

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

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In the dark, my hand was shadowed against the angel wings on his back. Some time ago ink-filled needles had ripped apart his body and taken on images and symbols with unexplained meanings, words without definitions. His skin, light and smooth, was an access point into the world within him. It was twisted, complicated, uninviting. I wanted all of it and nothing to do with it at the same time.

His tattoo crawled across my hand and danced with the shadows, consuming my palm. His exposed neck waited, while he laid there facing away from me. I had attacked him while his soul was raw, his heart vulnerable. I had told him the truth about us, about *him*. And he didn't like it.

"I'll never completely trust you. You'll never respect me in the way that I deserve. And we'll always come back to that," I had said just moments earlier.

Silence. "So what do we do?" he finally asked.

"I suppose we have two options." I didn't sound like myself. I was always asking the questions; he always had the solutions. He could see things that I couldn't. But in the dark, something had shifted, and I was the one with the voice. "We can compromise, and that's what makes us, well, *us*. Or this ends it."

We hadn't even defined *it* yet. Our worlds had collided together suddenly, physically, a sloppy attempt to fill gaps in ourselves left by others: his by a lover who left him because he could never be something he wasn't, mine by an attacker who left me with a black eye and a persistent fear of parking lots. We found solace in how we mutually exist in the world. As the days passed, though, it became strikingly evident that how we react to and engage with others was so notably different. We didn't know if we could survive it.

"This can't last forever," I had told him a week earlier during a late-night phone call. "This will change. We will change."

We argued about love. He ran his hand over the Emily Dickinson quote tattooed on his chest, "That love is all there is, is all we know of Love," and said, "Love is a promise that I will hurt you less than anyone else." He turned over, looked through the dark and right through me.

I didn't believe it. I didn't believe in love, either, but I did understand loyalty. What I did not understand was why he would still go to Denver in the morning. Why he would pursue love with another, even if just for the weekend? Especially when I had just come home, whatever "home" was, to be with him.

I'll be a wreck, I had told him. You already are, he had said. We had spent the past two hours talking about it. Being reasonable, fair, giving each other the chance to complete our thoughts.

"Don't go to Denver," I pleaded. My suitcase was sitting, still packed, at the foot of the bed. His empty suitcase was waiting next to the closet. There was still time for him to change his mind.

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It doesn't have anything to do with you, he said. I can't accept that, I said. I'm not asking you to, he said. You can't just use me, I said. I'm doing this because I want to be used, he said.

Round and round and round we went until I bit into his shoulder, and the talking stopped. A train blew its whistle outside the open window; a gentle fall breeze crept into the room, settling over the bodies of two lovers who were on the verge of hating each other, coming in and out of each other's worlds for moments only, connecting on false pretences and unspoken promises, but never resolutions.