

APERTURE

Optics: An opening, usually circular, that limits the quantity of light that can enter an optical instrument.

1.

I have seen my brother's eyes very few times. Eye contact is always brief—he tries to escape it whenever possible. Watching is an act of great importance for him. Merely glancing at him is an offense. Looking at him intently could result in a tantrum. His tantrums are huge, vocal, physical attacks. He is the unstable element: eyes like lithium. *Just look at it and it will explode.* Flashes of dark brown—flecks of gold—or is it the way the light shines off them? What I know I've stolen through the years.

84 In a yellowed photo of my brother taken a month after his birth, his pale face is blank, his pupils wide in the dim light. It's a close-up: just his face and shoulders. The dark afghan my mother made is wrapped around him loosely, fuzzes up around his chin. No one is holding him. He looks calm. A deeper perspective is impossible—the room blurs behind him. I think of the birth I wasn't alive to witness.

My mother is glistening and exhausted beneath the high ceiling of their living room. Strands of her long, dark hair stick to her forehead and broad cheeks. She's delirious with pain. My father has a hand on her round stomach and a hand pressing open a medical book—he's sweating too, glancing between her face, the book, a clock chiming on the wall. It's been thirty-six hours, and still no baby boy. Thirty-six hours is too long. They know that much. Too late to find a midwife, too poor to pay for a hospital. She has to push harder. *I wanted my hands to be the first hands to hold all of you*, my father often told us, *I wanted you to know the hands that would protect you.*

When my mother finally contracted Micah from her body, he didn't make a sound. Slick with blood and membrane, he stared around the room, but took in nothing. Our mother was too drained to lift him. My father wrapped him in blankets and laid him on the bed between them. Micah didn't cry until she touched him.

2.

Autism is marked by abnormal introversion and egocentricity. Autism is not a personality disorder. It is a developmental disorder with a spectrum of symptoms so varied as to be almost individualistic. Emotional expression varies. Verbal skill varies. If you've met one person with autism...you've met one person with autism. Not all autistic people are idiot savants. Not all autistic people are mentally retarded. No one knows what creates autism. No one can bring it to light. Not all lights can be adjusted. Not all lights can help you to see. If autism could create photographs, each one would be overexposed. A light strong enough to burn us to it. Pictures that needle the nerves.

3.

My mother was pregnant when she met my father. She was early on, so neither of them knew it. Micah was the culmination of a two-year love between my mother and a man named Jamie. He was from a well-off Sacramento family, deep in law and politics. She worked behind the counter of a Dairy Queen part-time while she studied at the university. It took her two months to say a word to him. She still smiles when she tells me this, shaking her head. A month before she met my father, Jamie broke up with her, said they got along too well, not enough charisma, etc. My father said he liked the way she stirred the shakes and asked her out.

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She learned she was two months pregnant. She told my father and he said, "Marry me."

"But it's not your baby."

"Marry me anyway."

But then Jamie came back onto the scene. He said he didn't love her but he didn't want an illegitimate child haunting his future political career. My mother told him she would marry my father, and then Jamie wanted her. He wanted to fight my father.

It's the famous scene with the two men in a yard with their fists clenched like fleshy bouquets. My father said, "You're going to fight me, rich boy? Think for a minute. How many fights have you been in? How many fights do you think I've been in?" My father worked construction, his tanned arms and shoulders, it seems, always tense beneath a swath of dirt or dust. Jamie sunk into silence, turned away.

The marriage took place in a park; everyone in embroidered muslin with flower wreaths in their hair. In the wedding slides there is a picture: my

mother in a sunspot, looking down at her belly, swollen like a moon over her bare feet. She holds my father's hand. He is in a shadow, his wild hair and eyes as dark as curling leaves. He is looking just out of the frame to something disconcerting in the distance.

4.

Turn away. It's easy to turn away. It's much easier than looking directly. Don't look here. *Don't look at me.* He walks quickly with his head down, arms stiff at his sides, moving back and forth, mechanically. Or he paces. He paces around the room sometimes and is unable to stop. Unable to stop making repetitive motions and sounds, fragments of sentences, noises that have no connection to the context (screech, yelp, pop, clap). He hits himself in the head. *Stupid. Retard.* When strangers come, he keeps to the corners, twitching and grinning wide, but unable to approach. Afraid to approach. The strangers I mean. Are afraid to approach. They don't know what he'll do. They don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. It's embarrassing. I'm embarrassed for him, for them, for myself. A brave stranger holds out his hand and walks toward Micah slowly, speaking evenly, as if he were a stray dog let in to the house. My father says, amused, "Say hi, Micah." Micah grins like a stray dog let into the house. I turn away. It's easier to turn away.

