

Restraining Order

By  
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ABSTRACT  
MICHAEL CARLO MARTELLA: Restraining Order  
(Under the Direction of Ann Fisher-Wirth)

This thesis is a collection of poetry and creative non-fiction that examines the intersection of place and environment with personal identity. Here are pieces written about sex, anxiety, beauty, death, masculinity, violence. But ultimately, this is a collection derived from and dependent on love.

## PREFACE TO THE INTRODUCTION

As I began thinking of how best to utilize the space of the introduction, I wanted initially to write a detailed account of the themes in this collection, about the movement between pieces and sections, and about the tensions that hold together the fabric of my writing. But in attempting such an introduction, it occurred to me that labeling these pieces outright with my own aims and perceptions would only add another layer of restraint to the voice that sings these narratives. For that reason, I have chosen to let my work speak for itself and to take this opportunity to briefly contextualize this collection.

## INTRODUCTION

During my formative years, I spent far more time outdoors than in, either at hunting camp with my father and the male members of our family and familial friend group, or at my grandmother's home in rural Hinds County. As one might expect, the social environments were vastly different in these two locales, and my perceptions of various abstractions such as love, sexuality, gender performance, and the relationship of these to the natural world grew as I did to reflect the dichotomy of my experiences.

In the winters, I spent the weekends in a decrepit cabin situated on several hundred acres of land leased by my father from a dairy farmer. The woods surrounding the home-place were a beautiful mixture of old- and new-growth oak and pine stands, every inch of which we came to know by heart: the patch of persimmon trees where deer would take their young to feed, the lowland on the west side of the property nearest the river where they bedded down at night. It was on that land my father taught me that the fields and forests are a place of reverence, an altar of sorts, where one seeks tranquility and communion with the earth and spirit, and where one interacts in a kind of antagonistic harmony with the physical environment. Of course, this is nothing novel. The hunting men of our small camp represent, if unknowingly, a patriarchal lineage of environmental thought that spans centuries and is proffered from older to younger generations of men as a kind of cultural preservation and kinship. In this way the physical environment became for me a place of ritual sacredness and a place where masculinity effused. This is a perception that I toil with rather explicitly in poems such as "The Ritual of the Blood" and "Dove Season," in which aspects of the physical environment such as light or heat or animals become integral to the movement and the message of the poem. While these and other poems often unfold within the framework of interpersonal relationships, they also attempt to reach beyond the particular in order to complicate the relationship of the characters and the readers to their environment and to one another.

Though the land around my grandmother's home was physically and ecologically quite similar to that at the hunting camp, the set of values to which I was exposed was quite different. She was neither a hunter nor a father. Having grown up in poverty, with eight brothers and sisters living together with their mother and father in a two-bedroom house several miles from town, she knew well how to tap into the economy of the environment. But hers was not purely a pragmatic environmental purview – as a young girl she and her siblings entertained themselves in the woods surrounding their home, cultivating a sense of wonder and imagination that required an engagement with nature. During my own childhood,

she taught me the games and songs she remembered from the time she spent with her family. She would take me out to a little red swing that hung from a tree next to the neighbor's pasture, and she would push me as we sang to a herd of cows. She and I would blow up balloons and tie them to sticks, setting them loose on the pond to see which balloon could make it fastest to the other side. She climbed trees with me into her late fifties. From her I learned to view the environment as a place of joy and wonder, a landscape that nourished and encouraged discovery. The influence of her presence in my childhood is most prevalent in poems such as "The Wig Stand" and "The Sorting Room," both of which take a skeptical approach toward the human impulse to categorize and appropriate abstractions like gender or beauty.

While the influences of these early experiences most apparently inform the first and second sections of this thesis, the final section is equally imbued with a sense of place and environment, though there is a shift in this section as to the interpretation of environment, which becomes slightly more internalized and intrapersonal as the collection moves forward.

All of the poems in this thesis were written with the understanding that environment is always a messy blend of cultural and physical setting which ultimately and inescapably inform our personal narratives. Admittedly, the subject matter herein is often intensely personal, regionally specific, and at times, seemingly exclusive. These are pieces that could not have come to life in any setting other than Mississippi or with a narrator who was anything but queer. Furthermore, the tension that arises from the intersection of place and identity – particularly the social, cultural, and physical environment of Mississippi with gender performance and sexual identity – is the force that sustains this body of work. Narratives such as these permeate Mississippi, though they are infrequently expressed through the written word. It has been my goal throughout this project to lend a dynamic and evocative voice to my own experiences, and therefore to a side of Mississippi's story that often goes untold.

