
My Rib

*And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God...
And God saw all that had been made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there
was morning, the sixth day.*

Genesis 1: 27, 31

There was a moment in the world's story
when I was the youngest thing in it—
Adam on the sixth day, with my hands around
the whole globe, no concept of that burden,
just earth under my nails.
God whispered things in my ear
but never said much, never really told me if
the twinge under my ribs was His doing.
I sat in the dirt, wondering.
And the world grew old around its infant.

It's not that weird to skip a grade. That's what I always tell people. *I know lots of people who've done it.* And it's true—I know a few. But the older I get, the more people are surprised that it happened, or that I wasn't born in 2003 or 2005 or 2002, like them. I can't particularly recall anyone asking me if I wanted to do it. I don't think I asked to do it, since I was five years old with no idea that skipping was an option. When you're that young, you don't really know there are options at all.

In the memories, I sit in a classroom with the principal, taking a test on all the things first graders must know, and can't for the life of me figure out what a fraction is. Eventually, the principal moves on from the question, and it's the only thing I get wrong on the whole test, which is remarkable, or so I'm told. Like I said, when you're that young, I don't think you really know what's happening to you. You are always waiting for something but never realize it—I suppose I thought they were placing that thing in my hands. So, in the memories, they just take the year—snatch it like a rib from my body, promising that they will make something good from it.

They don't explain to me that I will be younger than everyone I know for the rest of my life, and that this is something that will matter more, not less, each year. Maybe they don't know, or maybe they don't want to scare me, but either way they don't say it. They don't say (this, at least because they truly *can't* know) that many years in the future I will decide to finish my undergraduate degree in six semesters. That I will be running down the street at age twenty trying to catch up to my future with a sinking feeling that I ran past it miles ago.

I don't know to consider this when I am five years old, and neither does anyone else. I'm so excited that the grown-ups think I am smart that I never imagine there will be a drop. That someday I will balance on the limb of a tree, staring down at the distance between my life and

the rest of it. I never imagine that all I will do is climb quicker than anyone—blindfolded, with no idea what to search for—up to the top of the tree, its thinning body threatening to snap under my weight. I don't consider that someday I may be tumbling through nothing, still reaching up for the branch I'm falling away from.

God said, "It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him."

Genesis 2:18

I used to sleep like a baby
in the hollows of the Garden trees.
Now I roll over and my skull cracks
against the walls of wood. There has been
no more creation; I am still the youngest thing.
In the evenings, I walk behind God,
staring at the back of His head and thinking,
someday I will be older. God laughs.
Older than who? By the time you are older,
it won't matter. But the twinge in my side is still there.
I run a hand over my uneven ribs at night.

My ninth birthday party is at a gym, on February 2. I have invited M, who is the first person that I will decide is my best friend.

That's the day before my birthday, M says, when I tell her the date.

I tilt my head, a gleeful smile growing on my lips. *Wait, what's your birthday?*

February 3.

This is when M and I learn that we were born on the same day, and for a moment this is the most beautiful thing that's ever happened to me. In my little mind, we are like twin stars.

You and I are the same age, she says. *The exact same age. That's so cool.* Her cheeks are flushed but her smile is so pure that I wish I could bottle the joy and drink it later.

I grin conspiratorily. *Well,* I say, *not the exact same age.* Her eyes widen when I say I skipped a grade, and her mouth drops open a little because she is impressed. Everyone is impressed. This is what I am used to.

Well, she says, *I guess I'm exactly one year older than you. That's even better.*

I laugh, still giddy because, if you ask me, stars have still aligned.

But also, I know that she is wrong. This is not better.

When I am eleven years old, I sit in my seventh grade classroom with the only nine people I know—my entire middle school class—and our teacher is making us take turns talking about who we want to be when we go to high school. While someone else is talking, I try to think of something to say, try to imagine who I will be years from now. When it's my turn, the first thing I say is, "A teenager. I'll finally be thirteen." My friend giggles next to me, probably because she is thirteen already. She's old for our grade. I'm young.

I'll be twelve soon, I think to myself.

And then I'll be thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteenth. I can't even imagine being so old.

(My fifteenth birthday will be the last time I take a picture in the birthday cake hat that I've had since I was five, the last time I announce so hugely that I am growing up. Soon I will not want anyone to remember that I am not the same age as them.)

The real birthdays will begin to happen. At sixteen I will be able to drive. At seventeen I can go to an R rated movie. All the way up until I am grown—until I get there, that place I think I am going.

I'm fourteen, a sophomore in high school, when I meet N. He is sixteen and a junior. I give him a nickname that is just between us, and he makes jokes about how young I am. Calls me *baby* in a strange way. I let the name swallow me whole.

My mother hates him. My father hates him more. I am told I am too young to have a boyfriend, even though my brother had his first girlfriend at my age. I don't know what I resent more: that someone is keeping me from being with him, or that they are probably right in doing so.

