

Corey Zeller

Untitled

Hazed: a motion like scrubbing dirt from your palm. Clumsy: your hand snapping up, bare, with your thumb in your fist. All half-assed, drunk—pivoting my bar stool toward the deaf girl next to me—the pretty one, with long braids and tattoos—who’s talking through a drowsy, middle-aged woman she met at the Laundromat.

*Words*, she signs, the woman says.

*I’ve been hurt*, she signs, the woman says.

And now, I want her smooth hands to shape out every word I can remember.

Like *song*: a soft brush of your hand over your cradled arm.

Like *alone*: the forefinger, positioned away from the body, making a winding motion, some circle in the smoked-out air—almost crisp, but sloppy. A slow jam playing—all bass and baritone with the air in frequency—almost ultraviolet, sepia-toned.

Like *almost*: one hand barely touching the other.

What was it H said about heartbreak earlier that night? After K told us the story of a dead hooker her cop brother found in Baltimore—how the woman had cold cuts stuffed up her pussy—how later, when interviewing prostitutes about her he found it was common practice—something they did to keep from getting too worn.

S lit his cigarette, laughing. And I wanted to tell him that there was more to loss than this one, in another country. Or this one, crazy, burying his broken plates. My brother, there is this: a dead father, words like *employee*, the generic color of our skin.

I wanted to ask him if he remembered that time, on our way to the bar, when we passed an abandoned hospital. How, staring through the soap-streaked Plexiglas of the emergency room entrance, I saw nothing but stripped walls, wires, and an empty elevator shaft. He was standing on the sidewalk waiting for me. What could he possibly have been thinking?

I was thinking of L. How they put the mental ward on lockdown when she climbed up into the cardboard ceiling. How the staff saw that chair in the hallway, the space missing. How they tore her, like hope, out from the ventilation, the pipe work—like a prayer actually happening. How, on the elevator, after seeing her, I almost cried—G and I—and that other guy, the one with red dreads—what could we be but someone’s family? Two patrol cars parked beyond the bridge—and G, with the evening multiplying over his shoulders—a glint of sun caught in his lens, sighing.

*Loss*: what else could it be but our hands, together, then separated as if to show something falling.

What else, H, is there to say about heartbreak? What else could it be but our hands, cupped as if holding water against our chests, then broken into halves. Or the picture of this one, pretending to load a gun. Or this one, soaked in smoke—asking for a ride. Or this one, years later, still wearing my clothes.