

Etchings

They say that some tattoos can withstand fire.

But the tattoo on Jordan's wrist cannot.

It is melting as she watches, the purple dye dripping, sliding across her hand, a hot river. It takes an eternity to travel from the blue line of her vein to the mole just underneath the knuckle of her ring finger.

She wonders where it will stop. She wonders if the butterfly that it once was will sear up to the surface of her skin and evaporate into the thin June air. She wonders whether some part of it will remain, whether the skin will harden across it, etch it into her bone. She holds the Bic in her other hand, her right one, and stares at the flame on her left wrist as it starts to lick and spit towards the ceiling.

She is standing in the kitchen of her parents' summer house and it is midnight, midnight at least because her older sister Lizbeth is asleep and the loons down at the lake are trilling like a ward of insane asylum patients and the light at the Turners' place next door is out and she can hear their voices starting up, the hoarse rasping of Sheila *Get out you motherfucker* and the lower, calmer register of Adam *Sheila please the children* and now the sleeve of her bathrobe is a torch and her mother's voice is shrieking above everything *Dennis the extinguisher* and she feels nothing, only hears the sizzle as the cloud of chemicals sprays across her arm and body.

And then she is lying on the sofa, her mother kneeling beside her, *Drink this*, and she takes the huge white pills offered without asking what they are for. The room is shadows, nothing clear, but she knows that he is not here—her father; if she listens, she

can hear his voice from the other room, speaking low on the telephone, but she doesn't want to listen and so she closes her eyes and listens instead to the humming inside her head.

She had walked down to the shore alone that evening, went there to hear the quiet lapping of the water like milk, to get away from the wall of her mother's silence, her sister's chronic sarcasm, the rumbling of her father's discontent. She had failed at something, displeased them somehow, was it the new spider inked across her left shoulder or was it that they had somehow learned about Matt. She wasn't sure, and she wasn't sure it mattered; in the end it always came to this, and she'd managed to ruin another family vacation, only one day into it.

The voice in the other room stops and Jordan's chest hollows and suddenly she can feel everything. It is as though a gaping hole has opened up in her arm, as though some demon has gouged away at it with a curved, hot claw. She moves her eyes to look, but there is pain there, too, the millimeter shift in her vision sending new waves of it rippling through her body, so she closes them again. Her father is coming into the room now, she can hear by the soft thuds on the floorboards, *THUD thump, THUD thump*, his right leg always landing harder than his left, some old tennis injury. *Mom* she whispers and what she means to say is *I don't want him here* but what comes out is a groan. Her mother shushes her, pats her shoulder, shifts the towel on her arm to a new side so the cool can again suck out the searing heat.

"They're on their way," she hears her father say.

"Did they say how long," her mother murmurs.

"Rumford's an hour. You know that."

“This is not my fault,” her mother spits. Jordan has never heard her mother speak like this to her father. She wonders what she knows. She wonders what she’s seen or imagined. The burn sears again. She wants to grab her arm right where the pain is, and squeeze it until she wrings everything out.

It had started with the etching. It was an impulse she had, childish perhaps but she had followed it. The first one on Lizbeth’s door jamb. She had taken her pen knife and carved a careful *Fuck* just below the latch, where her sister might see it and then again might not. She attempted a skull and crossbones but the look was too Tic-tac-toe instead of Rat Poison. She thought she needed to do better. *Cunt* on the inside of the locker next to hers – she’d wedged it open, BANG metal on metal while Matt walked by without turning his head.

Better words, she thought, *I can do better*.

She borrowed Lizbeth’s SAT prep book. *Ersatz*, she etched into the bottom of the oak chair she sat on in Mr. Lacuna’s office, while he closed his eyes and leaned way back in his desk chair as if to maximize the distance between them. Mr. Lacuna, Mr. Laconic. Her therapist. Her ersatz doctor.

“So, Matt was your third...partner,” he was saying. Jordan finished the Z without watching her knife, looking instead at Lacuna’s face for the moment the eyes opened. Snap, like Venetian blinds. The eyes transparent as glass.

“Do you think you know what love is?” he asked. It was a trick question, Jordan knew. There was no right answer. He looked for ways to assert his intelligence over hers. Only he wasn’t more intelligent, they both know that, so he muscled his way around with

his age and theoretical experience. *You will understand this when you're older* he would stare, or *Oh to be so young and naïve* he would smile condescendingly. When his eyes landed on her breasts he always looked away too fast.

“Excuse me, where is your wife?” Jordan demanded one session. When they’d started, there were two ersatz doctors. Now there was only one.