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I. The Ritual of the Blood

Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

- Anne Sexton

## The Ritual of the Blood

### I.

Limbs sway leafless overhead, fragment and map  
the steel-blue sky, transposing constellations.  
Warm colors steep the East and dark  
discovers morning like a tide. The yawning breeze  
breathes over the bean field into the oak-wood edge  
where hold-out acorns shell brittle leaves  
littered, layered inches thick, on the forest floor below  
the stand that leans twenty feet up a red oak trunk.  
We watch the rhythm, the earth-clock ticking toward day.

### II.

Sleeping –  
my father's sturdy arm a pillow camouflaged  
in pattern over pattern of maple, oak, and ash  
leaves – I dream of nighttime creeping through  
the gullies and the sloughs, the blood-  
red moon burning like a fire across the land.  
Face and limbs, my whole body bathed in red  
light, shivering, curled like an armadillo, tight.  
A whisper through the trees.

### III.

A whisper:  
*wake up, son, wake up.* I crick my neck and brush  
sleep from my eyes. A mourning dove sighs.  
Finger pointed past the railing, my father aims  
my gaze toward a sweet-bay bottom, a gray silhouette  
emerging from the thicket. A deer, young and male,  
full body yet, though winter-lean,  
a narrow set of antlers spiking from the crown.

IV.

My body quivers as the barrel of the four-ten  
sneaks through a sliver of burlapped window.  
My finger taps the trigger like a snare.  
Below, among fallen acorns, the hunted  
haunts a patch of early morning light, dew  
rising into heavy mist. The buck crumples  
when the shotgun fires, and thick red  
dribbles down the hide. In a tunnel  
where the pellets tore the air,  
fog and smoke unfurl around deadpan eyes.  
The echo rings and rings and rings.

V.

Its head hangs from the front of the four-wheeler  
where it lies, tightly fastened. The deer rides limp  
like a sleeping child. I bear-hug my father at his back,  
the unmuffled exhaust an elegy, a warning rumbling  
through the woods. Up the cow-shit-covered hillside,  
the old cabin, and in back, the skinning rack melded  
like two crosses. Here, we slow, quiet, stop.

VI.

My father loosens the straps, slings the buck  
and drags it to the swinging hook, hangs it by both feet –  
the forelegs spread in unnatural surrender.  
*Tschick*, the blade springs out, cocked to puncture flesh.  
In front of me, they dangle there, the damson testicles,  
the yearling buck, crucified and dripping red.  
What remains is the deep cut, the gelding,  
the bleeding of the boy, like sacrament.

## The Pit

Pine trees kept it hidden one hundred yards within,  
but the two of us, wandering toward dusk,

came upon the twenty-foot drop with apprehension.  
Had it been a lake the forest sipped too quickly

in the swelter of an earlier summer –  
only a memory of bliss? Those woods

were dense and dark, the layers of the canopy  
so tightly stitched that shadows flowed

like water with the breeze, and only he and I were there –  
no one else to baffle our discovery,

no mothers or fathers to preach to us the dangers  
of inching closer and closer to the edge.

From a low branch above the bank,  
a rope swing hung down near where we stood.

What would it have meant to anyone  
had he and I together taken that rope in hand,

and with a running start swung out over the pit,  
over the empty possibilities?

## Dove Season

September, Mississippi: the breeze was like convection,  
insects went on wailing in the trees,  
a crescendo as consistent as the sun.  
My father had his gun, and I had mine propped at my side.

Years later we would nearly come to blows:  
he must have felt he failed to raise a son.  
It wasn't even anger in his eyes.

Back then, I sat beside him on the edge of that corn field,  
waiting for a single dove  
to interrupt the blue.  
And when at last it came, the bird dipped down and landed  
on a mound of dirt, twenty feet from us.

My father leaned my way and whispered:  
Be a man and pull the trigger.  
So I brought the gun up quickly, clicked the safety, fired  
into the ground.  
Once the dust and smoke had cleared away,  
there was nothing left but a glaring hole  
neither one of us could name.

## The Wig Stand

Soft white like porcelain, the face stared  
innocently blank, as mannequins do.  
The wig, brunette with waves draped past the nape,  
framed the smooth curves – forehead and cheeks –  
with feminine plasticity.

