Shaky

I thought it was sunny, but it wasn't. Instead, the bright red I saw through my eyelids in the split second after I woke but before I opened my eyes came from the too-hot bulb in the ancient ceiling-lamp above me that I had forgotten to turn off before I fell asleep. I opened my eyes and blinked rapidly in the not sunlight.

A plate cracked in the kitchen and I was comforted by the sound of the splintering ceramic. It was my mother: the noise my mother always made early in the mornings or late at night, the tremor in her hands breaking dishes against the corners of the sink as she washed them or causing wet glasses to slip from her fingers as she carried them from one place to another.

All my life, I'd worn rubber-soled shoes in the kitchen: avoiding driving splinters of broken glass and broken plates and broken bowls, too small for the vacuum to pick up off the tile, into the soles of my feet. And all my life, I crunched bits and pieces and shards under my feet on the way to the tall pine cupboard in the corner where we kept our extra, blue and white, misprinted replacement-china that we bought in staggering amounts for cheap on certain summer Saturdays at factory-sales outside the city. The plates would rattle in newspaper-packed cardboard boxes as we rested them on our knees on the bus, and the train, and then the subway home. Later, we'd stack them, sectioned out by size on the softwood shelves, chipped pieces at the top so they'd get used, and broken, first. When the stacks in the regular kitchen cabinets dwindled, we would move these replacements across the room to become part of the selection of plates in current, heavy rotation.

I held my breath and heard the telltale thud of the larger pieces against the bottom of the metal trash can under the sink, and listened to hear if my mother's cork-bottomed slippers would

creak on the hardwood hallway floor as she passed my room on her way to the bathroom; to hear if the mirrored medicine cabinet above the sink would squeak open so that she could root around in our collection of mostly empty tin and cardboard boxes of Band-Aids for one that was just the right size. I didn't hear her tread in the hall, and I breathed slowly out through my nose, relieved that she wouldn't enter my room quietly to sit on the edge of my bed and stroke the hair out of my face to wake me, gently, clenching her other, bloodied hand away from me, so that I could squeeze out a slug of antibiotic ointment and help her position a white cotton square correctly over a gash. Whenever she tried it herself, the adhesive would stick on the wound and pull off the scab when it was time to take the Band-Aid off. My mother's hands were covered in dry, greying scars, her cuts forced to take their time healing by prematurely ripped off scabs and too-new skin. My father called the thin lines purple and insisted that ashy-purple-grey was his favorite color, especially if it shined in the light the way that new skin always does. If he was home and she approached him, her eyes on the floor, he would hold her trembling hands to his lips and kiss them lightly before adding his slug of Neosporin and a Band-Aid to whichever hand needed it. When it was me doing the doctoring, I could only avert my eyes and try not to faint at the sight of her blood bubbling up from the jagged crevices in her hands. Sometimes, she needed stitches.

I think her hands used to be beautiful, once, before they started shaking too fast to focus on. I have to imagine that my father and mother held hands, firmly; and that she held me, at least once, with a steady grip, but I don't remember it. Instead, I learned to read notes and grocery lists that were illegible to the untrained eye, and to feel comforted when shaking hands held my face so that steady lips could kiss away my tears. I loved her hands, when they massaged my scalp, their fingernails scratching against each follicle of hair, and when they slid sunscreen over my

nose and onto my cheeks, but I also hated them, when they shook too fast to take my picture at my fifth-grade graduation. When my mother waved at me from the bleachers, I had to look away. Doctors didn't tell her why it started, or if it would stop, so she stopped writing on the chalkboard at the front of her classroom and started sitting on her closed fists in meetings or at lunch tables. If the parent of a friend of mine offered her their hand for an introduction, my whole body would become rigid, my own hands plastered to my thighs, my palms sweaty, and I would will her arms to stay at her sides, too embarrassed to want her to shake their hand with her unsteady grip, but also red-faced and shameful when the hand was left hanging in the air between them, empty and rejected. When strangers on the street stopped my mother to ask for directions around the city of her birth, I would stare, wide eyed and horrified as she raised her arms to point in the right direction. She would see me then, fear and embarrassment written all over my face, and she would shove her hands back into the pockets of her raincoat or the fraying pockets of her blue jeans and say quietly, "You know, I'm not sure."

The faucet in the kitchen stopped running, with a click and a dull thud in the pipes, and at the same moment, the first few, fat drops of a downpour smacked into the warped glass of my bedroom window. It seemed like the water that had been diverted through our faucet was now overflowing and falling from the sky. I listened to my mother hum her way from the sink to the stovetop, where I knew she pulled the dish towel from the oven handle where my father had spread it carefully, sliding his hands outwards over damp fabric to smooth any creases, to make sure it would dry evenly, and wiped her face before toweling off her hands.

The rain picked up.

I laughed out loud, "Mama! Mama, you made it rain!"

"Hm?" She called, "Pumpkin, you awake?"

I kept laughing.

“Pumpkin, come eat breakfast.”

I slipped out from between my sheets and my bare feet on the cold floor sent shivers straight up my legs and made the hair on my arms stand on end. The cold pricked behind my ears with every step I took across the hardwood.

I slapped the light switch on my way out the door, a ping from the ceiling told me the bulb was cooling, and bounded down the hallway, stopping abruptly where the hardwood met the ancient, off-white tile of our kitchen.

My mother’s back was to me, and I watched her hips sway back and forth while she hummed over the griddle that straddled the front two burners of our stove. A trail of thick batter smattered the countertop between our largest mixing bowl and the steaming cooktop.

I slid a pair of tired tennis shoes from a row of similar pairs that lined the wall outside the kitchen before I took the last step to cross onto the tile and slide into my seat at the breakfast table.