We only make it a few months. This is already a trend; my being young is the reason I cannot have sleepovers or boyfriends, cannot attend parties or sleepaway camp. Around this time I realize that skipping the grade doesn't really make me older. Just because my friends, every person I've grown up with, are *old enough* doesn't mean that I am.

I fill a journal with scribbles. This is becoming a habit, sprung out of the ground after years of never saying exactly what I feel. *I'm too young to be so weary*, I write, terrified that it's

true—more terrified, maybe, that it’s not. My fifteenth birthday is in a few months. I huddle in the hollow of a fruit tree—alone and so, so small.

So God cast a deep sleep upon the Human; and, while he slept, God took one of his sides and closed up the flesh at that site. And God fashioned the side that had been taken from the Human into a woman, bringing her to the Human. Then the Human said, “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...”

Genesis 2:21–23

Once, I could have sworn there was
movement in the Garden. Some shadowy figure
darting between the skeleton trees of autumn.
When I asked God, leaves crunching under our feet,
He said, *there are many things in the Garden,*
things older than and separate from you.
I crouched down, pressed my fingers
into the dirt I was made of. I had named
every animal in Eden but not that thing
that darted through the treeline.
The memory dangled in front of me,
my flesh and bone strung on a fishing line

cast by someone far away.

A is the same age as N, also blonde, also handsome. The difference is that A is the best person I have ever known. I have the thought, when I am fifteen, that I am in love with him. I will think back to this time for years and think it couldn't possibly have been love. But then, conversely, I will remember the joy, and wonder when it slipped through my fingers. It's a last dance in Eden. After this there will still be a Garden, but the trees will grow from my inwardness, drooping downward, heavy with perpetual melancholy.

At some point in these years, A and I are driving in his car, speaking about other boys. I didn't bring it up, of course, and my cheeks are growing red. A is dating one of my best friends now—he is one of my best friends now. I pushed the two of them together, because I'm an idiot and a good friend.

I broke up with J for a lot of reasons, I say, in reference to events that happened a year ago and don't even feel real when I'm sitting in a car with him. *I felt bad. I had feelings for someone else.*

He brakes at a stop sign and turns to look me in the eyes. *Was that before or after you liked me?*

It takes me too long to respond and he clearly feels a sort of satisfaction at taking me off guard. I must be the color of a tomato. *Before*, I answer. It's the truth.

Not said: *there is no after.*

I'm too young to be in love with anyone—that's what I think. Definitely too young to be in love with *him*, a new adult on his way to college soon. (Years later I will yell at my friend as

we try to write a song about him. I will start to cry when she yells back. *Let's do something else, she will say, because you clearly can't do this.*)

Life keeps me behind. Someday I'll be older, I know. Someday I will get what I am looking for. *Still*, I think, glancing in his direction as silence falls over the car, *wherever I go to college will have to be very far away from you.*

Now it is time for me to be older. I am seventeen, in college, and this is the time I've been waiting for. This is where I will be grown, where people will never consider me a kid because they won't know me as anything but an adult. My professors treat me like an autonomous person, not a child in need of discipline. I have begun to prove that there is skill—talent, even—rooted deep in my chest.

I'm shivering in the locker room after my first club water polo practice, thinking that I shouldn't be here (at this practice, with these people) at all. I went to the welcome meeting last week just to make myself get out of my dorm. I've been in Boston for a few weeks now and, outside of class, have spoken to almost no one besides G, my roommate. While my academic life may be thriving, my social life certainly isn't. Still, I wasn't actually going to join the team. Not until I saw *her*.

(This is when I learn that tropes are so popular not because they are far fetched. Every eyeroll-inducing cliché has its teeth sunk deeply into something true. This is a fact: people will do just about anything for a beautiful woman.)

A—a new A, about as different from the first as someone could be—is twenty one years old today, which makes her three and a half years older than me. Her girlfriend, L, is another

teammate. L holds my gaze for a bit too long every time we meet eyes. My face has never been able to lie, and A might be the most beautiful person I've ever seen. But it doesn't matter how much older she is, because my desire is dumb and groundless and inferior.

Still, I resist revealing my age for weeks. It's not really about A. It's about the fact that, for the first time, no one knows already. I grew up in a small town, and knew the same people for most of my life, even with my school change. Lots of my high school friends remembered when I moved into their second grade class. I crave the feeling of being known, and I suppose part of that has to do with my age—but for once, I am determined not to let my identity drown in the waters of my perpetual youth.

No one realizes that I am seventeen until we travel to a different school for a scrimmage and have to fill out liability waivers. *I can't sign this*, I tell K, a second year. *I'm not eighteen*.

Our club president has to sign the form for me. *It's not a big deal*, K says, *I was the same way last year*. K will become my best friend in college. She is perhaps the only person I know that will never make my age the butt of a joke. I take the form back quietly, feeling a bit off balance.

