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A Work in Progress

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Artist Profile:

Inspired by Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams*

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Rheumatology

SP Training Materials

CASE SUMMARY:

You are a four-year-old female patient experiencing joint pain and fatigue. The pain is concentrated around your knees and ankles. The pain usually flares up when you are walking in the park with your babysitter and twin brother, playing in your little league soccer games, and running around the jungle gym at recess. The pain began about a year ago, and for a year your mom has been taking conference calls in sterile waiting rooms all over New York City with your head resting on her lap.

MEDICATION HISTORY:

You are taking mydriatic eye drops three times a day, they feel like cold wind. You take iron drops every other day, they taste like bile. You remember that one time the drop made you throw up. It was your nanny's first week on the job, and she didn't add enough water to dilute the drops. When you drank the water, your mouth became overwhelmed with a rusty metal taste. It penetrated your gums, tongue, and the dangly thing in the back of your throat. Your throwup was so acidic, it burned your throat as it came up.

MEDICAL HISTORY:

You are anemic and Vitamin-D deficient. The combination makes you look like a little vampire, pale and sickly. Your grandma told you eating fish would make you tan, so, at a nice restaurant for your mom's birthday, you ordered salmon. You couldn't even eat a bite because the smell was so repulsive and your mom didn't let you get dessert. You think that, because of your aversion to fish, you will always be Vitamin-D deficient. In one of the countless tests they ran, doctors discovered that you have uveitis, inflammation behind your eyes. They think that might be related to your joint pain.

PHYSICAL PRESENTATION AND TONE:

Your hair is in lopsided pigtails because your mom does not know how to do hair. You can't see it, so you don't mind. Wear a Paul Frank pink shirt and a cute little skirt. Wear tights that don't go with anything else you are wearing because you think that you have a fashion sense, and more importantly, that your fashion sense is better than your mother's. Hide your hands in your sleeves because you suck on the back of your hand, which leaves a huge hickey, instead of sucking your thumb like a normal kid. Make your voice raspy and so quiet that adults don't understand what you are saying the first time you say it.

ENCOUNTER DYNAMICS:

Don't speak unless you are spoken to. Every time you are spoken to, look to your mom first to see if you should answer. Only answer if your mom nods.

When the nurse asks if you are in pain, shrug. You don't want to burden your mom by having her know you are hurting. Sharing your pain doesn't help anything. The last time you whined about the sharp pains in your ankles, your babysitter left you on the corner of 80th and Broadway. You were hysterically crying, throwing your arms around and bellowing for her to come back. She walked a full block as you cried to "teach you a lesson". The last time you complained about the dull ache behind your knees, you had to sit out the rest of your soccer game, curled in your mom's arms like a baby while your brother ran up and down the field.

If the nurse asks if she can take your blood, nod your head, and extend your arm before she asks you to. You have to stare at the needle sliding into your deflated veins. You have to watch your murky blood pool in the blue vial. You have to keep your fist clenched the whole time because it does kind of hurt but not enough for you to be scared or bother your mom about it. You can look up at your mom once the band-aid is on, and you can see that she has been looking away the whole time.

When the doctor comes in, answer the same questions the nurse asked. Answer them politely, as if you have never heard them before. You can tell that the doctor is not going to find anything new because he is not paying attention to your answers or the weird way you are sitting to avoid stiffness in the back of your knees. He is busy making small talk with your mom, asking leading questions in the hopes of finding out her relationship status. Channel your favorite doll, Stella, and let your legs get limp as the doctor twists and contorts them to check your mobility. Remember how you got Stella for being brave and getting an IV at the hospital a couple of

months ago? Remember how much that hurt, and how this doesn't hurt that much compared to that.

Endure two more years of questioning and nodding and decades more of mobility checks, blood tests, and holding in your pain.

