



SILHOUETTES

Hayden Ira May

EPHRAIM AND I SPEND THE AFTERNOON FISHING at the pond we claimed for ourselves over time. Across the old truss bridge, hidden, kept from the wind and ornamented with cedars and shining aster, it's a place he and I know to always find each other. We share a couple of smokes and return to the water everything we catch, a cardinal rule of his. When he walks me home in the evening, the soles of our shoes are heavy with clay.

He and I go uphill through town. The houses gleam with orange light in their rooms and on their porches, but the parish church where my mother attends mass remains dark. Its windows are populated with figures of saints and martyrs, all of them lithe, obscure, and converging into a storm the higher I look. The church raised funds for a hearing aid for me when I was a boy. I imagined the saints coming at night to deliver my mother the paper check themselves, shutting it tight inside our mailbox with dim, perforated hands. I told her we should use the money to buy a beautiful black dog.

We did not get a dog. I was fitted for a hearing aid I don't wear anymore.

I continue to the street corner, but Ephraim halts at the church steps, slouches, and opens his fly like he's taking a piss. He looks at me over his shoulder with a grin too wide for his face. I mutter formless curses as I retrieve him and drag him away by his arm. He crows loud enough for me to hear, and maybe God, too.

When we come beneath the large mulberry tree at the edge of my yard, Ephraim tells me something, but with his shoulders backed against the sky, he's a shadow I can't lipread. He signs instead, with hands first bending toward himself, then one falling from his chin, and at last both coming to a low rest, one folded on top of the other as if it was broken or an offering to me: *Have a good night.*

I nod and sign, *Good night*, and step up onto the curb, but he grabs my shirt and pulls me back to the street with a sharp jerk. I topple into him and then right myself, not knowing if I want to laugh or headbutt him. Ephraim leans down to me, our faces meet. He puts his lips to mine, anxiously, alignments askew, our noses and chins crashing.

And then he really kisses me.

His breath, flavored with smoke, pours down the front of me, into my shirt, scalds me. I kiss him back and he binds me to his chest in the bend of his arm. We try to find and ride a rhythm, but our bodies alchemize, become like the saints in stained glass, blurring together in the dark as we climb. His tongue licks wordlessly over mine, my hands spin unknowable signs around his head, and I feel his erection between us, heavy in his slacks like a hammer.

The beams of an approaching car untangle us. In its light, Ephraim's unshaven cheeks and throat are scarlet, about to burn through the collar of his shirt. I retreat to an innocent distance from him, stumbling, hobbled by the heartbeat in my shorts. He shakes his head, a chuckle dissolving his worried look. The car passes. Dusk covers us again.

Ephraim comes to me and assumes the same configuration, bowing, heavy while holding me. I sink into him and feel relief. Rightness. Air after submersion. Reunion of a joint and its limb. "I'm going to hell," I say. He unfolds himself from me, smiles without a wry twist this time. *Same*, his hand rocking like a cradle. We kiss again, and as he leaves, he motions, *Good night, Thomas*, signing my name the way I taught him, close to his chest.

When I first told him my name, I spoke it.

It was at the coffee shop in town, a place with sooty windows and brick floors. I slipped inside to wait out a rainstorm and noticed Ephraim right away: dark untidy hair, severe-looking, hazy from the smoke on his clothes, his bare feet resting on the table in front of him. I approached the store counter and he said something to me that only reached me as vibrations. We questioned each other in a dizzying loop before I finally understood: “Doyouhavealight?” He held up a cigarette.

I blushed. Vermilion, then crimson. He put his feet to the floor and fully turned to me, immense and frightening. I braced myself for injury, invisibility, for him to ridicule me about my voice and deafness, or maybe worse: unsee and forget me.

“Areyoudeaf?” he asked gently, clearly. A question I never hoped for and commonly endured, its answer inviting pity, pain, and endless other interrogations. This time was different, though. A cool-toned mercy in his eyes disarmed me just a little.

I sighed. “Are you always this observant?”

His laughter coiled him into a knot and I laughed with him. When our eyes met again, he asked, “Whatsyourname?”

The day after, I discovered him hunched over the same table in an ocher sweater, hands babbling half-signs in his lap while he read books about sign language. I asked him if he borrowed them from the library. He nodded with his fist and signed with funny, lingering pauses between words: *All they had*.

Ephraim disappears from view.

I withdraw to the mulberry tree, where consequences for what I have done come to mind. Visits from faceless angels. Plagues and woes. Burning sulfur. Heaven is not as potent at night, though. Somehow not as essential. I taste Ephraim’s breath on my tongue, in my nose, a lemony balm smoothed across my mouth and chin. I muse for a little while what I would surrender for him. The list is long.

A shadow roosting in the front window of my house startles me. My mother. Her gaze leaves me colorless, whitens the mulberries above me. The clamor of different, more material consequences crowds my head while she summons me silently, signlessly. I carry myself to the door and meet her in the sitting room. She resembles the grim virgins in the parish paintings; sunken, somber, her pale hair parted around her face. A lamp behind her chair phantomizes her

and casts spears of darkness onto both of us. I stare at her mouth, as much to lipread her as to avoid her eyes.

