James watches from the window. It's raining out. Suzanne and his mother stand together by the car. He watches them talk, watches her hug Suzanne goodbye. His father is coming back up the stairs. He leans in the doorway and stares at the spot on the floor where the light falls in. "You, uh, you okay, kid?" James nods. "Well, alright then. Get some sleep." He turns to go. "Oh, uh, James? Don't worry. We don't have to tell your mother." He closes the door behind him. Under the covers, James makes himself as small as possible. "And it's a three run homer!" the radio announcer says, "It's all over here at Shae Stadium."

—Dana Langer

Father, Father

"He hit me."

"Honey, honey, it's okay." I tuck the telephone between shoulder and pillow. I feel guilty for the lie. "Where did he hit you, are you bleeding, did you break anything?"

The questions have followed us through our lives. They are marked down on our noses and teeth. In the eye that folds down in a squint when I'm tired, in the shoulder that dislocates when she's only sitting still.

The answers never come any easier. I am begging her now to get away, to come here and be safe with me. We have been here before, and tonight it must be bad: she agrees and snuggles her love you. And then she is gone from the phone.

I push the covers away from me. I cannot stand to have anything touch me. Not even this green soft blanket that is always scented, in its folds and corners, of her. Nausea coils in me like a snake, and I run to the toilet: to get this out of me now, before she needs me to stand as she falls. Only one of us can be haunted, tonight.

I fold myself against the sink, leaning my forehead on the cool of the mirror; bitterness surges and burns against my lips, then subsides. I pull back, slowly, searching for his face in mine, and scoop a handful of yellowish tepid water from the faucet. I can barely feel the runnels it makes along my face. There are droplets on my shirt, patterning over my breasts like fingerprints. I pull my hair down to cover them, raking hard against the dark waves, pulling to hurt. In the mirror a flush has risen under my eyes, and I stand looking mad with one hand in my hair.

My hair is long now, fine as silk and the only thing that makes me vain. As a child I cut off my plaits whole with poultry scissors; when a man's hand wraps, and twists, and drags you up the kitchen stairs, when his knuckles hang against your scalp, you do these things. Anya's hair has not touched her shoulders in years.

I look at myself hard, waiting for the wraiths' rising. I imagine her driving out over the bridges that span the night, steering from her one good eye and biting against the taste in her mouth, salt sweet
metal of blood. You would not think it of Anya's father if you met him; during the days his uniform is spotless white.

My father sold diamonds from those soft pink hands of his, shook them clear and sparkling into sacks and tied the velvet throats tight. He bought me stockings with ribbon garters and his hands over time frayed the ribbons. There was never a speck on his coat.

My hands are not moving with my mind; they are gathering up gauze, butterfly bandages, Betadine packets. One of the packets splits and antiseptic, curdled blood in texture, stings my hand. It burns. It burns. A white-hot light and my knees frogged apart on a hospital gurney. Not now, not this. I throw the packets back in the drawer: Betadine burns.

I am forcing myself now to think of Anya. How she looked when we were last together, on the steep terraced hillside in the park. Bracing her feet in the grass, bent over her notebook, her hair falling soft over the page as it filled. Now and then she pursed her lips, drawing the top of her pen against her teeth, and I wanted to kiss her. Instead I stood up and looked out, at the crisp deepening leaves, and the lucent blue they spread against. Red and gold and blue and Anya. I wished that color had taste, that I could melt the moment out on my tongue and keep the sense for after the picture faded. We were alone, no words moved between us, and we were happy with inkblotted fingers, sharing a sun-warmed pack lunch and the quiet touch of a hand. The last summer plums were sharp-skinned and tangy; her lips tasted of nicotine and sweet.

But even in lemony warm autumn sunlight, there are things you can't get away from. "I shouldn't stay," she said, slipping in the grass a little as she gathered her things from the hillside. "I told him it was errands, I don't want him to think I saw you." Her eyes were grey in the light, and I was the one afraid. "If I'm home in an hour, it'll be okay. It will be, Cat, I promise."

That was the night of the broken shoulder, or else the jaw, I forget.

"Cat."

"Oh Jesus." This is not a thing to be assuaged with tea and mint Milano cookies.

She stands in my doorway with her arm bundled into a crimsoning towel. One of her eyes is swollen shut, and her lip will bleed for days when she smiles.

She is smiling now, ironic. A stranger might take it as grimacing pain. She pushes past me and sits on the bed. She does not unwrap the towel. "Tell me if it's broken," she says, tightly; it passes for hello.

I slide practiced fingers over her skin, squeeze her hand and rotate the wrist. Her bones are delicate here, but they have held. She looks wryly at me: someone built us for durability. Someone knew this was coming for us, broadside in the face.

Gently I pull away the towel. I close my eyes. I sway. Blood wells around my fingers as I pick a few splinters from the wound; windowstill, I think, kitchen counter. I brush the last one away and see something dark, nearly black, underneath. I touch it cautiously, hear her hiss and realize I have touched her vein.

"Hobbit," she says, her voice small now and plaintive. "Do you think I need to go to the hospital?"

Over the din I hear her: "I want my friend, I want my friend." I crash past nurses and duck through doors, and come up short to keep from her lap. She is sitting up, working with pallid fingers at the thread of an IV. It slides free and blood spurts, but by now blood cannot startle. For lack of a pressure dressing she uses her thumb. Only her voice was frail and hurting. Her mind is miles away, and she has bent her body to its course.

"We are getting out of here."

"Anya, are you crazy?"

"This place is full of drunks. No one will even notice." She steps on my foot to silence me. Then she runs a hand through her hair, shrugs her jacket on over the sling, and we walk like we know where we're going, into the freezing night.

The sky is stark and clear and densely black. The pavement looks starrier, glittering with cold. She is pale and worn but still beautiful, like a rose cut days ago and left behind. She gathers herself before I do, setting her foot on the uphill curb.

"Do you hate your father for what he did?" She speaks low against our rhythmic walking.
“Ye~.” I draw in icy air on purpose, to clear away the anger.
“Do you hate yours?"
“Not yet.”

~Jeannelle Ferreira

“The Other World Is like a Thorn in the Ear of a Tiny Beast”
~Robert Bly

For Sheila A. King, 13 February 1956—2 July 2000

The other world is like a thorn,
Like a thorn,
A thorn: that means it hurts.
I missed that angle at first
Reading, when a lass. Alas:

The other world is like a thorn,
Though not in my ear,
I'm not near. I know
It's like a thorn because
I hear her moan,
The “tiny beast.” Morphine
Takes care of all except
The other world. It penetrates
The ear alone. The ear?
I missed that too.

But now I know, thanks
To a friend who told me so:
“Hearing's the last sense to go.”
It's in her ear, the world
She leaves, the world
To which she goes.
To which she goes,
The tiny beast.

Not like the sea but like a thorn
It's in her ear, a pain
That speaks, as pain does