

Men o' War

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We lost our boys to the same thing. Hers was nineteen, mine was twenty-three. We lost our boys to the same thing, and now each ripple in the world comes ashore like the knock of a long-awaited debt-collector. The reaper of our malevolent fortune. My brother likes to tell me that the world's been like this since before we were born, that what I really ought to try and do is stop paying attention to the news, but I can't. Or as he likes to put it: *I won't, I won't, I won't*. I try to keep my finger on the pulse of things, try to feel the ripples as they come into shore, but of course the shore changes so slowly. Entire months pass with the lassitude of a montage.

I suppose life's like this: all you see is the same old thing, the same old open water before the ship runs aground. I was a child of the '60s. My mother was a Catholic and my stepfather an atheist. I never had much interest in God or war or interest rates. I remember being a serene and incurious thing, a consumer of nail polish and palm-readers and Coca-Cola. I

hung out in gas stations and laughed whenever Kurt snuck a pack of Beech-Nuts into his pocket. Talk shows bored me unless David Bowie was on. What I am saying is this: all ships look the same before one of them finally runs into the stacks. In the years since Damon left all that's really changed is I've come alive to the garbled ways of the universe. Like I said I was a sheltered, stupid thing, always ironic, always boy-crazy. I photographed well, and I was bright enough to know that if I kept my face pert and my teeth white and my hair a certain way, I'd never be in want of company. In my dreams now I might have gone to school, might have studied architecture or interior design, but the way it all shook out I had Lydia by the age of seventeen and Damon a little while after that. I still hear from Lydia from time to time, but she's married now and teaches yoga in a different city.

All I had was love, really. A chest that loved and loved until it could no longer circulate blood properly. I used to wonder all the time how long I would have to bear it, housing that heavy, distended tumor of a heart. Death never touched me, but adulthood always did. I cried every time I remembered I would have to grow up one day and leave my parents behind. I hated

how my brothers seemed to take their love for granted. I loved them so much I would sometimes scream for hours at a time, let myself be caught stealing roses from the neighbor's rose garden, just so I could relish in their admonishment and learn to love them a little less. I knew what I was doing—I had been cursed by a lover's heart. I wrote a story when I was a little girl about a boy named Alfie who had an awful secret: every day he would come home and take little nibbles of his mother's flesh. He had a rare disease that made it so he would lose patches of skin from his face, until his face disappeared. That was how I saw parenthood as a child. As bodily sacrifice. And I loved my parents for it—maybe a little too much, I now see. Things got a little rough and tumble after Lydia was born. I had changed by then, but of course we all had, even the best little girls do not stay dumb forever. I took Lydia and ran and never looked back. Nobody thought I could raise that little thing myself, nobody did. Nobody understood how badly I needed to exorcise that swollen, beating heart.

I know what you must be thinking, *once a lamb, always a lamb*, but I'm telling you it's not that simple. The world was a different place then. America, too. There were certain things

you talked about and certain things you made peace with. You had a certain house and a certain orthodontist and a certain set of hopes and fears about how your life might turn out, and that was that. Nothing about the postman's smile or the way the dresses always came back from the cleaners pressed and folded made it so you wanted to ask too many questions. There was never any reason not to like the other children on the block, not to look at the President on T.V. or the astronauts waving as they entered the space shuttle or a baseball falling from the clear blue sky and not think you weren't looking at humanity's past, present, and future. The best of what humanity had to offer—it was all there, in microcosm on those quiet suburban cul-de-sacs. Even Watergate had the thrill of uncharted territory, like the novelty of stomping on a sandcastle.

