

Taylor Nawrocki---Fiction Writing Sample

The Stars at Night

You are looking at the stars. You're on the balcony of your apartment, where, surrounding you, potted plants, half dying, strangle themselves in the soil that was meant sustain their life. You are holding a translucent brown bottle in your left hand and the other is gripping the balcony's railing.

Someone at the complex is taking a smoke and you reach to your pocket for a cigarette but your hand only feels cloth and you remember that you quit smoking months ago. You bite down on your lip.

You take a sip out of the bottle, eyes still open, still looking at the stars.

You hear the balcony door slide open and her slippers, the ones you know to be pink and fuzzy and worn a little grey, pad against the cement. She comes up behind you and kisses your neck, wraps her arms around your waist.

"Are you coming to bed soon?" She asks.

You feel like you should be with the stars, way up there, up in the nothingness.

She nestles against you and pulls your bodies closer to one another. You feel far away.

You take another sip of beer. It is warm.

She asks again, "Are you coming to bed soon?" and she loosens her hold on you so that she can peer around and look at your face, look at your eyes that she cannot look into because they do not turn her way because they are still looking at the stars.

You close your eyes for a moment, slowly, so that the black of the sky and the black of the inside of your eyelid seem to mesh so that instead of blocking out the whole sky it's like you are erasing only the stars.

But you open them again quickly like you need to make sure that you really hadn't erased anything.

You feel her breath on your cheek. You turn your head so that you are facing her and the stars are now out of your line of vision.

Her eyes are brown and right now her pupils are large and hard to see because you didn't turn the balcony light on when you came out and neither did she so you depend on the light seeping from the living room to see her. She has her lips parted just a little so that she can breathe from her mouth because she has that nasty cold.

You nod your head, yes, you are going to bed soon.

She mirrors your nod and fastens her arms around your neck, using them to pull herself up to kiss your cheek.

Her slippers pad against the cement and the balcony door slides closed.

You look back up at the stars and a star that you know is really just an airplane because it moves so fast makes you want to scream, scream at the sky and the stars and the night and the cascading, unrelenting, unconquerable blackness above you but you don't because she is inside and waiting for you to come to bed and the someone smoking a cigarette would probably be able to hear you and so would all of the other people who live here who are probably trying to sleep but part of you wants to scream anyway but you don't and so you set down your beer on the edge of a wide-brimmed terra-cotta pot whose plant is brown and shriveled and you slide open the balcony door and go to bed.

The Things Norah Likes

January 8, 2005:

Norah likes drawing and outer space.

The Big Book of Everything lies spread open in front of Norah, who is on her bed, stomach down. Her father has given her the Book for her tenth birthday last month and she hasn't spent her free time reading much else since.

The Book is kind of like a dictionary, except that instead of a definition, each entry has a story, a history answering a million questions she had ever even thought to ask. She reads the book so often that she begins to know the words before her eyes reach them on the page.

Art accompanies many of the entries. Photographs of peacocks, an oil painting of Jesus Christ on the cross, satellite images of outer space.

This is what Norah likes most in the book, the art and the entry about space, especially the art about space. She studies that page longer than any of the others, traces her pointer finger around the planets until she memorizes their shape like the words on the page. She finds herself tracing them in her mind whenever plain old earth isn't captivating enough. She starts doing this in school, pencil in hand. That's when she realizes that she likes to draw.

At first it is just outer space. She likes how the colorful planets look against the black sky, and how, with her pencil, she controls their revolutions. She has notebooks filled with detailed sketches, pretty good if she says so herself, of the planets and the stars and the cosmos.

On the first weekend that she gets to see her dad since he has given her the gift, she can hardly hold herself together, wondering which drawing she should show him first. She wants to show him all of them, tell him how she knows the Big Book of Everything from cover to cover and that he has given her the absolute best gift—better than even Mom's. She is proud of him for knowing exactly what to give her for her birthday. She wants to show him that he has done well, and she wants him to be proud of her in return.

Her mother's green Toyota pulls in front of the well-kept apartment complex Norah's father had moved to after the separation-turned-divorce. It has been about a year now, so she is used to not seeing him often.

