

Three Flash Essays

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Lifelong

You are seven years old, and you are swimming in the pool. The water holds you in, and you break it apart; you take advantage of the reduced gravity and dance in its embrace.

Breathe in, float up;

Breathe out, sink down,

But there is someone watching you can you feel their eyes can you feel them watching? You keep

Floating up;

And down

Because there is no one there. Even if *you feel them, even if you feel their eyes and they are wearing black*, and you feel, all of a sudden, that you are drowning—the water holds you in and you cannot break it apart—there is no one there.

Can you still feel them?

You are eight years old, and it is time to sleep in your own bed. You like your brother's bed better. It is nice to sleep on the inside and press your

little footie pajamas against the cool drywall. If anyone comes in, you can melt into that grey paint, and *they* will probably see him first. *Why would you think that?* Your brother always falls asleep first. It does not matter now because “you are eight years old, and it is time to sleep in your own bed.” And you cry—keep crying. Let the polyester fill with so many senseless tears that you drown when you pull it over your face. *If the blanket is over your face, will you still feel them?*

You are nine years old, and you sleep in your own bed every night. Your mother tells you that if you just make yourself sleepy enough before bed, if you just let the sleep fall into you, you will fall into it, too. So, before bed, you read Judy Blume books, silly books, and you hope that the silly Judy Blume books will coax you into that sleepy swimming pool where the water holds you in and you can dance in its embrace. *But they hope so too.* You read sitting up in the center of the bed, not so far forward that *they could reach you from the door and not so far back that their fingers could crawl up the headboard and press eager palms around your neck.* You fall into a rhythm as you read to make sure that *they won’t get you.* Set the metronome: you read a line, look back, look forward, and back down.

Read a line,
Look back,
Look forward,
And back down.

When your head twists, the lightbulb above you burns holes in your line of sight. You move quickly, each motion a breaststroke into the next, hoping that as you face one direction *the hands* do not come from the other, hoping that you can see *the hands* before *they see you.*

You are nine years old, and you sit in your parents’ bedroom.

“What are you so afraid of?” your stepfather prods.

“They’re waiting until I fall asleep, and then *they’re going to get me.*”

He replies, “Maybe you’re not that special.”

You are fourteen years old, and you sleep in the car for two nights. How many three-hundred-and-sixty-degree loops does it take to drive far, far away? Far, far away has nineteenth-century wooden pillars that creak above your living room air mattress. *How many upstairs footsteps does*

it take for old pillars to cave in, and where can you feel those eyes now? Are theirs the footsteps that make this downstairs ceiling creak? You would not be surprised.

Upstairs is where the mirror is, eventually. When you pass by, *those hands* curl around its edges and raise it in front of you everywhere you walk. You stare into *those eyes* and suddenly *they* are almost exactly like yours, but *their* color is one that you've always thought was so beautiful. You are fourteen years old, and *can you see them? Their bones protrude in every place that yours do not, and the marrow is made of daisy petals and cane sugar. They laugh more than you do; they stand straight and tall, so straight, and so tall that each vertebrae on your spine folds in bitter veneration.* You are fourteen years old, and you used to say that you could not see *the eyes* and *the hands* you always felt.

You are fourteen years old, and *you see them everywhere.*

You are eighteen years old, and you sleep in your own bed every night. You can hear your breath as your green blankets float up and down. Your roommate breathes right above you on her top bunk. You are alone enough to feel the quiet around you but not enough that you are drowning in it. You enjoy being alone, most of the time.

When you see *their eyes*, (*you still see them, don't you?*) *they* look much less like yours and much more like everybody else's.

They are the eyes of your mother when you're not who she wanted.

The eyes of your friends when you've just said too much.

The eyes of every person that's shown you a ruler on which every inch reads "fallen short."

The eyes of every person you've used that same ruler for.

You've gotten so used to *their eyes on you* that you've started to borrow *them* from time to time.

You are eighteen years old, and you are okay.

You are seven years old, and your mother asks you, "What are you so afraid of?"

You curl and flex your toes in your favorite little footie pajamas.

"Everything."

Dissection

When we were young enough to not know better, my brother and I would venture into our mother's herb garden and pluck juicy, green grubs from the tomato leaves. I imagine they felt safe there, soft and vulnerable, inching along the fuzzy pricks of each stem and feasting upon the greenery. The midsummer light fell lazily over each upward curve of the fragrant leaves. It was here that I learned how living things feel safe in beautiful places.

