

Dear Girl, Dear God

Here is a prayer your parents never had you kneel for at bedtime. Here is a small testament to the conversational song, to the evanescent vignette we are all given. Here is the unnatural, historized.

It's fourth grade, Scholastic Book Fair season, and I've been told to stay away from boys when she twists into the classroom in a pair of knockoff Skechers, her mouth stamped with a hot red rash untouched by a mother's smear of Vaseline against the morning bus stop cold.

The teacher doesn't even have time to name her before she slides her hand under the stapler and hammers it down hard and fast like a punch card, crucifying herself via Bostitch.

Then, sweet and sick as a cavity: *May I please go to the nurse?*

The whole class swore they saw blood droplets dripping behind her, a black-and-white shot angled against the tile, Gretel and horror. But they're all liars. And I condemn the Christ-haunted halls of a Christ-riddled land for turning her into a monster, into girlhood mythologized, into something mean and unrelenting and wretched.

Five years later, the fall I got my period and still believed in boys, she slams me against a bookcase of anthologies in the library, her hair Bible-edge golden. *Help me*, and I hear a thousand tongues flickering in the hollow and charred cathedrals of her eyes. Here is the unholy, plattered and sprawled, apple-in-mouth, forks raised. Here is terror turned acquiescence, watercolor blurred murky.

Here is us, incandescent and ignited with youth, burning paper steeples, laughing when we steal Bupropion from our mother's nightstands because if there is a God and if He gives a singular shit then He must hate us, raw knee-to-knee in the bathtub, pulling spider silk taffy from our throats like magicians, salvation long gone sour in the pedestal sink.

Three months before graduation, and what are boys when you've got the North Star pinned to your chest as a cameo brooch, blistering white-hot with the throat thrown backward in ecstasy, rupturing with candy, an aurora of powder in every color. Here is the kaleidoscopic; the psychedelic; the illusion optimized and primed.

Her mouth twitches like a child left too long in a church basement. Like a once-smashed-stained-glass window stamped on our tongues by Jesus Christ Himself. She hums hymns around the hookah pipe, smoke climbing through the cracks in her ribcage, a gnarled serpent curled sweetly at the foot of her heart.

I am young and of a fully accountable age—hotly, oppressively, deeply in love with a girl whose skin reeks of kerosene and the floral stench of church pews, and she is seeping oil into the seats

and setting them on fire and I hear the punch-card of the stapler, *click-click-click*, and the scaffolding crumbles to dust, to ashes, to a spleen-splitting rib in my side.

Three days later, I am a crouching girl spewing chunks of chicken casserole on ceramic, seeing visions of sutures dissolving in the skin like aspartame, listening to the venomous murmur of raccoon-eyed mothers and their precious, crushing blubbering. God only takes the best, so I remain. Here is the toppled steeple.

Here is an atheist in a dirty foxhole, holding a dead girl's hand and praying to something made to hate them. Here is a sorry, a word, a forgiveness bitter as hyssop on the tongue.

I can smell the dirt being dumped over the body of a girl who made me believe in God as something neither absolute nor incomplete. But here as a warmth, an iridescent pool of fuel and light burning against the pavement, the afterglow of a downpour ribboning around a pair of knock off Skechers.

Here is a Sunday school story you never made crafts for; here is a small testament to the bloodied dove and the churchyard crow. Here is the unnatural, made martyr, made beatific. I will un-repent and tell it anyways. I will reverse my own immersion into the river to rise screaming. I will kneel on the crown of a mountain and tell it anyways until my voice grows raw and time ends.