Creative Block

It was the Sunday before the first day of seventh grade when I realized that I could not jump. I was in my living room, dancing to this new song I liked because I was home alone and free to do whatever I wanted wherever I wanted. The afternoon sun flowed through the large windows in the living room, turning the maple-colored hardwood into a honey-brown dancefloor. The basic, poppy rhythm of the song made it easy to dance to the beat. The lyrics meant absolutely nothing, but I still sang along to the gibberish. I shimmied my shoulders, jigging to the thumping bass. I bogeyed to the ground, bounced my butt awkwardly, and flailed my arms with ease. I skipped around the first floor of my house— weaving through the kitchen and dining room, returning to the living room at the beat drop. But when it was time to jump, I couldn't.

I was honestly shocked at my inability. I tried over and over again, letting the song run through my favorite drawn-out beat drop where the bass comes in at the perfect time, but my feet simply wouldn't leave the ground. In the precipice of the impending jump, it felt like my arthritis had progressed to the point where my joints became bone. In each attempt, my back would get stiff and stop the momentum from my legs from lifting me up. It would cause me to freeze in place, stopping my jump. My soft, flexible flesh had been under attack for too long, and in an act of surrender, calcified. I didn't want to worry my mom or annoy my brother, and I was sure I would be able to jump the next day, so I just kept quiet about it.

I tried again the next morning. I brought my bare feet to the cold, morning hardwood of my bedroom floor and they wouldn't leave. Same stiffness. I didn't want to try again. I just put on the outfit I had laid out for myself the night before and went downstairs to take my pills

before the bus came. My mom was already at work and my brother was outside, yelling at me to catch the bus. I would tell them about it later.

As the bus was pulling up to the edge of my cul-de-sac, my brother told me that my outfit made me look like an idiot. I believed him. I felt myself morph into the ugly clown I imagined he viewed me as. The oversized yellow sweater I thought was “very Copenhagen” just made me look like a Minion. I became aware of my knee fat exploding out from the rips in my jeans and how my rings were too small for my fingers. My statement earrings were stretching my earholes and I looked crazy. But it was too late. The bus squeaked to a halt in front of me. I tried hopping up the steps. I couldn’t do it. I watched my house with my closet and all my normal sweatshirts shrink in the distance as the bus started moving toward my middle school.

Every morning that week, the first thing I did when I got out of bed was try to jump. It never happened. I would take my pills and put in my headphones as I left my house so that I didn’t have to talk to my brother while waiting for the bus. At lunch, I would scarf down my self-packed lunch (gushers, goldfish, and a shitty sandwich) and go straight to the bathroom. I knew the girls I was sitting with would probably make fun of anything I said, so I didn’t say anything. I just left. The lunchroom bathroom was by far the worst in the school. It had no windows and was inconveniently nestled under a staircase. The yellow fluorescent light made the checkered blue floor tiles look green and the red stalls look brown. There was never toilet paper and always girls in there screaming about shit that went down during lunch. It was one of those bathrooms that you didn’t dare enter alone because you had to squeeze past at least ten people you half knew just to get into a stall. I would go alone, though. I would go alone to try jumping. In the comfort of my cramped stall, I cycled through different exercises I made up to help me jump. One involved me skipping in place and increasing my speed to try and get both of my feet

off the floor at the same time. Another one was keeping one foot on the toilet and trying to lift my other leg by itself. They didn't work.

I was honestly just confused. I had rowing practice that week, and I was able to row perfectly. In the boat, my legs worked to explode from a squat to legs extended, propelling the heavy oar through the murky Connecticut River, and when I returned to a squat, my back was able to tilt way back when my legs extended and crunch forward. But, when it was time to do burpees, jumping jacks, and box jumps, I had to stand to the side. I had to face the heat from my coach's breath close to my face, questioning me. I didn't have any answers. He berated me about my laziness in front of my teammates to make an example out of me. But I wasn't being lazy, I literally couldn't jump. I started skipping my rowing practices.

