Mutilated Thoughts

A Free-Verse Short Story

JACOB RUSSELL DRING

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Preface

This piece yields to a myriad of themes that I won't openly address right now. That is for the reader to interpret for themselves and consume as their own. While on the outside *Mutilated Thoughts* presents itself as a love story between two strangers-turned-soulmates, it is fathoms from this. I'm not writing this as a spoiler, nor necessarily a warning, but simply to anesthetize the hook in your cheek. Ultimately, however, it's like I said—for you to develop as you wish. Take from it, bit by bit or in large chunks, to your desire. But whatever you decide to do—open your mind and, I hope, enjoy the read.

I welcome—no, *yearn for*—all kinds of feedback and criticism. Please rate, if not post a review as well—however brief or long—where you got this story from Lulu after you're done reading. It would be immensely appreciated.

Mutilated Thoughts is not a book—it's a sojourn in someone else's life.

1

Aaron Kessler was seeing faces
Smiles, frowns, fearful gazes
In the sidewalk beneath him
He walked lazily, aimless, yet rigid
Hands stuffed in denim pockets
Eyes bowed down to his feet
With a slight hunch but straight legs
Gray sweater zipped up
Hood cast down over his head
And as dark as the night had grown
He still saw their faces in the concrete
Were they friends, family, enemies?

They dissipated from sight
As soon as he reached the next square
And then a fresh cluster spawned
Scribbled in the sidewalk
Ghosts that'd died during its construction
Or so it seemed to Aaron
But in reality he knew it wasn't so
In reality he knew it was just his mind
Losing a fight with his heart
As wrought and mauled as it had become

Because he'd let his guard down
Because he'd dropped his shields
Because he'd been too damn human
For even his comfort
And now he'd let another
Crush his heart in the palm of their hand

His jaw tightened at the thought of her
His skin crawled, itched, at the notion
Of holding hands with her, with it
With what she had grown into
Or was she like that all along?
Had her true colors only bled into the light
Once Aaron's shields dropped
And he'd pried his chest open for her?
Aaron was ambivalent on believing that
Because on one hand he wanted to
So that he could rest knowing that
She was a lost cause, out of his repair
But on the other hand he pulled away
Realizing that if this were the case
It meant that he was even more stupid
Than he would've ever imagined himself to be
And that he'd been deceived for the worse
Toyed with and then ravaged
By something he had believed to be
The face of Love Itself

Now, he couldn't help but feel
That such an emotion was never real
To begin with
Now, he couldn't help but feel
That he wish he couldn't feel at all
So, he walked and then he walked some more
The sidewalk along the suburban road
Took him miles upon miles

O N E

Before it snaked its way out of town
Onto a path where no sidewalk existed
Only asphalt with faded lines
As if they, too, had grown weary of this place
As if they, too, had given up on Life
So he walked until his legs hurt
And his feet wept for cessation
But he felt that such pain
Could never begin to touch upon
What Allison Paige had done to his heart

The shadows of the night clung to him
Like flies to fresh carrion
And he didn't brush them off
Because the murk grew very consoling
And, coupled with the stygian silence
It was all a greater comfort than anyone's words
Could or would ever be to his ears
Those on his head and elsewhere unseen
It was this solitude, out here
Seemingly in the middle of nowhere
That numbed his doubts and fears
Struck down his futility and despair
Instead enveloping him in a robe of hope
However hollow it was, it was nonetheless
And he went so many miles without a voice
Not so much as a single murmur
To have escaped his lips
Nor a thought to breach his trachea
And he went miles further, in the autumn night
Without a single headlight
To have passed him by
Nor so much as a humming engine
To remind himself that he wasn't dead
Until, at last, a vessel drove up
On the opposite lane, with a busted headlight

And a rickety chassis whining past
Slowing as it approached, its single light
Gifting Aaron with a white corona
Until it finally did pass, as if gliding
Nonetheless atop a quilt of discordance
But Aaron did not look up
Although his eyes proffered the desire
He declined it for the rigidity
As if it had grown into him
Like a new pair of chromosomes

And then the vehicle slowed, dramatically
Taillights lit up, blazing rubies in the night
Less than a quarter mile down the road
Tires screeched, banshees howling to the sky
So Aaron lifted his head, and his feet slowed
Heart and temples thrumming emphatically
To a rhythm interruptive of his solitude
Something he found to be ambivalently blithe
In lieu of all that had transpired this night
And now the vehicle far ahead sought a return
For what reason Aaron couldn't possibly discern
Even in the brief moment that he feared death
Despite earlier wishing it to take his breath
Away