In an old beautician's chair pulled close  
to the vanity mirror, I knelt  
and met that girlish face –  
so alien, so familiar – wondering  
where the body was that matched.

Truth or Dare

That night I learned what it means to be a fag.  
Like truth or dare, when truth is written in the bones,  
dare is stepping-stones on two-by-fours  
into the belly of the attic.

*Dare*, he said, and I said, *Dare*, and got down on my knees,  
pressed him back against the insulation,  
like communion, ate and drank.

When his mother knocked, we came this close  
to plunging through the floor the roof the sky and center of the earth.  
What could we say  
as light slatted through the attic door?  
We could not hide, nor could we stand to be abhorred.

So we left it in that place where things are left  
to be forgotten or ignored,  
but the insulation kept us  
scratching at ourselves  
for days.

## A Conversation

On a Saturday afternoon I sat sandwiched between  
my mother and my father, who drove two hours north from Jackson  
just to visit. I rarely go home anymore  
because rural Mississippi is a Crock-pot –  
attitudes, ideas, beliefs homogenized, it seems, by the heat,  
the populace stuck in suspension.

Fifty years apiece and wearied, my parents  
made themselves at home on the olive sofa  
in my cramped one-bedroom cottage.  
To my left, my mother turned to me and said  
*I did something I think you'll be proud of*  
and I asked  
*what?*

*Last Thursday night we went out for dinner with the Laney's  
and our waiter was clearly a homosexual –*

*Gay, mother, he was... He is gay, mother. Homosexual  
sounds... so... prescriptive... diagnostic... when you say it.  
Go on.*

*Fine, I'm sorry. He was obviously GAY, and Mike looked  
across the table at your father and me and said  
"I just don't get it. God makes everything and everyone  
perfect, after his own image, and then you have queers  
who say they were born that way. Why would anybody  
choose to be that way?"*

A smile creased my mother's cheeks as she squared her shoulders,  
coming slowly to the point:

*I thought to myself, "Mike out of anyone should understand –  
his son Cole," you remember Cole, the little boy  
with Asperger's, "Cole has his Asperger's, and he didn't  
choose to be that way."*

*So I squinted over at Mike and let loose:*

*"You know, Mike, I don't think I agree with you.  
Who's to say that God didn't create homosexuals*

*in his image, just like he made your son with Asperger's?  
What about a baby born with HIV? Not perfect either  
but still designed with love in God's image."*

I looked to my father, unmoving, quiet, his eyes  
    peering straight ahead at the blank TV.  
Pills of sweat pooled at his hairline.  
My mother dabbed the skin above her upper lip.

I had forgotten to close the windows, and in that stuffy house  
    the afternoon air was uniformly hot.

## II. Fragments of Ecology

The earth's a little harder than it was.  
But I expect that it will soften soon,  
    voluptuous in some age hence,  
because we captured it as art  
    the moment it was most itself:  
fragile, flecked with nimbleweed,  
    and so alone,  
it almost welcomed its own ravishment.

- D. A. Powell

## Orientation

Day one as an intern in plant community ecology,  
and thirty doe-eyed students stand, squat, sit

in a quad of open field, listening,  
ears cupped against the whirl of wind.

The man in charge weaves a path through plots –  
sixteen by sixteen – of grasses, forbs, and sapling trees,

going on about this or that experiment, manipulation  
here of nitrogen and there of CO<sub>2</sub> or heat,

each arm of his research as storied as a human life.  
And then the question, having been for some time stirring

in the mind of someone near the front, interrupts  
a monologue on plant-fungi symbiosis,

on how a two degree increase in temperature can disrupt  
even the most stable synergisms.

*Who provides the funding for all of this research?*  
To which our guide replies *Exxon and Mobil.*

Hands fall from ears, let the wind drown out the noise,  
as sixty eyes stare skeptically into a field of swaying green.

## A Dove Begins to Sing

I shiver in the cold, cross-armed and stepping slow:  
October 4<sup>th</sup> in Mississippi, sunrise.  
Except the sun won't rise today,  
not fully, the pale and mottled grey  
of almost rain keeping out the brightest light,  
turning the pond a milky white.