Lacuna, Laconic, cleared his throat, “We only work together for the full family sessions.”

“Where is my family?” Jordan asked.

“Your...mother,” he pieced the words together carefully, as though they might break if strung all together too closely, “thought...individual...sessions...might be more... helpful.”

“You don’t agree.” She sat up from her slump. Her black thrift store polyester dress slid across her bare legs, revealed the lace of tattoos up her inner thigh. His eyes brushed across them, snapped back up to her face, the clear glass clouding.

“I was interested,” he admitted, clearing his throat again, “I was interested to see where things might...go...with everyone present. To explore those relationships right, on stage, as it were.”

Ah, that was it. On stage. With Mrs. Lacuna, aka Dr. Eva Frank, as the stage director, fitting the part perfectly, all sharp angles to her husband’s softness. The cat’s-eye glasses with the tiny diamonds in the corner, which flashed each time she turned her face. All angles and also all order. She had announced the case in the first five minutes, as though to make clear to herself what she was doing there. *Jordan, you are engaging in some behaviors that are of concern to your family. You have had sexual intercourse with*

more than one partner and—let's see—there has been some marijuana use. Maybe some other drugs, too? (It seemed to be a redundant question, so Jordan kept her face hard and still. The glasses flashed to Lizbeth.) *Lizbeth, you learned of your sister's activities and wrote about them in your diary. You left this diary open on your desk—perhaps accidentally, perhaps as a call for help.* (Lizbeth's eyes pooling; she never did well in situations where she wasn't in control.) *In any case, your mother found this diary and read it. That is why we are here now.*

Perfidious. If she had been at home, she might have etched it on her sister's headboard. But for lack of a surface, she imagined etching it right into the skin of Dr. Frank's forehead. And there they were, the four of them, her parents and her sister and herself, all gape-mouthed, actors stripped of their scripts, nothing more to say. Had she really thought, this Dr. Frank, Mrs. Laconic, Mrs. Can't-Shut-Myself-Up, did she really think that theirs was the kind of family who actually spoke about these things? Out loud? To each other? That any one of them would dare to say the word "sex," even in a completely non-contextualized way? They were all the Accused, they were all prisoners bound at the hands and feet to their chairs, unable to move in their shock, the admittance of everyone's guilt.

Well, except her father. His part in the whole drama anonymous. He acted guiltless and embarrassed, looking away from all of them, ashamed of these women, these girls, his family. Maybe he found solace in Mr. Lacuna's presence, the two men, mute, distant and beyond all the static of the women rubbing up against each other. Or maybe he just thought Mr. Lacuna was a weak and silly man with a tyrannical wife.

By the time the ambulance arrives, the horse pills her mother gave her are starting to work. Jordan sees everything as though from underwater, faces rippling and dissolving. She lies back and lets arms enfold her, laying her across blankets cooled from the outside night air.

“One of you can accompany her in the ambulance,” Jordan hears someone say. *THUD thump THUD thump* on the creaking porch steps behind her. Her blood turns and turns inside her body. Someone, a woman, takes her right hand and turns it over, smooths it out as though preparing to read her future. Jordan realizes she is still holding the Bic. The woman removes it gently, holds her wrist to take her pulse. She can feel her father’s shadow across her face and can imagine the crease between his brows, the worry lines edging his eyes. She wants to roll away from him so he cannot see her face. She is too aware of her lips, too self-conscious of her tongue as it slips out to wet them.

When the door slams behind her she expects darkness to descend inside the ambulance, like the back of a Mafia van, but of course it is bright white, like the inside of a doctor’s office, like the inside of the gynecologist’s office her mother made her go to after their first appointment with the Lacunas, after it had been made clear to all that Jordan had been screwing every boy she was able to. (“Sexually active,” the gynecologist had called it, and spoken like this, coming from this woman doctor’s voice, it had sounded so important and at the same time, so normal.) Under the bright lights Jordan cannot sleep, but she also cannot open her eyes, the lights piercing through her envelope of tranquility, penetrating like needles through her lids. She feels her father take her good hand. He strokes it with soft, back-and-forth caresses. Fatherly caresses, she wishes she could think. And maybe it is, this time; but there have been too many that are not fatherly,

and she cannot tell the difference anymore. She pulls her hand away, sensing her father's sorrowful helplessness at the gesture. If men cried, she thinks, he would cry. And she would be the reason.