When I brought it up to my Rheumatologist the next month, she asked me to try jumping in front of her. I did my thing where I bent my legs, sent my arms back for momentum, and just stood still instead of leaving the ground. I think she thought I was faking it. She said that my ankles weren't swollen any more than they had been the last time I saw her, that it was not indicative of a flare-up, and that it was probably just a side-effect of my back pain. She said that I should stretch more. I started crying in her office.

I felt my back weakness infect the rest of my life. I gave in to my brother and started wearing sweatpants to school. I stopped reaching out to my friends for plans. I quit rowing. My mom was at work all day and my babysitters didn't really care, so it was easy to resign myself to a self-imposed bed rest as a thirteen-year-old, spending my afternoons watching the trashiest television I could find. When my mom came home, we would eat dinner and I would tell her about how I finished my homework and went for a walk. I would go months without even trying

followed by months where every time I would find myself alone, I would attempt a bunny hop. And I still couldn't jump.

One of my first binges was on the show *Vanderpump Rules*. It follows a friend group of waiters/wannabe actors/part-time models/sociopaths who work at Lisa Vanderpump's overpriced restaurant. Each character is more self-involved, deluded, and selfish than the next. Stassi, the classic blonde mean-girl, has a model boyfriend Jax—the classic arrogant, failed male model. Jax cheated on Stassi with her best friend, Kristen, and denied it for three whole seasons. Kristen did not admit it until the fourth season, and when she finally did Stassi bitch-slapped her and ran away crying. Jax went on to cheat on his next four girlfriends. He would admit to his affairs in his confessionals and the show would immediately cut back to him trying to convince his girlfriends that they were paranoid and dumb. It was absurd. I watched all eight seasons in less than a week. In these eight seasons, there was not an ounce of character development in any of these real people. It was scary to watch, it was addicting, and it subconsciously influenced me more than I would have liked it to.

Vanderpump Rules became *Love Island* which became *The Bachelor* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *Real Housewives: Beverly Hills* and *America's Next Top Model* and *Jersey Shore* and *Project Runway* and more absurdly *The Flavor of Love* (Twenty single women move into a mansion in Los Angeles and compete for the affections of Flavor Flav). I was living a cautionary tale of what happens when you watch too much reality television: I thought of people in my life in terms of the characters in whatever show I was watching at the time. My friends were just characters in *Love Island*, but they didn't know it yet. The way they competed for the same pool of guys who hit puberty a year earlier than the rest, how they would backstab each other just to survive another week. I was able to convince myself that I was Kendall Jenner,

that I could disrespect my mom and still get whatever I wanted, and that my public silence was “chill” and “endearing”. I quickly understood my mom was not as agreeable as Kris Jenner. I would stalk the stars on social media and follow their every move, sinking deeper into their fake real world. At the beginning of eighth grade, I got a selfie with an old contestant on *The Bachelor* and convinced myself it was the best day of my life. It was dark.

I ended up not being able to jump for about two years. There wasn't this awakening where I realized I was wasting my life and body away. I didn't have a sudden shift in mental health that helped me lift off. Things just slowly got better towards the end of eighth grade. In part, it was because I ran out of plausible reality shows to watch so I started getting out of bed more and listening to music I liked. Music that made it hard to sit still. Music that pulled me up out of bed and moved me around my room to the beat. It was different music than I listened to before. My new music had intricate melodies. The raw sound of acoustic guitars and fierce drumming poked through chilling lyrics. It was a mix of songs from the 1970s psychedelic rock, 2000s garage rock, and 2010s indie pop. It made me want to dance more than anything I had listened to before.

A month before my middle school graduation, I was home alone on a Saturday morning, sitting on the couch and watching *Good Morning America* in my living room, when I realized that I hadn't tried to jump in a while. I stood up from the couch, planted my feet on the frayed carpet, and I jumped. My feet left the ground when I wanted them to. And then I jumped again. I sat down for ten minutes and then stood up to jump a couple more times just to make sure that I really could. I did a jumping jack and a burpee. I played one of my new favorite songs and jumped the whole way through.

