

Baylorian

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Baylorian 2010

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~Just Because We Can~

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Hands

I can feel the tension creeping down the vertebrae of my back. The paper on the desk in front of me is distorted through the foggy lens of tears. The teacher's voice is ringing clearly across the room as she calls out our vocabulary for the week. I am holding the pencil in my hand; I am holding the pencil in my hand, holding it, willing it, begging it to keep up. My shallow and syncopated breaths mark time with the taps and scratches of the other kid's pencils. There is no friction; my pencil glides from the left margin of the paper to the right corner without a moment's hesitation. The shadow of panic is drifting across my face. I clench my jaw to steady myself. I am only four words behind. No big deal, right? I'll just jump in with this next word. The trail my pencil leaves behind resembles the make-believe writing of a three year old more than the writing of a fourth-grader. It is too much. A renegade tear escapes the corner of my eye, only to be followed by the rest of the pack.

There are twenty-seven bones in the human hand, twenty-seven bones and twenty-eight muscles. But I have a tremor, and that makes my hand different. I have a tremor in my right hand only, and this makes me different. It is what makes me different that also makes me lucky. I was born with a Group B strep infection, an infection that affects approximately twelve thousand newborns each year. Out of this twelve thousand, one-tenth will die and the rest can expect to be physically and/or mentally handicapped. The doctors told my parents that the chances of me surviving were one in ten thousand. I lived. The doctors then led my parents to believe that there was no possibility of me ever leading a normal and functional life. They sent my parents home with a laundry list of problems they should expect, and a child that more closely resembled a rag-doll than it did a 6-week-old infant. I grew up, made good enough grades to graduate in the top ten percent of my high school class, ran cross country, hung

out with friends, squeezed myself into the ranks of normal society. My parents could not have been more proud; in their eyes I had overcome so much. But my parents' perspective is lost on me. The only experience that I have with my tremor is that I am the only person I know who has one.

Uniqueness? Being unique is scary. If you think about it, no one really wants to be truly unique. We subscribe to subcultures and say we want to be different, but all we really do is find a smaller group of people with whom we can identify. Being unique is being different; being different is to distance yourself from those around you. It is one of the greatest ironies in life that the most beautiful thing about the human condition is also the one thing that grieves us the most. No matter how rich or poor, confident or shy, we need other people, we need other people to want to understand us.

As any good teacher would do, my fourth grade teacher, upon noticing that I was clearly upset, asks me what's wrong; why am I upset? And because she is a good teacher, she asks me this in front of the entire fourth grade class. Forced to answer, I unsteadily reply that I can't keep up. I don't look at her; I only stare through the haze and pulsing in the front of my head; I stare at the paper in front of me that is filled with a child's make-believe writing. The tone of my teacher's voice has the creeping edge of offense to it. She wants to know why I don't trust her to help me. Hasn't she always helped me in the past? Couldn't I see that it really wasn't a big deal that I couldn't keep up, that I could always get the words later?

Hands have had a hypnotizing power over me for as long as I can remember. Hands gently gliding down banisters; hands that tiptoe across the keys of a piano; hands that lay relaxed and cat-like across the table-top; hands that echo drum taps on steering wheels. They are fascinating if you watch them; they always have so much to say. The intertwined hands of lovers; the locked fist of a prizefighter; the strong and sure hands of an artist. We see the world with our hands, not our eyes. Hands can carry burdens, they can guide you down unsure paths, they possess the strength to form, and the grace to calm. Hands are the world's visual poems.

One of the first things I notice about a person is what

they do with their hands. Sometimes they hang loosely by a person's side. Other times, they rake themselves through coarse wind-blown hair. The best hands act as an accompaniment to what is being spoken. Articulate hands can entertain me for hours. I am memorized by the way they dance along in controlled and fluid motions. I took a drawing class once, not to learn how to draw, but so I could watch other people's hands make long straight lines or gently shade the colors of shadows. I notice odd things like the way a person holds a pencil. I envy people who can balance a plate in one hand and a full glass in the other. I watch intently as hands perform tasks that mine cannot.

My parents have never talked to me very much about my tremor. If I bring the topic up, it is always efficiently skirted around with statements like: it's not that noticeable; it's really not a big deal; don't let it bother you; no one else is bothered by it. Perhaps it is because my parents never had the words to talk about it, that I can never talk about it. Though, to be fair, doctors never seem to be able to talk about my tremor in a way that makes sense either. No doctor has been able to say exactly what causes this constant shaking in my right arm. It is assumed to be a very small amount of brain damage that is the culprit. Brain damage that hasn't shown up in any of the tests I've had done is all I have to explain my problem. Maybe if I knew what caused it, I could tell others about it; surely ignoring it, pretending no one can tell that my right hand is shaking is not the responsible or considerate thing to do. If I knew what to say, I would say it. But, since I don't know what to say, it feels abstract, it feels like something entirely unconnected to me. What should I do, introduce myself and then say, "Oh, by the way my hand shakes?" Not even that makes sense; what does it mean; what does it matter? How does one explain something that not even she understands?