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5.

I was born. A year later, Mount St. Helens erupted. Ash covered my parents' land and made it fallow. They moved to the city. My father got a job working construction. Days they argued about the money they didn't have, and nights he stayed out later and later. My sister, Jasmine, was born. Then Mileah.

We couldn't survive on his paychecks. Our mother got a job waitressing nights at Pancake Corner, hoping she'd make enough to help. She'd come in late, smelling of nickels and butter, and kiss our elbows to check if we were sleeping. There was no way to tell her what was happening when she was gone.

My father came home each day from the job site red-eyed and slow, landed heavily on our dying sofa, and untied his construction boots one notch at a time. We were allowed to play in the yard if it wasn't raining, and to watch TV if it was. Then he'd drink and keep drinking. If we were quiet enough, he'd pass out in the shifting blue light of the television screen and we could brush our teeth, tiptoe to bed, and lie awake waiting for our mother to come home. We were safe when our mother got home.

Sometimes I pretended to sleep when she came into my room. Sometimes I sat up to say hi, and she'd shush me back down.

"How was your night?"

"Good," I'd say.

6.

What I mean to say is my father beat him. Almost every day. It became ritual: my brother would begin his questions, or rock, or mumble, or laugh to himself. This would be the perpetuate. I always come back to this: the undertones of fault. *Micah is the perpetuate.* This is not my voice. This is the voice of my father explaining himself again. Micah is downstairs in his room, shaking. Mom is at work, so she can't wedge herself between them like she does when she's home. It got out of hand. It always gets out of hand. And then my father comes to find us girls to explain that he loves us all. *When your mother told me she was pregnant I was happy. Even when she told me it wasn't my baby, I was happy. After Micah was born, he went with me everywhere. Everyone told me what a handsome boy he was. He used to ride on my shoulders in the woods and laugh the whole way. But your brother has problems. He makes things hard—you know how hard he makes everything. And I'm so tired; I just don't have the patience. And then he just won't stop, you know? I don't mean it to get out of hand, but he keeps at me...and besides, who knows how much he remembers—understands?* My father is lovely when he's calm. So strong and lovely. He lifts the air to make us believe. This is the voice of the magician, who could wave his hand and be kind or cruel. Who could carry us on his back, or bare his teeth.

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I've heard the story so many times it has become myth. My brother is not my brother, but the archetype of brothers. We heard of him in a bedtime story. We keep him shut. Light never falls on him. I can pace around the violence of the room, the small opening of my memory, create a myth that I can walk away from: The Myth of the Boy Raised by Wolves: The Myth of the Coward: the story in which I am transformed into a tree. *Who knows how much he remembers—understands?* My roots digging down into silence.

7.

Cowardice is marked by ignoble fear in the face of danger or pain. Autistic people have an atypical sense of, and response to, fear. My brother is terrified if you approach him unannounced, but might walk into interstate traffic if no one is there to redirect him. Autism is not caused by bad parenting. It is thought

to be the result of abnormal brain development, particularly in the cerebellum and limbic system. Abnormal brain development can be caused by most anything and often doesn't result in autism. Danger and pain can be caused by most anything and often doesn't result in cowardice. Cowardice is an adjustable opening in one's psyche that limits the amount of light that can enter.

8.

I don't remember how it started, if there was anything to start it. My father came home red-eyed and wired, ready for a fight. Micah said something, did something. I don't know. I can't remember. I grabbed Jasmine and Mileah and ran up the stairs with them to my room—stayed there holding their heads to my shoulders, covering their ears so they couldn't hear. I heard everything but couldn't make a complete scene of it: clips of violence without context: wailing, falling, scraping, yelling, something wooden against the wall. My brother against the wall. They moved around the house in a circle, my father approaching, my brother retreating, until they reached my brother's room, just below mine, where the worst of it rose up through the floorboards—fist to rib to back to thigh, the breath knocked out of him and knocked out of him, a choking sound, a dense thud.

