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After

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Melissa King Rogers

AFTER

After, you'll save scraps of paper, their babbled alphabet of baby names, sounds round as a kept pebble on your tongue, catalogue of open vowels cased in consonants delicate as egg shells. You'll keep marked-up calendars as almanacs, erasures & strike-throughs like passport stamps: *see how far this time*—fourteen, sixteen, eighteen weeks—checkered flags whose good news you'll come to guard against with each new heartbeat gone under the ultrasound probe's pressed fist, womb a blown iris in grey terrain like a lunar still. You'll sift doctors' silences, vague jargon (*just getting another look*), gentle harbingers to a death knell. In time, you'll knuckle up & scan the screen yourself for life. You'll study the fetal heartbeat's underwater flutter, feeble as tiny mollusks swept ashore at the Gulf, burrowed in sand & seafoam, each a naked tongue pulsing like a raw nerve in your palm. As a child you held one open & killed it by mistake. Its taut grip snapped. Pearled enamel dangled from a fleshed hinge like a thumbnail ripped to the quick. After each D&C, each D&E, your body's pried open, raked clean, a wet ache, a story stopped short.