

Mortal Kombat

We walked the rows of our strip mall arcade to find it waiting for us:
Verboten machine in its inaugural summer. Nineteen ninety-two:

The year it swallowed its very first coins. I hesitated, but not much,
As he pinned me there in front of the screen, this man, just barely a man,

Recent discharge from the local children's home & new subject of my
Parents' amateur ministry. He stood, shifting slowly behind me

With his block-kick-jump-duck, his hands over mine as he ripped the spine
From our opponent's back. He never let them fall intact, never left them

Where they knelt before him. He who moved into our basement with his
Plastic sack of dirty clothes, his no toothbrush, no soap, his Nintendo

Entertainment System & said he'd stay long enough to get up & on
His feet. My parents washed his feet & prayed for him as he sat on our couch

Draped in my father's bathrobe. They left us alone with him, let us play games
with him—my sister his favorite challenger, but I might serve, too—eyes

Glued to pixelated pools of blood. The other cabinets blathered on behind us
& I knew I wasn't to play this one. *But look*, he said, *we can do it*

If you want. If you just don't tell. & How well can you keep a secret?
Well, I said. *Sure*, I said, his fingers soft if heavy upon my own—

The buttons' plastic slap whenever he attacked—as he showed me how
It was a game of rhythm: knowing when it's safe to strike & how, when you're

Exposed, you always give yourself an out, a way to dodge the blows.
& even if I liked it, standing with my back to him as he taught me

To slay all who stood in our path, later that same day, I did not keep
My no-tell promise. & yes, I liked that too. The telling. Revealing him

As the liar he was as we sat at the dinner table: his face grown
Red, his empty plate, my parents' trembling jaws. My silent sister, knifing

Her peas, crushing their skulls.