

Good Bones

by Austen Walker

We are walking past a white house with green shutters when my mother tells me she is grieving me. It is a nice house. Old, good bones. I touch my ribcage, re-cuff my jeans, reassure myself: I am not a ghost.

For some reason—I couldn't tell you why—when I go for a walk while the temperature hovers around forty degrees, my thighs begin to itch uncontrollably. Is there something in the air? I focus on the feeling and tune out my mother. I know how badly she wanted a baby girl and this is why I do not interrupt as she tells me my new pronouns represent a death. I reach down and scratch at my leg. I walk faster. Someone approaches on the pavement and we cross the street so we do not catch the virus. Real death looms over our heads: her medical practice, my online classes and the news headlines that vibrate in our pockets. I am wearing a mask, she is not.

My mother has been seeing a psychotherapist twice a week. Wednesdays and Fridays. Grief: this is the word she keeps repeating to me. She never learned to process sadness as a child and now it is coming out all at once, now that I have come out. She told her psychotherapist, she tells me, how deeply sad she is to have lost her daughter. I stop, stand on the crack in the sidewalk that's birthing young dandelions. I hook one ankle over the other. I reassure myself once more: I am not a ghost.

Months later, I call my mother from the wooden floor of an old Chicago apartment. I can feel it underneath my ischia as if my bones are screwed into the concrete. I beg her to help me get surgery. *It will help me not want to die*, I tell her, and it feels so true. She says things about mental illness and things about regret. I say things I regret. I say it is her fault for making me this way and her responsibility to fix me. I hang up and do not call back. When I finally mention it again, sitting on the bristly red rug in her living room, she confesses her fear: that it is our bodies that connect us as mother and daughter. It is our bodies that make us complete and make us love each other. She is more vulnerable than I have ever seen her. Her psychotherapist must be so

proud. As for me, I keep my eyes on the floor. I crack my neck, my back, my fingers. I don't know what to say to convince her. My breasts do not make me her child. My trapezii and my stomach are in knots. If I could step out of my flesh I would in a heartbeat. My heart has always beaten too fast. We already do not share a body, I want to tell her. Underneath it all, it is our skeletons that look alike. My heart has always beaten for her.

When I finally get my surgery, I set up a monthly payment plan with the hospital so I can afford my co-pay, an amount less than my mother spends each month to maintain her 1924 house: worth it, because it is baby blue and beautiful. Because it is her home, because it has good bones.

The payment plan is for seventeen months. The black binder keeps me from filling my lungs. My ribcage bruises from the pressure. I have never loved my body like this before. It has never felt like home. I turn my head to the wooden wainscoting and the lead-painted radiator and the cracked window glass. I turn my head to my mother, who did not want me to do this and yet is sitting in the red chair. I think: I'm worth fixing, too.