That's how it all went until Lydia anyway, those endless halcyon days that were as illusory as they were numbered. All of a sudden I had a little human being growing inside of me, the size of a fava bean. "Please, God, whatever you do, don't let it be a girl," I had prayed every night all the way up until the third sonogram, but God has a funny way of imposing his will on you anyway. That afternoon I couldn't say a word to my mother as

she drove me home from the gynecologist. All I could do was stare out the window at the pouring rain, and an Arab man standing inside a bus shelter, watching me. I recognized this feeling as the weight of adulthood pressing down on me. I could stay inside this life, raise a child under my father's roof with my mother scrubbing the carrot stains out of the baby bib, or I could slip away quietly—but how? In the middle of the night? Would I sneak out, leave a note on the kitchen table and disappear? Who would take me in? And what would I tell the police when they came around? When I looked over at my mother I noticed she had been staring at me, too. I gave her a weak smile, and then the light turned green and the Arab man and the bus shelter disappeared. I watched the black gums and the white oaks swaying in the wind and said another prayer: “God, now that what's done is done, I pray that you give me the strength to do whatever I need to do—all the strength you have—to protect her.”

America dimmed a little for me that day, but my heart grew harder, wilier. I decided I would wait until after Lydia made it out of the womb to make my great escape. I spent the next four months, as my parents vacillated between brooding and doting

over their latest humiliation—a pregnant teenager—making sure that my provisions were in order. I had to give up Virginia Slims and aimless walks with my girlfriends through the mall and Kurt, who hounded me at school for weeks after he found out, peppering me with theatrics like Who’s the father? and How could you do this to me, Lizzy? That poor impressionable thing. I could always tell a difference in him between before and after I made him watch *Annie Hall*. Finally I told him if he wanted to know the name of the father so badly he could tune into Phil Donahue next month, which seemed to settle it. “I don’t know who you are anymore, Elizabeth,” as if that was supposed to hurt me. In fact it freed me. I didn’t want him to know the girl he thought I was—that girl was a chump, a naïf, a pushover—I wanted to wipe the Bonne Bell off of her face and grab her by the shoulders and say: “What were you thinking, letting him get away with it all these years?”

It was hard not to look at giving up things like Kurt and cigarettes as a sign that I was on the brink of a more radical metamorphosis. Now this is the point where the movie montage might have me standing in front of a mirror, cutting my hair with a pair of safety scissors while mouthing the words

to “Modern Love,” but I’m telling you it wasn’t nearly that glamorous. The third and second most radical transformations a girl can make as she translates into adulthood are material and social. The first is ethical. I had to annihilate the part of me that still said please and yes and thank you to the people who wanted to destroy me. I hid a knife underneath my pillow, pretended to read Isaiah every time my mother knocked on the door to see if I had said my evening prayers. (She had slipped a silver medal of St. Gerard into the top drawer of my nightstand just in case.) It didn’t hurt that the provisions fell into my lap like candy. Milo, Damon’s father, practically tripped over himself asking me to move in with him when I broached the subject of my impending homelessness. “I don’t know, Milo. Give me a day or two to think about it,” I stalled, trying to imagine my life with a twenty-two-year-old painter and pothead who had gauged ears and the word AMBITION tattooed across his chest and who called me “Izzy,” even though nobody else in the world did. His apartment reeked of smoke and grass and patchouli oil and his earlobes drooped all the way down to his shoulders when his studs were out, but I needed a place to nurse the baby, and I could paint the world in Jovan Musk and Jean Naté with the

best of them—so I said yes. A couple of trips to the Fay’s fragrance aisle and I’d be all set.

Adulthood.

I had Lydia at 6:16 p.m. at Unity Hospital on Lake and Spencer, sixteen days before my seventeenth birthday. The moment I laid eyes on her, the moment every bit of love I had nurtured for my mother and father drained out of the dam for good. I’m telling you now I would’ve done anything in the world for that girl—for Damon, too, once he came around—and even though I’ve made my share of mistakes over the years I hope I never once in all my years of mothering ever let them forget it. “Is there any way I could arrange to have my daughter become, you know, a ward of the state . . . in case anything happens to me,” I whispered to a nurse in the recovery room, “I mean—instead of going to my parents?” I had stunned myself when these words came out of my mouth, but the nurse just looked at me as if she fielded this question every day. “You’re going to have to talk to a lawyer about that, sweetie; now I’m going to take your blood pressure and I want you to tell me as soon as you feel any pain. . .” And that was that. The moment

the chrysalis fell away for good, and nobody there to even see it.

