

SunShine by Natalie Riley

I am kissed by the sun, hair burnt and hallowed forward in memory. My knees are dry—chalky as my nose presses down on my skin—I lick away the ash, revealing a smooth surface that tastes like a mixture of the outdoors and sweat. It is warm and familiar, a dirty-sweet yearning. And when I visit the banks, I imagine myself staring into a mirror, but no matter how hard I look, I can't seem to find her reflection. The dimensions of her face: runny nose, flushed cheeks, the length of— *my* bangs? But as I trace her steps, I stumble upon a set of cold breathless hands.

"Remember me as a kind man" My father said to me. The vibrato of his voice was no longer—gone since the stroke. I had always loved the deep reassurance of it, now it was weak and feeble. This was not how I wanted to remember him, hunched over sipping a tincture of muscle relaxants, anesthetics, and barbiturates chased with an orange popsicle (orange and lime popsicles were meant to be savored for movie nights with the lights dimmed and fresh popped popcorn—not a farewell to life).

"Good-Day Sunshine," sings Paul McCartney—my dad's last song request. Shut up Paul, it's not the time, but my dad did always have a sense of humor. And as his eldest son is on the phone, they both cry: disbelief, *how could you do this, how could he not?* Soon, I begin to cry, or cry harder and my older brother tells me to be quiet, that I am scaring him, but how is anyone supposed to remain strong in the presence of suffering and death? My brother tells him that *"it'll all be okay;"* and at this moment, for the first time I see them, eye to eye, no longer father and son, but an old man staring at his reflection.

And I think to myself, is this what it means to die? The faces of everyone you love peering back as you squeeze their hands, knowing this is the last image you see? Do you feel content that to be loved is to be seen, that you choose your own fate? Or are you petrified as the wrinkles seem to release?

I am no longer looking at a man, but a boy. Hyperventilating with fear, you stuttered for words, managing, "I'm scared, I'm so scared." It feels wrong, this was wrong, so I ask:

"Do you believe in God?" Resistance in my voice. A final hail mary—I don't believe in God, but maybe I can console us both.

A thick glob of snot and grief fight its way up my throat and I forget his response, or rather I don't care to listen. He is dying. But I assume like for many others, it was complicated, he was complicated. But I wished I would have asked more questions or at the very least remembered more. Like the moment I found his daily prayers: Lord I pray that you direct thinking, Lord I pray for strength in calmness, and Lord I pray that nothing will upset me.

I didn't know of his past, of his childhood and the abuse he endured and years of alcoholism... All he had told me was there was an evil man in his life. But the years of repression made him volatile with a disposition for anger. I can still feel the house shake, the doors slamming—I am 10, and my face brushes the carpet, hand balling up the hair off the floor, and my eyes stare blankly as I lay wedged between the wall and my bed. I act with invisibility, anticipating the aftershock—I was never scared but always ashamed, louder does not mean stronger.

"Remember me as a kind man" My father said to me... I do remember him as a hurt man, a sacred man, but he was my dad and he was kind to me—he was gentle and good—he is me, and I am him, though I do try to be more patient and have always been cowardice to confrontation.

Now, every December 21st, I will listen to his recording of Happy Birthday to find some semblance of the past, and as he strums the ukulele, calling my name it feels too real and I am reminded once more that I grew one year older without him.

And with every stepping stone I squint my eyes and hold myself real tight to tell him I love you and miss you... after all, grief is a reminder of love; a love that is burnt into your ethos, like the smell of sunflower seeds, salty as they rest on your tongue, and dove hairspray that still lingers though you have now past, and the black Lexus that smells of stale coffee, worn leather, and an apparition of man with combed back hair—and, and, and—

When I miss him, I revisit the memory bank.

I am five, sitting in the dry heat, my face unrecognizable, but I like to pretend the warmth is my dad kissing me back.