

Hand and Thumb

by J.R. Hughes

We have compromised to occupy new spaces of ourselves. For the sake of staying together, we do this. For the sake of chore division, of our rent, of not having to look far and wide for other looking eyes, we do this. It took so long to get here. It took so long to find another person and unwind the rope of our personalities and join together in seemingly meaningless knots — electricity bills, shared blankets, quiet dinners, glances. We took so long to find a nook of comfort and now -- now we have discovered that we are old and unsatisfied. We are unsatisfied with whom we chose to love and we know that we are not right together and perhaps, were only fitted with proper alignment for a short moment. All of the other time, the time that drags us from year to year, was filled with healthy distractions, with growing only for ourselves. Perhaps we concentrated too heavily on improving apart.

You say that we need to get back to who we were. Back to the basics. When I ask you how rudimentary do we need to become, you say I've already missed the point. Often we sit in silence and age. We are observers of dust, fashioning ourselves into antiques. I ask you again who we need to become and you still present silence as an answer and I remember before you, before pairing, and I remember how I hoped to fall in love so that I could be filled with sound. I see how I was steadfast in remaining lonely because I could not understand love as a concession. I was looking to create stars, burst into fire, to feel full with warmth and nothing less than that could sustain me. But I am alive with shoddy, nicked furniture, a job that pays itself doubly in stress and consuming time, with French porcelain-ware as my most beloved possession and, what feels like, an alarm clock that reminds me to tell you *I love you*.

You ask should we just let this go and I nod to let the words flow in through one ear and carry to other side of my head, heavy. You say we could stop right now. Why you wait until we are in bed,

folded into covers, visible only by warm yellow born shadows, to talk about this reminds me you still fear sleep.

I ask do you think we didn't make the commitment soon enough? Maybe we should have married? If your arms were not pasted to your sides, you would cross your arms across your chest, fingers digging into the sandpapery flesh of your upper arm. And you would blow out air from a straw sized hole created by your pursed lips, blowing away the wishes you claim to be banal. But you cannot move your arms and I realize how many things you've swam to the bottom of the ocean to bury in hopes not a single wish could breathe long enough to find its way to the surface. So perfectly compartmentalized, you fear sleep.

We do not travel safely into the past together. We have committed injustice upon injustice upon injustice toward each other. We have carried on for ten years noiselessly. We have lost the words to explain what hurts and, so, we are petrifying. I do not apologize for the lost wedding, for the ring without fire, for never keeping track. You do not apologize either; instead, you say we have long weathered our living jackets. I want to ask what that means but know we are tenuous parables of creation and destruction and maintenance.

You say I think we have the capacity to be very different. Not refined but new.

I let the words slip in with the others.

You say we can continue as we are and we can carry the weight of what we've made together or, we can promise to carve ourselves into new people. We can even occupy different bodies, if we want. But what composes us must be fresh and uncompromising; dedicated to the other.

I ask do we have to talk about the changes we plan to make?

You say it's much more interesting to unravel.

I drain what you've said from my ear and make sure to brush away the remnants of the letters with vigorously batting lashes.

We've only been new for a few minutes but we negotiate silence differently. Or, at least, I now negotiate silence with my hands.

Under the covers, I walk my fingers to your side of the bed, concentrating upon the stiffness of my joints. You are still wound tightly within blankets and I peel the blankets back slowly as to give time rhythm. I touch your skin and it is soft and I trace my fingers down the length of your forearm with hopes of entangling my fingers with yours. I find your hand balled into a fist. With the same smooth stroke, I play different patterns on your knuckles remembering each so that the key will not be forgotten. You do not move. I tap time into keys, your hand life's security. Only a mattress mounted fist. You do not move. I lay my hand on top of your fist and feel your pulse through your thumb.

