

# An Act of Kindness

We are not who we say we are. We have severely failed to provide anyone the opportunity for fulfillment. Stethoscopes, ballet slippers. Crayons, pastels, and fingerpaints. A floor riddled with exit wounds, the foundations quenched by spilled milk. Ironically, you can't hear all the shouting pouring out from the four walls of this tiny universe. He said, she said, she pushed, he fell, no he didn't – bit by words more fanged than the mouths from which they came.

I'm starting to mistake our voices for gunshots. Please stop pulling so many triggers at once.

We take small steps. Less like who we say we are, less like who we should be. Unsteady if we're lucky, fumbling backwards, awkward and accidental. Still no control over the momentum we generate for ourselves, surprised by all the tumbles (seeing the forest for the upside down trees might be all the perspective we're going to get).

I have propped myself up on siblings who might still be bruised from my own growing pains. I have fashioned spare limbs from the words of friends who indulge me in moments of nonsense. Today, in the tenuous safety and dusty nebulae of four walls, I tried to put on McKenna's coat (she's two; she loved it). Tomorrow, I'll teach an eight year old wrist locks. There may be bruises. There will never be shouting. We are more than that. That's not who they deserve to be.

And that's not who I will let them become.

# Monument

Dear, (and from the start, written with too much heart, a clumsy greeting, and the deepest sense of don't in his chest)

I wish you'd stop reading books like crystal balls as if they could foretell your future. As if the crinkled mirrors they contain aren't worth gazing into (look at all that gorgeous lettering -- you could mistake the lines of your face for typography). Your reflection should fall apart at the monument you are, despair whenever you walk away. Most people don't remember what wild, wonderful faces they made seeing how beautiful they were for the first time, but somehow we grow up learning that our only value lies in our reflection? Who looks at ANYONE and thinks *well, aren't you hideous?* Listen (and when I say listen, I mean you steady your shaking everything, twist your expression into something uncomfortably spectacular, like your first reflection, and find this letter like a mirror).

When I say every experience  
is the same kind of overlap you find  
in all of those pages you turn.  
You offer up so much of yourself to their pleas,  
and they need you to forgive.  
(What is forgiveness?)

When I say covering declarations  
of your beauty  
with too many adjectives  
would weigh it down.

When I say this won't last. Every word is truth, regardless of your own admission or the escape routes you've considered. Those hollowed caverns in your chest stand on scaffolds. A lesser body would not carve out the walls of its own future, or push deeper in despite fear of collapse.

You are a monument.

# To Tiger

You have thumbtack claws. A roar that travels in circles. Sometimes, simply standing near you is to place my head between your jaws. It's no metaphor - I've felt teeth. You wouldn't be the first to nip at a provider, back bristling for the contest as the two of us inch the volume up on our growls, snarling warnings and tweaking the slant of brows into granite intimidation. Yours is a force set to self-destruct as easily as it could demolish. A cub behind bars, steadily adding to a collection of scrapes both reckless and incidental. All that thrashing, all those tears.

Are you okay? You have thumbtack claws. I swear I see them dragging tallies through the dirt most days, trying to puzzle through a maze of steel wire. We all do it, or so I hope. Some scope out finish lines and sprint, others are heavy-footed with little foresight. You just had the 1 in 80 chance of being forced to navigate in the dark, not to mention the collision of echoes that comes with it. There are stretches - days, weeks - when they can only sit back and watch you take the same right turn over, and over, and over.

So there's whiplash. Eruptions. Things come to blows. I keep tripping on the line between hug and straitjacket.

"Tiger, stop!"

"Ooops," the tiger says. "Tiger is sorry."

Two beasts, mangled, panting, fur in knots. The linoleum is hard on both of us, emaciated as we look. Why doesn't this ever end up on the carpet?

"Read to tiger?" But tiger reads to me, and I find myself wondering which of us is more comforted in this moment, hoping that we are both stronger for it.

# Nostalgia (Time and Teeth)

Count teeth like oak rings  
dazzling,  
mouth of a lion,  
freshly satisfied  
wide,  
with all its heart set on showing off  
what came before, or how much is left.

I don't really know if an extra year means much  
until you get to the last one.  
"Look at all the shit I should've done by now,"  
hours questioned,  
breath withheld.  
Someone hasn't given you enough attention.

Up until now, I've only been crawling. The arms shift, the legs rock one after another, limbs so careful to keep you balanced and on track. Someone put Big Bird on a coffee table, six inches out of reach. He's soft and grinning, and that plush beak is teething's best friend. Scratch that, second best. The dog strolls by. Greetings in kisses. Gaping, toothless jaws from the both of us, indulging in sensory overload.

Hey, help me out here.

Watching, blindly  
the clock at midnight.  
And a voice that makes noise loud enough  
for the ghosts of cathedral towers  
to remind us  
this day, we give it a lot of weight. That we aren't  
alive.  
Not yet. I still have so much to do.  
I'm getting old.  
I'm too young to understand what that even means.  
Death on the lookout,  
vague sense of medical vigilance,  
financial necessities,  
who I have been,  
and who I will be.

I spent a lot of time with that dog. Now I chew things over longer than I probably need to. Before today, I had a major at a university. Rewind some more, find me braver than I know myself

("Meet me here this afternoon. I've got a surprise for you."). Decisive moments, late nights with friends (growing security in dank smells), sleeping on roll-out mattresses with no a/c. Nostalgia is just the reminder that we are already living. Ageless, beautiful rows of moments strung together out of sequence like teeth lining the jaws of a lion.

That grin alone forms lifetimes.

# Press Start

I don't remember fighting over first player. I remember needing more controllers, quicker reflexes, a softer excitement /thicker walls (whichever lets mom sleep).

You remember most of the combos, cheat codes, and having to hide in the bathroom (the only door with a lock).

I try to be a good man. It's arguable if I'm much of either. I'm known to breathe vitriol — sparks through yellowed filters, but maybe it's the dying reflex of withered parts. It's a measure of remorse. It's passed.

I remember how tall you looked as I sat, overburdened, cowering spine, a shallow body nursing tethered charges. Never one to twist limbs, you stood present, speechless and paused. You drew plain pictures in the tall grass until my legs worked, and we walked. Back to disconnects. And openness. I'm fortunate, in recent years, to have cut back on the habit of locked doors and hiding places.

I don't know that you remember.

It's just I'm always trying to stay on track, and some days what keeps me there is a little bit of multiplayer and some backbone.