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### OUT OF MY HANDS

In March of 2008, I sat in the back of a dimly lit room. At the front, from a hand-worn lectern, a renowned poet read selections of his work: a special privilege of the MFA program in which I was enrolled. The light was his. I sat next to the woman who would one day be my wife. She was listening. He read, but I could barely hear him. I was sobbing. Uncontrollably.

I sat. And I sobbed.

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It was a January afternoon shortly after winter break. The school day was over when, as I rose from my desk, there was a knock on my opened classroom door. Two of my former students surprised me with their joy. A month earlier, my "kids" had one of their own. That afternoon we stood inside my open doorway, their happy and healthy little bundle of smiling spit bubbles cradled in my arms.

Both were archetypical high school "screw ups." Both had possibly spent more days stoned than not. Both often worked beneath their potential. Both had home lives that strained the credulity of the word home. He graduated because I, and others, dragged him kicking and screaming towards a cap and gown. She needed both carrot and stick to recognize how much she could accomplish in life before she switched schools. Both needed their asses to be lovingly kicked on more than one occasion, and I was happy to oblige.

Now they were different. In less than a year they were so very different. Sober. Grounded. And most of all beaming with pride. I couldn't tell who was smiling more: the father or his son sleeping in my arms.

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The dim room was filled with people unable to see what was collapsing behind them, an emotional implosion. I sat, chin pressed to my chest, legs prayer-curved beneath the cushioned seat. Behind my fist, no one could see my face or what rivered down my cheeks, my lips. The fluids

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matting my facial hair. Perhaps they could hear. I tried not to make a sound and failed miserably. But I didn't care. My classmates were supposed to be rapt by the words of the famous poet standing before them, not the choked, stifled gasps of the fledgling poet sitting behind.

The woman who would be my wife noticed and got me a tissue. She didn't ask.

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During the last week of February, as winter began to retire, another knock came on my open classroom door. It was the middle of the day; the bell had just rung, and my kids were settling down to work. I told them to quiet down and get started before I was forced to strangle one of them as an example to the rest: our shared joke about parents never finding their bodies.

I turned to the door. A colleague ushered me beyond the liminal space between class and hallway. Her face, concerned, did not tell me enough. I was wanted in the office: two former students were asking for me; she didn't remember their names. As I began to ask her if they could come back after school, to explain that I was busy, she cut me off and said they had lost their baby.

"Lost their baby? Where, in the school? How?"

"No," she said. "Their baby died."

(February 25, 2008)

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I don't remember leaving my class, or what I told my kids to do. I don't remember asking my colleague to watch them, though I assume I did, or what I told my class when I returned. But I remember them knowing something was wrong, reading it in my face. I remember them not asking, even though they wanted to. They cared for me as much as I cared for them.

I had walked them through the minefield of asking out secret crushes and breaking up with those who vowed suicide if they were ever left alone. I interrupted the classrooms of teachers who publicly shamed them, and

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hid, in my coat, their developmentally delayed per squirrels from school administrators. I stood before their employers, when they skipped school one too many times, and between them and the drug dealers wanting retribution for deals gone bad. I sat with them after they met fathers for the first time and while they wrote goodbye letters as fathers were dying. I sat beside them on cold tile as they sang to their confused, medicated siblings in locked psych wards and held them, crying in my arms, as their mothers stormed away, disowning them on the harsh carpet of my classroom.

And I stood holding their barely four-week old son.

My class couldn't understand. I couldn't tell them that on that day, I sat with two of my older students in the office of a principal I hated, trying to find words. Words of comfort. Words of explanation. Words to answer the question, "Henry, should I go to the funeral home to wash and dress my baby for the last time, or let a stranger do it?" And more broadly, "Henry, what do we do?"

I held their hands.

That weekend, I sat at the wake for their child, holding a funeral program in my hands. The autopsy held no answers, and some felt the silence must be filled. I sat and listened to the words of a family friend: "heaven has another angel;" "everything happens for a reason." I rolled the program between my palms and listened to the words of a pastor. He recited John 3:16—*for God so loved the world, He gave His only son...*—not as a call for conversion, but as an explanation for her empty crib. Funeral program clenched in my fist, I sat listening to all manner of criminal comfort, waiting.

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At the back of that dimmed room, I sat beside the woman who would be my wife, listening to a poet read "Four Prayers" for a mother, four seasons of grief after the death of her son. Spring. Summer. Fall. And then Winter.

And I sat. And I sobbed. And I stared into my empty hands.