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The Vernal Pool

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

Saltwater

By Maria Nguyen-Cruz

When I realized that I could not trust you,
it hit me as hard
as the water did my thighs
when I jumped off that cliff into the ocean that day.
That day I learned
too late,
that you were as pleasant
as the saltwater in my eyes.

I should have been able to tell
when you murmured to me softly about
when you dived down that cliff
with another girl whose
eyes looked like the ocean,
all while
rubbing your calloused hands on my thighs.
It was a beautiful day;
the sun melting into the ocean,
your hand over mine,
and the spindly tree that sat firm in your front yard.
I felt so happy,
I sighed in contentment.
Until you grabbed my arms,
gnawed at my breasts,

tore me apart,
ripping my trust into pieces
with your teeth

your hands bruised my thighs,
you slammed yourself into me,
I wanted to scream

but you shoved your collarbone into my mouth.

Then the saltwater that spilled from my eyes,
did not come from the ocean.

I sat in the shower
scrubbing my skin a third time,
trying to replace the salt and filth that coated me
with something fresh,
and something clean.

I spat out salt for a week,
and spent the next three years feeling bitter.

Then when I was nineteen
I found myself by the ocean again.
I downed a bottle of champagne,
fizzy and sweet,
when suddenly
I remembered you.
You were sitting on the couch with me.
I told you that my mother had hit me

and that she's been
beating me for years, and
the purple that you see
wrapped around my thighs
like ribbons
or tinsel on trees,
is because when she gets angry
or when she feels lonely,
she ties her pain around my legs,
so that I'll know what her pain was like
and I would never leave.

You stayed silent.
Then you broke it
when you asked,
"When was the time you masturbated last?
I didn't take you
to be the kind of girl,
to let a man lie beside you.
Did you know, that the girl I hang out with
doesn't touch herself,
hasn't even been kissed?"

Then I was quiet as the ocean roared in my ears.
I knew that girl was thirteen.
I chuckled then but now I wish I had gasped
I couldn't believe it at first,

thoughts were churning through my head
and I was caught in the middle of the whirlpool in my despair.

Then your response to my silence
was to reach down my shirt,
and ask me
if I'd behave.

I remembered vividly what it was like to kiss you.
Letting your lips meet mine
felt like entering a warm stream of water.
The heat was welcomed until suddenly it had burned.

I started crying immediately.
The saccharine champagne
spilled onto my lap like a river
and suddenly tasted salty
and buried itself in my teeth.

I cried out
and all my friends heard.

When they saw me cry
they held me.

Suddenly,
everything was a little
bittersweet.