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Then it stopped, suddenly, like a sharp exhale. I heard my father's boots across the living room, out the front door, the door slamming shut behind him. I let my hands drop to my sides. Jasmine and Mileah slumped against each other, whimpering. I pulled a blanket from my bed to cover them, then edged my way carefully down the stairs, the lit hallway, to Micah's room. When I opened his door, a sliver of light pointed across the dark to his pale form crouched in the corner—head between his knees, one arm over his neck, the other reaching up, flat-palmed and trembling.

I stood there a while behind the light without telling him it was me—without giving him reason to uncoil. I knew beneath his lids his eyes were swollen from crying, and I did nothing. The light opened him to me—a narrow slit adjusting in my psyche—and I was a silhouette, watching his skinny arm raised toward my shadow.

"It's just me," I said, finally. When he heard my voice he let his arms down slowly. "I'm just here to see if you're okay." He dropped his arms down completely then looked up, glossy-eyed, to a spot above my head—the light? Does he see me at all? *Who knows how much he remembers—understands.*

"Yeah," he said finally.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m fine now. I’m fine.” I walked into the unlit room, shut the door behind me, and sat down on the edge of the bed. He got up from the corner and sat next to me. The room was opaque at first, but slowly my eyes adjusted so that I could see his face. A light shone in from somewhere, glossing his face in silver. I can’t remember how long we sat there in silence.

“I’m sorry,” I said, finally.

“Why are you sorry? You didn’t do anything.”

I didn’t have an answer.

9.

I stood in Ockley Green Middle School’s field—a short expanse of matted-down grass and dirt patches hemmed in by a chain-link fence that separated the milling students from the traffic of Interstate Avenue. Keisha’s thick form, made thicker by a black down parka, briskly walked out of the heavy metal doors and across the field to find me. She was caramel-colored and lovely, her hair always slicked into a spiky black ponytail, her eyes a disarming hazel.

“Micah’s your brother, right?” Whenever she brought up my brother, she always began this way, as if at any moment I would reveal that all along I’d been lying. Her suspicions were valid. Until a few months ago, she didn’t even know I had a brother. I didn’t sit with him at lunch, or even talk to him in the hallways. If I happened to pass him, I’d wave hello and he’d wave back, speeding along in his brisk, twitching walk, with his permanent grin—but nobody paid attention in the hallways, so nobody knew. I’d only mentioned he was my brother a few months ago because she and I were talking to Giovanni and Alfonzo—two boys from our class—when they started (perhaps to impress us?) making fun of the *retard* by the fence. Micah paced back and forth beneath a huge Douglas fir, talking to himself, sometimes laughing, smashing his hands over his mouth. It made me angry.

“Actually, that’s not cool,” I started, but the guys kept laughing.

“What? Like he’s your best friend or something?” Alfonzo rolled his face near mine.

“Awww, that’s sweet! You love him!” Gio said, placing his hands over his heart as if swooning.

“Yeah, actually, I do,” I said, deadpan.

“You sweat that retard boy?!” Keisha’s exclamation was sincere. She’d been trying to get me to say who I had a crush on for weeks, but I wouldn’t

tell her. James, of course, with his champion's smile and confident stride—the most popular boy in school, and black, which meant I was doubly cursed to remain unnoticed. He'd never leave the top social echelon of the middle school to date a geeky white girl, no matter how elegant a way I found to tell him, so it was best to keep my crush to myself.

"No. He's my *brother*." They stopped laughing, took a few steps away from me, their eyebrows arched, their hands half over their mouths—they did this in perfect unison, as if they had practiced it.

"Really?" Keisha said.

"Really." But they didn't believe me yet. Micah has his father's face, with the Mexican hair and eyes from our mother's side of the family—dark brown, almost black. I look just like my father, through and through. No Latina beauty for me—blue-gray eyes and pale skin. There is nothing in either of our faces that might hint we're from the same genetic pool. Finally, I was charged to prove myself by going to talk to him. Their logic: no one except family would be brave enough to talk to the strange, wild boy beneath the pine.