“Isawyouwithhim,” she says.

No. I pinch the air with my fingers. *Sign with me.* I have little allowance for demands, but she seems off-center, weakened by some mortal wound beneath her gown.

Expressionless, she signs: *I know you understand what you have done.* Her hands never touch her face or each other, words bound in emptiness.

I don't know what you mean. I keep my two fingers in my palm, hold them there to check for a pulse.

Lies, she signs, slashed past her face. *Do you have any shame?*

I'm going to bed. I turn to escape upstairs.

My mother stomps her foot, gouges the hardwood with her shoe. The house shivers. Teeth clenched, she starts again, aims an accusing motion at the window: *That boy —*

Stop, my hands crash together. *You don't know him.*

“I know enough,” she says.

No speech. Please. I scrub an ultimatum into my chest.

She continues, sound spills from her: “You will not / again not ever.”

I can't understand you.

“I raised you to be / nothing / you would choose —”

Stop talking. Fury wobbles up my spine in a current, surges in my arms and fists.

“Too young to know / too far / gone godless,” her lips contort into scribbled shapes.

Stop. Please. Stop.

Every particle between us vibrates with her voice: “Are you / failed you / how could you / unquestionable unnatural —”

An electrostatic cry makes its jump, flashes up my throat and arcs out from me, white, deafening: “Pick up your hands!” The bolt ripples through her. Her eyes brighten. Words move me before I know them and I reach for her. *I want you to understand! Let me help —*

My mother rises from her chair and seizes my wrist in one hand and my elbow in the other. Her grip shackles me. Signs, unfinished, fall from my fingers in pieces, clatter to the floor, and roll into the corners of the room, vanishing. Through tears, I read her face. She knows she

has cut too much. Severed the last ligaments. She clutches me tighter. “Thomasthomasthomas,” she murmurs, and I see how much she means for it to be my name, but it will never be again. Its wings are clipped whenever it is spoken. Her diamond ring, turned inward, carves a long wound down the length of my arm as I pull free from her.

For a splinter of time, I sink through the floor, into the earth below the house, and then I am in darkness. Displaced. Dethroned.

Purgatory.

Ephraim’s bedroom window comes to me in space. I peer within, see him and me collapsed on the carpet of his room among dirty socks, sodapop cans, malt liquor bottles, and pages of notes, questions, answers, messages, and manifestos written to each other when sign language and lipreading are not enough or too much. We lie drunk and dangerously close under the blue-green haze of the television, as we have done many nights, pretending that the careful touches, grazes, glances of limbs, hands, and feet are accidental, hoping that every next touch will be the one that conjures words. Signs. Wonders.

Paradise.

I relive it and all of its variations in flickers, milliseconds of memory, and they inflame me with each pass. The lure to remain here, to indulge in counterfeits I can never lose, to waste myself adoring a shadow of him is so much greater than gravity. But I know I have to leave it. A window in the dark is not a way out.

I’m alone when I return to the little room in oblivion, every chair empty. On the fireplace mantel sits a framed photograph of my father, gone from us. His only lasting influence is that he named me after the disciple of doubt, the one who denied the resurrection until Christ let him touch the holes in his hands. I have no hope those hands could convince me now, save me, let alone sign with me. The words would run right through and be lost.

My mother materializes in the hall at the telephone table. She raises the black handset to her jaw and splits open the phonebook. I watch her and slink toward the stairs. The telephone was never a friend to me before, but under her touch, it’s an instrument of misery, ready to send her voice on a wire to invite more pain upon me.

Or worse.

A revelation propels me through the front door. I dart over the yard, into the street, down the hill, leaving my breath, hope, and ghost beneath the mulberry tree. The telephone poles plot my flight through town as I chase a transmission between them, a call for crucifixion that seethes in the sky above me. I tear past the parish church on its corner and don't stop to see the saints sneering, scattering from their perches to pursue me, wings spread. Vultures.

No time.

I keep running. Cut through gardens of lily of the valley and rose of sharon. Pass two women walking. A man in a car. A boy and his dog. All just negative space. Dark matter. On either side of me, the lights of night spill in neon strokes across the road, and I charge through them. They strip me of totality, every yellow ray rendering half of me a shadow at a different angle. Ephraim will receive me in quarters at his doorstep. If I make it.

No fucking time.

Sprinting. Holes burned into my shoes, I collapse. The gravel walkway in front of his house rips the skin from my knees and palms. Gasping, panting, "Ephraim!" I call, unsure of my tongue, and rise.

Apocalypse greets me.

Ephraim's bedroom lies ransacked, displaced and disassembled around the yard. A temple in ruins. His belongings choke my path to the porch: t-shirts, underwear, socks strewn beneath a catapulted drawer; a guitar, the body bashed in; books, slain, loose pages trampled into the earth. I find his golden knit sweater pooled near the mailbox. I collect and hold it against my ribs. "Ephraim!" I cry.