Midstride,  
I pause beside a cypress tree that leans  
along the bank. The high is fifty-six degrees,  
cold for this time of year.  
Winter gathers near. The water  
ripples at the prow of northbound wind,  
and frond-like branches comb the air  
that passes through. The leaves,  
shifting forth and back, reveal a knot,  
a spot where pruning shears lopped off  
a failing limb. From the stump sprout shoots  
of lively green, and up ahead,  
in dense pine woods, a dove begins to sing.

## Sea Turtles

Stars burn out beneath the surface.  
No wind, no waves whish and whir –

the moon bobs like tackle  
adrift and set to catch,

casting a haze of light  
through the soft blue-grey.

With no marks of land or sky,  
the internal compass like a magnet

guides them through pelagic waters,  
swimming, swimming toward the island

of Ascension that waits somewhere beyond,  
obscured by miles of dark and aimless sea.

## Echo

Which reminds me of the bellbird perched high up in an avocado tree, tolling through the mists of a Costa Rican cloud forest. As I lower my eyes behind a spotting scope, the view shifts, and the bird becomes more brilliant: crimson torso edged against a headdress of white feathers. Three wattles sway loose like clappers chiming from a pointed beak. Through the lens, deep eyes are clear. One hundred yards away, bellbird looks back at me. I am small down here through films of glass. Always looking through glass – wanting always to see. The eyes of the bellbird see.

The bell tolls from the forest edge, echoing out over miles of patchwork pasture.

## Sowing

In the grasp of your right hand,  
held an inch above your left,  
is a bag filled with seeds  
all thirsting for light and the moisture of soil.  
They file slowly, one by one,  
from their paper nest as you pour,  
then slide toward your palm in clusters,  
two's and three's.

The seed shells appear dead-brown  
and cracked like a dozen irises  
squinting in the sunlight and dry air,  
waiting to be shut beneath the soil.  
With a calloused thumb you press  
six holes into the dirt that fills  
the box-bed below the window,  
and in pairs you plant a row of seeds.

At last you stand, knees crackling straight,  
and step back to see the bones  
of last year's vine coiled tight  
around the bars of a graveyard gate,  
a makeshift trellis.  
Once more you kneel, reaching out a hand,  
and snap the moon vine's lifeless spine.

## The Sorting Room

Matte black plastic, cracked  
down each side and flimsy,

stacked ten high inside the industrial fridge.  
From the top, a single tray

of milkweed collected from Plot X,  
a monoculture clipped just this morning,

fresh and wet with ample dew.  
I carry the biomass into the sorting room,

take my seat at the table  
across from Lindsay.

A monoculture is a dream, we think,  
the work of sorting already done.

So as the pile proceeds to grow,  
we talk of menial things:

drug exploits, partners, the survival  
of the fittest, the pros of atheism,

what of a world inhabited by no other  
wild and tragic thing apart from humanity,

what of a world devoid of catharsis  
and discovery, absent of science and poetry.

We talk of the Monarch caterpillar  
dangling from the milkweed leaf,

as Lindsay lifts and holds it  
before our gawking eyes,

then sets it gently to the side, among the pile,  
acknowledged and neatly sorted.

### III. Who We Were

But that's why  
we invented the complex sentence,  
so we could stand at a distance,

and make adjustments  
in the view  
while trying hard to track  
the twisty, ever-turning plot:

the loneliness of what we did;  
the loneliness  
of what was done to us.

- Tony Hoagland

## Contingencies

The Meyer lemon  
potted on the porch  
pulls back  
into its roots,  
leaves scattered  
like love notes.

It was winter,  
wasn't it,  
that caused this  
desiccation?  
The pail sat daily  
by the door,  
but we blame  
the lack of rain,  
the sickled wind.

*We* could not  
have done this.  
I. You. But now  
it's nearly May,  
when buds burst  
purple from green,  
and new leaves  
sprout to fill  
the holes.  
That is, if  
we can keep this  
thing alive.

You woke me one morning

You woke me one morning, late October,  
coaxed me to the window. Your eyes  
pointed through the glass, out toward the pond,  
where sleeping were a pair of geese,  
    nestled on the dam.

One stirring roused the other –  
I pressed my lips against your cheek.  
The birds slid forward into the water –  
I slipped my fingers past your palm,  
    whispered in your ear.

The words rippled as you walked away,  
my eyes still on the geese.

