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## Apologia

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# Apologia

I am eleven and fiddling with an off-brand Swiss Army Knife when the silvery van shimmers uphill like a minnow. Its compact body, slick, a bullet spitting through the horizon, leaves oil-breath and hissing tar in its wake.

My mother is always composed, always poised, except now she is not. I watch her calculating outcomes in the rearview mirror—but the van is in the wrong lane, its driver beer-breathed or suicidal. These are variables that cannot be predicted. She does not know if the car will decelerate, if he will change trajectory, if she can save us.

I hold my breath in anticipation. This is not voluntary; it is necessary. She is trying to shift into the other lane but doesn't quite make it. I am safe, but she has not evaded impact. I know that nothing will ever be the same again, because I have always been good at math and this is basic—the law of equivalence. An eye for an eye. A tongue for a tongue. Mother loses her legs and her voice so that I may walk and speak.

It is four years later and the aftermath still lives on my upper thigh—a lateral line pulsed into the skin like an interjection, emblematic. A reminder of how trauma can cleave a person in two: a before and an after. Suffering has an expiration date stretching far beyond the advent of that initial event. The diagonal still slashing across the right leg, trauma still darkening sun-starved skin.

At night I dream of vans like silver bullets. In the dream I am on the roadside, bearing witness to the moment of contact multiplied by the amount of time it takes to jolt awake, sweat-soaked, hands shivering from the adrenaline high. There is nothing as violent as the sound of metal shredding metal—the face of our car becoming tin confetti. With each collision I watch as mother is propelled out the driver's window, trajectory always the same. Her doll-like

body arcing towards the asphalt, poppy-colored skirt rippling like silk kite. I try to catch her; maybe this time it will be different. But as fast as I run, I never reach her in time. She always lands back first, spine snapping like communion bread.

Coping is a reaction to injury. When the skin is lacerated, blood begins to coagulate—clotting so that a person does not bleed to death. The body is constantly adapting to physical stress, always looking—for ways to survive.

My mother's coping mechanism is knitting. She sits in her wheelchair, silent, learning how to knit and purl. Perfecting the lace stitch until she forgets what time it is and falls asleep, needles in hand, fingers still trembling in anticipation.

Father copes by coming home at ungodly hours, breath rank, smelling of alcohol and desperation. His lower lip curling into a cruel sneer as he points at me in wordless accusation. He does not need to speak for me to know that I have stolen his everything. He blames me for what I did not do, for what I could not have done.

I am sixteen when I swear out loud for the first time. Later, I will learn the full potential of obscenity; it is like water, taking the form of its situation. But right now it is in the form of the word "fuck." Its catalyst is an accidental burn in the form of iron skillet kissing elbow, like a rabbi blessing a child's forehead. Crescent moon is birthed, angry and angular.

Father, sticky-eyed, asleep but not quite, screams awake when he realizes what has been said. He grabs the thing closest—a toy gun—and slams it into my back so hard that the body welts in two places: a before and an after. A friend once told me that all children are mistakes. My father is correcting his.

When finished, he thumps upstairs, leaving me alone to deal with the aftermath of what has happened. Broken-bodied mother wheels herself over to where broken-bodied daughter lies. Daughter can only look upwards, sobbing the words, "I am sorry, I am sorry, I am so so sorry." Mother can only look down in horror, mouth shaping words that never harden into sounds, like phantom limbs. What she is trying to say is this: "Don't be."