Priming the Canvas

I start in the handicapped shower. I go there so there's more room to contort my body. There's more room to twist my back and shave the back of my thigh, more room to lift my leg by my big toe and shave my foot hair. The water pressure is low in the handicapped shower, and the searing hot water falls on my body in thick droplets. I keep it this hot and suffer because it is supposed to open my pores and reduce the likelihood of ingrown hairs. The dull razor scrapes my leg as I drag it up. It catches the stubble I want it to, leaving a streak of skin unsullied by my dark hair. Now my scars from mosquito bites and bruises from being anemic are visible, and I can't tell if my leg looks better like this. It is one of the most familiar feelings in my world, the feeling of shaving my legs.

In second grade, I hated getting pedicures. Every time the nail ladies talked to each other in Mandarin, I was convinced that they were talking about my leg hair. I would ask if I could unroll my leggings to cover my hairy calves as soon as they were done washing my feet. One night after a pedicure, I sat down in the shower and led my mom's razor up and down my little legs. I made sure no one would find out by using the rusty razor instead of the clean one in the shower and wearing long pants for the next month (basically defeating the purpose of shaving in the first place). I didn't know how to get my hairs out of the razor, so I swiped my finger across the blades. Three perfect lines of blood sprouted up on the pad of my index finger. It stung. I didn't know how else to clear the hair, though. For the next three years, I cleared the hair from the razor with my finger. I still have three perfect lines on the tip of my right index finger.

Now, I wiggle the razor at the top of the shower head to clear it of the little hairs. They catch in the water and fall back on my body before swirling down the drain. I drag the razor up

my leg again. And again. I take too long—the shower pressure gets even duller and the water chills to room temperature. When I'm finally done in the shower, my skin is red and raw. My eyes are cloudy. But I am clean.

I have to tweeze my eyebrows quickly, while my pores are still open. I prop up my cosmetic mirror on the edge of my bed so that it is at eye level. I flip it to the side where it is three times magnified—the side where I see every budding pimple, every scar of past budding pimples, and every little out-of-place hair. I start with my unibrow, quickly and randomly pulling whatever hair dares to grow between my brows. I pull until it's just skin.

In elementary school, I didn't know people were looking into my eyes when they were talking to me. I thought they were staring at the hair between my eyebrows. The hair that I thought made me look like a boy, the hair that I thought only I had because I couldn't see it on any of my friends or any shows. I would use my knuckle to feel for my unibrow during class, pushing the hair up and down, reminding myself that it was there and that everyone was looking at it. One night, I took a razor from my mom's bathroom and obliterated my unibrow along with the beginnings of both my eyebrows. There was instant regret, there were silent tears. My unibrow was gone, though. And no one noticed a difference.

I move onto my left brow. I highlight the arch by spotting and ripping out any hair that is found closer to my eyelid than it should be. These plucks cause tears to well up in my eyes even though I don't feel the pain anymore. Once I am done getting the hairs from under my eyebrow, I use cosmetic scissors to trim the top so that all of my hairs end on the same imaginary line. I always get complimented on my eyebrows.

I have to blow-dry my hair. I have to plug in the Revlon One-Step Volumizer which means I have to unplug all my other electronics because it takes up so much power.

I went to a seven-week, all-girls, Jewish sleepaway camp for seven summers. We had no contact with boys except for socials once a week which began when we were 13 where we would go to nearby all-boys camps and “make friends.” My friends and I would skip our Cross-Country and Arts & Crafts periods to get ready, to take long showers, to do our hair, and to figure out what combination of tiny tank tops and jean shorts looked the best. For one of our first socials, we had two hair straighteners, three hair dryers, and one curler plugged in at the same time in our bunk. Since all the hair dryers were in use, I was straightening my damp hair. It let out death rattles, violent hisses, from between the hot irons. It crackled and squirmed as I clamped it with the straightener. Only ten minutes into doing my hair, the lights went out and the showers turned cold. We were using too much power. I had to go to the social with my hair half fried and straight, half curly. I asked my friend to ask a boy if he thought I was cute. She came back from talking to him to tell me that he liked blondes. I pretended to be fine when I saw him write his phone number on a brunette girl’s arm before we left. I didn’t go up to any other boys for the rest of the summer.

