

The most tender thing

by Steven Pirani

You were playing hockey when it fell from the sky:
A small pane of pitch,
a flat black window on our lawn.
Almost warm.

The neighbors came to see it,
said they saw it fall from the clouds.

What was that, Erik?
Never seen anything like it.
My God. What'cha think it is?

While you put your hockey stick inside,
I told you things might get crazy,
and by 6 p.m. we had a parade on our front lawn,
begging to see the crater in our backyard.

You smiled and laughed
at the Suburbans packed with children
pressing their faces on the windows.
I think it was weird for you,
seeing all the kids from class, on the weekend.

Rhonda, from down the block,
came from her house with her strawberry apron on.

She touched the thing, but pulled away quick,
then murmured something about god
and walked back to her house.

I never told you how they found her.
How she drank all the shampoo in her bathroom.

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/steven-pirani/the-most-tender-thing>»

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That her husband had to pull her out from the shower, screaming,
going on about trying to “clean her heart.”

After that, there was too much ruckus,
so the police cleared away the people,
and then, at night,
some other people cleared away the police.

When you came down for breakfast,
there were soldiers
drinking coffee in our living room,
sucking donut powder off their fingers,
asking you about hockey,
laying their guns on the table.

That made you uncomfortable,
and I'm sorry for that.

Just after dawn, the next day,
a wailing woke the entire town.
I thought it was you, at first,
with your night terrors.
But you were standing next to the bed, waking me up,
telling me to “Look, look.”

A long arm had bloomed from our lawn.
It was like my eyes couldn't even see it:

Long and black,
a new shape I had never seen before spilled out, into our yard,
and began wailing into the grass.
Some other,
pushing into our world,
through a square the size of a monopoly board.

You asked me what it was,
why it was screaming,
that it looked a lot like the bottom of our tree
that got ripped up during that tornado.
I couldn't think of anything to say to you.
All I mumbled was, "T'unno," and turned away.

After a few hours,
the screaming became a whimper, like a hum.

I saw you, later that day,
when the soldiers went inside for coffee.
You could have died, you know that?
How could you have walked right up to it, put a hand on it?
Rubbed it back and forth like a friend?

You were young then, probably 14,
But that was the first tender thing
I had ever seen you do.

That night, I heard a sound,
like a whole building falling into itself,
and in the morning, it was all gone:
the creature, the soldiers, the neighbors.
All gone.

All that was left was you,
sitting, cross-legged on the lawn,
laughing to yourself,
wearing a new, clumsy smile.

Ever since then, you've been different.
You don't think about anything like you used to.
You just draw circles in your hands,

and eat paper,
and mash bugs into the crooks of your ears.

Somehow, I have your body,
but you've gone missing.

The counselor at school said you've stopped reading.
Stopped being able to read.
They keep using the word "regressed."

You bite more,
you throw tantrums,
you chase dogs,
you hurt yourself.
And I keep wondering when you'll be 14 again.

They ask me about lead paint,
and gas leaks,
things like nutrition and once, abuse.

Even I pretend like it's a mystery.
I shrug and say I don't understand.
But behind everyone's words,
We all know the story:

A lost thing came and robbed you
of the ropes that held your mind together.
My son, my son,
the only thing I knew with any compassion at all,
you gave yourself away
to the shadow of a ghost
that none of us will speak of.

Some nights, you scream,
in the voice you once had,

about cages and infinite planes,
about the tunnel.

The first time this happened, I woke you up,
thinking you'd come back from this walking coma,
and I looked at you,
somewhere behind your eyes
where we only ever look
when we love someone truly, and plainly, and deeply,
or when we want something out of them.

You just looked back,
and grabbed my mustache, and laughed.

All I can do now is bend the pillow around my skull,
and sing the National Anthem, over and over,
until you stop.

But when it rains,
you like to strip your clothes off,
and stand in the back yard with your arms outstretched,
staring toward the sky, laughing,
scrunching your shoulders,
poking out your tongue.

It's the happiest I've seen you since.
The happiest I've ever seen you.

You spin and flail and look at me,
full of amazement and confusion,
and as long as it keeps up, you stay out there,
while I watch from the patio door.

You point to the sky, and smile at me,
saying, "Look, look," over and over.

I wave, with the tops of my fingers.
"I see, I see."

Sometimes, when you and I do this,
I'll catch the neighbors,
spectating from their windows.
They all wear the same face, when it rains.
All of them,
with their lips pursed,
trying on a smile
and those apologetic, knowing eyes.

