

Hand in Hand

My foot snags on the rug
I pitch forward haphazardly
Before I collide with the floor
He's there
A hand
A smile
He pulls me up

We're sprawled on the pavement
Baking in the July sun
Popsicle-stained faces
Chalk strewn at our feet
Wands waving
Bubbles drifting to the sky

The darkness presses in —
My five year-old eyes conjure shadows
Taunting, dancing
Inching closer with every breath
But before I can scream
I remember
My four year-old brother, sleeping soundly
On the other side of the room
Forcing the shadows to recede
Just by being there

It's his first day of kindergarten
I nudge him backwards
As the bus skids to a stop
We ride together
Hand in hand
Gazing out the smudgy window
Silent as the fall leaves float
To the unforgiving ground
I walk him to the classroom
Holding his lunchbox in the hand
Not entwined with his own
The room looms large
And him, so tiny

A hug
Not enough to say “good luck”
Not enough to tell him that if anyone’s mean
I’ll show them what’s what
Not enough to say “I love you”
And yet, just enough

A moment in the movie-theatre darkness
The seat lurches as he dives forward
Not in time to catch the cascade of popcorn
Tumbling everywhere as my eyes meet his
Silence as the scene flickers on
To the music of laughter we cannot suppress

We twirl to the beat
Breaking the Friday afternoon spell
Lungs bursting, voices hoarse
Echoing throughout an empty house
Lost in an impromptu dance party
Just us

He’s behind the wheel now
Navigating traffic lights, turn signals and all
Confident and proud
And taller than me
By a lot
I’m no longer the big sister
Just older
But he’ll always be my little brother.

In September, I must leave him
I don’t know how
The world is waiting
Beckoning with arms outstretched
A million horizons to chase
But I don’t know how
He’s a piece of my world
My brother, my built-in best friend
No —
He is my world

I tell myself

No matter where I go
We'll always have our shared childhood
Always have the laughter
Ringing throughout the house
Scooter races on the bumpy sidewalk
Picnics under the dining room table
Chalk drawings in the driveway
Games of tag by the barn

We'll always have the scars
The endless scraped knees
From when our legs couldn't carry us
Fast enough to reach the horizon

I'm standing on that horizon now
And all I want to do is go back