

Culling is the act of reducing a population via slaughter.

1.

You're in your dorm room, a small table wedged in front of the door. The lock is turned. You're certain, because you've checked three times within the last hour. You're glad that by some stroke of luck, you were inside instead of caught in the middle of the university campus grounds when the alert had been sent out. Your dirty laundry sits in the corner basket, and through the haze clouding your mind, you remember the biting chill of the cold when you stepped outside earlier in thinner clothes.

How could such a small choice have been so monumental in deciding whether you lived or died? You imagine your blood splashing onto that pavement, staining your fingers red as you try to plug the holes left by unforgiving metal. Your stomach churns, and a wave of nausea makes your knees buckle. You sit.

Your phone is in your hand, seeping small amounts of warmth into your cold, stiff fingers. You hear police sirens blaring in the road outside. Lights flash against your window, and numb fingers dig into numb skin as you cradle your arms close to your chest. Your mouth feels full of cotton. You hear everything as if you stood at the opening of a tunnel, catching only bits and pieces from somewhere far, far away.

Lectures proceeded as usual the very next week. A few faces have disappeared from your class, some that you knew. You find yourself regretting the ones you don't. There is a heaviness in your chest that you will carry for a while.

2.

You're in the school bathrooms. 4th period was only about halfway through when you heard laughing outside. At first, you smile, since commotions in the hallway are common occurrences at your school. You wonder what they could have been talking about, to have brought them so much joy. You don't register that anything is wrong until you hear the screaming.

The color drains from your face, and you stumble away from the mirror. In the bathroom, there is nowhere to go but inside the stalls. You are aware, as fear grips your chest and violently halts your breath halfway up your throat, that this is often the first place that is checked.

From your hiding place, you dry-heave onto clammy palms, shoved against your face to muffle the sound of your own breathing. It's evidence that you are alive.

3.

You're in your home, and everything feels large but familiar. Your small hands are unblemished and smooth, pale, save for the dark soil tucked into the deeper crevices of your nailbed. You were taught how to wash your hands properly, to drag your nails gently across your palm. That when the frothy water flowed down the drain, so too would the grime disappear like the faint whisper of a dream behind your bleary eyelids. You were taught with soft touches and kind voices, but you have not yet learned.

You're sure that you have a purpose, that your life would be grand and full of misadventures. You tell your mother you ought to be a painter, renowned, as fantasies of glory paint children's dreams in golden hues. The crayon scrawlings on the refrigerator seem to echo your sentiment. Your mother laughs, hugs you, and tells you she can't wait to see what you become. Her eyes are fond and— honest as they are— let you in on the shared secret: she already found you quite spectacular. It's a memory to be understood in the years to come.

Outside is vibrant and loud. The sky is an eyewatering blue. Your backpack is heavy, but there is an unconquerable fire in your chest. The world seems so big as you step through the threshold of your home on small feet. That morning, you were proud that you tied your own laces.

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Your room is left untouched, the bed unmade as it was two mornings ago, during the rush to get you packed, out the door, and onto your bus. Now, every evening, your mother sets out a third plate and collects it after each meal. She stands there, her sleeve damp, and cannot bring herself to throw the food away. In all her waking thoughts, she holds you a little tighter, hoping somewhere you felt it, too.