I left home two months later.

In the end there was no great escape: I didn't wear camouflage or do it in the middle of the night; instead I just told my parents how it was, and how it was going to be: that I had made up my mind and was taking Lydia to the city to live with Milo, and now that I was legally married (which was a lie) there was nothing they could do to stop it. You should have seen their faces. They didn't even know who Milo was. As far as my mother was concerned, I might as well have been raped by one of my schoolteachers, it didn't matter to her who the father was—what's done was done, all that mattered was that an abortion was out of the question. I packed quickly, quivering with nervous energy the entire time; the only pang of sadness I felt came when I opened the door next to the dryer, looking for diapers, and saw the wall of toilet paper my mother always kept stocked neatly inside the closet. Toilet paper that would now outlast me. I packed three rolls for good measure. "I don't have time to talk about it, mother—Lisa's waiting for me in the car."

I suppose life's like this: all you see is the same old thing, the same old open water before the ship runs aground. I read somewhere that the only animal in the world that never has to say goodbye to its children is the Portuguese man o' war. The Portuguese man o' war replicates asexually: its children bud out from the body of the parent, but stay attached to the parent as independent organs, or "interdependent organisms," destined to feed together, to wander together, to replicate and replicate across the ocean forever. I don't envy the position my parents were in, leaving aside the fact that they had woven this nightmare all by themselves. They were losing a child. He was losing his freedom, too. But they would've seen this coming had they only tried to see their children as anything other than infrared light, to be gauged as replications of their egos emitted out into the world and nothing else. My aplomb must have taken my mother by surprise. She called me every name in the book: a narcissist, a sociopath, an ingrate and a prima donna—but my father, what a sight to see, that proud and ascendant thing shrinking into a withering violet right before my very eyes! "Say something, Richard," my mother would scream, turning to the backlit figure skulking in the doorway behind

her, but he didn't flicker. He was searching me and I was searching him: his mannequin-girl had come alive, had emerged out of the chrysalis in a suit of armor. Never mind what he might find, I thought defiantly. I had the weight of truth and history on my side. Finally, he spoke: "Leave the girl alone, Cara. This is theater, that's all it is. She'll probably tell a thousand stories on her way out. I wouldn't take a single word she says seriously."

War came with the totality of an overcast sky. "All right, daddy, it's theater. It's opening night at the Apollo, Big Daddy is dead, and it's Barbara Bel Geddes' cue to exit stage right." I opened the door. The rain that night had ebbed and thickened in sporadic bursts, and now it was so loud I could barely hear my own heart. "Elizabeth," my stepfather said, his voice ballooning into a soft howl, "if you have something to say, then say it, but I'm not going to stand around and let you make a mockery of us. Your mother and I have done a lot for you."

Your mother and I have done a lot for you.

The words entered me like wet bread.

I couldn't help it: I started to laugh. "I'm sorry, daddy," I said as Lydia strapped to my shoulder began to cry. I stole a

glance at Lisa as she mouthed *Is everything okay?* from inside the car. “Mother, I know you’ll never admit to doing anything other than what you thought was best for me, so I won’t begrudge you for that.” I opened my umbrella and started for the car, but at the last possible second I turned around and said: “And as for your husband? Well, why don’t I let him fill you in on just what exactly he’s been ‘doing’ to me all these years,”

before closing the door.



War came with the totality of an overcast sky. I didn’t hear the clarion call when Lydia and Damon were young, but of course I hear it all around me now: the ’90s and the early 2000s, when Lydia and Damon still wore overalls and later boot-cut jeans from Old Navy, were the last years I can remember when America still seemed to me to be in any way sane, at ease. Even the shock of 9/11 and the inevitable deployments that followed, which the three of us opposed in name and spirit if not in consequence, hardly grazed us. War was something that happened for the most part as a side effect of entertainment, peppering our humdrum lives in the same way that love and

tragedy did, as a shot of adrenaline that hit us, shook us awake for a few minutes at the movie theater or in front of the T.V.; or else as a necessary evil that bankrupted the lives of distant people somewhere else, people who we didn't know, and who we secretly hoped we'd never love.