When we spotted the gluttonous beasts, we would skip away and rush up the ladder of our backyard "treehouse." Without a tree to be built around, the structure was more like a plywood fortress, somehow gothic despite being square and red. As we reached the top rung, lightning struck ominously around us, foreshadowing the menacing events to come. Inside the treehouse, there was a plastic bin. Inside the plastic bin, there were kitchen scissors hidden not long before—buried beneath broken Transformers, naked Barbies, and single socks that would never make it back to the washing machine. As one of us dug for the scissors, the other stretched the specimen across the floor so we might discover what color it bled. Surely a young Doctor Frankenstein, with his deathly curiosities and dreams of scientific stardom, did not always have a laboratory to conduct his revolutionary research. Surely all the greats began, in childhood, on some dusty wooden floor.

The main procedure moved quickly.

The worm was (not) placed under anesthesia. Its soft body was fastened by surgical straps (a child's index finger) to avoid any pesky movements. The incision changed each time: sometimes, a harsh, reckless chop where the scissor blades crashed together and the worm's body fell apart, and sometimes a professional glide across the abdomen. Once the patient's viscera were exposed, we documented our findings out loud, amidst various gags and groans of disgust.

We were diligent researchers—child scientists of the most prodigious degree. Still, I don't remember what color the worms bled. I remember our traipses through the garden. I remember the rusty blades of the kitchen scissors and how I could never remember which finger went in which hole on their handle. I remember the mutilation, but I cannot

remember what it meant. Did we find treasures or horrors beneath its thick, green skin? In the worm's stomach, could we spot the leaves of the tomatoes that my mother tried desperately to grow that year? When we threw the thing away, did it bleed green like the color of its skin, or did it bleed red like the four walls that confined it?

What color did the worms bleed,
And was it beautiful?

Portraits of Life Forgotten

The tragedy of life on Earth:

We are born, we depend; we are free, we depend; we die.

For a first job, working at a nursing home ranks far from the worst. It involves tasks that are easy to learn and difficult to unlearn. During evening shifts, the hours go by quickly, and many residents yawn too often to cause problems with the nurses or each other. New employees train for three days, learning names, memorizing drink orders, and discovering where each dish goes at the end of the night. These employees *should* be trained in the art of distance—not lingering long enough at any table to grow fond of any residents who may not be there the next evening. They should be trained to look away when the nurses feed those residents who cannot feed themselves, residents whose food the kitchen staff must blend into mushy gruel before it can meet their lips, residents who cannot even lift their heavy heads to accept the spoons that nurses offer them as imaginary airplanes. Even teaching their names seems like cruel malpractice—like allowing a child to name the bird that they found in the backyard and will return there within the week. Working here is an easy job for those who can learn not to notice. At my nursing home, I noticed this:

Out of all the residents, Sue reminded me most of the childhood we return to during our final steps on God's earth. She always sat at a table towards the back, with no salt, pepper, sugar, or centerpiece. Eventually, she lost her napkin privileges as well. These regulations may seem harsh, but the nurses withheld table-bound items for good reason—Sue took to these items as a dog takes to a pair of shoes. Many evenings I stood at my drink cart as exasperated CNAs foraged for bits of napkin in the vast, toothless cavern of Sue's mouth. Sue and her dentures were not as familiar with one another as you might imagine. They knew each other as intimately as third cousins at Easter brunch, united only by force or circumstance. At her barren back table, Sue would talk, and talk, and talk. She mumbled memories to herself, repeatedly piecing together Lincoln Logs of the past as if doing so would help her rebuild them into the life she once knew. She recounted scenes of shoe shopping and marital

spats as one explains a dream sleepy-eyed at the breakfast table. These once-vivid moments kept slipping away, and soon, no one else would remember them. Her listeners did not feel the significance of them as she once did; they did not long to slip back into sleep and continue the episodes after reality had let the credits roll.

Sue loved to sing. “Sing to me, Sue,” I would say on days when she seemed too quiet. She would laugh for a while, tell me about shoe-shopping, tell me about the “man in the corner” who talked to her always and exclusively, and then she would sing old hymns or “Jolene” by Dolly Parton in a bright, choral tone. Her voice flew up into the foam board ceilings and whizzed around the dining room, high and echoey with a shaky vibrato. When she finished her performance, an audience of nurses and aides would clap and chuckle. Sue would break out in a grand, all-too-gummy grin, to which the audience would reply in a more serious tone, “Sue! Put your teeth back in!” Then we would chuckle some more, and suddenly kitchen mistakes, lead eyelids, and feet on fire seemed farther away than they had at verse one.