The vehicle grinded to a halt, far from quiet
Half in its lane and half in the other
Windows down, wind whipping by
Aaron hadn't even realized that he's stopped
But the girl behind the wheel did
And now she, mute, beckoned him to join her
With no more than a wave of her head
Long black hair tossed about like riled mambas
A thousand shades darker than Allison's
But that didn't make Aaron sure

O N E

If he could trust her
In fact, it only heightened his fear
Although something deep beneath
His shattered surface
Beckoned, too, the avidity to solve a mystery
That birthed in his conscience
The second their eyes connected
Even in the thick of the muddy night
Even way out here, on such a path
That Aaron had chosen to take
For a reason that felt all too familiar now
Still did something tug his chain
And tickle his spine

Aaron swallowed a lump in his throat
And crossed the street, without looking
The two ways he knew that he should
Risking his life as a car sped by
Seemingly materialized from thin air
Honking its horn chaotically in the process
While Aaron was left to catch his breath
And then cross the asphalt
Black sneakers smacking the pavement
White shoelaces slapping around
He bowed his head, avoiding eye contact
As he circumvented the vehicle
Gaze glued to the ground until he reached
The passenger's side door
As he extended his hand to open it
A low-hanging tree branch snagged his sweater
Yanking down his hood and pinching his skin
Aaron hid his grimace and shook it free
Then ducked into the car
Regarding the dead tree by the size of the road
With malevolent eyes
As if it had a mind of its own

And he was its sole target
But now he was inside, and now
The door was shut behind him
And now the girl was driving again

"You should watch where you're going"
Her voice was low, quiet, but soft
Heavy with something, yet, that Aaron
In spite of all his experiences
Couldn't place

"It's not up to me where I'm going"
Aaron responded, his own voice
Crippled and wavering
Waves across a sandy bank
While his eyes just stared ahead
Through the grimy windshield and
Into the half-lit darkness before them

Instead of speaking, at first, the girl
Just turned her head to look at Aaron
No, to stare at him
Driving, still, and adhering to the road
Until finally an anxious Aaron
Swiveled to return the gaze
A morsel of panic in his eyes
"You're right" she said "it's up to me"
Then her lids seal
And the car slowly begins to go off-course
Aaron leaps out to seize the wheel
But with startling force she pushes him aside
Eyes still shut, wheel jerking slightly
And he's thrown against the inside of his door
Heart in his throat
He can taste its sorrow, its dejection
He can taste it beating rapidly

A sign of panic and fear and anxiety
A sign, nonetheless, of a submerged desire
That which was responsible for life
And a lingering hope
That the bath set before him was brighter
Than what extended in his rearview

With a fresh surge of verve in his veins
Aaron groaned and lunged forward
That is, to the side, over the center console
And grabbed the wheel, jerkily
Returning them back to the road just in time
As another car seared past them, horn loud
But the girl stomps the brakes
Throwing Aaron about in his seat
While tires bled rubber across the asphalt
Until the vehicle lurched to a stop
Rocking on its chassis, the two of them inside
Aaron's eyes wide and hers calmly open
Now with her back to her door
Sitting awkwardly, albeit comfortably
Wearing an expression of sheer tranquility
And a smile so damn small
Aaron nearly missed it
But as they stared at each other now
In the squeaking-metallic calm
A stalemate of voices
There was very little about this girl
That Aaron missed
Although he had a hunch
That there's more to her than the surface

She had a slightly ovoid visage
With soft, placid features
Like the reflections on a river's veil
And with the slightest ripple

The subtlest of change to current
Everything would break, for the better
Beautified in a thousand ways
For just the smallest alteration
And it was like this that she smiled
Thin but somehow full scarlet lips
Curling at the commissures
To produce such a furtive smile
An expression that seized every muscle
Every stretch of sinew and gobbet of blood
In Aaron's body
With a pinch of wraithlike fingers
And he was enrapt, speechless
Her lips made this curl, no teeth shown
Something glinted in her eyes
Those dark brown, or were they green
Who cared?
Those eyes nonetheless, they gleamed
Humanly so, of course, but illuminated still
And she brushed back a wave of her hair
Exposing further her pale cheek
Satin of the flesh, in the flesh
As if to substantiate her being here
And not just in his head

"You have a name?"
She asked, like a whisper off ice

Aaron couldn't find his own
For the longest moment
But ultimately he grabbed it
And clumsily threw it back
"Why…what does it matter?"