Later, in the locker room, I begin to tell K a story. *When I was, like, twelve*, I start, but L interjects. *So, like, last year?* Several people laugh. I try to join, because it really *is* just a joke, but the sound dies in my throat. I know my age is not impressive anymore—that's not the surprise—but I haven't considered until now that it could be used against me in this way. I'm going to go home and write this down, to hold and remember my anger by immortalizing it with dark blue ink. I continue with the story, smiling joylessly in L's direction. In my childish way, I think I will hate her forever.

Months later, on my eighteenth birthday, I wake at 6:03 in the morning, shivering in my damp sheets. I haven't had a fever since I was twelve or thirteen years old, but I know at once that this is what has happened to me. When G wakes up, I ask her weakly if she has a thermometer. She takes my temperature and mutters, *I think you need to go to the ER.*

I don't go to the ER. On my first day as an adult, I leave my dorm room only once, to walk down the stairs and retrieve K from the lobby of the building. She lays on the floor with me for hours, watching TV on my computer and forcing me to drink a disgustingly sweet beverage that is full of electrolytes. The number on the thermometer drops from 103 to 101 by the evening, but I faint in the bathroom the next day.

My childhood won't let me go, I think at some point. It's putting up a fight.

God called out to the Human and said to him, "Where are you?"

He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

Genesis 3:9–10

After years, I stopped chasing bait.

I waited in the shade of a hundred trees,

sinking teeth into fruit that had fallen to the ground,

then vomited up the sweet juices,

gagged by old dreams.

It is a Saturday afternoon and I am closer to nineteen than eighteen, more adult than the day before but no less terrified by the world. In my pockets are my hands, because Boston winter is seeping through the seams of my clothing. *Aren't you cold?* A asks. The answer is the same as always: *only my hands.*

Not said: *I'm not cold when I'm with you. Being around you feels like laying by the fire at home, eating a peach I plucked from a tree in the Garden. You know which tree.*

Things between us are not the same as they used to be. She's not with L anymore. (She's not with me, either.) I know my words will remain unsaid. There are far too many years between us. Years that will always be there, that might not *really* matter for the rest of my life, but haven't stopped boxing me in yet. I am once again angry that I am not older and frustrated that I did not stay young.

A and I settle on the couch, laughing while speaking of serious things. At some point, she asks me if I think God is real. *Yes*, I say, staring at her face, knowing that she isn't meant to fill the space inside me but unable to believe it. When they took my rib, it wasn't to make Eve; it was to make success. And here I am still, with a gap in the armor in my chest.

A stares back, as she always does, like I am something important to her. That's as far as I let myself think. I think of those words a different A said to me, years ago. *Was this before or after you liked me?*

This A has asked me similar things before. She is not afraid to ask hard questions, but now she says nothing. I thrust my hands into the pocket of my sweatshirt again, wonder absently

if being four years older would make things better or worse. That night, I ask this question to God and the refrigerator hums in response. I stare at the ceiling until my eyes bleed, write a poem and send it to K and focus on the edits she makes instead of the burning in my lungs.

Someday I will be older; I think, but this won't matter by then.

Not said: *Where is the missing part of me, God? What did you do with my rib?*

So God banished humankind from the garden of Eden, to till the humus from which it was taken: it was driven out; and east of the garden of Eden were stationed the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 3:23–24

I had been restless for weeks when
I climbed the tree. The real fruit hung
on the highest branches, closest to the sun.
It was beautiful—soft and ripe and unblemished
unlike the half-rotten stuff I had gorged myself on.
The juice dripped down my chin when
I bit into it, but I frowned at the taste—
the same as always, as all those
old and bruised lumps in the dirt. In my confusion,
I dropped the fruit, watched it fall to the ground,

and caught a glimpse of my naked self.

Nothing about it shocked me—

I was used to the sight of hair on my legs

and dirt coating my feet—

except the contour of my ribs.

God said nothing when He found me there,

my hand pressed against my side. I stared at Him

with a touch of anger, but He only grinned as

He pushed me out of the tree.

When I woke, flat on my back in the dirt,

I knew I wasn't in Eden anymore.

There was too much light breaking through

the canopy of trees, and besides that there was

a person peering down at me,

something like satisfaction drawn on her face.

I didn't have to ask who she was.

Bone of my bone, I thought,

staring up at my rib.

I don't know how to end it, I tell K. She sits across the table from me, my essay between us, frowning slightly. *Well, where's your rib?* she asks. I shake my head, laugh bitterly. *That's the*

problem, isn't it? I don't know.

K raises an eyebrow. Smiles. *Yes, she says, you do.*

I am almost nineteen years old, sitting somewhere east of adolescence with a pen between my fingers. *There was a moment in the world's story, I write, when I was the youngest thing in it—Adam on the sixth day...*

I pause. Touch my side. Look at my hand, at the pen it holds, and then at the ceiling, where God hangs about, smirking. *You're watching, aren't you?* I find myself saying. *You want to see what I will do with my rib.*
