

## Callused

Calluses riddle my mother's hands. As a child, I would put my own hands inside hers to admire their parallel patterns. Doing so reminded me of similar shapes—the objects in geometry where one is a little larger than the other. Our hands now resemble mirror images, both with fingers just short enough to make playing the piano a challenge. The only differences are the calluses and scars across my mother's palms, which run thick so that mine do not.

Sometimes, I tiptoe through the kitchen in the early hours of the morning to find my mother hunched over her computer, glasses perched on the edge of her thin nose, fingers racing across the keyboard, as my brother's do across the piano. With her small frame, I can't help but think she looks like a bird. The bags under her eyes only add to this effect, making her face seem somehow thinner. They became more pronounced when we first moved to Mississippi, in the days when my mother's starting salary had to cover what our meager child support did not. Looking back, occurrences beyond my first grade comprehension click into focus:

Why my mother's light snores could be heard in the movie theater.

Why my siblings and I were the last children picked up from school.

Why, when I came home crying because I hadn't received a role in the school play, my mother told me not to be jealous until I had worked twice as hard as everyone else.

As these pieces of my childhood fell into place, I threw myself into the tasks placed before me, working in my grandfather's belief that each generation must better itself. My mother says that I grew up at a young age, which is true; I learned to be self-sufficient, stretching to fill the gaps she sometimes couldn't. I have worked my fingers raw as a student, but also as a daughter, sister, and granddaughter.

By the age of five, I had taken it upon myself to teach my three-year-old brother how to read. The wallpaper in our shared bedroom is still chipped from taping “lessons,” which I had scribbled out during kindergarten naptimes in blue crayon. It was not until after my parents’ divorce was finalized that these lessons became bedtime stories.

Most of these stories were of my own creation, but my brother would, on occasion, pluck a tattered book from the shelf. On these nights, the sounds of yellowed pages turning intermingled with my mother’s typing in the next room. Through a small crack in the door, I could see my mother, face washed white by the glowing pixels before her. Sometimes, she would catch my eye, coming to tuck us into bed before returning to the screen. Most nights, I watched stray moths flutter in the light of her laptop before climbing into my top bunk.

This was our ritual for nine years, during which my hands began to resemble my mother’s, with scatterings of paper cuts from schoolwork and thick calluses from playing musical instruments. My hands also cradled wounded animals and held heartbroken friends as their cries shook my small frame. My hands have poured agar plates and turned pages, each one yielding a more thorough understanding of the ever-accelerating and expanding universe. No matter the day, my hands have found themselves dialing my mother to deliver a static-filled “goodnight” and a quick “I love you”.

I have seen my mother work her fingers numb. Her hands are rough and scraped and burned, yet fit perfectly in mine when we say the Lord’s Prayer in Mass, or when, to this day, I hold her hand while crossing busy streets. In these moments, I note their acquired similarities: how my hands have grown and scarred and formed their own calluses. They are far from mirror images, but I wouldn’t mind my hands reflecting hers one day.