"Well" she said, almost scoffed
"I don't drive complete strangers

Wherever they so please”

“But you pick them up?” Aaron replied
A snake on his tongue
Not unlike before, and it caught her
He could tell he’d struck a chord
Was it a violin or a harp
Or the nastiest guitar riff
Ever to grace her ears?

Eventually her startled expression tamed
And she looked at him from beneath
A lowered brow, but not contemptuously
Her eyebrows toyed with her features
Slick and dark as the night
But with a tinge of elation
“Everyone’s a stranger to everyone else”
She spoke as sly as an arrow
“At some point or another”

“Yeah” Aaron said, more so to himself
Than to her or the night enrobing them
“Yeah, I suppose they are”
He swallowed, then, a lump of doubt
And fleshed it out in his voice
Reborn and remolded
Into something like vague curiosity
“So…my name’s Aaron Kessler
And you? Or does the stranger thing
Only work on a one-way road?”

The girl, this woman of youth, suddenly
Looked over her shoulder, out the window
Then out ahead of them, through the windshield
Then back again, only further, at their rear
And back to Aaron, who was only

Half a stranger now
A nobody with a face and a name
And eyes that made him a somebody
To her, the world, this car even
And especially the night
Which had clung to him so tightly
Just moments ago, despite her gaze
Which had found him nonetheless

"This is a two-way street, my friend"
She said, snagging something on him
Causing a tic in his face, but not a smile
Although one might argue that matter
And then she proceeded to drive again
Back on the road, her lane
Going the right way, in the right direction
Whatever and wherever that might be
She stared ahead just the same
Hair pushed over her ears
Which were small, pale, and a bit pink
Perhaps from the cold of the night

"You, uh, you don't have A/C?" Aaron spoke
A few seconds into their resumed journey
If one could be so bold as to label it that

"Why bother?" she said
Without looking over at him
Although he couldn't help but do so at her
"The night offers all the A/C I'd want
You should be so thankful"

Aaron scoffed and returned his gaze
Now heavy and dark
To the road stretched out before them
"For what exactly" he said

O N E

"I couldn't begin to name"

"I can" she said "for starters
His name's Aaron"
He glimpsed that microscopic smile
Grace the commissures of her mouth
For the second, if not third time
On this strangest of nights
For a particular Aaron Kessler

"Thankful for myself, you say?"
He replied, with an edge of bitterness
"And how's that? Do you know me
Where I'm from, what I've done
What I haven't, the places I've been
The places…the places I will be?"
Aaron diverted his eyes to his window
More rather, where it should be
Instead just an open portal
Into the same night he'd formerly
Succumbed his mind and body to
Just before accepting this interruptive ride
From a most…intriguing individual

And yet still did his thoughts storm
Still did they ravage his conscience
Although every time he looked at her
He couldn't help but feel a stab
A prick, even as small, of anesthesia
Easing his way into the next wave
Whatever its currents might yield

"Yes to all" she simply replied
And for an instant he began to
Sincerely regret ever getting in
Ever saying yes to the ride

He began to fear for his sanity
Fear for everything

"Bullshit" he said instead
Unable to find the right words

"On the contrary" she retorted
Calm as an ocean breeze
Rustling the grains of sand
Between a beachgoer's toes
"On the contrary" she repeated
Just under her breath
And that was damn loud enough
Even with the wind intensifying
As she drove on, and on they drove
Through the night, into it
Aaron all the while hoping
That they reached the other side
Sooner rather than later
He even prayed for it
But to what, to whom, he did not

"Care to" he almost stammered
"Care to elaborate?"