Those first few months with Lydia had the quality of both a nightmare and a sitcom. The sky, violently blue from the shock of my emancipation, had been cleared of both aid and obstacle. I had treaded into the black and silent waters of womanhood. Every object I encountered in the world I encountered as a gradation of danger. The paracetamol on top of the nightstand. The ammonia underneath the kitchen sink. Milo as he installed a toddler chair into the back of his Impala. What can I say? This was my fate. For the rest of my life, motherhood and intimations of violence would coexist together.

Milo was patient with me. He wasn't the type of man to feel emasculated by domestic duties or childcare, a point he raised again and again in his seemingly interminable audition to be my husband. All he ever talked about was marriage, right up until the day I discovered he had been carrying on with a small gaggle of girls plucked out of convenience stores and retail shops up

and down the interstate, a week before I was due to give birth to our first child. I was a lamb about the whole thing. My take on the union had always been stubbornly utilitarian. I had a G.E.D. and enough money in the bank to hover our material circumstances at the lip's edge of the surreal, and so when an offer came down to be an administrative assistant at the county courthouse a month or two after Damon was born, I left Milo and moved the children to an apartment on the other side of the city. It was so like Milo to offer to give up his parental rights in exchange for my not asking for child support. I didn't even put up an argument.

The years passed not so much quickly as they did unyieldingly, without remission. I waited for them to collect at the bottom of the river, never quite realizing that as the years changed, as the faces and fixations of my children changed and our house on Fulton Street became the home we used to live in, that the sky had changed, too. Suddenly the peal of war was everywhere. Features of the world I had never given a second thought to—"jihad," "sharia law," "Allah"—simply became part of the *donnée*, alongside Madonna, Newt Gingrich, O.J. Simpson. I didn't like the culture my children were being

reared into, and remolded to resemble: oversexed, overindulgent, overstimulated in every direction. This was not so much the '90s but the mid- to late 2000s, when reports from teachers and later, more ominously, from other parents, trickled in that Lydia had become something of a “social butterfly” at school. It had all happened so quickly: puberty, lipstick, all of it. She had inherited her father’s genes, aging into a confident, magnetic thing: from the day she turned eleven to the day she went away for college, I could count on one hand the number of times I’d seen her outside the house without a herd of pretty girls surrounding her. They passed through life so incuriously, with a flippancy that I remembered from my own rouge-lipstick days but with an assertiveness that startled me. I found myself standing at the kitchen sink, doing the dishes and listening to Lydia’s voice radiate from the other room, wondering how she and I might have gotten along had I been her age. The only time I really lost it with her was when Damon burst through the door one night with a jar full of tadpoles, and Lydia looked up from her homework and wondered out loud to the boy she had brought home if her brother should be sent to “autism camp.” I couldn’t help it. I slapped her.

Damon.

You can love a person so much that your heart splits open for this person, and still not get any closer to his fate. Fate. “Fate.” What a silly word for that contrived transition, for that unnatural journey that some young men take—sensitive and idealistic; but dangerously alienated—on their way to becoming monsters. Damon’s journey had all the familiar trappings. He was a delicate child, which is how all monsters begin: I remember picking him up from school one night after a massive snowstorm and running into his fourth-grade teacher outside the main office. She wanted to congratulate me. She told me about a new boy at school, Aaron, who had just moved here from Dallas and who had been having a little trouble fitting in. (I later found out from Aaron’s parents that he had been having more than a little trouble fitting in: he had been bullied, ostracized, targeted for his yarmulke and his lisp.) Damon had sat next to him in the cafeteria one day and befriended him. From what his teacher could tell, Damon was Aaron’s only friend. That’s one thing about Damon that’s never faltered: he never went along with what the washed or unwashed masses

were doing. Maybe that's another thing all monsters have in common.

