

THE LAND OF ORDINARY VIOLENCE

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Here, I can forget the name
of my first love's mother
for an entire week. The woman
who brought him to America
after his father died at 28, who lost
her only child when he was 19. Suddenly,
frying an egg in the afternoon, her name
smacks me like a dark wind
and, from then on, *Tess* is all I can hear
in the rusty mouth of the mailbox,
in the shudder of keys in my pocket.
I sing *Tess* to myself absentmindedly
as if it were an old hit. She's everything
I know about the wicked
occupation of living.

*

Here, a bad dog is the object
of my wildest affection.
And every bite she gives—
a boy's leg, a woman's face,
the neighbor's cat's newly punctured
lung— becomes a new freckle
that I stare at in the mirror.
The more I look, the more genuinely
I love it. Because every hole
is also mine, every grief a meal.

*

Here, Dad shows up drunk
to the funeral and, parking, hits Tess's
car. *I just bumped it.* He snivels
into my shoulder. Later, loses
his keys in the pews. Tess says she wanted
an open casket but *His face* she says
Did you see his face? I didn't.
She holds her hands to her forehead.
I just saw his back and his black
mess of hair. Put my fingers through it.
Came away with blood.

*

Here, a crowd forms outside
the movie theatre. A woman's hair
tangles into my sister's fists
as she brings the woman's face
to her knee again and again.
Because I talked during the movie
and the woman shushed me.
Weeks before, our father grabbed
my sister's hair like this, slammed
her forehead into the wall. In the car,
my sister shakes, keys in hand, repeating:
What happened? What just happened?

*

Here, half of my molar falls
away while eating popcorn
and I only notice after,
searching for stray kernels
between my teeth. The flesh
there: soft, unhiding, dark.
It is months before I can
get it patched, so I spend
my days probing the hole,
tonguing the wreck of sharp edges.

*

Here, my mother stops
my sister from slamming
the glass ashtray into the base
of my father's skull. *The medulla
oblongata* my mother says, recalling
that night: my brother cowered
in the corner as our father's
body raged in a blur above.
He wouldn't have noticed my sister
behind him. The ashtray so heavy
in the possibility of her small hands.

*

Here, mailboxes no longer torment
me. The night of the crash, before
we all stepped into separate cars, the driver
stumbles, drops his keys. Now
I'm nervous— insisting everyone go
slow. The truck behind (the one *he's* in
with his clean face and warm, brown
arms) passes on the left, clips the mailbox,
flips. Everyone survives but him. Before
I find his body, I am sure that everybody
is fine. Because everyone I love
is still so much alive.

SAPPHIC FOR ASKING MY BROTHER ABOUT HIS MEDICATIONS

Transmissions misfire in channels and you
set the volume, come to the table, don't eat.
Easy isn't possible. I know, brother,
growing up crooked.

Tired hands, trailer parks in the cow-cry night— you
sleep it off for weeks and you haven't even
left the house except to the neighbors for a
haircut and a fifth

of burning knock-off peppermint schnapps that has you
handcuffed later on their lawn, hospital bound—
either there or jail. And how many pills for
sleep? The white caps will

twist and lock. You mumble in the cherry light of
blankets over lamps and the windows. Standing
here: our shared and hapless blood in a too-still
hallway— flags fall limp.

THE BABYSITTER

Here, I'm two. The shag carpet
kicks up static in lamp light
and she pets me as sparks set
off of her long fingernails. I eat
from a bowl of cold chopped
hot dogs. She's teaching me
to read and write, so I'm tracing sloppy
letters, spelling *Jesus* and *baby*
in a workbook. Yes, my sister
is here, too. She'll spend three years
in another room with the babysitter's
youngest son, thinking she'll get out of there,
soon,

soon,

soon.

PRETTY WHITE TRASH GHAZAL

When friends first start to come over in elementary school they look around, say *Huh, I thought you were rich*. But no, we're pretty white trash.

I don't know it then, I just know that their house smells great, has a pool, and that teachers look at me like they're worried (like I'm pretty white trash).

Eventually friends aren't allowed over anyway. Brother wears a wallet chain & too-big leather jacket. Sister smokes pills off tin foil in the kitchen. Pretty white trash,

we hungry kids, & we grow to know it. Hanging too late in the park, eating the cool nights, searching for half-smoked butts. Hey-mistering forties, you know, pretty white trash

stuff. Dad gets his throat slit open by his own sister, his blood spools out: Popov vodka & meth. Pretty standard, I think. I'm pretty white trash

for laughing about it. He survives, holds his stitches together, stays cool. He winks when he says *Shaving accident*. See, it's all good in Pretty-White-Trash

Town where my sister breaks Dad's nose outside of Big Bad Bubba's Bad-to-the-Bone BBQ. It's dollar-shots night after the fair. A Bic lighter as a fist pack protects her pretty, white trash

hand from breaking. Dad's so proud he flickers, says *Caitlyn, your sister's got a mean right hook*.