

CATHARSIS

SHIRLEY LIN



S TARES

LAURA PERRAULT

I am confident. I parade into my first-grade classroom, a Hello Kitty backpack gripped tightly against my shoulders and a genuine smile plastered across my face. My hot pink leggings are matched with a loose-fitting tank top covered in vibrant sunflowers that bobs up and down with each fearless stride. My mother shields her face behind the hallway window in hopes of hiding the tears slowly dripping down the side of her cheek, but she knows that I am ready to take on the world. I am beautiful. I am unique. I am powerful. That is what my parents always told me, at least.

Stares

I am comfortable. It wasn't long before I made friends within my elementary school bubble. These friends weren't the type who just hung out with me at recess because my house was remembered as the best 6th birthday party in Mrs. McGlynn's entire class (the secret is a bounce house, that always wins them over). Instead, they were my friends because we giggled nervously at the back of the classroom when the teacher made a mistake, passed notes about this week's crushes, and stayed up way too late at sleepovers talking about how we wished that the school cafeteria served pizza every day instead of only Fridays. I had found my place with the people I was meant to be with, and nobody could take that away from me. That was until a little twerp approached me at recess, spitting ferocious fire out of his hateful mouth, "what is wrong with your face?!" The words sliced through my skin, leaving a trail of blood dripping down my body as my whole world crumbled between pursed lips. My friends stood in silence. What does he mean? My mom told me I was beautiful. I thought I was unique. I was supposed to be powerful. Have my parents been lying?

Stares

I am puzzled. I stare deeply into the mirror, desperately hoping to get rid of the foreign face glaring back at me. It has been added to my nightly routine that as I lay in bed, I pray to God that He can fix this broken doll to look like all of the others, perfectly pursed lips delicately placed upon sun kissed skin. I used to yearn to be picked out of a crowd first for intense games of kickball or tag. Now I wished nothing more than to blend into the painting, my body spreading outwards until I slowly begin to fade into a sea of hues that you can't tell apart from the others. My mother attempted to soothe me with the idea that He chose me to be different because He knows that of all people, I have the determination and compassion to handle it. I can only imagine the laughter erupting from my classmates when I tell them this the next time they make fun of me.

Stares

I am lost. My brain finally comprehends the fact that what I look like is not normal, but does knowing this reality make it any easier? Defect. The word has become my only definition, throwing me in a box placed in the back of the room to be returned. Defect. It becomes the sole topic at endless doctors' appointments and awkward conversations with family members and close friends. It pierces my ears when it is said aloud, making my face burn with embarrassment and rage. Defect. I retract until the lack of light allows me to fade into eternal darkness; the word can't reach me here. There is no cure for this.

Stares

I am improving. Slowly, I take one courageous step out of the darkness at a time. My knees tremble with the weight that they are forced to carry, but I beg them to stand up straight and propel my body forward. I started as the timid freshman that hid behind dorm room walls, avoiding social interactions that went beyond stating my name, major, and hometown. I looked fear in the eye as I practiced my introduction in front of the mirror, perfecting the way my name escaped my mouth with assurance. “I am Laura Perrault.” I stick out a firm hand, stronger than ever before, and my hand meets theirs and knows exactly what to do. Three seconds, then let go so that they don’t think you’re clinging on to their presence. “It was nice to meet you, we should get lunch sometime.” Do they really want to get lunch with me, or is it out of pity? We get lunch on Monday at 12pm, and days later those lunch dates turn into Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I sit beside them again at dinner at 5:30 pm sharp. We’re regulars now, and there is a sense of comfort in their presence. I am given a new introduction, “this is my friend, Laura,” and the word never tasted so sweet. Friend.

Stares

I am beautiful. There is no way to erase the years that I allowed my birth defect to take the reins of my life and eliminate all happiness. Along the way, I met people who challenged my improvement, and encountered situations that made it almost unbearable to regain my balance to keep moving forward. However, in those darkest moments, I found others that stood by my side, building up my army to protect the castle inside that lay defenseless. They built up my walls and then slowly tore them down until my vulnerability was something that I was no longer afraid of. Sister. Daughter. Chemist. Academic. Researcher. Friend. The name Laura Perrault is sculpted by these words, making a definition that overpowers any other that once plagued the name. This new definition is added to the dictionary, making it permanent in the ink that bleeds the pages. This confidence is here to stay.

BLOOD TEST

GABRIELLE LATORRE

Blue Button

It was a routine blood test. Results were negative. She spends the next night writhing under pale pink, sweat-soaked, polyester sheets. Beads of perfumed perspiration drip trails and tributaries down her damp skin. A sharp, pointed pain shoots through the crook of her arm between forearm and bicep, lurching her awake. She brushes her fingers over the spot, feeling a distinct, cold swelling. Frantically, she fumbles for the light switch and sits up with a start. Her mouth gapes in horror as she watches what appears to be an iridescent blue button the size of a dime fight its way to the surface of her skin. She swallows a panicked, garbled scream, certain she must be dreaming, delirious with fever. Covering her eyes, she peaks cautiously through partitioned fingers, holding her jagged breath. It’s still there. A deep, hot jolt of fear courses through her veins like molten lava. Thoughts swirl in her mind, a cacophonous frenzy, clamoring over and crashing into one another, each vying for attention. She forces herself to take a deep breath, but it comes out shaky and she can’t steady it. Fingers twitching, itching to push the button, yet she refrains. She reflects on yesterday, yearning for clues, anything to latch onto. The quick, white swish of fresh ironed lab coat, the melodic clicking and scribbling of felt-tipped pen on clip board, the hushed tone and quiet arguing outside her hospital room. Too terrified to bend her arm lest the button get pressed, heart beating in rhythm with the swift hooves of a racehorse, she finishes the night with eyes stapled wide open.

Pressed

She felt her veins expand to heavy tubes through her once sun-soaked skin, now a translucent milky white. They pulsate with her heart, a steady thrum like the beat of an ominous marching band, processing into darkness. The blue tubes snake through her body and emit a dull glow, muted by clusters of cells. Blood swirls through them, like water through an enclosed amusement park slide. She can almost hear it sloshing through her. The urge to cut herself open and investigate what’s inside consumes her.

[This isn’t some warped sci-fi movie, this is her life. They told her the clinical trial might have unknown side effects, but nothing like this. It was supposed to save her, not ruin her.]

[The unknown is simply too deadly, a potential trapped door to fall through, never to recover.]