

*But up in his room by artificial light
My father paints the summer. — Richard Purdy Wilbur*

HONORABLE MENTION \$50

Torn Apart

by Meredith Gordon Resnick

I don't know when I started biting my nails. But by the time I was in the first grade, I couldn't stop. My teeth serrated the edges of my fingernails, ripping away the half moons of new growth, leaving the tips of my nail beds, at times, exposed and tender. I'd rip the skin from around my nails, too, working it harder until it pulled away from itself. From me. There were times I'd wake from a nap with my fingers wet, balanced on the edge of my bottom lip.

People called me high strung, anxious. They called me nervous child, but I never understood why. I didn't feel anything when I bit my nails, just a familiar pressure on my fingertips, the sheath of wetness, the point of a torn nail on the tip of my tongue. It didn't always hurt. In fact, there was something hypnotic about it.

My parents saw a habit I should be able to stop—if I really wanted to. They tried to wean me from it, but by the time I was six or seven, they were years too late. My mother bought me a tiny bottle of syrupy lacquer that tasted like paste. Its amber bitterness when painted on the tips of fingers, was supposed to discourage nail biting. Downright stop it. Which it probably would have, if I'd have used the stuff. But I didn't like the way it tasted; its bite was worse than the pain of shredded skin any day. And since my mother never forced me to coat my nails, I didn't. Seeing this effort fail, my father bought me a metal nail file. It had a plastic orange handle that bore the words Revlon FINISH in gold. I loved its clear, flat plastic carrying case and routinely pulled the file out and slipped it back in its narrow chamber. I carried it everywhere, and even stuck the ensemble in one of my knee socks if my outfit didn't have a pocket. My father's instructions: File away rough edges instead of tearing. It was that simple. As an incentive he promised a grown-up manicure at the beauty parlor where my mother had her hair set. I'd get my fingers bathed in soothing cups of warm oil and my

nails buffed and maybe even polished—when they grew. But I had no nails to polish or buff or file. Just shreds to chew. I felt bad that the nail file had gone to waste, until my mother started using it when she couldn't find her emery boards.

"Where's that nail file?" my father would ask.

"I've got it right here, Daddy. Mommy's using it. I'm next."

"That's a good girl."

But I never used it.

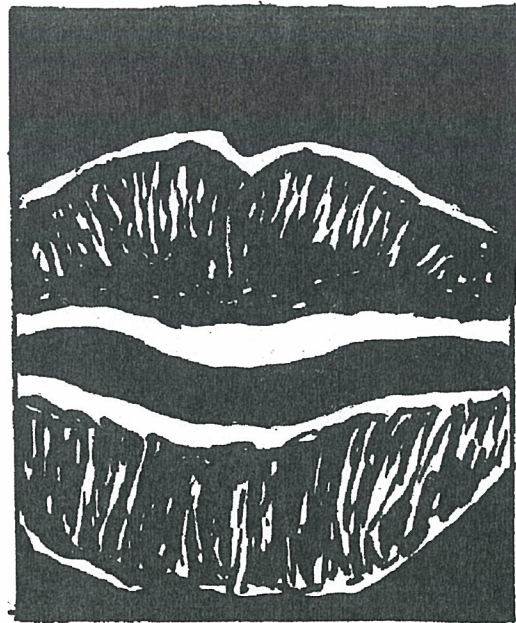
So it was no surprise that when it was time for camp pictures that summer when I was eight, my fingertips looked more like grapes do after their skin is peeled away. I bit my nails standing around in the sweltering humidity and white sun of another New York summer waiting for picture day to end. Waiting for the camp

photographer to snap the stupid picture so I could stop smiling and get back to it. First the group picture, then me, alone, poised against a pine tree, a big shady one with a craggy trunk and pointy needles. If you'd put one of my fingertips under a microscope, you'd have seen the cracked lines in my fingers, jagged as the tree trunk.

I know, because earlier that summer I did that. We were working with microscopes in nature class. The microscopes had adjustable silver knobs that made things look bigger or smaller beneath the lens. We were supposed to be

looking at some squashed bug or dead butterfly for wildlife appreciation, but I couldn't stop poking my fingers into view. I screwed the knobs in and swiveled them out to eye the pit marks and cracked edges. The skin was dry but in places it oozed a sappy clearness. I was mesmerized, until I remembered that those disgusting specimens belonged to me. The weather-beaten side of the tree in my camp picture was just an enlarged model.

It got worse that autumn when my father went to the hospital, then later when he got out. I remember backing away when my mother changed the bloody gauze that bandaged the cavity on his back. The cavity that swelled from cancer, something I didn't understand. The only



Degrade first the arts if you'd mankind degrade, / Hire idiots to paint with cold light and hot shade.

— William Blake to Sir Joshua Reynolds

cancer I knew, the only cancer I ever heard of, was Cancer the Crab, my mother's Zodiac sign. Why couldn't my father get that cancer, instead? My father explained it wasn't the same, but that was all he said. Lying on his belly in bed, bottles of alcohol, medication, and sterile bandages on the table beside him, he never once called it cancer. Never called it *metastatic malignant melanoma*. He called it a road map—his road map. With scars going every which way on his back, like the tire tracks cars make just before an accident.