When he had seen her first tattoo, he had recoiled. The first one she had chosen carefully. It was just an experiment. A small dagger, on the skin of her neck just below her left earlobe. That one had hurt like hell, which was what she had expected. Just out of her line of vision, it was strange not knowing when the needle was about to start, when it would stop. There was a timelessness to the pain, like it might just go on and on forever without stopping. A part of her relished this, and it was why she kept going back for more.

She had thought she would keep it hidden for a while, but there was no hiding the enormous piece of gauze covering that side of her neck. She had come home, supposedly from an after-school book club, and tiptoed into the kitchen to microwave a fast dinner for herself. He was behind her before she realized it, his hand touching her neck.

“What happened?”

“It's nothing,” she whirled around, trying to tilt her head to cover the gauze. “I just got a little cut.”

“A cut?” He was standing too close, as always, and his hand still rested on the gauze, tenderly, one finger brushing her ear lobe. The molecules boiled inside her, but she had nowhere to step back to, the corner of the counter sharp in the small of her back.

She gasped as with a sudden gesture her father ripped off the bandage, revealing the raw, red, shiny patch of skin, the dagger still wet, a drop of blood surfacing. He

stepped back, his lips curled in disgust, and his expression made her feel proud, made her feel strong, and she stood up straight and the disgust she felt at herself disappeared.

“What did you do to yourself,” he said. She smirked at him and sidestepped away, making her escape.

Now she knew what she needed to do. The etching had been just a kids’ game. She went in for a second tattoo, and then for a third, a fourth, a fifth. Beneath the fritzing fluorescents of the tattoo parlor she closed her eyes, learned by feel how the needle would travel, skimming across her skin, under her skin, in and out, the room filled with its low buzzing, punctuated by clicks from the lights. The tattoo artist with his wire-rim glasses, his thin body, his steady hand. She didn’t care that she was the only girl ever there, that the other customers were fat men with black Harley Davidson shirts and shaved heads. She liked it like that, no one expected her to talk to them, no one talked to her. Lying across the low table, as though she were getting a specialized spa treatment; or sometimes sitting in the folding metal chair, cold and hard against the back of her legs. She opened her eyes to watch when she could, to see the drawing emerge dot by dot and then disappear again as her blood rose to the surface, thin and red. Her body gradually, surely, being covered with an intricate pattern, the tattoos approaching each other but never touching, interacting in a strange harmony, a tiger’s mouth opening wide, smiling across the head of a phoenix, brilliant blue, rising out of the flames of a dragon’s mouth.

When she was there, she could forget everything. She loved the feeling of her head spinning and spinning. She was light as helium and her head buzzed along with the needle. When she was there, nothing else mattered. She didn’t have to think about her father loving her too much, loving her more than he loved her mother. When she was

there, it was only her, and the needle, and the blood, and that soaring dizziness. When she was there, all time, and fear, all shame, stopped.

She must have fallen asleep, because she doesn't remember being taken in to the hospital. It is dark now, and she can't see what's around her very well, but she can hear the soft beeping of a monitor next to her, and feels a pressure on her right index finger, where the monitor is connected, keeping track of her pulse. Bags of fluid suspended over her, a wire leading from them into her veins. Another machine hums quietly and shows red blinking numbers. She doesn't know what they mean. 86. 99. 92. She watches them blink and change, blink and change. She is alone in the room. 90. 98. She keeps watching them blink and change, blink and change, and she breathes in time until she falls asleep again.

The next time she awakens, it is morning. A nurse comes in and takes her temperature, makes some notes on her clipboard.

"Are you ready to see your family?" she asks.

Jordan is silent.

"Shall I tell them you're still asleep?" Her voice is kind and almost conspiratorial. She pats Jordan's good arm. Jordan blinks hard.

"They didn't do this to me," she tells the nurse. "I'm sure you think it's child abuse, but it's not."

The nurse nods once and looks hard at Jordan before answering. "Okay, honey," she says. "Don't worry about that right now."

"When can I go home?"

The nurse sighs. “Don’t worry about that, either. Let’s just see how this goes.”

Her last visit to Lacuna’s office had been the day before their trip to the Maine woods and the day after her sister’s graduation from high school. Lizbeth would be off to Princeton the following year. Jordan would be alone in the house. Well, of course, not *alone*. In his office she sat rubbing the knuckle of her middle finger, trying not to think about the itch on her shoulder from her latest tattoo. The office was overheated and dry. Jordan looked towards Lacuna but not at him, staring instead at a spot in the middle distance.

“I think I’m losing your attention here,” he said suddenly, clearing his throat. “We were talking about your relationship with your father.” His face was long and blank.

