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TWENTY.

I came back into the house. My arms were wobbling like how the dog had been all these days. I found my bedroom and I stood there. I leaned against the wall. Soon it was leaning with me. We were parallel to the ground.

I stood up and went into my closet. My closet smelled like wet. I dug my best shirt out from the hangers—a white dress shirt I'd worn at all the smallest times. I saw myself then, kind of smiling. I buttoned downwards from the top. I laced my best shoes. I brushed my gums and tongue. I rinsed and flossed the holes. So much crud came out from where my teeth were. It was like a little meal.

Outside the sky was mostly white like salt and caked with mush.

I sent Emily another email.

I sat the phone down on the floor.

I went into the room where the dog was. He was shaking so hard he looked still. I bent my knees and lifted. I felt him inhale just a little. I felt his tumor tremor through my chest. I heard a song.

I walked him to the kitchen.

I walked him through the door.

One room was like the one that I'd grown up in, from the house I'd shown the dog. The same sheets were on the bed that'd always been there, pale blue patchwork washed to rags. There was still a bloodstain on the pillow like most mornings when I was dumb. My nose or ears and sometimes eyes would trickle in my sleep. The mattress was soaked through. Under the bed I found the magazines I'd stolen from gas stations—women topless, holding shotguns; women full of need.

I called the dog but he did not come.

I could hear the other family, the one that dislodged mine, in a room beside me slightly singing but I couldn't understand the words.

A room to the left and up above that room was stuffed seam to seam with pink cake icing.

Another room contained a baby and a sea.

#### NINETEEN.

In certain ways my skin would glisten. In certain windows I saw sun. The further I got from my house the harder it was to remember. I felt new teeth growing in—fat slits of enamel blooming through the old holes, strong enough to crack my jaw. I kept repeating my name aloud—though the more I said it the more it kept getting all messed up. I tasted someone else's tongue.

# PRETEND I AM THERE BUT VERY LITTLE BLAKE BUTLER

what I'm doing right now but I am afraid if I don't do it I will feel even worse. Last night I couldn't sleep again until I ate a ton of breakfast cereal at 7 AM and then I fell asleep holding my stomach. I am very familiar with the way one's mouth smells when you eat milk and then don't brush and then sleep for a few hours and then wake up. Sometimes sitting in this chair for too long makes me feel like I could \_\_\_\_\_. I can't think of a word to put there. i don't know a word i am tired of everything i am tired i dont know what else to say or think about i dont know why i dont

SEVENTEEN.

Emily,

Is something the matter?

EIGHTEEN.

There were many other rooms beyond the first two. The doors had many different kinds of locks. Some doors had no locks at all and only opened when touched a certain way. Each room led to several others. Some rooms held pews or dirt or laughter. Some rooms had no walls.

FIFTEEN.

I was older then than ever.

I was older than I'd ever been.

I was old.

I went to bed.

On the mattress I rolled around to find the way I fit.  
My skin was peeling on the sheets. I tried to count the  
nights I'd spent in that position. The ways I'd wriggled.  
What I had or hadn't had.

I went into the room where the dog was standing,  
shrunken, and rang the bell. He didn't blink.

I rang it harder.

SIXTEEN.

Dear Emily,

I don't feel like thinking about anything. I  
don't feel like thinking about things I normally  
like to think about. Today while I was looking  
at bills I said to myself, "Life is awesome," and  
then someone else inside me said, "Life *is*  
awesome," then it paused. Then it said,  
"Frustrating, hard, awesome." I do not feel  
like explaining anything. I don't feel like doing

ONE.

After I sold my teeth to the museum, I used some of  
the money to buy a Dachshund. My previous dog was  
dead. The house was hushed and full of dander. I'd  
tried for years to give that dog a name but nothing  
ever seemed correct. Called her Mom's name and  
she'd whimper. Called her my name and she bit. She  
was a good dog, though. She liked me. I think she  
missed me when I left. On cold evenings she licked  
the skin between my fingers. She slept around my  
neck.

I didn't realize she'd crawled inside the dishwasher.  
High heat. Double rinse.

What was she thinking?

What was she thinking?

The kitchen smelled like hell for days.

TWO.

Before I bought the new dog, I spent a hunk on Costa Rica.