## To Pieces

### I.

*I love you to pieces, he would say.  
As if his brand of love were comprehensive,  
made grander by summation.*

*I love your hairy arms. I love your hair.  
I love your smelly breath come morning.  
I love the feel of you behind me  
like we're Russian dolls,  
and I can nest myself inside you.*

### II.

A sweet gesture, you think, the first flowers of Spring,  
and he's reminded of you.  
Hold them gently in your hands  
and walk them over to the window.

The sky coming up northeast  
is a storm you didn't see.  
Sound of thunder, lightning splits the tree.

See the lightning and the tree  
erupting into splinters?  
Now, the boy holding the blue blossom,  
veined like lightning, quiet thunder.  
Look of love, akin to madness.  
And when he plucks the petals  
in his lovers' game –  
that's what it means to love a thing  
to pieces.

The Libido in August

And *god* was it the hell we always knew,  
skin pearled with the body's dew,  
the ungodly heat that heat itself succumbs to.

## Who We Were

As dawn-light slivers through the curtains, I awake,  
the mattress empty at my back.  
Like a dream in blurred and patchy bits I recollect  
the night before: Halloween, the crisp air and the spirits,

the devil himself reclined against the bar,  
that 'both-elbows-cocked-back-on-the-counter' posture,  
suggestive of boredom or arrogance or mischief.

On stage a boy with shadowed eyes and slim  
cheeks contoured a shade of charcoal gray  
wailed and shrieked into the microphone, his voice  
traversing octaves in a Marilyn Manson kind of way.

A painter clasped hands with a dancer.  
Two hipsters sipped froth off the tops of draft beers.  
From the bar my devil smiled back at me, his artless skeleton,  
through the currents of the crowd, the beautiful people.

Then, the yelling when I found that devil in the alley  
haunting someone else's bones. The casting  
back and forth of stones. The long walk home.

And now, in morning's clarity, I crane my neck and head  
up from the pillow, lift a finger to my face, white paste  
caked on thick and cracked. Somewhere the devil moans.

I shuffle out of bed and down the hall, peek in the living room.  
He lies asleep in costume on my couch. As in that fragile night,  
so in the breaking light of day: we are wholly who we were  
and not ourselves at all.

## Demolition

They're bringing down that old brick building  
across the street, the one that stood for years,  
  
weather-beaten, with cracks and holes,  
resisting the pull of time, like a dead pine trunk.

The demolition crew works day and night  
with bare hands and big machines,  
  
even on the coldest days when breath is steam  
and engines creak. Last night at midnight,

I slipped out of bed and tiptoed through the dark hallway  
into the living room where John sat reading on the sofa,  
  
framed by lamplight and the night  
that bled through our bay window –

silent, as he had been for days. He didn't notice me  
until I pushed his book aside and slid onto his lap,  
  
my thighs against his thighs. His hands were cold  
like the blue night, his head hung

in the hollow of my chest, and I stared past him  
through the window, the red lights of the wrecker flashing,  
  
gears grinding, attesting to the destruction.  
Isn't that our way? – undoing what we've done.

## Stargazing before Dawn

The blanket beneath our bodies glows  
in the flicker of candlelight.

I keep quiet and listen  
as his finger sweeps the sky, tracing  
first Orion's Belt and then the Little Dipper,  
which I can never find on my own.

*Is that the North Star?*

*Yes, Polaris.*

In this moment I am again a child  
lying on the edge of discovery.

*And that, that steady light swimming  
through the dark, is that a shooting star?*

*No. Much too slow. A drone.*

Languidly, as it creeps across the night,  
as minutes pass, the light dims.  
In an instant, or by morning, either way,  
it will vanish altogether.

## Restraining Order

As I put the car in park, my eyes list slowly left, looking out the driver-side window, where in the next space, a somber police officer steps out of a black and white sedan. He nods in my direction, then strides off down the sidewalk and into the building. I stare at the heavy metallic door that slams shut behind him, and for several moments I sit cradled in a worn-out leather seat. Raindrops like pinpricks fall against the gray exterior of my car and run rivulets down the windshield.

I close my eyes.

My right hand rests limp on the cold gearshift, waiting for fingers to push between mine, to heave this moment into reverse, but my palm remains upturned and open, as empty as the passenger seat. There is no sound but light rain falling like time toward an end.

\*

I always drove. His car or mine, day or night, drunk or sober – I always drove. It wasn't a lack of trust. Or maybe it was. I told myself it wasn't. On a Wednesday night I drove the two of us along with some friends to a bar downtown. I parked in the lot across the street from the bar, and as everyone fumbled blithely for door handles, I noticed John sitting stiffly in the passenger seat. I laid my hand where he could see it, wondering what was wrong. His hand fell heavily into mine, and I consoled him once again.