As terrible as this is to say, the instant my fourth grade teacher started questioning my trust, I secretly began to wish that there was something worse than a tremor wrong with me, something that would separate me from everyone else, a lifeline to pull me in from the vast unknown of in-between. In the grand scheme of things, having a tremor is really not

that big of a deal. Can I write? Yes; slowly, but I can write. Can I type? Again yes, but slowly and only by using the taboo two-finger method. Can I read, understand complex ideas, and follow instructions? Yes. So in the eyes of the education system, I was just like everyone else, a little slower, but basically the same. As these fourth graders stare at me, as my teacher questions me, as I stare at my make-believe handwriting, I believe this -- I need this to be true. I need to be like everyone else. I need to write in big bubbly, girly hand-writing.

Like a good concerto, life presents many variations on the same theme. When I was in middle school, my youth group took a trip to a ropes course. When we arrived at our destination, we were lined up across the room and given a piece of wooden track. The object of the game was to align our piece of track with the person standing next to us so that a ball could roll down the track from one end of the line to the other. We were told that if we could successfully complete the game we would be free to play on the ropes course. The ball starts on the opposite end of the line from me. Round one, it gets to me, I shake, ball falls, we start again. Round two, the same. Round three, the same. At this point I walk away, completely devastated. I walk away from the game upset and disappointed, wondering, "why can't I do this?", "why not just this once?" The only words of counsel I received were along the lines of: "it's only a game," and "no one is mad at you." These are nice things to say, but come nowhere close to what I am truly feeling. Not everything is this dramatic. Sometimes having a tremor is quite humorous. One time in high school I spilled my chocolate milk on the cashier at the end of the lunch line. All I could do was grin sheepishly. It really wasn't my fault.

It has taken me years to figure out the answers to the questions my fourth grade teacher asked me. Somehow even then I knew, I knew that it was not the fact that I was missing words on my vocabulary list that had upset me. I was upset because the girl sitting next to me had the prettiest handwriting I had ever seen, and I couldn't read my own handwriting. I was upset because I was the only one who couldn't keep up. I was upset at the ropes course because I

was only one who could not get it right. I knew it was just a game, I knew I could get my vocabulary words later, but I also knew that no one else would need to. I have grown up, and none of this has changed. I still fear not being able to do what everyone else can do. I fear in class essays, not because I don't know the content, but because I don't know if I can get it all down in time. I have learned to accept that my notes from class will always be missing some information because I can not keep up with the pace of the lecture. I have learned to sit with my arms crossed, or my hands clasped, so no one will notice the tremor that I don't have the words to explain. I am trying to learn to not see what my parents call a blessing, as a curse. My comfort comes in watching hands, hoping just maybe mine can learn through imitation. Hands with fingers that fly up and down keyboards, hands that hang lazily off an armrest, hands that are as steady as they are strong.

Jevon Westmoreland

Bitter Bread

Realizing what I had done
was like biting into bitter bread.
I had lost, and no one had won
because of the nothing that I said.

And nothing was what I was left with.
Nothing. Naught. Nil.
I let the darkness take over.
It took me against my will.

It took me over and spat me out.
It sprayed my body all around.
Remnants of my being were strewn about,
but there was nothing to be found.

Not anything worth the ground where it lay
rotting, smelling, dead,
and emaciated with decay
because of the nothing that I had said.

So nothing is what remained there
for everyone to see,
for everyone one to wonder where
and what had become of me.

Nothing is what I aimed to sow,
and nothing I did reap.
Nothing tastes like bitter bread,
with not a crust to keep.

Ashli Lawson

When I'm in the Set of Math

$\sqrt{-1}$ 've never been too sharp on paper,
 And I'm prone to Δ my mind.
 My patience runs \ll short;
 I'm not ∂ unwind.
 "Ashli" is spelled somewhat $2\mathbb{Z}+1$,
 I have a $\text{dis}\propto$ wrath,
 But I always feel right in my \mathbb{C} ,
 When I'm in $\{\text{Math}\}$.

Translation

:
 I've never been too sharp on paper,
 And I'm prone to change my mind.
 My patience runs much less than short;
 I'm not partial to unwind.
 "Ashli" is spelled somewhat odd,
 I have a disproportional wrath,
 But I always feel right in my element,
 When I'm in the set of Math.