

Somatic

“Daddy?” the young, hollow voice echoed in the blackness. “Daddy, where are you?!”

“I’m here!” The withered man awoke in the same place he fell asleep every afternoon. Drool from his nap seeped into the deep crevices of his skin, disappearing beneath the soft white overgrowth of his beard.

“I’m here!” he yelled again with a sleepy, choked voice. He looked around his small office. Bookshelves lined the walls, each dedicated to a point in history. Most of these items were tokens of his childhood, books that molded his world, or rather cemented him in it.

“Where are you?” he said as he tried again to find the voice he hadn’t heard in thirty-six years. “Abby, where are you?”

A flash caught the corner of his left eye. He turned slightly toward the wide sliding door window, which framed the setting sun over the Charleston harbor. A battered silver spoon wind chime clattered in the breeze.

The old man turned his mind back to himself as the wave of daydream lifted off of him. His jaw clenched and he grumbled. He was alone, had been since his wife Catherine died twenty years ago. Her image rolled through his mind as fresh as the day they were married, the day she found out she was pregnant, the day their daughter Abby was born.

“Ah, dammit!” His thick, surprisingly unsouthern voice carried throughout the room as he pulled back tears, not letting one release. He turned his wrist. “Another one.”

The yellow afghan Abby knit in high school and gave to him at Christmas slipped between his thinning knees. “Damn thing won’t stay up,” he said. He reached down, his body convulsing with each inch, revealing the purple and red flesh on his arms.

He gripped the chrome wheels of his chair to push himself to the bathroom. The hollow sound of the gray rubber tires against the worn down carpet followed him out of his lonely office. “Happy 80th!” birthday cards sat in a pile by the doorway, covered in six years of dust.

“Good for nothing,” he said when he received them from the church down the street. “Full of young people who don’t give a lick about anyone but themselves.” It was a sentiment both Abby and Catherine heard a lot throughout the years. “These millenniums.”

“It’s millennials, Daddy, and they’re not that bad,” Abby told him once on a visit from college. “They want to love you.”

“What do you know? Oh, I forgot. You’re a college student and college students know everything,” he said, slamming the door to the same office he left decades later.

The light buzzed on as he rolled across the browning tile of the bathroom. Medical gauze and tape, alcohol pads, bottles of prescriptions, and a few used up tubes of antibacterial ointment were strewn across the counter. In a room that was growing mold and mildew and collecting body hair and splashes of urine, these were the only items that made the room feel anything like clean.

He tore open the soft, white paper of the gauze, placed it on the arm of his chair, and grabbed the crusting tube of ointment. He turned his wrist and brought it close to his face.

“Bigger already!” he gasped.

Lesions were something he had grown used to over the years after Abby left, and they only sped up once Catherine passed away to a better world. The doctors tried everything from steroids to internal and topical antibiotics, but the sores kept coming, and no patch of flesh was off limits. Only once did he stay in the hospital for testing.

“That’s ridiculous,” he told the young MUSC doctor. “I’m fine. Always been fine. Never cried a day in my life, and I’ve never seen a sickness I can’t tend to at home. Ask anyone!” the old man said as his naked bottom crinkled the sanitary paper beneath. “You young people just want to try out your new toys.” It didn’t matter. He spent a week in quarantine in a little sterile room, even though the tests revealed there was no contagion, and the doctor couldn’t find a treatment that would prevent the sores. No one came to visit, either, not even his daughter who should have known. He knew someone would have told her.

“Ah-ah-ah,” he groaned. The antibacterial ointment stung the wound that grew from one inch to two in a matter of twenty minutes. “Damn thing is oozing!” He quickly grabbed the gauze pad and taped gently around the edges. “I’ll have to be careful with this one.”

His face scrunched as he got himself moving again out of the room, headed back to the office. On his way, he stopped. Along the hallway walls were the pictures of the small Michealson family that Catherine had so carefully placed but now were laced together by spider webs. Confined to the wheelchair, he couldn’t get too close to see them, but he had seen them enough in his lifetime to know what they were. He closed his eyes and imagined each one.