I'm pretty sure it was Costa Rica.

On the plane I sat next to an obese teen with a mole covering the majority of her face. The mole had lots of hair grown on it. Some of the hairs were very long. The skin of the mole was much darker than that surrounding—like she had part of another person stitched into her.

Somewhere over the ocean she fell asleep. She leaned against me, snoring. I couldn't move my arm. I put a brochure under her face but she still drooled on my shirt a little. She sleep-said the same thing over and over.

The in-flight pretzels were very stale.

I'd seen a movie where this guy went to Costa Rica and put his mouth on many gorgeous women. He also smiled a lot in the movie. His pants appeared expensive.

When the plane landed, I did not get up. I stayed and watched everyone flood around me. Babies were screaming. Several asses hit my shoulder. Someone had to fire-lift a fainted mother down the aisle. Then the plane was empty. There was trash in all the seats. Someone had thrown up and you could smell it.

was full of glowing. Everything was hazy. My ears were rung. The air was warm as milk still in the cow. I moved along into it. I couldn't see or feel my hands and yet I knew that they were there. I stretched until I hit some surface. I slid along it, stumbling. I heard incision. Some kind of droning. The walls were ridged like Braille. Some spots had holes deeper than my arm.

In the light I felt another door. The door and I were shaking hands.

This door was locked by combination. I could not see the numbers. I couldn't see the other room behind me. I tried to think precisely through the color. I tried to lift my head into position. The light began to spin. I slumped against the door. I hit the ground. I felt several children tug my fingers.

I had a lot to say. I said it.

Then, above, I saw a rabbit. A rabbit twice as tall as me. He had huge eyes like shattered windows. He bent down and told me something. His breath smelled like spaghetti. His face touched my face. Soft!

He offered me his hand.

### THIRTEEN.

I went to the museum to see my teeth. It was a seven-hour wait. Outside the sky rained ash and cinder but those in line remained serene behind their masks and steel umbrellas.

Inside the building, down a long hall, they had my teeth roped off behind some glass. They'd fit my teeth into a ceramic head. The head looked mostly nothing like me—small and clean and polished—though also sad or somehow tired. Under the intense lighting my teeth seemed huge and yellowed, like little tombstones, little walls. My teeth. My teeth. I missed them. I could hardly remember how they felt—though I could remember years of things I'd bitten, the endless brushing, my dentist's eyes. I felt a tremor in my sternum, as if from sugar, my fingers trembling at the rope. No one was looking.

No one else could see.

### FOURTEEN.

I opened the door. I closed it. I opened the door again. The bugs were still crudded on the carpet, though there were more now. The whole carpet was slightly writhing. A billion wings in heat.

On the far wall now was another door. This door was latched with an iron bar. It scraped the paint as I slid it over. Behind the door was another room. This room

It's not that I couldn't move—I just didn't. My fingers wanted to stay fists. A steward came and asked to help me with my baggage. Then there were several stewards asking. My tongue inflated. My legs started itching. I put my head down on the tray table. Up close I saw many colors. I pulled back and looked again.

### THREE.

I picked the Dachshund because of the tumor. It was navy blue and kind of gleamed. The dog was fat. Other dogs would not go near. Still he didn't seem to want to leave. He hunched and whimpered when I tried to pet him. The woman who ran the shelter said that was normal and took my money. She helped me help him to the car. In the car the dog sat on the backseat in the crumbs and change and looked confused and didn't squeak.

On the way home, I stopped at fast food. I spoke into a neon sign. I asked for sweet tea and four things of cheese sauce. A girl in a window passed my order over with her fingers. The cheese was hot and made the plastic steamy. It was burned on top with chunks of crust. I took the lids off and set them on the seat beside the dog. He hesitated, then he ate. He got it all over his face, and the car. He looked happy, finally. I felt glad I'd sold my teeth. I looked in the rearview mirror and grinned and touched the sorer places. I'd swallowed so much blood.

From there I took the long way back and showed my new dog everything he'd need to know—the school and park where we'd walk and watch kids; a mountain for weekends; a little river made of sludge. We passed the crumbling house where I grew up and then grew older. The house was small and square and yellow with storm shutters painted orange. A mold had bloomed across the roof. Mounds of dirt piled in the yard. Through the window I could see the family that'd moved in after mine. They were standing around together in the kitchen—a large man, a small woman, and three young ladies. Just standing, holding hands. Their eyes were closed. My new dog huffed and barked into the glass. The family in their window did not flinch.

