

Weapons at Hand

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I.

I watched the news in the dark, where nightmares live. Safer, then, not to turn on the lights, make the monsters real. Underneath my hands, my belly rippled, vibrations pulsing the tight drum of my skin: the beat of the unborn, a foot or hand stretching, pushing, announcing, *I'm here, I'm here*.

Early in my pregnancy, I'd stolen furtive bites of bitter chocolate or bright pulpy sips of orange juice to jolt awake my tiny stowaway. Anything to make sure he was still alive in there, swimming like a fish in the sea. That night, I'd sat down in the dark after twelve hours on swollen feet, nine months pregnant as different from three as an elephant from a mouse. Inside, a punch to my ribs from what felt like a heel but could also have been a shoulder.

On television, the same footage repeated, a horror loop. 154 rounds in five minutes.

I watched small bodies walk together, stumbling in long lines, hands on each other's shoulders. The children wound through school parking lots leading to blocks of tidy suburban neighborhoods where parents had left their cars parked like forgotten toys, in gardens, by fire hydrants, on curbs, in the woods, doors still open sometimes, engines running.

II.

I didn't yet know that love. My own life's heart was still tucked safely under my expanding rib cage, growing, dreaming, being. I couldn't begin to fathom how love, threatened, becomes a weapon. Couldn't know how, in the absence of a chair, a stapler, a high heel, a book, a phone, there are those who would use even their soft, yielding flesh to fashion a shield.

Under my hands, my son-to-be danced restlessly, swayed by the tides of my emotion. In the darkness, I realized it was too late to send him back to wherever he was before, too late to tell him to stay where he was.

III.

At five, my son is small in his grown-up chair at the kitchen table. His tongue still trips on the slippery letters, crooked *s* and soft pallet *r*, as he recounts his day. At school, they ran a drill to practice hiding. He loves this game. He is the best hider in our family, he reminds us, and it's true—sometimes he hides so well we have to call out so he knows he can stop. They have different rules at school, he tells us, miming hiding behind jackets in the cubby, curling up small in a closet. He knows where to hide now in his classroom. In the library. In the gym. If he's in the bathroom, he knows he has to close the stall door and pull up his feet.

I stand up so abruptly that my husband places my full dinner plate in my shaking hands so I can pretend there's more I need. At the stove, I help myself to food I don't want so my son can't see my face. Ask myself what good would it do, now, for him to fear the world. He doesn't yet know what he's hiding from.

IV.

At ten, my son is kinetic energy, shouting joyful voice indoors, smell of sweat and sunlight, tender ankles exposed in pants always a bare inch shy of outgrown. Friday morning, cusp of spring, his school calls the wrong code for a medical emergency. Code Red instead of Shelter in Place. Doors locked, bodies huddled under desks. Taller each day, he tries to compress himself to fit under the flimsy metal frame.

Later, he will tell us the hardest part is willing his body still, watching the second hand shiver around the clock. Fifteen full minutes passing like a day, like a year, like a lifetime. He worries about the girls who are crying, how the teachers cannot move from behind their desks to help, how the spacing between the desks means that the girls stretch awkwardly in the gaps to try to hold each other's hands. He will ask us if we can get him a watch or a phone, share how worried he was that he wouldn't be able to call us. Hidden in his words: his unfaltering belief that he will call, and we will come for him, a certainty we will be able to reach him.

V.

He understands, some, that today was just a mistake. Asks us what he would do if it was not.

And we lie and tell him he would listen to his teachers, find a place to hide, wait for help to come. Soon he'll know the names of our secret fears, our greatest shame. The places we feint away from, in the dark.

For weeks afterward, he dreams his school is struck with a virus that turns people's hands into weapons. He careens through the hallways looking for places to hide as the virus passes from person to person. Soothing and smoothing him in the middle of the night, I think about how much he understands: a disease without a cure, the body attacking itself.