

The Watercolors of Thoughts

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I come into the house, firmly pushing the door closed behind me and forcing the bolt lock that doesn't line up right. My work bag slips off my shoulder into the crook of my elbow, and a sigh escapes my lungs again. There's a faint headache caressing my right temple, and I want to lie down.

My thoughts dart around me, their blues and grays shifting over the ceiling and walls. They are usually more vibrant at home where there is no audience for their swirling dances. When I was younger, I learned how to train them to be less ostentatious out in public. I smile whenever I remember my mother and I in the backyard of my childhood home, practicing breathing exercises and meditation movements to bring harmony into my mind. Our colors blurred together among the branches of the trees above us.

As an adult this "training" helps at work so that my students don't notice my flowing emotions as easily compared to their own. The clouds that emanate from the kids are striking, almost neon in their appearance from their unbridled nature. Once, one of my 7th graders shrouded in lime green asked why there was a quivering streak of maroon up the wall behind me. I stared at her, the very one who'd just been harassing me for being so strict with the school's policy about no cell phone use in class, and I didn't know how to answer her. Now, standing in the entryway of the house, I glance around at my thoughts' blooming forms and notice they are not as bright as they could be. My eyes sting.

Every day this week has been non-stop: up before dawn, an easy breakfast of a toasted bagel, quick ride to work one exit down the highway, several hours of class after class and drama after drama (one student suspended for bringing marijuana to school and another suspended for pulling the fire alarm "by accident"), hurry home and go to the gym, then try to shower or eat dinner before slipping into bed and doing it all over again and again and again. The drudge of the routine gradually drains the colors of the slew of emotions I carry and collect throughout the day, tight fluff shifting around my shoulders and legs.

I head into my home office – less used now that I'm teaching in person again – to drop off my work bag. There's a flicker of purple at the edge of the swirls along the walls; there was never any drama in my serene home office, no yelling, no flying objects, no questionable PDA. The ache in my chest deepens.

My husband, Caleb, won't be home for another hour since it's a late work night for him, so I'm in charge of dinner. Often, Cal is draped in shades of green and purple, thoughts of curiosity and delight. I enjoy watching him work on a project in the yard, his mind alight with focus and determination. He once told me that he loved how my colors brighten whenever I caught sight of him. There's a photo on my bedside table from the moment Cal proposed, showing shimmering sheets of opal all around me.

I move into the kitchen, but I'm struggling to remember what we'd agree to eat that night; I feel a tide of anxiety rising inside me. The grays and blues are heavy as clouds now, crowding around the island in the kitchen. I inhale a deep breath, and there's the scent of rainwater in the air. I can't swallow, I'm choking, and the blues and grays are to blame. They reach for me with gentle tendrils, and my weary mind can't form the commands to move my limbs away from the feelings demanding attention.

The faintest touch on my forearm; the thought tendril does not feel warm or cool, but it is there. Another around my other bicep, not tight, but solid. I realize they're twisting up my legs, too, and my chest is fluttering. I can't run, this is going to happen, and I fall into the clouds, the kitchen no longer visible through the watercolors of my thoughts.

I'm suspended in what appears to be gray, then shifts to blue, then back again. My face is wet now, and my chest is tight. I want to tear everything to shreds, then I wish the ache in my head would go away. I close

my eyes, but darkness is not what I see: the greys and blues remain. I yelp and I scream, I cry and hug the clouds so tight to make my insides stop hurting. I curl around them, my hands holding fists of wisps, and, faintly, I feel warmth. My face slowly dries.

The sound of the opening garage door winds its way into my head, and a few minutes later I hear Cal enter the kitchen. I feel the cold tiles of the floor pressing into my arms and body.

“Lucy?” He’s at my side when I open my eyes, and I see the clean white walls above us. Cal takes my hand. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I say, my throat hoarse. “Just another episode.” The air comes a little more easily into my lungs now.

His arm is strong across my back as he helps me sit up. “I’ll make you some tea, and you can tell me all about it. You’re okay now.” Cal looks around the kitchen again, and this time I notice a shy yellow creeping up the walls. “I’ll make dinner tonight,” he says with soft eyes, standing to help me up, and the color swells to comfort us both. The amber that pools around our feet now smells of wildflowers.