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Holding Back

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HOLDING BACK

Nick Bilich

I pour my oatmeal dry into a bowl, little clouds
of flavoring and sugar billow as it all crashes
into the bottom, microwave at two minutes HIGH.
The toaster shoots my pieces of honey oat bread
onto the counter, squares burned to a good crunch.
I sip my coffee and let the sweet and bitter mingle
on my tongue.

—America is at war.

My car is warm now, ice framing the long sweeps
of windshield wipers, the early commute always cold.
On KCBS: “150 civilians killed today in...”
—Jesus, that’s the whole office. Switch to the hymns
of Damien Rice, a thin smile for the sun as it shoots
over the hills. I look at her face, bronzed in the morning.
She leans out her car window—“That attack in Iskandariya,
isn’t Mark Kinsley’s son there?”

I love how her breath steams at this temperature.

This place always smells of dark roast, the pungent
tropical breeze of cubical air fresheners. Everyone always aglow
with the blue sheen of a laptop. Jenette says Mark isn’t
going to be in today, “He’s going through family
issues,” and answers line six before giving details.
At my desk, the first email, “PRAY FOR MARK,”
a PDF attachment of the article—“the U.S. military found
the bodies of 14 men, hands tied behind their backs, shot
in the head in a mass grave, believed to have been the work

of al-Qaeda.” At lunch, we talk about the company softball game, how Doug could play better at third if he cut the habitual morning bear claw and mocha. Everyone laughs, and Tracy adds how Mark saved the game with his triple against McKinntrick Lumber—the laughter stalls. We sip our coffee, look at our shoes, go back to our desks one by one. Driving home,

there are kids playing football in the rain, like our boys used to. All of them tan with earth, like a desert people, wearing their soaked shirts upon their heads like turbans. Even over the hum of traffic, I can hear them yell as the boy running is brought down, and the rest pile on, howling, grinning, teeth blackened from mud.

We watch Saturday Night Live, talk about the salmon we cooked on the gas Weber, drink Pinot until we’re sure we can’t be holding anything back. Then we talk about the sunset I saw on the drive home, how I wanted her, how there was no service when she tried to call me. We lay together on the futon and say nothing, flipping between channels of burning trucks and statistics. After she leaves for bed, I pick up the phone to call him, but it’s busy. I fill my glass and watch the purple legs drip down, swirl the dark juice and sip, slowly falling asleep to Brit Hume’s monotone.

—*Our country is at war.* 