

FORMALDEHYDE, MAYBE?

by ISABELL BRINKMANN

I now think of you every time I apply my sunscreen.

You used to always do it for me, as a child; with your big hands struggling to cover every inch of my young face, inevitably leaving some spots uncovered while others were lathered in thick layers of the stuff. The lack of dexterity in your fingers was always funny to me, considering you were able to perform most other activities with great ease.

Perhaps it could be attributed to your eagerness to finally enter the sea again, which was one of your preferred elements. It must have been the vastness drawing you in, come to think of it now. Where else was there such free rein, the promise of absolute openness and freedom? Where else was your body weightless? Mom and I used to be astounded by the sheer distance you were able to cover by swimming and the subsequent radiance the sun and the open sky would lend you; the picture of utter liveliness. Your skin - red, burnt, both in look and temperature - accentuated the blue of your eyes in an almost uncanny way.

And remember when you took me on that spontaneous hike behind the house? I - having been fifteen years old at the time - was supposed to be in my physical prime, at least compared to you. You, however, overtook me from the very beginning. It was natural to me, really, not being able to catch my breath even remotely, lacking the muscles to continue and eventually having to sit down, while you strutted on, inconvenienced by my lack of stamina.

As many children tend to view their fathers, I also thought you were some sort of superhero, capable of anything as long as physical strength and capability were involved. That which left its imprint on me, however, was not your sheer strength, but the way you revelled in your body and the insurmountable enjoyment you extracted from your senses.

Absurd, then, grotesque even, the images more recent instances evoke, right? You used to say so yourself.

"These rails", you said, unwillingly quiet, "these rails are absurd."

I thought so as well. How strange that I would be the stronger one between us, me taking care of you, carrying you. How strange, even audacious, that I would be the one with no trouble breathing. I doubt you've forgotten, but we did take the rails off, eventually, following your insistent pleading.

"Get me out of this bed", you used to repeat, evidently aggravated in tone ,yet lacking the strength to articulate the emotion further.

We knew what was happening but refused to acknowledge your shrinking, fragile form, the all-encompassing immobility, or even the pain. And yes, I think I understood which memories must have been going through your mind at that point. I, too, could see you running, biking, surfing, sailing, swimming. I, too, could see the sky enveloping you once again, your body weightless instead of burdensome and static. We both saw the sterile white ceiling giving way to a bright blue, red taking over grey and yellowish hues, vivid over pale. It was the same urgency you experienced by the sea, the same concept you were chasing, in your wish to get up and out. I, too, was and still am unable to grasp this transformation, this exclusivity that now marked life and health.

I had switched to unscented sunscreen a while before it happened. And its smell had never particularly struck me beforehand. It is not completely scentless though, is it? After having met you in your, for lack of a better word, ultimately altered state - frigid, still, pale yellow, smelling pungently of chemicals - and as the first hot days of that year crept their way towards me, I soon became reacquainted with the distinct, acrid smell of preservatives. Their ubiquitous use was unclear to me beforehand.

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Remembering and the act of writing are after all, in and of themselves, a type of preservative. And because I try to capture you and how it all was in most things I make, I became more closely acquainted with the wide variety of preservatives I unintentionally employed. Funny, to even think of preserving something already dead, already ridden with spores of rot and decay. What is it that we're trying to embalm here, exactly? Perhaps at this point I've also grown to perpetually exude that abominable, chemical stench.