If You'd Been a Deadbeat

Tegan Blackburn

I wish you'd been a deadbeat;
one of those fathers who
only calls once a year
or can't remember my birthday
or uses the words "I love you"
as sparingly as pocket change
left forgotten in your old jeans.

I wish that you had beaten me
either with hands or with belts
or kicked me down the stairs
or shook me in my cradle
until my tiny brain rattled
and smashed against my skull.

I wish you'd been the kind of dad
that was simple to shove down
in the neglected corners of my
subconscious as easily as the
faded scars on my knees where
the flesh has died and regrown
so many times that I don't
remember what bloodied them;
the echoes of old pain on some
nameless concrete road that
dug into my scrapes and tried
to make a home in the layers
of my raw and open skin until
gentle hands brushed them with
water and picked out the bits of
gravel and cleaned out all the
infection.

Instead you were the kind of dad
who always gave me the bigger
half of every chocolate bar

and wrote tooth fairy letters
and spun me around in the pool
and told me that you loved me
and sang me to sleep with a lullaby
“skinamarink-a-dink-a-dink
skinamarink-a-doo
I
love
you.”

If you had been a deadbeat
who left me on some curb
I wouldn’t know your absence
any better than your presence
and I could let my life pass by
with the scars you gave me
going slowly, steadily unnoticed
as the skin grows thicker and thicker
until I could look at them all
and barely remember
they existed to begin with.

Instead the wounds are ripped bare
whenever I see a gumball machine
or drive by our old Blockbuster
or play pinball at a bowling alley
or hug any kind of man
who is tall like you
muscular like you
hairy like you
and I watch the blood drip down
to the floor as I remember
that you were unequivocally
the best dad I ever could have had
and every dripping cut, every open sore
is still all because of you.