

IN THE BEGINNING

True or False: There are many different Angels of Death.

True: Some of their names translate as “Help from God” or “Destroyer” or “Blindness of God.”

By the time I met you, the Angel says, I had stopped promising anything to anyone. The Angel sends me an emoji of a pirate flag and a star; a bomb, a bee, a skull; a buck in profile, a black heart. In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Levi asserts that “everything Satan does is for the sake of heaven.” When another rabbi preached a similar idea in his town, it is said that Satan came and kissed his knees. Mostly earthbound by an ankle bracelet after getting tased by a cop, the Angel spends long clouds of time now on the roof, looking at the moon. I recall looking out the open windows of my white car with great peace, lounging in the backseat while the Angel went to cop cocaine. I recall deeply loving our city of bridges that spring just after high school—I loved each steep dip that North Side street took to the river, those brick row houses nestled cheek to cheek. The Angel came back with heroin. That was the first time. What did I say then. The Angel must have promised it would be okay. I must have chosen to believe him. Someone says there are six Angels of Death: two angels escort a person home from evening prayer—one good, one evil; during a plague, an Angel of Death will walk in the middle of the road. My Angel lays naked on a mansion’s roof, asking me again about the next full moon. I don’t know anything about the moon. One Angel of Death was created by God on the second day of earth. For a few days, I try not to speak to the Angel and outside my window, a black-eyed Susan appears to be on fire, twin flames on its petaled head, burning without burning. How does the line go in that movie about the vagabond in the desert, looking for his family.... *I wanted so bad to see him, I no longer dared to imagine him.* There is in fact a Hebrew prayer for the moon, a Hebrew prayer for thunder. Have you heard the one about Rabbi Yehoshua, who tricked an Angel of Death? That particular Angel of Death was showing the rabbi his place in paradise, lifted him up, and Rabbi

Yehoshua jumped! And fell “into that other side, thereby escaping into paradise.” Some discussion was had regarding oaths and it was agreed: Rabbi Yehoshua could stay in paradise. *At least give me my knife back*, said the Angel of Death. Rabbi Yehoshua did not want to return the knife, but then A Divine Voice emerged and said *Give it to him.... Death is the way of the world.*

I hear that faith takes courage and also, that by its nature, it is blind. Full of eyes, an Angel is only a messenger.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALLEGIANCE, PART 1

When the Angel calls, I stare at his illuminated name and let it pass. It is late and has been years and when I see his name, I know he is holding a gun. Someone once teased me for “the ridiculous allegiance to truth” in my poems. I call him back: the Angel is holding a gun in the woods and drunk, the Angel’s tone, mistakable for happiness, reels like once-thought-lost dogs do in viral videos, hurling their bodies into the bodies of their owners... it is not happiness. But not unhappiness. *I’m going to put a few rounds into the night*, the Angel says and I listen to the shots. The Angel has called out of nowhere because *You Capital K Know me*, he says. Turns out he’s been turning back to who I first knew by strobe light, by playgrounds with forties in backpacks, by dime bags and whippets and waiting for heroin. So much of addiction is waiting. In the mythology I’ve made of our addiction, the Angel is tattooed with wings where wings should be. The nights we slept with the clumps of other teens on a stained carpet, squatters in the house on Juliet Street, stray kittens trying to stay warm, I slept half on my back, the Angel half on his stomach, one arm tossed over and tucked under my body. A blackout of wingspan. I should try to say more of the world that was outside the one we lived in, but this is a story about addiction, and that’s addiction—the story you tell yourself, to be able, for awhile, to live through it. It’s part of my ridiculous allegiance to the truth—it’s true: of course the Angel has wings. My neighbor with a face like a clotted pillow howls back at the thunder needlessly from the shed in the rain, then laughs and laughs. Even before the pandemic, he did things like this but now, two months in, my neighbor also yells things like *We’re all gonna die!* then laughs and laughs. It is spring, and everywhere, the new word is “shelter.” *Come here*, the Angel says. *Here*, as in, *to this new church of wound*. His possible track marks come unspoken through the phone like a mouth slow against my neck, the way you might lean your cheek against a very young child, asleep in your arms.

DEATH IS A HOUSE, THE ANGEL SAYS

The summer we were 22, the Angel and I often hid out in the threshold of a certain mausoleum, snorting coke, stilling ourselves against its smooth marble columns. In the wet dawn, startled awake to deer grazing close, unafraid, watchful. Each steady eye reminded me of a Magic 8-Ball, the toy you could hold in your hands as a child to ask a question to, then shake gently, turn, and wait for an answer lifting upwards from the dark. *Without a doubt*, it could say. It could say: *Better not tell you now*.

FAITH

In the Angel's favorite show, a scientist takes his grandchild into—beyond—all possible realities: a planet that eats itself; a god challenging the scientist to a duel. A fake white orchid curves along the edge of the flat screen. *Are you still watching?* the TV asks. I am still watching. I am writing about the Angel only after asking permission, only after promising not to paint him in a bad light. He shaves himself neatly, nearly hairless. His wings ache chronically, too roughed by cops in the last arrest. His hair, blonde; his cheekbones, of course, very sharp; his eyes a clear sky's epitome. *Money is like weather*, the Angel says, bugging me to buy crypto. He tells me about his ancient ties in Egypt, in Italy. Alone in the mansion, he drifts from room to room photographing family artifacts: an embroidered crest, a cracked bell, an oil painting of someone he resembles holding their first child. He is explaining again the work of creating a gun, naming the pieces out loud by drawing each in the air. I follow his hands, tattooed with stars, with the area code of our hometown. I think of his name haunting my teenage journals, how he was always something I wanted to be alone with. In mansion's basement, we lay on our bellies as he teaches me to shoot a pellet gun towards a propped-up mattress. We bow our heads when the pellets ping back towards us in their missing.

ONE ENDING

In the light rain, the Angel drives us to a columbarium in Homewood, his car smelling of energy drinks and chicken bones, of sweat and iron. The Angel does not say who he is looking for, and I do not ask; he takes my hand as we enter. He leans against my neck and inhales. Cream marble walls, gold plaques to mark the names of ashes. Rust-colored water like a dropped shawl pooling slick where the roof has leaked. *But there's so much left still of our story,* Alice shouted in tears. The rabbit in his hospital gown, the watch in his pocket coughing up blood, then gone; *all I want is more time with him. Perhaps,* said the cat to Alice, *that is the story.*

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