John told me of a memory he had from high school, when his mother and father were talking around the kitchen, and he walked in to listen. Leaning against the counter, John heard about a boy from school who had recently come out to his own parents, how the boy had been disowned by the entire family. As John's mother went about preparing dinner, she punctuated the conversation by assuring her husband that should those circumstances ever arise, they would do exactly the same.

After John finished the story, I thought about our separate lives, the roads we had taken before, as individuals bound eventually to meet. I realized then how lucky I had been. When I first came home sporting rainbows and skinny jeans, my parents eschewed their judgment in favor of acceptance and compassion. But in most of Mississippi, rainbows only remind people of bad weather and the Old Testament, and what's worse, there's no pot of gold; there's a disappointed family, abandonment, and showers of persecution. In the world of his upbringing, there was no asylum save assimilation, and I could see the wear this wrought on John, who replayed that moment over again as he sat sullen-eyed beside me, searching for a loophole, an alternate ending where love and happiness were unconditional.

I leaned over the center console to kiss him on the cheek and squeezed his hand before letting go to turn off the car.

\*

The sound of thunder, and startled, I open my eyes. It's still raining; I'm still here, alone. I open the door and step onto fractured asphalt that crunches beneath my feet. The door closes with a gust of wind, and I walk slowly toward the building's front, letting the rain settle in my hair and splash off my skin. His shirt weighs heavy on my shoulders, the scent of his cologne in water droplets distilled, and again I close my eyes.

\*

“Another?” I asked John, looking down disparagingly at the brimming vodka tonic in his right hand before sliding my view to the still unemptied glass of chardonnay in his left. “You know I don’t like it when you drink this much.”

“I know,” he sighed, “your grandfather. Mine was too... I’m *not* an alcoholic.”

Glossy eyes squinted through a full-face smile that begged for my forgiveness, and I yielded. Time, I thought, had taught me which issues to dispute and which to let dance into the crowd.

At around 11:30 everyone decided that our bar had become a bore so we all emptied our wells and made a row of ice-filled plastic cups along the counter. Down wooden stairs our party walked in almost single file save John whose arm hung on my shoulder. We steered ourselves toward a bar on the south side of the little town square, and John and I lagged behind at the mouth of a dark alley.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you.”

“Because sometimes I feel like you don’t really love me.”

“Well, I do.”

“But sometimes I feel like you don’t think I’m good enough for you.”

“That’s not true.”

“And sometimes I think I’m going crazy.”

We stood there staring at one another through the opaque yellow of the streetlights. His eyes flicked from my left to my right and back again, his irises eroding into a deep well of black. I knew the scene that played behind the darkness, the one that led to this line of questioning. I could hear his mother’s voice, and so could he.

“You don’t really love me,” he said with shallow breaths and a lowered brow.

“That’s not true. You know I love you, John.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do!”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well I don’t know what to say to make you believe me.”

“If you don’t love me, just leave me.”

“Why are you taking this out on me? I’m not your parents. I *actually* love you.”

“Fuck you!” he yelled, standing opposite me in the alleyway. His eyes were yet heavier, and in the dim light ebbing between brick walls I noticed the distorted shape of his half-lit face. Each word flung whisky-laden in my direction pushed me toward the dark.

“John, don’t be angry. You know I didn’t—“ I lost my words midsentence as he shoved me against the wall, swung his fist into my cheek. I panted for breath and put a hand to my face. “I love you. But...” I paused, choking on the finality of an promise that changed whole futures, his and mine. “We’re through.”

From behind his gritting teeth, John grumbled, “I hate you.”

\*

My eyes watch as I reach out and touch the smooth silver door handle at the entrance to a large brick building. The door opens slowly, and I step in. I think about turning around, bolting out the door and locking myself in the car. I could burn five-eighths of a tank and be in a place where none of this exists, where none of it ever

happened, if I choose. But the door clicks closed behind me, and I know that isn't true. Like a bottleneck of images, the totems of our past lead me in the same direction, toward an impasse of fear and sadness that I can't surmount in flight. The smell of his hair on the pillow stings me when I sleep; the phantom hand I hold while driving down the road pulls back against the wheel; the clothes of his I've kept sit like the Babadook on shadowed shelves; his presence now makes me mad.