"Not at all" she said, smiling
And it was big, it was bright
It was like the Pearly Gates
Presenting themselves to Aaron
Not opening, of course
But just standing there
Just smiling, and somehow talking
"It's rather obvious, actually
See, you think you're different
You think you're alone in this world
You strongly believe, with all

Your heart and your being
That your problems differ greatly from
Everyone else, no matter how likewise
Theirs might seem
Your predicaments, past present and
What you've already fated as your future
Are much heavier than theirs
And I'm sorry, Aaron, but they aren't
In fact, they're much smaller
But I'm not saying this to dissuade you
As a person, that is
Instead I'm saying this to dissuade
Your fucking shit vibes"

Aaron threw her a sharp look
He raised his eyebrow
Did he just hear that right?
He needed to get out of this car
She was still smiling, no, grinning
He's going to die
She's psychopathic
He's going to

"Don't be scared, Aaron
I am here. I know what you're thinking
I'm crazy, I'm this strange epitome
Everything you fear
Somehow, somehow that is me
Because I counter your beliefs
In yourself, in me
But we don't know each other"
She chuckled to herself
"Well, you don't know *me*
But I'll tell you this, Aaron
Nothing's how it seems"

What was Aaron hearing now
What did he feel
And why did he feel it and
What the hell was going to happen?

"I'm not a stranger to you?" he asked
His voice shaky ever so unnoticeably
But he knew she noticed it
Because he did
And even so, she said not a word
Nor judged him for it or mocked him
So far she spoke truth
So far he'd fallen in

"Yes and no, but not really, Aaron"
Her smile faded and she sighed
He took the time, as she drove
With her eyes and attention adhered
To the road pulled taut before them
In the dead of the living night
He took this time to observe her
As casually as possible
From her black open-zipped cotton jacket
To her underlying white tanktop
And fitted blue jeans
She was petite, small
But goddamn, his inner voice wept
She was severely beautiful
Not a strand out of place
Even when her hair whipped about
And her voice, her voice captured him
A hostage of sorts, captivated
And just like that all of his aforementioned
Fear, uneasiness, anxiety
Was sapped from him
Who was she?

Didn't matter, not now, and why?
Because her voice in lip and tongue
Had him by the throat
"You're bent on self-chaos
Whatever that might mean for you
It's different for everybody
But ultimately you're in control
No matter how strongly you feel otherwise
Afterall, you just proved it to me
And yourself
Only moments ago"

Aaron didn't know what to say
Could he even say anything?
"All this" he finally uttered
"From a name?"

"Not really so much a name"
She replied simply
"But a face, and a voice
And eyes that speak louder"
She turned her head, while driving
And gave Aaron this look
That pierced the veil of time and space
As if a million fathoms
Were just within reach
She could tell that Aaron was speechless
So she spoke with ease
"Where are you headed, Aaron?"

Aaron wasn't speechless
His voice crawled from between lips
As lazy as slugs baking in the sun
Eyes glassed and heart sobbing
"Wherever you are"
He thought out loud

Not even realizing that
It might have not been
The best thing to say to her
This person, this stranger
Or were they so foreign to each other?

"What makes you think
I'd want you with me
Wherever it is I might be headed?"
When she asked this
It wasn't in the form of a question
And her small smile puzzled him

"Your eyes" he replied
"I'm not the only person here
That's abandoned hope"

Her eyebrows lifted
Taken aback that he'd spoken
Words which belonged to a mirror
Lain across her lips, not his
"Well" she breathed "I'd be lying
If I said you were completely wrong
But…you aren't right"

"Then what am I?"
He asked, his voice thin

She smiled, as if under her breath
And kept driving
Eye on the road still
Her words spilled into visibility
"Coming with me"

2

Until now Aaron's senses
Had capitulated to the night, the chills
And to this stranger of a familiar girl
Who's so ambiguously, so cordially
Invited to give him a ride
And now she was heading deeper
Into the night, into the unknown
So far as Aaron could tell
But now he discerned additional features
Not so much about her
As his immediate surroundings
Including the vehicle, a Mustang Fastback
Probably a mid-sixties model
Wearing a worn white finish
And burgundy interior
It groaned and whirred
But it got them from point A to point B
All the same, somehow or another
Despite Aaron's obliviousness
As to the details behind these points

Also, the car's contents
Were few and far between
Nevermind the two of them

There was no visible luggage
Nor trinkets of a journey
At least not visible, since Aaron
Wasn't one to go probing neither
Glovebox nor center console, under seats
Instead he sat atop them
Scanning the Mustang's interior with
A most observant, furtive gaze
But at times he could feel her eyes
Bear into the side of his head
Whenever he wasn't looking
And he knew that so little
Ever escaped her
And now him
Was he so different?