You want to believe it all shows up in the tea leaves but I'm telling you that's not true: fate lies in ambush. Fate is obscure. That restless and hyperactive child would surprise me again and again with his compassion—his solicitude—his preternatural sensitivity to the suffering or ill-being of others. Year after year Damon's teachers would tell me the same two things: that Damon couldn't sit still in class, and that he was also the first to be counted upon to offer help if anyone was ever upset or in trouble. In my mind I came to think of him as my little firefighter—I couldn't imagine Damon dedicating his life to anything other than serving others. One memory I have from when he was a boy still stands out. We were driving home in my then-boyfriend's car and Lydia and Damon were in the backseat, giggling and screaming as kids do, Lydia had just finished a musical rehearsal at her school and I was stalling a headache by silently massaging my temples. "Mom," Damon asked suddenly, reaching across my chair. "Are you okay?" "Oh, I'm fine, honey," I smiled, turning around.

"What's the matter now?" my boyfriend asked.

“It’s nothing. I just have a migraine.”

Within a matter of seconds, I noticed Damon’s voice had quieted down in the backseat; only Lydia could still be heard singing Olivia Newton-John’s part in “You’re the One That I Want” at the top of her lungs. “Lydia,” Damon finally whispered, tapping his older sister on the shoulder. “That’s too loud. Mom has a headache.”

He was seven years old.

Aaron, like me, must have found a friend in Damon; I often came home from the courthouse to find the two of them sitting in the kitchen, eating Honey Nut Cheerios and talking about the politics of *Pokémon*, the politics of *South Park*, the politics of Eminem. Somehow politics had a way of seeping into everything. Aaron was shier than Damon, less preternaturally talkative but always unfailingly polite—“Hi, Mrs. Godfrey!” he would light up whenever I came in. For a long time the nights resolved themselves like this. I would come home from work and make the kids dinner, creamed tuna and peas on toast if I was feeling regal but on most nights macaroni and cheese from a blue box, and then I’d sit with them in the living room as they did their homework and I balanced the checkbook or thumbed

through a magazine while waiting for the laundry. They slip away from you so easily. All of a sudden Lydia was sixteen and working at Patagonia, co-captain of her volleyball team, and Damon—well. Damon had receded, and in his place was now a tall and gangly teenage boy. A growth spurt that summer had left his skin spotted and acne-ridden. His hair at various points covered a third to half of his face. I knew from his teachers that he had experienced some mild bullying in middle school, and from Lydia that his freshman year of high school had been particularly isolating.

The invasion of Iraq, which began the spring of his freshman year, seemed to be a turning point for him. Initially I loved sitting at the dinner table with him, listening to him wax philosophical about “uranium enrichment” and “aluminum tubes,” “the Ba’ath Party” and “B.P.” and “oil merchants.” “Fuck George Bush,” I remember him spitting one night as the President appeared on T.V., which ordinarily I would have said something about but in that moment decided to brush off, maybe even secretly endorse. And then that year his grades, which had always been middling, collapsed from under him. He failed three classes. There was talk of sending him to an

alternative school—academic probation. The principal showed me an essay he had written for English class entitled “The Politics of Cover-Up: 9/11, CNN, and Building 7.” “Wait a minute,” I remember telling the principal. “You can’t punish a kid for having contrarian beliefs. It *is* his freedom of speech,” before the principal pointed out the essay had been plagiarized. I kept thinking on the drive home about how brilliant Damon was, about his flair for war and military history, philosophy and current events, and, my god, Damon, *I* knew what it was like to be fourteen, I knew how hard it was, and, why, if you’re too lazy to do it yourself then I would even go in and live your life for you, but I *can’t*—so instead I went home and screamed at him. That night he swore at me for the first time in his life, calling me a “bitch” and later a “whore of a mother.” By the time he apologized it was 3 a.m. and I was in my room, catatonic. “Come here, Damon,” I said, sitting up in bed. “I love you. You know that, don’t you? I love you, and I will always love you.”

The sky was growing darker but I tried to keep my eyes firmly on the horizon: Lydia that year had made honor roll and was already talking about colleges. U.S.C. was her dream school but I knew there was no way we could ever afford it.