\*

I made my way outside the bar to sit on the balcony among a group of friends. The air was cool and clouded slightly gray by smoke and booze. Looking up at me as I closed the door was a blonde I used to date. Mistake. I smiled with all the cordiality that I could muster and stepped gladly by, thinking how easy it seems in retrospect to let the present become the past, to let the past remain that way.

Taking a seat next to the dearest friend I have, I heard a voice echoing faintly from the sidewalk, calling *Michael* amidst the noise of laughter and conversation. It was John standing in the middle of the street.

"I need to talk to you. I love you. I'm sorry," he said in a dampened yell, trying in vain to avoid embarrassment. I shook my head *no* in a single exaggerated motion so that twenty yards away he would know I wasn't moving. "My phone is dead. I don't have a way to get home."

"You can walk!" I spat the words back over the metal railing.

"I hate you," he said, and just like that contrition was again contempt.

\*

"Can I help you?" asks the woman behind the counter. I walk in her direction, silently studying her purple blouse, the springy twists of brownish black hair, the smile on her face that puffs up her cheeks and squints her eyes. I want to shatter the glass partition and scale the counter, wrap my arms around this woman I've never met and make her tell me that everything will be alright.

"I need to file a restraining order."

The smile melts from her face, replaced by a solemn glaze. She stiffens her back to stand up straight. "Sweetheart, are you okay?"

My face flushes. "I'm fine. I need to file a restraining order."

"Okay. Who will you be filing the order of protection against?" she asks.

"John."

"I'm sorry," she said, "let me ask another way. Is this pertaining to a relationship, a friendship, a family member?"

"A relationship."

"Okay, sweetie." She walks over to her desk and shuffles through a drawer of files, eventually finding the proper category for my situation. She pulls out a stack of neatly stapled papers, then slides the drawer shut. Back at the counter she reviews with me the paperwork, the procedures, the ramifications, the responsibility. "And on the last page you'll need to present your account of the accident, as well as a rough timeframe of events. When did the accident happen?"

The room is silent; I only faintly hear her question, as if the glass has suddenly grown thicker, walled itself around me, turned all talk to muffled whispers. "Last night."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes ma'am. I'm fine."

I take the stack of papers with a pen from the counter and seat myself on an armless pink chair against the wall of the empty room. The information is at first generic: name, phone number, address. Page two asks more of me: his name, his number, his address. Page three: his place of occupation, his social security number, his hair and eye color. Page four: who keeps the children, the house, the money – we didn't get that far. Pages five and six: a description of the accident.

I sit alone inside a room, it seems, enclosed by glass. Violent shouting and rage echo within the walls of my memory as the night before pushes itself to the surface.

\*

Leaving the bar I was greeted by John sitting outside on a cold, metal bench, waiting with his eyes fixed on the exit.

"I thought you went home."

His gaze leveled with mine. "I didn't."

"I have a ride down the street. I have to go."

He stood up. I stepped back. He wobbled side to side, too much to drink.

"You can't leave me here," he said.

"You can't come home with me," I followed.

He shook harder and lurched in my direction, thrusting both hands into my chest and me against the cement wall.

"Hey!" came a booming voice, the bouncer from the bar. "Is everything okay?"

*Is everything okay?* I asked myself. I didn't think about the answer.

"Everything is fine," I called back through a forced smile. "I was just leaving."

I looked at John, a gloomy, pensive look, and he frowned back at me with frightening force. I moved past him without another word, hoping to let things blow over, things tomorrow to be ignored, and I started toward the street where my ride waited for me. Behind, the sidewalk was quiet. As I turned a corner, though, the sound of stomping feet came quick and loud. I wheeled myself around just as John began to swing. Bent over hands resting on knees, I looked down at the sidewalk as slowly I caught my breath from the right hook John landed in my lower chest.

"You can't do this to me!" he shouted.

Behind us on the sidewalk a seemingly happy couple strode by holding hands – they didn't stop, just kept determinedly toward the street corner where they vanished out of sight. I wondered whether their fights ever looked like this, whether anyone else's did.

"It's over."

Another couple sat in a drunken tangle on a bench nearby, oblivious, unconcerned. They looked together, young and new. I wished they would look up and see what love can do if bottled up with fear, with anger, with pain. I wondered how intimate they were, what they said and didn't say about the past. Whether they kept secrets.

