Soft Hands

Jared Buchholz
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Poetry • Jared Buchholz

A porch. A wooden swing. We’re wearing jackets. Mine blue. Yours jean. You’re sniffling. I’m shaking. Autumn’s just about gone. Our hands do a dance while the fingers warm and interlock and talk through feeling. And when my index finds the callous above the knuckle crease of your right thumb, you say, “It’s from drawing.” And I wonder, “Have I never felt something like this?”

Her fingers.

Elegant. Skeletal. I imagine her hand as an old tree, thriving alongside an untouched stream. Can you hear the water? The movement? And life moves, soaking earth, and deep roots drink and drink, and the green leaves, the branches from which they cling, these are the lines in the valley of her palm.

But my fingers are fleshy. Stubs. More skin than bone. One time I caught the cat staring at them, licking her tongue. She’d mistaken them for sausages. I told her, “No. You cannot eat my fingers.” However, it’s my right pinky—crooked, veering from the ring—that most disturbs me. The odd angle is the result of a headfirst slide into second base. I was fifteen.

A memory.

During that same year, in the front yard of the family cabin, my grandpa and I will chop wood together. My axe head will stick, caught on log. And I will fail and fail and I will sweat in November snow. When I take off my gloves, I’ll say, “Papa, they’re slipping.” And he’ll glance up at Pennsylvania sky and grin at me with his three teeth and declare, “You can tell a man by the callouses he’s got.”

After we finish, when he reaches out and shakes my hand, when I feel the hardness of his skin, my hand will withdraw, snap back. Turtlehead into shell. He’ll look confused. I’ll feel too foolish to explain.

My leg pushes. The swing’s chain scrapes against itself. And I feel at
ease. And I hear voices. “It’s almost Halloween,” you say. But I cannot see the party-goers through the shrubs and small trees. Silence. A passing vehicle. The brake lights. Overbearing. Our fingers and toes are now numb. I smell firewood in your hair.