Jordan blinked and looked at him. *Insouciant*. She no longer made the etchings but the words still rose to the surface of her mind like the droplets of blood in the tattoo parlor. She tried to force herself to think about her father. A hand on her thigh. Lips on her ear. A hug that lasted much too long, was much too tight. Her mind pushed all of it away.

“Why are we talking about my father?” she asked Mr. Lacuna. “I have no relationship with him. None at all.”

“None. At. All,” Lacuna repeated, adding the usual pauses between the words. He pursed his lips. Jordan scowled.

“I hardly even see him,” she said. “It’s my mother I want to kill.” It just came out. She understood as she said it that it was true. She knew it because she felt a rage boiling up inside her. She knew it because she could imagine doing it. She knew it because of all

those long years of waiting in the dark for her mother to protect her, but her mother never came. Her mother was down the hall in the bedroom. Her mother was sleeping. Her mother was reading. Her mother was looking the other way.

Jordan waited for Lacuna's reaction, but he said nothing, and his face gave away nothing. He only leaned back slightly farther in his chair. Jordan wondered if he would ever topple right over. That, she thought, would be something. That would be worth the time she spent here.

In the end, nothing was enough. Not the words, not the tattoos. Not the solitary walks where she taught herself how to inhale cigarette smoke without breaking into a coughing fit. The feeling of the smoke filling her chest and making it constrict. Not even her late-night conversations with Lizbeth, those rare nights at the summer house when her sister was feeling generous, when they would go arm in arm down to the shore, sneaking a bottle of Kahlua with them, drinking it straight, giggling and staring up at the unstoppable stars, confiding their loves, their obsessions, pretending for a night that they were best friends. Not even that. There was something hard across the sky, something she couldn't scratch or break through, something closing in around her like the cell walls in *The Pit and the Pendulum*. She had to push back the walls so they wouldn't squeeze her, but she couldn't find the way. She could only imagine the world in fire, the flames sucking out all the moisture, burning everything away, devouring matter and leaving a vacuum, leaving nothing, leaving endless, timeless, blackness.

The hospital lights too bright. The IV drip continuous, monotonous. Jordan slips in and out of sleep.

“What’s this one supposed to be?” Matt asks her, his finger tracing the line of the infinity symbol just under her navel.

“Eternity,” she says, her voice thick with the desire to not intrude upon the silence, to not say a wrong thing and ruin the moment. She keeps her eyes closed and smiles. What happens next? Do they drift off into sleep together, outside there in the park under the trees? Or are they in his basement bedroom? She can’t remember. She squeezes her eyes closed tighter, fighting her mind as it returns to consciousness.

“Are you with me?” the tattoo artist says. “I think we lost you for a minute. Skip breakfast this morning?”

The room is still spinning. Jordan laughs and laughs and laughs.

“Kiss me,” she says to the tattoo artist. He leans in towards her face. He kisses her. His tongue is warm. His hand is on her cheek, as light as air.

She opens her eyes and he is not there. Everything is melting away – the sketches on the dark walls fade and all that is left is the cold matte white of the hospital walls. It is her father leaning over her, hand on her cheek, watching her eyes.

“She’s back,” he says.

“Oh, good,” her mother says, and Jordan turns her head and sees her mother sitting on the other side of her. “Maybe we can finally go home.” In her mind Jordan feels the heat of the Bic again, feels the hot metal of the starter under her thumb, remembers the click, click as she started it once, twice, three times before it finally caught, the suctioning sound as it grabbed hold of her arm, devouring the lighter fluid she

had poured there. She tries to remember the pain, the pain she couldn't even feel in the beginning, but already the feeling is slipping away from her. ("No one can remember pain," the nurse had told her. "It's our best defense mechanism.") She tries to remember the sensation but it is like trying to remember a dream, and as she wakes it is vanishing, vanishing. She looks down at her arm and though it is still covered with white gauze, she knows it will be fine. Perhaps there will be a scar, the tiniest mark that, after years, only she will be able to see. With everything she tried, everything she went through, nothing ever stuck, and nothing ever changed.

She closes her eyes. "Where's Lizbeth?" she asks.

"Back at the cabin," her mother says. "Let's go."

Jordan opens her eyes again, stares at her mother.

"*You* go," she says. "I'm staying here a little longer."

"Don't be silly," her mother says. "The doctor said if you were up to it, you could come home today."

"Well," says Jordan, "I'm not 'up to it.' So you can go ahead. I'm pretty sure the doctor won't object."

And her words cut through the air and circle around them and etch a line in the hardness of the sky, a small line but a line nonetheless, a small scratch where light can shine through from the other side. It was a beginning.

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