JoJo possessed a confidence that many only dream of. Her full name was Joanne—as the nameplate on her door read for nurses, aides, and families who passed by. Even without this name tag, the door would remain irrefutably hers. It had bright yellow caution tape fastened thickly across the opening, and red foam pool noodles formed a trail to her bed. When the nurses woke her from napping or simply staring at the wall in front of her, they would take one arm and allow her to use the other, feeling for the objects dyed in vivid colors that she would never see. Long before she earned her squinty-eyed crow’s feet, JoJo’s father struck her skull with a steel-toed work boot and rendered her permanently blind. I often wonder who guided her before these nurses did.

In the morning, one of the nurses would dress JoJo and tie her sparse grey hair up with mini elastics—sometimes in little bunny ears, sometimes a braid or a ponytail with neon clips added for decoration. “You look so pretty, Miss JoJo!” I would say to her during mealtimes.

“I know,” she would shoot back with a tucked smile and eyes squeezed shut.

Until her brother, Wayne, died, JoJo always ordered the same two drinks. For my first several months at the nursing home, JoJo and Wayne sat together for every meal. I memorized their drinks easily: sugar-free lemonade and Kool-Aid for JoJo and black tea for Wayne. Wayne liked

his tea with two artificial powdery creamers and two even more artificial blue sweeteners. The day that Wayne passed away, I asked JoJo what she wanted to drink. She requested her usual drinks, but also Wayne's. For the remainder of my time there, the old man's legacy lived on in Great Value black tea: a bit watery, a bit milky, and artificial from foamy top to crumbly bottom.

After mealtimes, the nurses would often leave JoJo behind as I closed the kitchen. Sometimes, they had other residents to attend to; other times, they simply chatted behind their desk at the nurse's station while the old blind woman sat at an empty table, waiting for guidance from a gentle hand, and eventually, from her half crime-scene, half pool-party themed bedroom decor. As I wiped tables with sanitizer and swept half-eaten spaghetti noodles off the floor, JoJo would call out, "I want to go home."

"I know you do, Miss JoJo. I'll ask the nurses to come get you," I would reply. If I could, I would walk her myself, but they did not train dietary aides for the nurses' jobs. Often, even after I reminded them, the nurses would leave her a while longer as she repeated the request.

"I want to go home . . . I want to go home . . ." her words trailed at a volume that reached no farther than the empty tables around her. In JoJo's head, I imagine her voice sounded much bigger—commanding and confident, the tone of a woman who grew up guiding herself away from men with short tempers and steel-toed work boots. But in this dining room with its tile spaghetti floors and tables wet with sanitizer, it emerged small and pleading: a voice on its knees. It's difficult to yell when your voice is small and "home" is just a hospital bed.

Bill was a gentleman through and through. Many male residents had an explorer's gaze set perpetually within their clouded eyes. When I handed them drinks, I could feel them mapping territory on my dirty scrubs. I could feel the footsteps as they walked over my hands, my legs, and my torso, finally up to my face, my eyes . . . if they offered a compliment aloud, they did so in a lust-marinated tone that seeped into my skin and pushed it upwards in cold gooseflesh. Though their stares would linger as I walked away, I never stayed at the table quite long enough for them to plant any flags.

At Bill's table, I never felt scared to linger. When I brought him his requested treats every evening—green tea and vanilla ice cream—his eyes wrinkled up, his pupils came to life, and he smiled, not as a man

mapping out territory but as one happy to have you aboard his ship—like he had a friend to sail with. He wore a dark blue U.S. Navy ball cap and always carried a thick war novel with him to dinner. He always smiled and he always said, “thank you!” when I brought what he requested, as if I did so as a personal favor rather than for \$12.30 an hour. After a while, I seemed to forget that part, too.

Before I finished high school, I had an extra graduation invitation—the one that would have gone to my father if he hadn’t died a month before—and I brought it to work with me. During my rounds of meal charting, I stopped at Bill’s door with the slip of cardstock held at my side. He greeted me as he always did, with a “You’re here...” or “There you are!” I wish desperately that I could explain his voice in a worthy metaphor: words coated in brownie batter and sweet molasses, as gentle as moonlight in a dark room or dripping sunshine in early June. Truthfully, no metaphor can explain the voice of a grandfather. I returned the greeting as I always did, with a “Hi, Bill!” or a quiet smile, and I handed him the card. I do not remember anything more than a sweet “thank you” in return, but I do remember all the sweet “thank you’s” that followed in my next several shifts, as if he remembered the token all over again each time he saw me.

I returned to work once after starting college, sometime in November, and Bill was not there anymore.

The tragedy of life on Earth:

You train to remember, you remember; you train to forget, you remember.

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