War came with the totality of an overcast sky. I knew Damon was spending far too much time on the Internet, but I also wanted to believe it was a tool he could use to find friends, or even love, a girl, a boy, whatever; I remember viscerally how lonely my teenage years had been. “How sure are you he isn’t building a bomb in there?” Lydia once asked me, giving me the chills. And then one afternoon I ran into Aaron at the local supermarket—I remember it was a couple of days after Katrina had hit, Kanye West had just gone on T.V. the night before and said: “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” I asked him if he had talked to Damon lately. “No, not really,” he answered. “He and I are cool though,” he kept saying. I pressed him a little further and he finally told me: “I don’t know. He has something against Jewish people now or something but I don’t really know. I’m not sure. You should talk to him.”



We lost our boys to the same thing. Hers was nineteen, mine was twenty-three. We lost our boys to the same thing, and now each ripple in the world comes ashore like the knock of a long-awaited debt collector—a local affliction scattered not from

above but horizontally, a spray of effluvia into the air that condenses in the sky as a tangible discoloration, changing the color of light for all of us. I follow him every day now on Twitter; I use a special account because he's blocked the ones with my name on it. He has twenty-one thousand followers and posts three to four times a day about the "war": the war against Islam, the war against Jews, the war against white people, his tribe, his cult, his war, his people. The media is his *bête noire*, and then Republicans and Democrats alike—even Trump has disappointed him. Swastikas no longer burnish his page the way they once did now that he has gone "mainstream" within the community, now that he has grown out his hair and taken out his piercings and covered up his Totenkopf tattoo with oxfords from Hugh & Crye. Lydia tells me he can make three to four thousand dollars an hour just by going around the country giving speaking engagements, but I have trouble believing her. "How could you possibly know that," I asked her. "Who's *paying* him."

"These are well-funded groups, mom," Lydia replied. "You can read about them on the Internet."

In fact I have read about them on the Internet; in fact that's all I do, I spend my days recording the outcomes of court proceedings at the county courthouse and my nights reading about them on the Internet—reading, watching, waiting. My brother likes to tell me that the world's been like this since before we were born, that what I really ought to try and do is stop paying attention to the news, but I can't. Or as he likes to put it: *I won't, I won't, I won't*. I know his Facebook and Instagram handles by heart—the addresses fill in automatically whenever I type an i or an f into the address bar—but I don't like visiting them too often because I don't like seeing the company he keeps, I don't like seeing his girlfriend, I don't like seeing his tattoo, I don't like the possibility that one of these days I'll see an infant in one of his photographs, a little boy or girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, born to Nazi parents.

I remember when I was a child, holding my mother's hand as we crossed into an intersection and listening to her tell me about the man who would become my stepfather. "I hope he sees us for what we are," she said, her eyes darting left and right as my two brothers trotted impatiently behind us. "A family full of love—that's what we are, right fellas? We've just got love

oozing out of us. Love love love. . .” Love shoots out into the world and lands on nothing that fate couldn’t mangle first. Four decades on. My mother is in a nursing home in West Seneca, oblivious to the world around her. Her children do not speak to her. All the men she’s married are dead. This is how those bright pink promises, her pinned-back hair and Irish linen skirt and closed-toe sandals resolved themselves—time pities nothing. Four decades on and the peal of war is everywhere. I hear the war in the conviction with which we have taught our children to sing, to speak. I hear the war in the lucidity in our children’s voices, the clarity with which they’ve learned to assert their moral pronouncements. I hear the war in the chic perversions that man has impressed upon the modern world, those learned men and all their eloquent transformations, the flattening of quilled skin into the intelligible strokes of an artist’s brush, the beatification of symbol, and the abandonment of God—although symbols have always been beatified—and above all the perversion of love, that most sinister transformation, slithering out of the limestone as the mouth of the petrified devouring the tail of the tyrant, slithering and slithering in absurd circles until at last the head is mistaken for

the talon, and brutality is mistaken for God's sweetness, reminding us that nothing is sacrosanct.

And that's it, isn't it?

Nothing is sacrosanct.