Catherine on our wedding day. Her bright red lips were so sweet to taste.

Abby and me on a merry-go-round. She was three, her blond hair short and cheeks red, and I had never seen her smile so much.

Catherine and Abby. Their first moments together as mother and daughter. The mother’s eye shone pure joy through the dark circles caused by a hard labor.

A smile started to ease across the old man’s lips as he remembered. The pain in his wrist started to ebb away as gentle tears pooled within his lashes.

First day of middle school for Abby. She clung to me for that picture, scared the other girls would make fun of her first pimple, but I set her straight. “Don’t make a big fuss, Abby,” I told her, peeling her arms from around my waist. “You’re only making it worse by pouting.”

Abby on her graduation day. Ten weeks until she left me for that goddam college in the upstate.

Abby sitting in my office chair, eating Doritos. No smile playing on her cheeks. One of the last trips to see me. She just ended a two-year relationship with that Daniells boy. “I don’t know why you can’t just get over it,” I told her as she sat there. “It’s been three weeks. That’s what I always did and I’m fine.” She didn’t speak to me for the rest of that trip home.

A scowl darkened the old man’s face as he opened his eyes wide, pulling the tears back in, and he rolled back to his office. The new pain in his wrist began to pulsate through the rest of his flesh, pains he had since gotten used to.

As he set the brake in his usual spot in front of his desk, now empty of any work since retirement struck, another gust ripped over the house. Something crashed just outside the window.

Fluorescent white woke up the back porch as the old man flicked the switch. The palm trees were swaying as far as he could see, and the moonlight hid behind thick balls of storm clouds. Rain was on its way but had yet to soak the coast.

On the algae-covered bricks that Catherine used to keep so clean was the spoon wind chime, a gift Abby made in the 7th grade. The whole thing was splayed out like an octopus, Abby’s favorite animal as a child.

“They’re so cool, Daddy!” she would say. “They can change the shape of their bodies and get away from all of their predators. They’re the best hiders.”

The old man pulled at the rusted metal latch on the door, but it took some time and effort to push down. It had been almost a year since he opened it, another since he actually spent any time out there.

He growled as his chair dropped down over the two-inch ledge. He took a moment to draw air in and out of his lungs, hoping to calm the storm brewing under his flesh. His forehead became moist in the struggle. The familiar salty smell of the air filled his senses, and he remembered the last night he spent with Abby.

Tears were streaming down her face, and her chest was convulsing as she hiccupped through her words. "I can't stay here anymore, Dad...John. I just can't."

"Don't call me John. I'm your father. You can stay, and you will stay," I said. "Stop all that crying, too. It's not helping the situation."

"You can't tell me to stop feeling what I'm feeling!" she screamed and turned around to face the water. "This is what I can't keep doing. I have to be able to feel things and cry without being scolded for it. I can't keep silently crying in my closet when I'm home, fearing that you'll hear me. I can't keep being you, sucking in all of my tears so it doesn't inconvenience you. That's not how love works."

"What do you know about love? You're 23."

"Very little, but still more than you."

He bent over and picked up the wind chime and winced. He turned his wrist around, seeing that the redness swelled beyond the patch of gauze.

"Where are you going?" I said as she walked passed me toward the sliding door.

“I’m leaving,” Abby said. “John...Daddy, I love you. I really do love you. But it is killing my soul to stay here. I’ve left my address and number with Mommy, if you ever want to get together. But I can’t come back here.”

One spoon had broken off, but with a little solder, he could make it work again. He played with the remaining spoons. Eight of them. “Just like an octopus,” he whispered. He began to feel rain drops fall on his bare skin.

“Go on then,” I said. “Leave me like everyone else does.”

“But don’t you see why I need this—”

“Get out, do what you want. Leave me alone.”