She waves to her mother and walks up the cement steps and knocks on the front door, which has a number three on it. A lady with lots of curly brown hair and too much makeup opens the door. Norah's eyes squint and she is about to ask for her father but he comes up behind the woman who smiles at him and then at Norah. She smiles too big.

"Hey Nor, I've got someone for you to meet," says her father. "This is Cathy. Say hi, Nor."

"Hi."

"I'm glad I finally get to meet you."

"Finally?" Norah asks. She has never heard of Cathy in her life.

"Come on inside, hon."

She shifts from foot to foot, but resolves that she has no real choice but to follow them inside.

Norah decides not to show her father her notebook.

January 8, 2012:

Norah likes her friend David and the idea of leaving.

Her mom and stepdad are asleep and of course little Will is too. This is Norah's favorite time, when the world is still and the planets and stars glow against the blackness of sky; some things transcend the years of childhood. She pulls back her black curtain so that she can see the stars' pinpoints of light from her bedroom window. The streetlamp that usually intrudes on these moments has been out for the past week and she is thankful for it. She lets the curtain fall and slides on the age-worn green backpack that has been sitting on her desk chair.

She walks down the hallway, forever cursing the fact that her room is at the end, meaning that she has to pass by the rest of the sleeping house on tiptoes before she can breathe again. Her mother is a screamer when she is angry, and Norah avoids dealing with her when she can.

She makes it home-free, passing through the living room and out the front door, glad on these nights, the only times in her life, that her stepfather is allergic to dogs. David is sitting a little ways down the street in his car, its headlights on and its engine waiting.

“Hey there,” he says as Norah gets into the passenger seat and throws her backpack behind her.

She doesn’t say anything, but she turns the stereo up a little louder so that the voice of The Velvet Underground makes the car warm with the heat of simple moments.

David drives through the neighborhood, glowing orange with streetlight residue, to their house.

Their house is half-built and stands next to a street’s dead end where there is an old railroad that doesn’t get used. Their house isn’t very big, but it feels huge because there are no walls or roof, just the skeletal outlines of where these things are supposed to be. Norah likes it better this way.

She turns the music down and David turns off the car and they walk through walls like ghosts. They know the house by now. They know where the mother will cook the dinners and where the father will watch his football and which windows the kids will sneak out of when they get older. They know the house’s secrets that that family won’t ever know. They know what will make the walls stay up.

They walk up the stairs, which have no railing, Norah behind David, who she pretends to push off the edge. They laugh silently until they are in the room where, in the future, the boy will make out with a girl for the first time while watching a chick flick he let her pick out.

They use their phones as flashlights and kick away any stranded nails so that they can lay down side-by-side and look at the starlit roof. They both know the constellations but take turns pointing them out anyway.

“Ursa Major.”

“Ursa Minor.”

“Orion.”

They are quiet.

“You excited to leave?” Norah asks.

“Here? Yeah. You? Not so much.”

“I’ll still be around. You know, when you’re home for breaks. It won’t be so bad. I’ll be there in a year if I’m lucky.”

“Luck won’t have anything to do with it, Nor. You’ve already gotten in. You’ll work your ass off here for a year, save up some money, get that first year out of the way, and you’ll go.”

“If I’m lucky.”

The chilly air makes them shiver. They are quiet.

“Do you believe in God?” She asks.

They are quiet.

“I guess so, yeah. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Never? What about at church?”

“I’ve just...never thought about it.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

They are quiet.

“What about you?”

“I think so. There has to be, doesn’t there? I think I do. Believe in God.”

After a few moments of silence Norah sits up and digs in her backpack and pulls out her Big Book of Everything, whose pages have been painted over with thick white paint.

David doesn’t move and he doesn’t say anything but he knows that she is drawing him, lying there with his eyes closed, hands behind his head, facing the stars.

January 8, 2014:

Norah likes driving fast in cars and praying to a God she is not sure exists.

These likes find their origins in necessity. Norah’s like for driving fast has grown from her combined dislike of waking up from a good sleep and being late for various things that one should not be late for, including class and work.

Her like for prayer derives from her need to have a constant reminder that even though the world is bigger than her, she does not have to be drowned in it.