#### FOUR.

When I was small most nights my father would insist on making dinner. Mom would argue and he'd shout at her in Spanish. No one knew where he'd learned Spanish. He was very pale and hated god. He always made spaghetti but never sauces, and we weren't allowed to actually eat. Instead he'd make us sit on our hands and look at the spaghetti getting colder and he'd tell us to think about all the other people who'd like to have it. What they might do with their lives if they had the same caloric intake that we did. We had to go around the table and each say one thing we weren't doing right. I always said the same thing and then my mom would punch my knee.

membered is the day my father dressed up like a wrestler. He'd been in the living room for hours, straddling my mother, though in the memory she doesn't look like the mother I remember.

Dad knew I was watching. He had an apple in his hand. He was trying to force the apple in my mother's mouth but also being all teasing about it. He let her take the apple. She was beating him with it while I lay on the carpet watching from the next room. The light was very low. My father looked up at me smiling while my mother beat his head. He took out some matches and lit the apple stem. He grinned even bigger and the stem of the apple started to burn like a fuse and my mother who did not look anything like my mother could not get the apple out of her hand.

In other news, I'm not sure what to do today. If you have any suggestions about what to eat, I would listen. I'll leave a light on.

Yours,

P.S. Have you ever seen a bird laugh? It's awesome.

XOX

my eyes. I looked up quickly to see the room enough that I could move into the next one and then I turned the light off. I moved into the next room remembering what I'd seen. I moved through the next room in the same condition. And the next one. And the next one. And the next one. I was upstairs. I sat on my bed and moved onto it so that my feet did not touch the ground. The house was silent except for the A/C. My house had its own machines.

I rolled over and held a pillow. I felt dizzy. Something puckered in my throat. I thought of the night I'd let a bird into the house once by accident. It came right in behind me through the front door. It refused to move back out through the windows no matter how I screamed or blamed or needed.

## TWELVE.

Dear Emily,

I'm at FedEx Kinko's. My cell phone is being a bastard. It wouldn't let me connect to the Internet for a long time and I started to feel like there was something crawling on my back. I wish you'd write soon.

I've been remembering things I do not remember.

The last thing I did not remember that I re-

## FIVE.

At home I put the dog down in the front yard. He stood and cowered in the grass. There were whiter patches where other dogs had pissed and greener where they'd shit. I called the dog. I clapped my hands. A car went by and saw us standing. I felt the blood inside my head begin to foam. I shouted. I lifted the dog up like a human baby, careful not to touch the tumor.

From outside, the house was still.

In the living room I put him down again. He stood with his eyes open and legs shaking. I got the pink rabbit that had belonged to my prior dog and showed it to this one now. The dog did not blink. I pushed the rubber at his lips. I got down on my knees and put the toy in my own mouth. I did not realize I was crying. Each time I moved to match my eyes with his he turned away a little, just like that.

## SIX.

I checked my email with my cell phone. I'd thrown my laptop through a window. My yard was full of stuff that'd failed me. The swimming pool was green.

My cell phone's wallpaper was a picture of my favorite niece. I'd never met my niece. In fact the picture wasn't really her, but more a guess at what I thought she'd look like. I still sent my sister Christmas cards every November.

I had one new message in my inbox—

***SUBJECT: hey sweetie***

***emily says: Hi, my name is emily and i am  
25. meet me on windows live messenger at  
[ADDRESS WITHHELD] i saw your pic and think  
your attractive***

I read the email three more times until it was inside me.

I closed the phone and touched it to my head.

### SEVEN.

That night the dog appeared above my headboard.

The dog said, Do you know what I have in my stomach?

The dog's voice was strong. It was a voice I could believe in.

The dog said, Get up and touch my stomach.

I stood up on the mattress. He'd swollen several times his normal size. His tumor was blue and blinking and I could see through it into the dog. The dog's meat was crawling with little bugs. The bugs had eyes in which I saw myself reflected.