"Looking for something?"
She finally said
Not spitefully, however, benign

"Only a sign"
He replied, clearing his throat
And putting to a halt
His scrutiny, which was apparently
Far less covert than he'd intended

"Of?" she spoke
Raising one eyebrow
Like a cobra from its basket

"Normalcy" Aaron breathed
"A sign that you're not kidnapping me
Or worse"

She laughed
And Aaron's skin crawled

In only the best of ways
For it was a very human laugh
A bone-chilling, hair-raising
Pleasant laugh
If there was ever such a thing
It was appealing to his every sense
"You're funny, Aaron" she said
After a good chortle
"I like that, I do…but you must relax
I'm not kidnapping you, although
If I were, that would mean
That you'd have somewhere to be
A place you belonged, from which
I'd even be stealing you from
So, do you?"

Aaron swallowed for the nth time
Since he was picked up
But only fought for his words
In less time than it took to conjure them
"Once, I did
But after yesterday
I only had the night and its silence"

"Well" she said, smile fading
But not vanishing
"That's a beautiful place to belong
I believe that we all owe that place
Our hearts and minds
But…what's better
Is to share that place with someone
Who feels not far from you"

Aaron laughed, this time
And she was taken by surprise, this time
Then he spoke, through a small smile

Foreign to hers in a sense
But somehow the same
"If only we were all so fortunate
If only it was so simple"

"And it isn't?"
She tittered
"Look around you, Aaron
Why won't you open your eyes?
Better yet, open more than that
There's others, you know?"

"I do" he said "and part of that
Makes me feel worse"

"Sure, but all isn't lost"
She took a deep breath, slowed down
But didn't quite stop the Mustang
As it continued to roll through
The deep, dark, unmoving night
"I want to show you something"

A chill ran down Aaron's spine
And it wasn't the autumn cold
But something grander
"What?" he asked, barely of volume

"Do you trust me?" She asked
Looking over at him
With those mesmerizing eyes
And that nonexistent, sly smile

"Do I have a choice?"
Aaron scoffed

"Always" she replied

And that smile truly went away
From her lips, that is, from her mouth
And it rose to her eyes
And for the longest moment
That lasted but a heartbeat
Aaron thought she was going to

"Whoa!" he suddenly exclaimed
As she jerked the car off the road
Onto the shoulder, asphalt and dirt
It bounced, it flew, it bucked
And they went along for the ride
She was complacent the whole time
While Aaron, Aaron was speechless
For lack of a better word, because
Wordless was far from what Aaron was
As this young woman seemed to be
Driving them off the edge of the earth

"Here" she whispered
And somehow he heard it
As the Mustang jolted
Over a knoll and lurched to a stop
Just on the other side of it
Atop grass and mud and loam
Tires growling to a hush
Having just laid waste
To a fence of weeds and underbrush
Only to come to a rest, here
Set before a view
Boldly visible even in the night
Beneath so few stars
And a cloud-masked moon

"Where's here?" Aaron asked
His own voice quieted

Because now, at last
He truly was wordless

"Wherever you want it to be"
She said, and keyed off the V8
It rolled on its side
Taking a nap in the engine compartment
Alone in a fashion
But paired with so many components
It was far from alone
"Come on" she said, opening her door
With a pop and squeak of metal
He followed, clumsily so
But he followed nonetheless
Afterall, how could he not?

He watched her for the first time stride
With a complete stature
From head to toe, she moved with
All the grace and all the ineptitude
Of a genuine human being
After being cramped into a car for so long
But how long had so long been for her
And who was Aaron to judge it?
All he could do was observe
Without uttering the slightest inquisition
Her hair moved with her
Long and black and perfect and flawed
Just as her body did, and was
Black jacket splayed open
White tanktop beneath
Fitted jeans on skinny, long legs
She was short, still, but tall
In every aspect of the mind
That hit Aaron full-force
Then domesticated his desires

T W O

To the most basic, the most docile
And he met with her by the front of the car
Where she paused
Just shy of the bumper
And tilted her head the slightest
Hair cascading over to one side
Past her left shoulder, down her bicep

"You know" she said "you haven't even
Asked for my name"
Her voice washed over him
Like a calm, smooth ripple

"Sometimes faces don't need names"
He said, knowing he made no sense
And not caring to correct himself
Mostly because he knew not where to start

"Well" she smiled softly
"My name's Ximena, for the sake
Of your mental appendix"
She watched his facial expression
Contort, not with doubt or confusion
Necessarily, but curiosity
"Ximena Blackwater"

"He-men-uh" Aaron enunciated
Implying the question
But not voicing its intention

"That's right" she smiled
"I'm kind of…mixed…ethnically
That is"

"And mood?"
Aaron raised an eyebrow

This time fabricating the questions
This time rendering her speechless
However brief, however transitory

"Constant" she said
"Although, I've seen things that
Make me think twice
Or, sometimes, not at all"

"What was I to you?" Aaron asked
His expression going bland
"What made you stop and turn around
"To offer me a ride?"