"You don't mean that!" he said, the words barely escaping his tightly clenched teeth. He stuck his hand into his sleeve to scratch his arm, my eyes followed the movement of his hand, and for the first time that night I noticed which shirt he wore, my favorite shirt, the one with white flowers webbed over a solid cotton canvas of blue. I thought about the scent that shirt would bear when later he returned it. Sitting at home alone I'd want to burn it, pour the ashes around my lemon tree. But I knew I wouldn't, that instead I'd hold on to the hurt and anything that would bring it just the same as I

would keep our photos in the nightstand drawer and the Valentine card tacked on the bulletin board – the card that quoted Jack Kerouac, something about being mad and exploding like fabulous roman candles. I wondered whether this is what he had meant, or if my fireworks had sparked a different kind of fire.

“You won’t be able to take this back tomorrow,” John said. The gravity of his words brought me back from my mind to Mississippi. I leaned against the dark side of a building where no streetlights shone, and I slid down, sitting on my heels. He stood over me, the empty midnight street behind him. A stoplight changed from red to green with no one there to go.

“That’s not fair,” I mumbled from behind my hands.

“None of this is fair,” he replied.

And then Blake rounded the corner. I hadn’t been answering my phone, and he was waiting to take me home.

“I knew it,” grumbled John.

“Knew what?” I asked.

“I knew about you and Blake.”

“Are you crazy?” Blake shouted. “My boyfriend is in the car!”

Then, seeing the sadness in my face, he knelt beside me.

“Are you okay?” Blake asked.

“I’m fine.” I said. “I want to leave.”

\*

“Sweetheart, you missed John’s address.”

“I don’t know it by heart,” I replied, embarrassed. *I know the drive and where it ends*, I thought, *but nothing beyond the end*.

“Well, sweetie, he has to be served the court order. Does he have a job?”

“Yes, but...”

“Sweetheart, they’ll be discreet. You worry about yourself. Okay, honey?”

I reclaim my seat opposite the counter until the judge gets back from lunch. In my mind I imagine a gray-haired man, an arrogant redneck, a racist, a sexist, no compassion, a homophobe, some old lawyer who shoots trophy bucks for fun, plucked right out of small town Mississippi. I picture John’s family in a row behind the stand, gawking at me the way they did the first time they laid eyes on me, like I was an invasive species in a population of boot and ball-cap wearing Southern Baptists, and I *actually* start to pray. Partly for me, I think, but mostly for John. The fear and sadness I feel as I await my hearing must be what he has felt for years, for his entire life – like judgments new were daily made and only lies could hide his guilt.

Minutes after I sit down, the woman-I’ve-never-met comes out from her office and interrupts my train of thought. She prompts me to follow her. I stay a few paces behind, anxious and alone, hoping this will end quickly. She pushes open a door, and I see a courtroom with bright red carpet, a wooden podium, two desks and several chairs, and a middle-aged man, heavy-set with glasses, perched behind the high façade of his office.

“You can sit right there, sweetheart,” whispers the woman, and she points toward a chair behind a desk that faces the judges booth. She takes a seat at a table where she’ll record the minutes.

“Please stand and raise your right hand,” says the judge in a relaxed, authoritative tone. He peers at me over the top of horn-rimmed glasses.

“I’ll tell the truth,” I answer before he gets that far.

“Alright, you may sit down,” he sighs. “Can you tell me briefly about the accident that led you to file for this order of protection?”

“Yes sir. My boyfriend and I... My ex-boyfriend and I went last night with some friends to a bar. He was upset. He had too much to drink...” My words begin to quiver.

“It’s okay,” the judge assures. He flips through several pages of paper. “It says here that John pushed and hit you. Is that correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“Son, understand that violence is never excusable. There is nothing you did to deserve this kind of treatment. This is not your fault.”

“Yes sir.”

“Has anything like this ever happened before?”

The woman-I’ve-never-met stops typing, anticipating a response. Outside, the rain is falling still, the air around me smells like him. *They’ll never understand*, I think, and then I close my eyes.

## NOTES

### EPIGRAPH (PAGE 1)

From “Kind Sir: These Woods,” in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* by Anne Sexton. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960.

### EPIGRAPH (PAGE 10)

From “Tender Mercies,” in *Useless Landscapes, or A Guide For Boys* by D. A. Powell. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012.

### EPIGRAPH (PAGE 17)

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