One day that winter, after I went off to school, my father went back to the hospital. Everyone said he was fine but that he needed tests. Lots of tests. Three weeks of tests. He called it a vacation but no one knew when he'd be home. The only sure thing was my mother picking me up every day after school at three o'clock in her metallic blue Pontiac *LeMans*, and together, driving to visit him.

She was usually lighting an L&M as I heaved my book bag in the car. Matchbooks strewn on the floor, and the crumpled red and white pack in her pocketbook told me she'd been smoking all day. I'd turn my head away from the brick edifice of P.S. 16 to watch my mother balance the white smoking stick between her fingers. Those fingers draped the steering wheel with a certain dignity, a dignity that said she knew it was her job to be in control. Or at least try.

But she cried a lot with my father away; we both did. We were always afraid. And when she'd go to hug me, I wanted to sink into her soft arms, hoping she'd chase away my fear. But it seemed as soon as she'd touch me, her eyes would blur with tears. She'd pull away to cradle herself, or she'd lie down on the bed in the same place my father did when she changed his bandages. She'd draw her knees part way to her stomach and let the tears drip across her nose and cheeks. She didn't move, even to dry her eyes. I didn't care about her drying her eyes, I just wanted her to hug me. But I didn't want to ask. Instead, I'd slip into bed next to her, and align my body with hers. Then I'd lift her arm and put it around me. I used to wonder if she heard my cries the way I heard hers.

In the car she didn't cry. And as she turned the wheel, her cigarette followed in a wide arc, its orange tip teetering close, but never touching the windshield. Never burning it. She'd tap the gas pedal, the brake pedal, then gas again with great care—it was probably great fear—as we traveled the icy roads to Yonkers General Hospital.

Even with the heater on, the vinyl car seats were freezing, and the air around us was cold and gray from smoke. I liked to turn my face toward the heater to melt the flurries from my hair and lift my palms to my lips so

a breath could thaw their coldness. I also remember sticking a finger, maybe two, or three, or four, into my mouth to warm them. And whenever I did, I'd let my tongue roll over their wrinkled tips. It felt so good. But the softness of tongue turned to sharpness of teeth, leaving my fingertips red and sore, soft and weeping. I'd taste metal and not believe I was bleeding until I saw tiny streaks of blood on my snowsuit, or on the pages of a social studies or science or math book. I'd suck the wounded finger until the bleeding stopped, but sometimes it took a while. By the time we got to the hospital, my mother had finished her cigarette and lit another, and I needed a *Band Aid*.

My father had made arrangements with the head nurse so I could visit when she was on duty. Even as a second, then third, grader, I felt lucky about that, since children were rarely allowed in the adult wing of the hospital back in 1969. But when that nurse wasn't working, I'd have to stand in the hospital parking lot and wave to my father upstairs. He'd come to the window at 3:30, twist the lock on the push-out glass, and punch the window loose with the side of his fist. I would stand on the stone wall that separated the parking lot from a grassy incline, and wave to him. And blow kisses. On parking lot days, my mother would ride the elevator up to the third floor to deliver clean pajamas and a stack of mail. Her departure meant my father's departure from the window to greet her. And I was left alone with the image of an empty hospital window.

The empty window frightened me. Without my father's eyes to anchor me, I got scared. Standing alone in the parking lot, my mind would race. The only thing I could think of was one particular story a neighbor kid told me the last time my father went to the hospital. The story went that when smoke billowed from a hospital smokestack, when the soot swirled into a pale sky, it meant someone in the hospital had died. It could be someone's mother, or someone's father, or someone's little baby. But for me it was always going to be my father.

I'd search for my bellwether—the solitary smokestack. And even though I knew exactly where it was, even though I knew it was over by the cafeteria where my mother and I ate macaroni and cheese every night while my father rested in his hospital bed, I made myself look for it like I couldn't remember. I didn't want to find it, because a part of me believed the story. When my mother returned to the parking lot, she'd light a cigarette and call the story ridiculous. Nonsense, she'd say, trying to assure me. Trying to sound happy, like she thought the whole idea was impossible. But she didn't look happy, and I wondered if she believed the story, too. Cigarette

dangling from her pale lips, she'd try to ease my hand away from my mouth. But I'd pull away.

The rawness of my fingertips matched, of course, the rawness I felt inside, and the whipping cold wind made it worse. My own scars were starting to build up, with ten tiny road maps to rival my father's blistering grid. When my father was in the hospital and the window was vacant, I was scared. Scared of being left alone, of my father dying, and of my mother never being able to stop crying. I didn't understand any of it and I never talked to anyone about it. I wouldn't have known what to say. Biting my nails meant I didn't have to. Because when I went to open my mouth, to let words escape, to let the cries echo so anyone, everyone, might have heard me, my torn fingers would find their way past my lips to my teeth. Over and over again. My own misguided rapture. Soothing one wound while carving another deeper.

I never saw the smokestack blow smoke at Yonkers General Hospital. But even when my father came home again, the fear stayed with me for a long, long time.

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