"Oh" she said, bowing her gaze
So that she both looked at him
And somewhere else
"I never stopped, though"
Then she backed into the bumper
Hugging the grille with her thighs
Before leaning back
And reclining onto the Mustang's hood
Scooting up so that her legs
Occupied the metal
And her back took to the windshield
Posture arched comfortably
Gaze reeled back, aimed skyward
Hair fanned out beneath and behind her
In no one direction was it
Nor were her eyes

Aaron, yet again without a thing to say
Decided to join her on the car
So he boarded its hood, albeit awkwardly
Before putting his back to the windshield
And situation his hood down

T W O

To form a kind of pillow
Ximena looked at him with calm eyes
And embers hardly visible
Burning deep inside of them
He looked over at her
Perpetually and briefly
Then relaxed every muscle in his body
Starting with his brain
The greatest of all

"This is quite the place" he said
"Ximena Blackwater"

"I know" she said, and pulled her eyes
Away from his, returning them to the sky
And, occasionally, the view before them
An open field ahead and below
Immeasurably vast it appeared
Speckled with winter-stripped trees
In long, perfect rows
Aisles between them
Even at night the trees could be seen
Even on a night such as this
Such as this, Aaron thought
And what the hell kind of a night was this
After all that had happened
Little to nothing and more than that

"Do you…come here often?"
He asked, not sure of what else to say

"Here, specifically?" she said
"Not really, but I have been here before"

"I sure hope so" he said
Almost chuckled it

"Why's that?"
She asked, looking over at him
Raising an eyebrow, kindling an eye

"Otherwise" he answered
With a reckless smile "you'd have
Just been driving off into who-knows-what"

"Drive anywhere, eventually
And you'll find something"

"Like death, maybe?" he said
Smiling no more
"What if we'd hit a cliff?"

"Then we'd hit air
Say our prayers out loud
Scream, probably, because
That's the human reaction
And then…unless you know
How to fly
And just haven't told me…we'd die"

"You don't sound so fazed"
He said, nullified

"Why should I be?"
She scoffed, smiled all at once
Then rolled onto her side
Propped by an elbow, head tilted
And looked at him
Closer now than she'd been before
Physically, that is
"Are you afraid of death, Aaron?
Because I guarantee you

That wherever it was you were walking
Whatever your direction had been
If any at all
When I picked you up
It was no less than death you'd find"

"That so?"
He said, voice thinning

"It happens to be" she said
Voice no thicker than his
Which clearly took him by surprise

"Then yes" he said after a long pause
"I am genuinely afraid of death
But…I'd gladly welcome it at this point"

"I envy that"
Ximena said, shrugging "well
The first part anyway"

"Why's that?" he asked
Intrigued to say the least

"Because, I'm not"
And they kissed in the same instant
That the words finished leaving her
They both leaned in at once
If ever they moved at all
Lips together, a seal of sorts
Not likely to last
Beyond the time in their hands
Aaron felt her cheek in his palm
Hair coursing over his cold knuckles

Ximena felt stubble on her palm

Chilled skin, shivering
From an array of feelings, no doubt
And she felt his lips, chapped
Taste hers, wet
As their minds spiraled out of reality
Taken hostage by the night, the cold
The hiding moon and stars
The scent of silence in the air
And the flavor of passion
Vacated by reason

When their lips parted
Ximena's jacket had been pushed open
Draping over one shoulder
Exposing multicolored tattoos
That dappled her bicep
But left bare her chest and neck
Aaron's gaze spotted an hourglass
Winged on both sides
And a wolf dancing beneath it
Down her forearm
Which he now exposed
By slowly removing her jacket
Even in the shrill cold of the night
She didn't seem to mind even slightly
Both sleeves went away
Only to reveal others
Far more vivacious, quiet but alive
Aaron saw her other arm
A crimson and teal hydra
Coiling about her bicep
Swimming in a sea of roses like clouds
With yellow buds
And, along her forearm
Black eagles with eyes in their wings
All empty to the struggle of life

