perhaps a chemical thing. I've had a few and they're excited by my noisy re-entry into their space; they want me, they want airplane rides, they want to dangle over the big stairwell. I made the banister myself.

I dangle my favourite tiny son by his ankles over the stairwell. You let go of the pudgy ankles and clamp on again fast.

My kids all shriek. They love it.

Don't, she always says. She has no choice. Someone else wrote her lines. My mother said the same to father. Don't Jack. The slight Scottish accent. The reaction is part of the ritual.

The kids go to bed; you stay up, an adult. Eventually you catch a few hours, but before you know it you're at work again, rich white dust in your hair, your hands tearing down recalcitrant pipe scaffolding as the blue crane swings tapered buckets of cement through space overhead, and then you're heading back home again, a muscled mystery really, but the kids always hyped to see you.


Past tense because one night I lost my youngest son's fleeced ankles. A mistake. He went straight down, a heavy blond bomb dropped in a blue sleeper. No laws were broken. My youngest son obeyed gravity.

Superman failed to fly under his path. Superman did not save me. You actually hope for something like that. Someone with the power to bail you out. My son hit tiles I personally laid over the cement and his eyes rolled back. He didn't see me anymore. We ran down the corkscrewing stairs, the two of us actually fighting each other to get there first, a competition to show who cared
more. Forever I’ll run those black stairs. His perfect head and the great shroud of the sea closing over him.

In the Miseracordia hospital I was crying, trying to process this shitty information. This never happened when my father dangled us by our ankles. Why did it happen to me? My parents are deceased so they could not answer my textbook question. My parents’ house was cut from blocks of pale stone; mine is made of white tin; take a can opener and you’re in like Flynn.

Sorry, I said to her in the hospital, I screwed up, I said to her. I always screw up, I blubbered.

I admit I was hoping she’d tell me this was not so.

You wanted this, my wife said calmly.

I did not think this entirely fair. I think I could say I viewed a new side of her.

You don’t exist for me, my wife declared. If my baby doesn’t come out of this, my wife said, then you don’t exist for me.

My blonde son hasn’t come out of it. He hasn’t died but he hasn’t woken up either. My Goldilocks son lives on in limbo, machines telling him state secrets, his blue eyes refusing to aim. The doctors all say he could improve but I no longer exist for my legal wedded wife. Pound of flesh, eye for an eye.

Look, I say. But she won’t look. If his eyes won’t look then her eyes won’t look. I willed it into being, she claims. I wanted this. I don’t need to go home now. Not even a “Don’t go.” Not even nothing.

Time is some kind of invisible glue; you are stuck in your time, even after it’s no longer there filling an iris. You’re still young but they knock your old school over. You remember her oval face staring out the window or a map with chocolate bars on it, or the smell of a green apple, an old crooked kind no one grows anymore, or the stuttering janitor selling radishes. Then one day at the jobsite the new kid snickers at your time-warp fashions. It’s a new era. The new kid lives to regret this.

I went to confession at the Cathedral; I needed to confess.

As a kid at junior high school I always lied at confession: telling the priest made-up sins rather than telling the real ones.
“I lied twice; I disobeyed my mother.” I said this over and over. I think most of us in that class at St. Vincent’s did the same thing. What are we going to say? Forgive me for whacking off 800 times since I last spoke to you?

Anyway, I went to confession again and I lied again!

I found I could not force my mouth to say: Hi, I’m a fucking goof and I dropped my darling son on his fucking head. The priest behind the screen called me “son” just like when I was a schoolkid. And he gave me the exact same penance as when I was a kid: five Hail Marys and five Our Fathers. Maybe it was the same old priest.

I hope he knows we have other sins and forgives us for them. He’s probably not even listening. He’s probably thinking, *Hmm, gotta get the Nova tuned up before winter.* Jesus we must bore them. They must crave REAL sin, just once to hear utter depravity. Those hardcore ones probably never climb into their confessional. I tried to give him my real sin but I did not. I failed to thrill him. I’m with my baby in limbo.

Since those trying times I’ve made certain subtle adjustments. That’s me you run into at The Bruin Inn north of town or Curly Bob’s Supper Club way down by the sweetgrass borderline. I get around now, do what I want now. The tanned blonde guy in a sweaty tank top. Fu Manchu and the blue pickup truck with the highbeams and much-squandered tread.

Used to be that every Friday after work my tiny blonde boys gave me a hand spraying the construction crap out of the truck bed. The noise of the hose-water drumming the metal bed; the fine spray drifting back at us in rainbows; Friday nights I was free!

Now the garden hose hits the truck and I think of my lost boys: a reflex. Now we’re in Dispute Mediation. I can smoke those tires at will. I’ve left a lot of them on our driveway, on my own tar. In reverse. Amazing torque. Makes the hippies across the street jump. I’m aware of my nervous neighbours. I believe there’s talk of a court order.

Inside the rayless border bar I’m outside time’s glue while Seattle’s Blood of the Lamb Band rattles out Muleskinner Blues at 800
miles per hour. Almost as fast as my baby dropped, a glum plumbline down the corkscrew stairwell.

The music zines rave on about the new band, insist SubPop’s going to sign them to the hip label right soon. But hey. I’ve seen the hype before. I’m not a betting man. I’m a muscled bricklayer and I want to go, destroyed knuckles or no. It’s a test and I’m a collector, taking it out in febrile flesh.

Smash your foreign bottle and let’s do it because I adore shard sounds, that music that breaks something green, that melody of things twisting down fast and pyretic. I’m eager and Old Testament and I’ve got the bends. No feckless jabs or Marquis of Queensberry; just the routine roundhouse, the banal bodyslam, the pristine teeth to the curb.

I seek plain purchase and I win every time but that takes its toll. The rest of my life dedicated precisely to my head and the stairs.