The front door peels open like a bitter rind. Ephraim's father appears, who clutches a sharp and wide leather belt. He is closely followed by Ephraim's mother, swallowed by a wool blanket, arms tightly crossed. At the end of the stoop, wrapped in shadow, they become indistinguishable.

I ask, "Where is Ephraim?"

"Heisnthere," one of them says, I can't tell which.

"Hewont / hereagain —"

"Please, please, let me explain," I croak from a cavity beyond my lungs where breath will not reach.

“Yourmother / allthatneededsaid / done.” Their slick eyes and teeth gleam with light from the street. I step towards them, cowering, as one approaches animals.

“Where did he go?”

“— findhimyourself.”

“Please.”

His father cracks the belt against the porch post: “— fuckaway / myhouse!”

I leave and their starlike stares pepper me with puncture wounds until I’m gone. I wonder if Ephraim’s departure was similar to mine, or if he was steady as he left, a stoic St. Sebastian pierced with arrows. The roads lose their shape in the dark, become serpentine, pulled and lengthened by the wind. I don’t wander, though. I’m not lost. I go to the old bridge, which has nearly vanished into night, and I cross it. Through the maples, and then the cedars, our pond is a plate of bruise-colored glass. I crawl into Ephraim’s sweater and hide myself at its edge.

Ephraim heard my name when I spoke it to him.

He didn’t know my name until I signed it to him.

In midsummer, he took me here to swim with him, and we were both deaf for as long as we were submerged. The water splashed green onto the clay bank that met our hands and knees when we climbed out, and then he showed me his palm. A fish hook was curled into it deeply. One of mine, discarded from a bluegill I caught the day before. Ephraim reclined against a dry slant of stone and laid his hand in my lap. His nearness and heat melted me, the smell of him, moss, frankincense, drowned me. I pulled the hook loose after a few twists and he never winced, just watched me patiently as he bled, the noon sun coloring his hairy belly and chest amber.

He was more deserving of worship than any other martyr.

Withdrawing his hand from mine, he signed with a grin, *Nice catch, fisherman.*

Sorry, I motioned reflexively. *How is it feeling?*

Better, his smile unmoved by his good palm swiped across his chin.

Your signing is improving, I offered.

Agreed. My signing is good and your fishing is not good.

An easy laugh became words: “Fuck you.” I shook my head and then signed, *You have a lot to learn.*

“Okayokay —” Ephraim rose into a sitting pose, his legs and feet folded between us, his shoulders rolling as he signed, *Teach me something*. The corners of his mouth contemplated another grin.

What do you want to know? My signs were small, held close to me so I could keep myself from touching him, resist spilling into his lap.

How do you sign your name? he asked, his hands cupping the first sign and breaking it like bread. Name signs are sacred, sometimes secret, given to deaf people from deaf people. Mine had been given by my friends Shell, Bev, and Frances from school, and I had given them theirs. The signs became truer names to us than the ones uttered into air.

I only ever shared my name sign with people I loved.

I signed it once for Ephraim, a heartbeat glowing on my palms, and let it pass from me to him like slow light. He gathered it to himself, mirrored it devoutly near his collarbone. I nodded, breathless, and he signed it again, and as he turned it in his hands, it turned something else in him, and in me. A key spun right, a latch released from its strike.

I wander toward sleep, waiting for him, and nightmares come instead. Ephraim appears to me in semidarkness, the only thing made of any color. He kisses me beneath the mulberry tree and signs, *Why are you crying?* Kisses me again and signs, *Who are you looking for?* with his thumb on his chin, forefinger like a hook. We are not alone. The saints are a hundred silhouettes with lightning-white eyes, circling us, gathering in the air and in the windows of my house with my mother, all of them anxious to cut us into pieces with their belts and diamonds.

I startle into a green gloom, everything undefined, the trees and clouds and stones still emerging from their own dreams. I uncrumple myself carefully from the hollows my shoulders and hips left in the earth. Standing, then straightening, my bones whimper into place. I go to the path, step into and follow Ephraim’s old footprints with the ease of instinct, and amble up through the cedars, led by something close to faith.

The steel beams of the bridge seem more precious to me than before, more tenuous, like the slow spin of the sky toward morning could be enough to break them. I plant myself where the bridge’s wooden deck meets the dirt road. What is there to return to across the way? Houses, coffee and bottle shops, a parish church — places too small and lightless to keep me. So I stay

and wait. I wait while the dark creeps back to shelter, while robins and waxwings come and go on the cool air, and dew sinks into my shoes.

I wait and wait for him to come.

And he does.

Ephraim takes shape on the far side of the bridge, faint and swaying, breath pouring from him like fog. He staggers to a halt and steadies himself on one of the low and leaning beams. “Hey,” I say to him, but the distance swallows my voice, and he remains at the end of all things, not hearing me.

I laugh and call louder. “Hey!”

He jolts as if waking, sees me, and begins to cross. A howl from him reaches me first and it rocks me, levels the hills, breaks every window, deafens God and all of heaven. His run broadens into leaps, feet glancing the bridge in swift strokes, and he approaches as a warm shadow, one becoming more and more real.