

## *Into Our Perfect Bodies*

**O**nce upon a time, all of us, together, climbed into a photo booth. It was summer. The boardwalk was splintered and sun-bleached. Dad hiked me up to his lap, my brother followed, and Mom squeezed in beside him.

The light flashed our faces frozen.

If I could take the picture over again, I'd sit my mother alone in that booth. Instead of an automated camera behind plexiglass, I'd be there. I'd set up an old film camera shaped like a spider, gargantuan, black legs spread wide. I'd hide under a long dark blanket, my index finger hovering over the trigger, waiting to shoot.

Mom would just sit there.

I'd snap and snap and snap and snap, until she got so fed up, she'd throw her head back, mouth wide, and teeth gleaming. She'd laugh.

But I wouldn't stop.

I'd snap and snap and snap and snap, pressing the shutter until she wept, until she felt exposed. I wouldn't let her out. I'd want her to cry for the first time in front of me. I'd want my mother to smash the glass between us, to pull the blanket back and see it was me. I'd let her wrap us both in the dark cloth. I'd ask her to explain everything. I'd ask her, "Why does the river water build between us? Why do you hide the eyes that are exactly like mine? Why won't you let me touch you?"

I'd want my mother to look at her reflection. I'd want her to look at me with her heart open like a lens. Outside our photo booth little strips of little square photos would spew out in the hundreds, thousands. Thick as holy scripture. The dispenser would clog with the weight of it. The machine chock full of my mother's eyes.

I'd take my father's portrait, too.

As soon as he was settled on the bench, I'd crack his teeth until he was bleeding onto his buttoned shirt. I'd make him sit on the little bench, bloody. I wouldn't have the blanket then. I'd stand with the trigger over my head, daring him to move. The spider would move with me now, stepping closer and closer. He'd plead with me, baseball cap wringing in his hands, his feet turned inward like a child's. He'd whimper, or even cower.

He'd ask, "Why?"

I'd wait.

I'd wait until he threw his hands up, licked his lips, kicked his teeth across the floor and said, "You're right, I give up."

He'd stand and turn his back to me.

I'd tell him, "You can leave now."

And if he did, I'd snap a picture of the blank wall and empty bench.

I'd take another portrait of my father because I have more than one: a parent who is an alcoholic is multiple people. I'd find the little boy my father once was. Before the priests got to him. Before alcohol was the only thing that could drown their hands, and lips, and open collars. Before the crucifix became a dagger. I'd find that boy and put flowers in his hair. I'd feed him chocolate and fairy tales. I'd take his picture while singing a lullaby.

When the negative developed, I'd hold it to my breast and tell him to run. I'd watch the gentle face in the photograph disappear into white, knowing he never really knew how to love us.

Us.

My brother and me.

We are the dark room in the back of the white house where we hide while the plates and windows smash. We are

my mother's screams, and her mother's. We are my father's cracked knuckles. We are their darkness and their light. We are the broken children of broken children.

There's no picture that can show you how we've held hands while our parents tried not to fail us: my mother climbing deeper into herself, with Botox and wine; my father clawing at his own flesh, waking up in the middle of the night screaming.

There is no portrait I could take.

There's nothing I can show you.

The black and white photograph is the only one I have of us.

Instead, imagine a time from way before. Imagine the glittering cosmos, the dinosaurs, the cell, its mitochondria. Imagine blood and water and amoebas. My brother and I knew each other already. My cells stayed behind after I was born, swirled around in my mother's womb while she was pregnant with him. He carries me in his bones.

Our picture is infinity, of whatever star matter found its way into our perfect bodies, of the journey that leads us to each other, of the stuff that made us.