

Lessons

MELISSA CROWE

for Mark

At four I learned from my uncle's forearm split wrist to elbow & leaking blood on formica tabletop & linoleum floor that strangers in dive bars—or on the very streets I walked in daylight with my mother to the grocery store or park—will cut you. Eight years old I learned from uncle's drunken cries & how he pounded fists against his pickup that a brother can break your heart & from that brother I learned there are things you'll steal even from people you love if you want them bad enough. At twelve I learned from my aunt wrenching child from husband & toward her lover's car that bitterness binds us sometimes surer than love, the distinction blurred in a boozy driveway, their firstborn dead three summers & Tom Petty's gritty croon an eight-track soundtrack pouring from lover's rolled-down window & he doesn't get out. Just sits with his sunburned arm flicking ash on the pavement like he's got all night to wait. I was sixteen when I learned my grandfather could no longer tell me from my mother or that year from 1975—*Sandy* he kept saying *that bitch sat on the shed roof waving a whisky bottle and laughing while they buried my mother* & by *bitch* he meant my Gram from whom I'd learned men are hooks I shouldn't let into me & that it's okay to sleep alone without drawers on under my nightdress. At seventeen I learned no house is emptier than one you've begged to be left in while your father takes your mother south to have the cancer out hopefully but definitely her uterus & whatever else they find eaten by the stuff that made her bleed so much on the bed the mattress couldn't be saved. Even with the dog in the yard I didn't feel as brave as I thought I would & though I could see my grandfather's house

from the porch of my own I didn't go there where I'd be called
by the wrong name. Instead I called you & you came—as you
always did & as you still do—with a carton of Five Alive & a fistful
of daisies & you said *Melissa, Melissa* & I let you in. I let in whatever
that might bring & you touched me in ways that made me forget—
want to forget—every single other thing I'd ever learned.