90 I walked across the field at a steady pace while Keisha and the boys followed, though at a distance. When everyone was close enough to hear me, I spoke to him, perhaps more loudly than I needed to.

"Hey, Micah."

"Hey, Danielle," he said, mimicking my tone and head gesture—one of his favorite games. He didn't stop walking. I stood there for a moment, watching him walk briskly in a long figure eight, wondering what I would say to prove he was my brother. How strange to make theater of relation.

"Did Mom tell you what she was making for dinner tonight?"

"Um, no. What is she making?"

"I don't know. I was asking you."

"Oh, yeah. I don't know. I hope it's spaghetti," he said in my general direction, though not directly at my face.

"Yeah, me too." I looked over his shoulder to the amazed threesome behind, making the same shocked gestures and faces as before. My stomach sank. How strange to have to make a theater of relation. They should have already known he was my brother.

After that, Keisha started giving me updates on Micah's progress in their biology class. I never asked her to. I knew she did this mostly out of fascination with his disorder, and partly out of affection for me. It was her way of apologizing for having laughed at him before she'd learned he was my

brother. She would give me a list of behaviors and want me to explain them in clinical terms. I'd never read anything on autism. Like everyone else's, all my official learning about autism came from the movie *Rain Man*, which didn't explain much about Micah.

Keisha hadn't shown up in my life until that year, seventh grade English class with Ms. Hanson. We were on the "Advanced Track" for English and writing while other students in the school were placed elsewhere in the intellectual hierarchy: "On Track," "Remedial," and "Special Ed." My brother is two years older than me, but was only a year ahead of me in school and in the Special Ed class. He met with his homeroom teacher for the first half of each day, and was "integrated" into regular classrooms in subjects he could manage. This was supposed to give him experience in normative social interactions—as if middle school students anywhere were normal.

In elementary school, he'd had a small group of friends from his Special Ed class who sat together at lunch and went to each other's birthday parties. They were occasionally teased by the other kids for their strange outbursts or looming stares, but mostly they were left alone and sometimes treated kindly. But in middle school everyone was at the mercy of the masses, and the masses were decidedly unmerciful: anything not status quo was responded to with humiliation or violence.

"Micah's your brother, right?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Did you hear what happened in class today?"

"No."

"He started *freaking out*. Those mean white boys kept poking at him and calling him names and all of a sudden he started throwing things and screaming. Everyone had to get under the desks. It was like Desert Storm up in there. He started throwing rocks, books, a microscope—no one could get him to stop."

By *mean white boys*, she meant the Sidmore boys, who'd taken to chasing him home from school, barking at him, and throwing rocks at his head. They were squinty-eyed blondes who said *fuckin'* before every noun and came to school with dirty clothes and sometimes bruised cheeks.

"Mr. Raul started yelling at him—"

"Jesus, that's the exact wrong thing to do."

"Yeah, what are you supposed to do when he gets like that?"

"I don't know. But not that."

“You don’t know?”

“*I don’t know.* He’s got his own brain. I don’t know what he’s thinking all the time.”

“I know what he was thinking,” she said. “*I’m not gonna take it anymore.*”

“Who knows what he’s thinking. Who knows how much he remembers from anything—how much he understands?”

10.

My father left the house in the middle of December my junior year of high school and didn’t come back. Everyone fell into a deep silence. Temperance was strange to all of us. It filled the spaces of the house like stars: distant, bright. Micah began to see a counselor—a specialist in high-functioning autism. I didn’t pay much attention—turning inward, reading and writing in my room, concerned with the small dramas of my adolescent life.

My mother told me one afternoon that Micah had told his counselor that he knew something was wrong with him—*something is wrong with my brain*, he’d said, *and I want my brain to be better*. He was working with this counselor to forge new neuro-pathways that would help him connect. Micah began keeping a diary of progress and a list of social goals:

Say hello to people.

Ask how they are feeling.

Give someone a compliment.

Wait patiently in line.

When you are feeling frustrated or angry, go for a walk.

Do not scream at people, hit them, or throw things at them no matter how angry you are.

Do not follow Latrisse if she doesn’t want you to.