T W O

They didn’t need to fight it
For it had long since
Been given to them
And their home was here
Wherever here was, they didn’t care
She felt at home
And so did Ximena Blackwater

“So beautiful” she heard Aaron say
But she wasn’t looking at him
Because her gaze had bowed
Instead focusing on his hands
Which now clutched hers
And she didn’t need to redirect her eyes
To know that he wasn’t looking at her body
When his voice crept from between his lips
But when she did, she saw his gaze
Wrapping around her face
And kissing her mind, her eye

They collided again
Only this time in full
Passion not quite the word
For there was no syllable for it
Only the moment, only the event
A calamity of imperfections
And beauties and solitude

After it was all done
They had boned in ways unimaginable
To anyone outside of them
After it was all done
They needn’t get dressed
For they hadn’t undressed
Not physically, only emotionally
Previous to this night, this moment

Aaron was almost certain that she was
Without emotion, except frigidity
But he was far from wrong
And now he paid for it benevolently

"Do you still welcome it?"
She asked as they laid there still
His hands tracing the contours
Of her body, her face
Even with her clothes on
It was still the greatest adventure
He'd care to ever take

"Death?" He said, without
Looking to her eyes
And he grunted, formulating a reply
Before letting it depart his lips
"No" he finally sighed "but
I won't cower from it"

"Why's that?" she asked
As if beckoning his answer
As if she already knew it

"Because this is possible" he said
"And it reminds me…of other things
In my past, some time ago
Riddled with bad memories
Like splinters in my fucking heart
But…they've happened regardless
And who's to say they won't again?"

She just smiled and held him
"Go to sleep with me" she said
"I want you in my dreams"

3

Wings, she had wings
Not the tattoos, though
But emerging from her
Ximena flew, alright
Somewhere above Aaron
She was above him, and beyond
Was she better than him?
Far from it
They had their own flaws
Their own incredible strengths
One was not without the other

No, not wings
Not from her back or shoulders, that is
But something else, something greater
A halo, maybe? Aaron saw it
A light above her
Surrounding her
She rose skyward
But didn't leave him
He felt warm, he felt complete
Her words stung him
Where it hurt the most
But when the sting faded

It proved heart to Aaron
And he felt, palpably so
Swollen from the inside
That this was not an emotion his
Not entirely his
That this was shared, collective
He wasn't alone
He'd been touched, by her skin
Her eyes, her heart

Did she have a heart?
What was this?

"Where are you going?" he asked
"Ximena, where are you going?"

"Hold onto that" she said in a whisper
"That name, don't let go
But it won't be yours again…accept this"

His eyes glassed "What?" he asked "Why?"
When he should have been asking "Who?"

"My name is but letters
To a puzzle not worth discerning
Who I was to you, though
Who you saw, what you saw
Hold onto that
Because everything you said
Those words I tasted so flavorfully
Were as right as rain
As right as"

Aaron stirred awake at the sound of
Rain pattering metal, and soft earth
Upon which the car rested

THREE

Whereupon he rested, but inside
Behind the wheel, reclined
With his legs awkwardly out the window
He still heard the rain hit first
Before he felt it douse his jeans
And fill his shoes
Whence he jerked his legs back inside
Stuffing them below the steering column
And staring outside
Through the windshield, which
Appeared to be smudged on the outside

"Ximena" he whispered, hardly aloud
And put his hands to the wheel
Fingers lazily dropping over the leather
Feeling clammy but not hot
Sweaty but nor cold
The passenger's side window was up
And now he cranked his shut too

His…but this wasn't his car, was it?
It felt like it, but no
It couldn't be
His memory fuzzed
His being, his mind, his heart
Was a blurred abstract painting
But he wasn't the artist
No, he was far from it
No matter how close he felt
Having somehow grown
Intimate with the colors, the utensils

The night had since lifted
Leaving a musky morning
To seize the daylight, so to speak
And leave Aaron baffled

More than before, even
Albeit with a sense of purpose
However thin-as-thin-ice it felt
A purpose nonetheless

The keys were in the ignition
And he turned them, hearing the V8
Sputter to life, awake as he was
Alone but far from it