

In the early morning, they were released from the hospital, and were driving back to his house as the sky lightened. The queer, they had learned, was staying in a punkhouse in Philly. When she described it, it sounded filthy and cruel, although she insisted that it was "fine." His sister had insisted that Marta come stay with her, at least for the night. "My apartment is clean and my bed is very comfy. Let me take care of you." Marta had acquiesced after Ellen had badgered her into admitting that none of the punks who lived in her house knew how to cook a good chicken soup. He drove them to his sister's house, the two women in the backseat leaning on each other and closing their eyes. In the pre-dawn, he dwelled in silent, directionless jealousy. He didn't know which of the two women in his car he wished he were, watching them gently touching in his rearview mirror. He didn't know if he wanted to be either of them at all. But he didn't want to be himself. He drove with his knuckles white on the wheel and thought, in a repeating loop, "God, I need to fuck something," but somehow recognized that thought as not his own. A thought belonging to a different consciousness, superimposing itself over his exhausted mind. He dropped the two of them at his sister's apartment building. His sister squeezed his hand as she got out of the car and said, "come over tonight after work," and he promised he would. The queer looked at him through the rearview mirror, and they sat in silence for a tense breath, the door open, the cold morning wind filling the space between them. Marta opened her mouth to say something. She looked like she was straining to think clearly. Then she looked away and shook her head, and followed his sister out without saying a word. He rolled down his window and said, "Take care of my blood. Don't go wasting it, you hear?" And the queer smiled and followed his sister up the concrete steps and into the brick box. He sat back in his seat and looked around at his car. The passenger seat was covered in the same bloodstains as his wheel, as was the handle, the armrest, and a corner of the window. He looked in the rearview and saw blood in the backseat as well, across the grey fuzzy fabric. As he pulled out of the cul-de-sac and drove to work, he thought, "We traded. Blood for blood." Twice on his way to the base, he drifted off the road, and was jolted rudely by the rumble strips on the side of the highway. He hadn't slept a wink that night, and he wasn't 18 anymore.