The phone began to ring inside of his office. No one he wanted to talk to ever called, but he listened for the answering machine anyway. Each ring brought another pulse of pain to the lesions on almost every inch of his aging flesh, and then the expected robotic voice started, “You have reached John Michaelson. Please leave a message.”

“Daddy? Where are you?”

John froze under the humid and warm air that circulated around him. The sweet voice from his dreams began again.

“Miss Robertson from across the street says she hasn’t seen you in a week and that your mail is piling up,” Abby said on the recording. “She can’t get over to see you because of her hip, so I’ll be over in about 15 minutes.” There was a long pause and then, “Please be okay.”

John stared into the sky for a long moment. The cool rain drops started to trickle down heavier, piercing the Reagan/Bush tee shirt that he wore every other day.

“You’re coming?” he whispered, slowly caressing the broken spoon in his right hand.
“You’re really coming *here*?”

He brought his eyes down from the clouds and brought his hands up to his chest, searching for something. He noticed the stains and holes in his tee shirt and realized it was the same shirt he wore the last time he saw her. Embarrassment swept across his cheeks as he touched his warming face. “My beard!”

He pinched the collar of his shirt that at one time would have smelled sweetly of cologne. Putting it to his nose, he quickly grimaced. “Terrible.”

As he continued to take stock of himself, panic set in. He remembered the lesions, and he looked down again at his new one. His bruising and sometimes oozing flesh she had never seen before, although he believed her mother must have told her about it.

“My baby can’t see me like this,” he said as he jerked his chair around to get inside. The rain started coming down in sheets, and his hands slipped on the chrome handles that he used to propel the wheel. “She can’t come. Not yet.” He gripped and struggled, trying to ease his chair over the small ledge, but the rain water was like oil between his fingers. “No, no, no, you can’t see me like this, Abby!”

Suddenly, the raindrops felt warmer against his chest, and the pulsing pain that was building throughout the day subsided where they landed. John broke his hold on the handles and collapsed against the leather back. “Why?” He covered his wilting face with his hand. Tears were pouring.

Broken gasps escaped from the old man’s lips as he cried on the porch. His clothing, hair, and beard were soaked with a mixture of saline and coastal rains. The winds had since gone, and the white glow above his head was the only reason he could see anything.

He couldn’t feel anything either.

The pain on his palms and wrist ceased. He took his hand away from his eyes and examined the skin. He turned it back and forth. “Where’d they go?” The lesions there had disappeared. He lifted the collar on his shirt again, but this time to look. The lesions across his chest had gone, too.

“My tears?” he said. His body shook. “Oh my God, my tears!”

With tears still rushing from his eyes, he scrambled to lift the material of his pants. Collecting the moisture from his face, he wiped everywhere he could reach without falling over. The pain subsided, the color faded, and a smile broke out on his face.

He took some more and rubbed his arms, back and stomach. Like it had before, the pain went away.

John let his breath come in waves as he looked at himself in his glass reflection to the right. His skin had turned to a pale white, now pruned from the moisture. His silver hair and whitened beard were matted against his flesh, but he didn’t care. A soft tingling began in his back and started to swoop to his left shoulder. “It was always my tears. This is what you meant, what you needed?”

He heard a knock at the door. “Come in!” he yelled with a reverberation that surprised him. “I’m out back, come in!”

His face felt flush and his heart started pounding deeply as he heard the door creak open and then close moments later.

“Daddy, where are you?” Abby said as she walked through the front of the house with a bundle of mail pressed to her chest. She cringed as the musky smell of mildew hit her.

John slumped back into his chair, feeling the weight of his life sit upon his chest. “Abby, I’m here,” he wheezed. He heard her slow steps as she scooted around piles of trash and uneaten

food in the kitchen. Each step matched every slow breath the old man could muster in his excitement.

“Daddy?” she said as she entered the hallway by the office.

The fanned-out tips of Abby’s long gray hair were the last things John saw before he closed his eyes. “I’m here,” he said, and then he was gone.