Micah had a crush on a girl from his high school whom he followed wide-eyed everywhere she went. She was taller than him, African-American, and had more than twice his body mass. He couldn’t stop telling her how beautiful she was. *Will you be my girlfriend? Will you be my girlfriend? I love you.*

He was a joke to her. She laughed and kept laughing, until one day she asked if he had any money. He explained that he’d received \$75 from our grandmother for Christmas and kept it in his bank account. She told him if he gave her the money, she would be his girlfriend. He gave her the money.

From then on, she spat at him whenever he went near her. She gathered groups of friends to jeer at him, throw dirt clods at his head. This didn’t deter

him because she had clearly stated before the exchange that she would be his girlfriend if he gave her the money, and he believed her.

My brother's love affair finally ended one afternoon when he tried to touch Latrisse's shoulder to stop her from turning away, and she punched him in the face, called him *retard*, and walked away laughing. Her disdain was suddenly real to him. He understood violence—the way it maintains the boundaries between people. He realized, if only tangentially, that he wasn't real to her. He was a boy in a movie, a story of someone else's life, a fragmented object, a toy.

11.

Common symptoms of autism: impairments in verbal and non-verbal communication present from early childhood. The inability to lie (and worse, not even thinking to lie (and even worse, believing what people say (and the worst, not judging anyone for lying or for telling the truth) as lies only cause confusion) because life is confusing enough). Immediacy. That is, acute awareness of sensory input. Being always in the moment. Abnormalities of social interaction: severely stunted ability to control or manipulate social interaction (lack of skill in emotional manipulation). Not mindful of the distinctions between race, class, gender, body mass, age, disability (that is, not knowing to behave differently toward people because of these distinctions). A lack of regard for social expectations. Idiosyncratic displays of confusion toward neurotypical cognitions (confusing reactions to emotional displays, dishonesty, or violence). Having too much passion for things or people: a restricted repertoire of interests. A memory full of sharp detail (directions, colors, dates, names). Repetitive acts. Repetition.

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12.

Flinch away. Look the other direction. I give you permission. Turn your head from the scene. You don't know how he'll react if he finds you watching. It's scary, sure. Of course it is. Push him to the margins of the page, as I have. Don't you feel better now? There he is on the periphery, walking in the field, beneath the pine tree. Or he is not there. He is somewhere else—further from the line of sight. It's easy to forget him because who knows how much he remembers—understands. He flinches away. You flinch away. It's easy to miss each other. You feel better now. Don't you? It's almost as if he doesn't exist. This is easier for you. And when I say you, I mean me. Cowardice. Cowardice is. Cowardice is an opening. Cowardice is an adjustable opening in one's psyche that limits. (The amount of light that can enter.)

13.

One morning, in the kitchen, Micah didn't flinch when I walked into the room. He didn't sulk, or stamp his feet, or send me sharp eyes. Instead, he stared at me, anxious. I knew this meant he wanted to speak, but I ignored him, pretended to be absorbed in pouring my cereal, milk, lifting each spoonful to my mouth, stirring my tea, smoothing my hair—anything other than give him attention. The winter light swirled on the glossy linoleum, and somewhere in his head he was trying to speak to me, but I didn't care. I said goodbye as I left the kitchen and he remained silent at my back.

The next morning we went through the same routine. I walked into the room, and he looked straight at me, his eyes huge, direct, full of speech, but he was silent. I ignored him—*who knows what he's thinking?*—and attended to my cereal ritual. All through my meal I could feel him looking at me. After I took my last bite I looked at him, and he immediately looked at his bowl of soggy cereal.

"Okay, fine. What. What is it? Just tell me. But say it quick."

"Um, Danielle."

"Yes?"

"Did you know that I love you?"

I stared at him. He stared back.

"I guess I figured...but you never said so."

"Oh. Yeah. I said it now, though."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Because my counselor told me to write a list. See?" He pulled a badly crumpled piece of yellowed paper out of his pocket that had a short list in black ink. I was too far away to read it.

"What's it a list of?"

"People I love. See, you're here," he points to a scribble on the page, "because you're my sister and you're nice to me when Dad is mean. Remember?"

"Remember what?"

"When Dad was mean and you came to see me." I couldn't speak—light like a lump in the throat. He went on, "Oh, it's okay. It's okay if you can't remember. I remember. Yeah. It's okay if you can't remember. I was in my room, you know, on the floor. And you were there. At the door. Inside the light."