“Pancake, Pumpkin?” my mother asked without turning around, still dancing her hips from side to side.

I watched her pat the thin circles of batter on the griddle with the bottom of her spatula, double or triple tapping, listening. Somehow, she always knew when they were ready to eat based on how they sounded.

She slid the spatula under a cake and bent at the waist to peek at the underside. “Just about,” she said, “just about.” She dropped the cake with a slap back onto the griddle.

I nodded behind her, and she knew I wanted one, even though she hadn’t looked at me.

She spun on her heel and reached her arm out towards me, lengthened by the black plastic spatula. “The first one,” she said reverently, and both of us staired at the golden circle in the air between us.

It started to bounce, to sway, slowly, swinging in larger and larger circles in the middle of the kitchen. I wanted to laugh, to smile at my mother and the pancake, because it looked like she was waving an oddly shaped wand at me, casting a spell, offering up a charm to keep me fed.

She lunged towards the table, trying to get the pancake to a plate before the spatula’s swinging sent it spiraling to the floor, but she was too late. The momentum of her lunge and the swirling spatula carried the pancake in a graceful forward arc to the ground, where it landed with a slap and slid with a faint hiss under the table.

My mother stooped and scraped it off the floor with her spatula. The black plastic ground bits of sand and ceramic further into the tile. The sound of it grating and crunching made me want to cover my ears. “Five second rule,” she said, but delicately laid the pancake on her own plate instead of mine. She crossed back to the counter with the spatula hanging limply at her side. Bring your plate over here,” she said quietly, and turned on the faucet to rinse off the spatula.

It kept raining.

I carried my plate to the stove and she scooped a second pancake off of the griddle. With one swift movement, she flipped it onto the plate in my hands, allowing no time for error: no hang-time.

I sat at the table and cut my pancake into even, bite-sized squares. I watched steam pour upwards out of the cuts I had made, and waited to eat the perfect pieces while my mother flipped the remaining pancakes into a stack on another plate that she then lowered carefully into the

warm oven, the tower wobbling dangerously with her shaking until it touched the metal-grated oven rack and steadied.

I poured maple syrup from a warm green glass gravy boat onto my pancakes. The sugar spiraled and swirled as it melted against the hot pancake in an oil-like sheen of many different browns. I watched the colors change and move, not looking at my mother.

She sat down next to me at the table, “You didn’t have to wait, Pumpkin.”

“I know,” I said, “I was letting it cool.” I speared a bite of pancake and let the excess syrup drip back onto my plate before lifting it to my mouth.

I watched my mother slice her pancake the same way I had done mine, though her pieces were imperfect, their edges jagged. The cuts she made tore into the fabric of the pancake, pulling it apart at odd angles rather than cutting it. She couldn’t drag the knife in a straight line. She poured on her own maple syrup, her hands spilling more of the brown, thick liquid onto her plate than she wanted. “Cheers,” she said, and lifted her fork to me, offering me a wavering salute with her speared piece of pancake. The syrup running off of it made an unbroken thread back down to her plate.

“Cheers,” I said, my moth already full. I accidentally sprayed bits of off-white pancake fluff out over the table.

My mother laughed and closed her lips around her fork, making a show of her first bite. Slowly, she pulled the tines of the fork out from between her lips, and she smiled with her mouth closed in exaggerated delight. “Mmm,” she hummed, rolling her eyes back into her head and wresting both hands on the edge of the table.

I smiled too, open mouthed, showing her my pancake-caked teeth.

She covered her mouth with her hand, so I wouldn't see her chewed breakfast when she laughed, but I still saw her jaw set to work around the sides of her hand and through the cracks between her fingers as they shook in front of her face. She chewed the pancake that she joked you could eat without teeth because it dissolved so easily on your tongue, "Mmm," she intoned, over and over again.

All at once, her face changed. Her eyes widened, and the color drained from her usually-warm cheeks. I thought for a moment she might throw up, right there onto the breakfast table, or clutch at her throat in the universal choking symbol that meant I would need to wrap my arms around her middle and administer the Heimlich Maneuver, or at least spit the pancake back out onto her plate, surprised by a pocket of unmixed salt or baking soda, maybe an eggshell or a melted piece of her spatula.

I held my breath and watched her, and waited.

With her eyes still wide, she peeled her fingers from the edge of the table. She raised her hand to her face, holding it in front of her lips and spitting slowly. Two pieces of white ceramic slid out from between her pursed lips and fell, like droplets of water into her cupped, waiting, wavering palm.

"Gross!" I cried, and wanted to laugh at the hazards of our kitchen floor. I wanted to mirror the smile on my mother's face as she laughed at the ceramic chips, her own fault. I wanted to stand up from the table before my mother said even one word, snatch her plate from in front of her, and dump her dirty pancake into the trash can. I wanted to rinse any last shards from her plate and slide onto the now-clean ceramic another pancake, one that was warm from the oven and lay it all back down in front of my mother. I wanted to pour her maple syrup for her, to stop her from over-sugaring. I wanted to eat with her, to thank her for breakfast.

But my mother wasn't smiling, wasn't laughing, wasn't sticking her tongue out in mock-disgust.

And before I could act out my pleasant morning scene, replace her pancake and rinse her plate, steadying our morning, her mouth dropped open.

I could see her tongue running back and forth along her front teeth working slowly and carefully. As it moved, it revealed a sharp gap, and I could look back into her mouth the place at the back where her laugh would have come from.

I looked away from her face at her shaking palm. Blue-flecked and craggy, one of the pieces in her hand was ceramic, the other was her jagged, broken front tooth.

My mother closed her lips tightly and stared down at her plate.

I didn't want her to smile anymore and she wouldn't. She dropped the pieces onto the table with a light tapping sound that could have blended in with the rain.