

Solstice Studies

The bodybuilder was enormous. He'd stack plates on bars, pick them up, then put them down like a Stone Age hero. He never spoke and everyone stayed out of his way. But on the last day of summer, he pushed Steve Malthorp through a window and dangled him from the balcony with one hand. When they first came together the building shook and felt like it was cracking beneath you. Their quick grapple came as a suckerpunch of silence that made everyone stop what they were doing. You tried to watch but the sun through the window came at you too fast, like the thing that happens before a concussion. It was never really a contest and Malthorp, the Olympic wrestler, wide and full of storms, glided easily through the glass. From far away it looked slow and unreal, like the bodybuilder was reversing archeology and putting man back into ice. As he held Malthorp, you sensed something casual and sharp from another season, which let you know summer was finally over. He opened his hand and Malthorp flipped backwards and fell thirty feet into the end of August.

Breaker's Kaddish

In 1983 ten members of the Israeli wrestling team were killed when their driver slipped into a shallow sleep and their van jumped the overpass, fell twenty-eight feet, and sank into the ocean. Only Ziv Levy, who was sitting in the front seat, survived. He went through the windshield and landed safely on the sidewalk. He had known his teammates all his life. He had been to their Bar Mitzvahs, eaten endless meals with their parents, and had even kissed some of their sisters in high school. Lying on the asphalt, blood spilled from his mouth. Whenever he tried to move, something in his ribs kept crumbling into smaller bits. The bones of his wrists felt like boiling water. And yet he lived. It took months, but he came back stronger than ever. He spent every day lifting weights, jumping rope, and wrestling students from the university. He ate five meals a day, gorged on ancient grains and secret soups. He spoke as little as possible and slept with prostitutes. He felt depressed whenever he bought groceries. He longed for the days when a great chorus of laughter would leave him holding his side. Late one night, he walked to the beach. There he watched two harbor fishermen pull nets from the surf, disco blaring from a battered tape deck. Ziv turned away and saw a boy and his girlfriend dancing on the sand to the music. His shirt was unbuttoned and she wore a black dress. As they swung in slow motion she seemed to whisper into his ear, *Like this, like this.*

Why a Scar Is Better than Being Good at Swordfighting

The soccer player who was bitten by a shark has a scar that sits under his eye like a spiny fossil. He gets all the girls because it makes him look tough; they can see how violence failed on him, how it only managed to glide against his face in a weak splash. He kicks winning goals, he gets perfect grades, and to make matters worse, he's a really nice guy. He's kind and thoughtful and speaks quietly as if he's always discussing the delicate childhood of someone nearby. You make everyone laugh with impressions of your professors and your ventriloquist act with a sandwich, but that's about all you've got. You're old enough to understand that funny always loses to a scar. At night you stare in the mirror and think about giving yourself one, just to even things up. A quick swipe with a knife could mean years of girls, but you worry about how far to take the blade, or if the bleeding will stop on its own. You'd probably go too deep, puncture an artery; or you'd go too shallow for stitches and end up bandaged and embarrassed, known forever as a fraud. But the real problem is you wouldn't know how to live under a scar—how to act, how to stand, what to say when people ask about it. Instead you try to carve your initials in the wood frame above the window. As you slice away, the blade goes hot in your hand and the letters break in half on the grain.

David Naughton At Midnight, Full Moon, etc.

Shelly Beecher was so metal: pregnant in 9th grade, smoking on the grass behind the lockers in her Iron Maiden t-shirt. Her boyfriend, Tom Moody, was a senior, and he had muscles and a moustache and a car with no muffler that jackhammered across the parking lot every morning. One day in class you let her copy your *Great Expectations* quiz and after that you never saw her again. It didn't take long for Tom Moody to get a new girlfriend; she was blonde and wore dresses with skulls on them, and when they kissed against his locker, she'd put both hands on his face. You hoped she would destroy him quickly. The night the moon did something it does every three thousand years, all the members of a famous hard rock band were killed when their tour bus flew off the freeway and exploded in an empty field behind the miniature golf course. On the news, smoke tumbled from the twisted knots of scattered fuselage, and firemen ran relays with hoses around giant burning dragons. Paramedics knelt over bodies as policemen took notes and the cameraman trained his lens on a tennis shoe in the bushes. Behind the reporter, a girl in a bikini with wet black eyes emerged from a patch of smoking debris to wander in circles in the ash. A few hours later, while cleaning your parents' pool, you pulled a mouse from the drain and set it down in the grass. Crushed by the press of water, it gasped and steadied itself in the moonlight. You wanted it to dart back into the night but it didn't; it just stared straight ahead like it was waiting for you to do the same thing. You still can't remember who moved first.

Summer At Pitch 77

In late June at dusk, everyone was a silhouette playing with a dog on their lawn. But when the daughter of the doctor let the straps of her swimsuit fall off her shoulders, that's when the summer finally started. When you got in a fight with the kid across the street and he slashed your face with chickenwire, your dad gave you a sip of brandy, wrapped your head in gauze, and the two of you sat on the couch playing chess like a wounded Russian general and his trusty medic. You were too young to be a contender, but you wanted her to see you injured; you wanted to walk past her house the next day, bandaged like the street celebrity. But Jack Marobi, who played guitar on his driveway with a hazy smile under feathered hair, stole the spotlight when he got caught breaking into the sporting goods store and dedicated his crime to her on the evening news. Even though he ended up going to jail for seven months, you wished you had thought of it first. In July she worked for the Senator and later she'd go to that college in Massachusetts, never to come home again, even when her dad cured a terrible disease and television cameras lined up outside their house for two days. Before August ended you fell in love with Leslie Miley, who moved from Georgia and swam out back with your sister; thought maybe if you got hit by a car, there was an outside chance she might love you. When the nights grew shallow and school was ready to start again, you wondered if in his cell Jack Marobi knew the season was over; if he would lie in bed in the dark and listen to the sounds of summer turning to static.