

# Three Hands None

Denise Bergman



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For Esther*

# Table of Contents

3 he had three hands I had none

9 photos of men

17 told again

23 he knows who I am

31 a friend tosses in “compassion”

37 nothing speaks nothing

45 because here

53 go to her

61 how long

67 Acknowledgements

{—}

he had three hands I had none

where were my hands where were they

under the cotton sheet

his three loud hands shouted precise non-negotiable commands

his knife-blade hand. his hot blinding-flashlight hand. his  
granite-weight hand crushing my lips against gums and teeth

his hands stuttered filth in the eloquent language of power

look at hands

in uniform salute. waving from chandeliered balconies over  
town plazas. tossing benedictions. pushing round red buttons  
behind closed oak doors. pulling round red triggers. throwing  
darts at paper wall maps

manicured fingers snapping. snap snap snap

he knew my eyelashes. the Clearasil dot on my cheek. the  
rhythm my nostrils bellow in unchecked sleep. my lower lip's  
tremor

he knew in a split-second what a lover takes months to see

he knew my Adam's apple's shallow throb and my throat's  
spasm at the touch of the blade

*his say it his blade*

from the outside it sounded like what it looked like. barks  
then screams. barks screams then a door's nasty creak. it  
looked like desperation's aftermath. it was aftermath. he fled.  
there was no one but me. the dog panting and me

in the belly of night where was I. I had simply gone to sleep  
with an inch of May breeze

from the outside barks screams pounding silence. someone  
called the police I called the police 911 police

then catch-as-catch-can men went to bed with baseball bats  
and women kept bulbs burning

I fought back by waiting

the chokehold of time stretched compressed stretched  
compressed. a rapidly fraying rubber band

crickets swore off middle-of-the-night jabber. common  
grackle singsong drowned in swelter

his rasping voice on his whitewater breath crashed against  
my face

his voice deep inside my ears

{—}

photos of men was it this one that. I tell them I hadn't seen his  
face the flashlight melted my eyes

mug shots again was it this one that. I hadn't seen hadn't seen

did I smell his breath his underarm stench his filtered or  
filterless. did he smell me

he watched me. he locked my face naked in detention

he knew who I was knew me when I crossed the street knows  
who I am knows this is me

knows me. in the grocery aisle he sees me stripped to less  
than essence

he held me down. the heft of his hand the precise edge of his  
blade squeezed me pierced me emptied me of substance

I am not playing here with agency

this is what powerless is

barebones nothing

barebones and muscleless. skeleton collapsed

lunch became bread and water

motion was turning my head to look at the door

watch the door

thought was imploded chaos. speech was a pageless lexicon

sleep was a useless plan. exhaustion buzzed like a swinging hive

my home my skin locked me out

breakfast was a sip of juice

supper was bread and water. the week after, a fruit

what now

I waited. tea teacup teapot

rubbing the dog's forehead when it let me

sleeping noon to three up all night

the apartment bright as a penny arcade

dull or acute my choice and I chose  
depending on the day

as I had chosen to obey  
his blade

silence rings through the arcade

when after I leave I stay

alone  
with the wary dog who can't wait  
to be rid of me

home is skin but I couldn't inhabit my skin

empty limbs empty head empty pelvis bowl. pockets behind  
scapulas. cage around liver and lung. ringing in my ears  
drained down my hollow tube neck

no one inhabited my skin a vicious biting no one inhabited my  
skin

airtight insulated pores nothing seeped in leaked out

inside me the hard shrunken kernel of what I had been rattled  
like a single shriveled bean in a hand-painted maraca

shake (delay) move (delay) sound

the way I remember the end of the beginning the dog barked  
the man lost his hold then I screamed

or after he fled I screamed

did he release his hand from my mouth or his knife from my  
throat

when his hand pressed my mouth his knife was where

did he fling the knife onto the bed to empty his hand to press  
on my mouth and still keep the flashlight's beam blinding

or did he remove his hand to grab the knife

redundant a knife at my throat a hand pressed over my mouth.  
sores and bleeding lip and gums did he say I have a knife don't  
scream did he say I have a knife I will kill you if you scream

I thought he has a knife he will kill me if I move he will kill me  
finally the dog barked

and from me a defiant don't-scream scream an obedient-to-  
self withheld scream I screamed after the dog barked the man  
fled did I call the police who called