Norah sits at her mother and stepfather's kitchen table eating Cap'n Crunch out of a bowl filled with chocolate milk. She is reading the back of the cereal box and doing the maze leading to the Captain's buried treasure in her head. Her mother's heels clack quickly from the carpeted living room across the kitchen's linoleum floor. Norah, bringing a spoonful of cereal to her lips, observes her mother, who grabs her keys and wallet out of the key and wallet basket that sits on the countertop. Her mother's heels clack back through the living room, into the small foyer, and out the front door. Norah hears her car start and pull away. She takes another bite of cereal.

Her stepfather comes in next. His loafers click lightly across the carpeted living room and a little more loudly on the linoleum. He grabs his keys and wallet from the key and wallet basket and follows the path of her mother out the front door, into his car, and away from the house.

Norah's stepbrother, Will, has already left on the school bus before she has come downstairs.

She finishes her cereal and sips the remaining chocolate milk from the bowl and puts it in the sink. She then goes to the bathroom, brushes her hair, her teeth, washes her face, and critically examines her slowly improving complexion in the mirror. She dresses—dark jeans and a plain maroon V-neck. She slides into the driver's seat of her truck, throwing her backpack of books and a change of clothes in the back.

Her day is long, as usual. It is a Monday, so she sits through subpar lectures about Biology, U.S. Politics, and English Literature for a three-hour block at the community college campus where a good portion of her high school's graduating class attends. She manages to make herself invisible amongst the familiar faces, preferring anonymity to putting on a false smile for small talk.

She finishes her lunch, sitting in a corner booth of the on-campus food court, and pulls out the Big Book of Everything from her backpack. She flips through the pages, most of which are filled with sketches, watercolors, collages, photographs of people, memories, dreams, questions. She flips through the book, and the deeper she goes, the more her art becomes colors that have no lines bounding them and images that cannot be interpreted as representing any one thing.

She finds the empty page she has been looking for, pulls out a sharpie, and begins to draw a girl's upper torso, her two arms pulling an unseen body out from the center of the Milky Way galaxy. Her hair floats from the lack of gravity and her face is tilted upwards, as if looking around at the space beyond, but before her face is filled with features, Norah glances at the time on her watch and closes the Book on the girl's blank face. She puts the Book in her backpack and heads to her truck, where she changes into her black and white work uniform in the backseat. She has an eight-hour shift at the steak restaurant she works at full-time.

"Looking good today, Nor," her kind of cute but kind of creepy 29 year-old coworker, Lyle says.

"I always do, Ly," Norah says as she clears a table that had seated fifteen businessmen who had left her a 10% tip.

It is dark outside, eleven pm when Norah finally leaves the restaurant. She heaves herself into the driver's seat. She yawns and rubs her eyes with her hands, thinking about the English essay on *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* that she has yet to start that she needs to get finished with tonight because she will hardly have time even to eat tomorrow.

She feels it, that wave of anxiety that tends to get to her on her drives home. She thinks about everything in a span of two minutes. Her father, who is probably drunk right now, passed out on the couch in his trailer's living room while his girlfriend who still wears too much makeup breastfeeds their child. Will, who is asleep now and who she probably will not see until this weekend because of her demanding schedule. Of her mother, probably sitting on the edge of her bed rubbing lotion onto her feet which are aching from the heels she wore all day, and how she, Norah, still feels a little ache of sadness after all these years of never connecting with her. Of David, who has barely spoken to her since dating that new girl from college—real college. She thinks of that English paper and the money she is saving to transfer to a university in a year, a year more than she had planned—and how she still isn't sure what she wants to pursue as a career. She likes to draw, but she doesn't know if she is good enough.

The night is clear and so is the road, the same road she drives on every day. She decides to drive fast, because that makes her stop listing things. She decides to pray, because that makes the things that she has already listed feel a little bit less scary.

She is driving fast and she is praying hard and she feels her body tingle with a lightness that she can only get when she drives fast and prays hard. She presses her foot to the gas a little more and she is going 102 mph, the fastest she has ever gone. She is praying out loud, praying in words she does not understand. She dares to close her eyes for a moment, lost in the ecstasy of release.

The sound of truck-meets-tree shakes the otherwise quiet air. The night is clear, and constellations gleam over the truck and the tree and the suburban house beside the scene. The house's lights turn on and a woman comes out. She clasps one hand over her mouth and the other over her heart and calls for her husband.