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Notes from St. John's Hospital

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Notes from St. John's Hospital

1. Laundry

The ripples hold more fine dust than I'd have imagined. I stretch out the fabric between my hands, gripping it at the corners in dead fists, and see where the cotton's stained, where it is faded—there, like cloud shadows sweeping rhythmically across the park. When I first saw your face I almost fainted; hovering in the doorway of the room at the end of the hall, breath boiling soundlessly in my chest. The heat had melted your skin like hard candy. Rosy welts bloomed on your cheeks, thick with puss, and the gauze had clotted with brown blood, gathering darkly in the corners of your eyes. I wanted to smile at you—smile, like it was charity—but all of my muscles contracted, and I ached to burrow into myself, to retreat into the fluorescent hallway, away from you, love, a spider peering out from a crack in the molding. You motioned with your hand that you wanted to touch me. Your wrist flopped on the bed sheets. I snatched your shirt from the table, beside the remote, a pen, the cup full of phlegm. I'll go wash this, I said.

2. Full

I have been thinking about clay bowls, because I made one last week. The clay was bone dry, but had not been fired—so the bowl was stiff and cold and covered with a fine dust. The friend who had thrown it showed me how to cut clay away from the greater chunk, to soften it between my palms, until the pebbles of texture were smoothed away. He placed the lump on the center of his wheel, and leaned close to me on the bench, telling me how to cradle it with my hands, and press into the center with two fingers, like I was tearing into the stomach of a soft animal. I dipped my hands in water and began, too firm and then too lightly, so that my palms only

grazed the whir. My fingers were slippery, as though they'd been dipped in blood, and I began to hold my breath for as many seconds as I could, afraid to shake my chest and the stillness of my posture. I knew I was defiling the clay, digging into its softness so carelessly, without knowing anything about where it had been unearthed or the shape it would eventually take. I remembered the look in your eyes when I left the room. I remembered your eyes. I watched my hands move soundlessly, their purpose in making a bowl to be filled, in carving violently away at some center, until at last the clay leapt up into a delicate peak and collapsed inward, exhausted. The blood drying in your eyes. I hurled my fist into the clay.

3. Chapel

When we used to attend chapel together, you would rub the back of your hand up the side of my thigh, so lightly I had to look down to be sure I wasn't imagining. The music would swell, and you'd press me harder, over my skirt, insistently, fingers urging me to pray, to clap, to cry out manically in a dangerous and beautiful tongue. I had loved the brightness of your face, the way the stained glass painted it orange in those long services. I hadn't imagined the way you would look ablaze, your fingers ripping at your own sacred skin.