The dog said, Touch my stomach.

skin was frothing. I tried to think of things to say. I moved him around to aim toward the window so he could at least see a tree and some clouds and cars and if and when the moon went by.

### ELEVEN.

That night there was a new door in the kitchen. The door was the same color as the wall. It had a little knob with a button lock. Inside the room there were no windows. It smelled like smoke and was very cold. It had blue carpet and paisley wallpaper that was peeling at the top. I moved into the room. The ceiling brushed my head. I felt someone there behind me.

In the center of the room was a small metal table with a glass bell sitting on it. The bell weighed more than it looked. There was tissue paper stuffed into the bell's neck so it wouldn't ring. I took the tissue paper out. Insects had been wadded in the paper. They fell onto the carpet. I heard that someone call my name.

I rang the bell. My arm went sore, like sleeping. I breathed the room.

I breathed the room.

I moved back into my real house. It was dark now. I could not see. I moved towards the wall where the light switch had always been. I flicked it on. It stung

I look forward to hearing from you, Emily. Take care of yourself, Emily. Be safe. Write soon. Goodnight—or good morning, whichever applies where you are now (where are you from again?) and depending on what time you read this. You get the idea, of course. I'm sorry, Emily. Thank you. See ya. Hi. Hello.

Yours,

TEN.

The dog stayed in the foyer straight through Thursday. He didn't move or bark or squirm. He mostly just shook and moved his eyes away and sometimes whimpered at my touch. I tried to take him back to the shelter four more times but the doors were always locked. I didn't want to just ditch him. I put an ad out in the paper. I made a flyer. No one was looking for a dog.

I called my sister's number and no one answered.

I called my mom's and no one answered.

I called this girl I used to know and who I'd touched once and the line said her number had been changed to an unlisted.

By the end of the week, the tumor on the dog's back had grown almost as big as him. He breathed a lot. His

I touched his stomach. Through the warm fat flesh I could feel something moving. Ridges. Bulbs. The veins were pulsing.

I said, What is that inside you?

The dog said, Don't talk. Listen.

I put my head against the tumor. At first I heard a heartbeat. The beat was strong and clipped, like metal bashing. When I held my breath and plugged my other ear, I could hear the voice of someone speaking. Not the dog's voice—a voice I'd heard before. The dog's eyes rolled back inside his head.

The voice said, You are here and you have nothing and everything is over.

The voice said, I know what you have done.

The voice said nothing else at all.

I lay back on the bed.

I lay with both arms straight down beside me. I could feel my tendons getting harder. I didn't want to be here.

The dog began to grow.

EIGHT.

We were in the car. The dog was shaking. The radio was loud. I had it turned up loud enough to hide my thinking. The song kept repeating the same lines. The roads all looked like somewhere else. I kept seeing dead things in the median, ripped and shredded, blood and crud.

When we got to pet shelter, the parking lot was empty. I pulled in and I parked. I got out and got the dog in my arms again and carried him to the door. The door was locked. I tried to push through with my shoulder but it couldn't. I could see smudges on the glass from where other people'd put their bodies. A sign said: CLOSED FOR CHRISTMAS. It was June. I knocked on the door until my hand hurt.

I went back to the car. I laid the dog down in the backseat. It stayed frozen, sprawled out on its side. The sun glinted on the metal, my cheeks, the concrete.

The grass here was not dying.

NINE.

Dear Emily,

How are you? I'm sorry I haven't been on MSN. I tried to find a way to install the program to my cell phone but they don't offer that option yet. I hope you were at least able to download the new photos I attached to the last two emails. I took them with my cell phone, which is why they're grainy, but you get the idea. If you could email me back and let me know what you think, or at least confirm you got them, I would like that. Perhaps you could send me a photo(s) in return? I would really like to see what you look like. I have an idea formed from your writing and I'm curious how well it matches.

Write again whenever you can. I've been sick and have to stay at home, which gives me a lot of extra free time. By the way, do you want a puppy? It's not that I don't like him, don't get me wrong, it's just I don't know if I have the nerve. If you're interested please let me know and I'll send you his pictures, and if you want, some more of me. I can bring him by, or something. Or you could stop by here. I make an excellent turkey lasagna. Or are you vegetarian? I don't mind. Just let me know. No bother and/or rush.