**Red Ranger**

Michele Lovell

 In the rainy, grey Oregon months after your leaving, I couldn’t catch my breath. Each time you walked across my thoughts, each time I heard your name or saw some stranger-twin blonde boy passing me on the street, I felt the air in my lungs catch. Like the time I was eight, roller skating and pushing a broom stick in front of me down the sidewalk. It caught in a crack and rammed itself up under my rib cage, knocking the wind out of me, and I fell to the warm summer pavement trying to cry without breathing.

 I started watching television again, after your death, sleeping with it on just to keep the air moving. I started napping in the afternoon. I started composing a chronology to help me understand.

 When you were one and just walking, I took you to a party at the house on the mountain where the hippie girls with dreadlocks danced in the rain and the boys played drums on the porch and the smell of pot filled the heavy air. You walked with your white blanket covering your head, hanging down past your knees, your bottle protruding from your mouth like a small bird’s beak. You felt better wrapped in your blanket and you followed me around like a little ghost boy.

 When you were four, I took you to the beach and we built sandcastles and made towers out of pieces of driftwood and small shells. You were wearing your left-over Halloween costume—the red Power Ranger—long into the next summer. You held your hands over your ears when the waves crashed. You refused to take off your socks, didn’t like the way the sand felt on your feet. Your eyes were brilliant blue, you were squinting into the sun and the pale line of scar on your forehead just above your right eyebrow was still visible, from where you fell on the brick fireplace hearth months before. A close call, we thought at the time. Just missed your eye when you tripped that day.

 That night I read to you, and when I went in later to make sure you were okay you were sitting there still looking at books, quiet in the soft light of the bedside lamp.

 “I’m still reading,” you said to me, turning the pages of your library picture books. I smiled and said goodnight.

 When you were six, you wanted to be an actor. I shot a video of you singing into a hairbrush, dancing around the crowded bedroom you shared with your sister, pantomiming to the music and falling to the floor, onto the dirty carpet and laughing.

 You were a skinny boy with square kneecaps and long arms. I thought you would grow up to look like the boys on your mother’s side of the family, tall and blonde and athletic. You had stick-out monkey ears from our side of the family and dirty hair that you didn’t like washed or combed. You hated taking a bath and when the other kids would swim at the apartment pool, you’d sit on the concrete pool deck and play with your toys, yelling at them to not splash you.

 Later in the video, we’re playing soccer and when you scored a goal, you danced a little dance in your green soccer shorts and cleats, your Power Ranger t-shirt, snapping your fingers and smiling. When your sister scored a goal on you, you threw a fit, screeching in that high-pitched voice and flailing your long arms in protest, accusing her of cheating. You never were a good sport. And I wondered if you’d be one of those boys whose voice stayed impossibly high for years, causing our family to pray for puberty to hit.

 When you turned seven, I went to your house to bring you some baseball cards for your birthday. You wanted to show me something “really cool,” and I followed you through the apartment complex, cement stairwells and bark dust and identical carports to a place near the edge of a small cemetery that bordered the edge of the property. You wanted to show me one of your new “moves,” and I watched while you first ballet danced and then karate chopped and kicked your way out onto a small retaining wall and leaped down in a flourish. The first time you landed on your feet; the second you landed in some bushes but got up and took a bow and said we could go.

 Once when we went to my sister’s place to see your cousins, you were all drawing with sidewalk chalk. “Aunt Beth,” you said to her. “I want to draw a picture of you. What is your favorite color?” You never used conjunctions and you couldn’t pronounce your Rs the right way. We figured you’d eventually need speech therapy like your sister. Or maybe you’d grown out of it.

 “Green,” Beth said.

 And you looked into the bucket, looked at her, back into the bucket. Then in your little professor voice announced, “Aunt Beth, there is not enough green chalk to draw you. Can you pick a different color?”

 “Well, I am getting pretty fat, aren’t I?” my sister said, and we laughed. You were always making us laugh.

 When you were dying on the floor of your basement apartment, I was standing in my kitchen, eating an apple on the other side of town. I had just returned from a run when the phone rang.

 In my head, it becomes a speeded-up movie. You’re in bed. Your stomach hurts. There’s a doctor’s appointment for later that afternoon. You get up, ask for a glass of milk. Your legs give out. My brother picks you up. Then the 911 call… SIR, YOU’VE GOT TO STOP SHOUTING, I CAN’T UNDERSTAND YOU. YOU’VE GOT TO STOP SHOUTING and your mother coming in the door from work as they are zipping up her boy in a black plastic bag.

 I drive across town to my parents’ house. We’re gathered around the table in disbelief. We’re waiting for my mother to get home from an out-of-town bowling tournament. She drives 300 miles knowing something bad has happened but not what. And then she drives up and my father is walking out to meet her in the cul-de-sac, and the sun is setting behind her, and her legs are giving out, and she’s crying. She’s wailing like nothing I ever want to hear again.

 I take my brother’s shoes off for him that night. I put him to bed in my parents’ spare room, he and my sister-in-law sharing a single bed. He is stunned and crying and drunk from shots of whiskey my father fed to him. I can smell the sweetness of the liquor on his breath. I cover him up, and I lie to him and tell him it’s going to be okay.

 Then the movie stops.

 When I saw you again, you were ashes in an urn on a platform at a funeral home. They’d blown up your first grade picture; they’d made handouts with a prayer about angels and Jesus. It made no sense to me. Your best friend wept through the entire service. He never stopped until his parents led him from the room at the end. The minister was dressed in white.

 “It’s a glorious day,” he said, “When someone goes home to Jesus. And Anthony has gone home.”

 If I’d had the energy to rise up from that pew, I would’ve hit him, pushed him down, but everything was moving away from me in slow motion. I was mute, and my legs felt like stone; so I sat there while he told his stories, with the boy in the background weeping and your picture, smiling out on the room in front of me.

 On Halloween night, three weeks after you died, I was leaving a bar on Hawthorne Street in the rain, and one of those ghost boys ran out of a house, leaping down the front steps. I could’ve reached out and touched him. He was wearing a red Power Ranger suit like yours. He shot past me onto the sidewalk and ran down the street into the dark night.

 I dreamed of you all that fall and into the winter; you, barely visible on the edge of a field of green, green grass slick with rain, on the edge of a crowded city block, moving away—always moving away from me while I tried to follow, tried to find you, to bring you home again.