We lost our boys to the same thing. Hers was nineteen, mine was twenty-three. We lost our boys to love; perverted love. And I long for him as she longs for him, I long for him as a refugee longs for a collapsed homeland. I have a feeling of indomitable sistership toward her that for the first time in my life I think to attribute to my sense that she is culturally familiar to me: she, a Canadian with green eyes and coarse auburn hair; she, a fellow intimate of Western middle-class abundance. Of course I would have enlarged the same tenderness toward her had I encountered her as, for instance, a large-faced Japanese woman, or a sprig of a Somalian—but I wonder, I do wonder. It's no crime to wonder. The cinders of Damon's disruption. Damon in the years before he left had enlarged in himself a cultural memory he never had—but I do—of America "the way it once was." America "the way it once was" was a serene and incurious thing, had the guilelessness of a bright-eyed child tasked with consoling a hardened adult, sprouted freckle-faced

children and well-groomed mothers and transistor radios whose principled voices spoke from a single sensibility, sang in a single elocution. It nurtured the seeds of a war that it also never saw coming. War, Damon once explained to me, arouses whenever one man makes a victim of a second, and the second chooses not to bear it any longer. An accretion of mundanities, and then the firmament falls. “He had a good upbringing, had lots of friends, played sports, did well in high school, and then one day he just left,” she told the journalist from a Toronto paper. “He was supposed to be studying Arabic in Giza.” She learned a month later from two men dispatched by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service that her son was not in fact studying Arabic in Giza. She learned last week from a reporter from the *National Post* that her son’s name had surfaced in an obituary published by the Islamic State eulogizing seven people killed by a drone strike in Syria. Her son. Born in Toronto, dead in Abu Kamal at twenty-one.

We have children to replenish the world.

We have children in the same way that buds erupt after the winter into leaves, in the same way that fields continue to ripen after the Holocaust—by rote, and indifferently. I see now that

love is as rote and indifferent to its destination as a bright red scarf that has come unfastened from a woman's neck in a strong gust of wind, billowing above the plaza in autumn. I long for him the way he longs for a homeland he never knew, the way I long for God to have pity on my homeland's soul. I long for the passion he reproduced in his eyes every time I held him close to me, every time I promised him that he and his sister were my sun, my stars, my whole entire world—and I would do anything in the world to protect them. I wanted them to stay in my arms through the whole entire length of our sonorous and operatic passage through life, accompanying each other as dreams accompany sleep, as sheep accompany shepherds. But again—as I've only ever been in this battered life, and Lord knows I no longer have the fortitude for another—I was naïve. I see Damon every day now but only through a computer screen, I see the speeches he gives and the lectures he's been invited to, I scan the rallies on T.V. for a fleeting trace of his aquiline nose, his clean blonde hair, but I try not to listen to the battle cries—because sin is infectious. Communicable by platonic intercourse.

Instead I try to nurture in my instincts no longer love—but pity.

I see now that all we have in our souls is pity and error; and the replication of that pity, and the replication of that error.

I still remember one rainy, gold-hued night four years ago, Damon had just come home from a ten-hour shift at Costco and was taking a nap in the living room while I had stepped into the shower, listening to the garish thunder and the din of the rain thrashing against the bathroom window. The storm had come so quickly. Damon was by then already hosting a podcast that, he told me, attracted “two hundred listeners a week.” What he hadn’t told me was that a group of White Nationalists had recently invited him to stay with them at a campground they had taken over in northern Virginia, in a city called Covington. When I opened the door I was surprised to find my twenty-three-year-old son waiting for me in the blackened hallway, sullen and agitated. “I was worried you had gone out,” he said shakily. “I woke up and couldn’t find you. I looked all over the house for you. I was worried you had gone out.” “I’m right here, baby,” I said, startled by the childlike quality of his voice. “I was just in the shower.” I remember that night because it was

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one of the last nights I could look my son in the eyes and not see a monster, and not see the poverty of my greatest efforts, and not see an eidolon of the child I had lost—and not see the war, that looming war, blanketing over our country like the shadow of some queer, discolored sunlight—I just saw my golden little firefighter, Damon.

The storm that night had loosened one of the shutters outside our bathroom's casement window. Damon left home two months later.