People on the internet have said that my specific hair dryer is the worst for dry hair and breakage. But it is the one my mom got me for Christmas, so I use it. And I spray a suffocating heat-protecting spray on my hair before I use it. The spray smells cancerous and hangs heavy in the air. Hopefully it helps. I turn my blow drier on, and the deafening whirr begins. I slowly guide the hot air from the top of my scalp down to the bottoms of my long hair, twirling my brush at the end to get a healthy-looking bounce. I pass through again, going even slower and pulling even harder this time so that my hair gets straighter. I pass through again, going faster and spending more time twirling at the bottom of my hair. Steam rises from my scalp. I pass through again, and again.

Windows to the Soul

Eyes are the windows to the soul

Throughout my life I've been told

To see into another's heart

Eyes are the place to start

-Vern Eaker, 2009

You text me you are on your way to my dorm. I wake up from my social media trance to make my bed, smoothing the crumpled duvet and hiding my stained pillow under the nicer ones. I hide my oily hair in a high bun. I hide my medication in the bottom drawer of my desk. When you arrive, we engage in small talk about our classes and days. We spit out nonsense opinions about the workload and our social calendars. Once we have exhausted the usual topics, there is just silence. In this silence, I know exactly how much I like you. Your eyes study mine and I trace every little streak of color in your hazel irises.

I look into your eyes and I see your heart. I don't need to stare too deeply. You let me in. You wear your truth on the smooth curve of your contact. You let my long, unmanicured nails close to your eye. You let me touch your eyeball with my rough fingertips, take your contact out, and study the slimy residue. You look at me and I know exactly how you feel, not because your pupils dilate or because I can see the clear jelly behind your eyes, but because your mouth is moving, and you are expressing your feelings to me with such clarity and freedom that I writhe in awkwardness.

You look me in the eyes and look for my heart. You look me in the eyes and all you see is the honey-brown veil of my iris, shielding you from the remnants of a bloody battle. I see you want to peek behind the shield. And as much as I want to make you happy, I won't let you. My eyes won't let you.

They are hiding something. You won't find it by simply looking into my eyes. You'd need to take an X-Ray. Dilate my pupils and temporarily blind me by flashing a harsh light an inch from my eye. Check to see if the picture comes out clear. Blind me again if it doesn't. With my chin resting on a sterile cushion, use a retinoscope, an autorefractor, a slit lamp, and a binocular indirect ophthalmoscope to gather data. Peel my eyelids back for a couple of minutes and zoom in with your microscope. Move the microscope closer to get a better look. Move it closer so that we are face to face and I can feel the breath from your nose on my exposed eyeballs, I can feel the warmth emanate from your hand as you fiddle with the lenses.

In the X-Ray, you will see the white dots floating around the blood-orange fluid in my eye, overlapping with my veins and avoiding the blurry black dot that is the back of my pupil. Those dots are the inflammation of my underlying choroid. They are ugly. They ruin the otherwise beautiful, pastel image of the inner workings of my eye. The tests will show that there is a choroidal lesion that is enlarged. It is putting pressure on the viscous fluid in my eye. But I don't feel it. Through the microscope, you see that the fluid in my eye is white and murky. You found the truth— uveitis, inflammation of the uvea caused by the immune system targeting the tissue.

For the first four years of my life, my immune system got away with its crimes, its continuous attacks. My mom could look me in the eyes for hours and suspect nothing. My pediatrician wouldn't even ask about my eyes because they looked good from all the superficial

tests. Meanwhile, my tissue was slowly deteriorating. The thin walls of my eyes were slowly caving in. It does not make my vision blurry or my eyes red. It does not change the color of my brown eyes or the pale pink of my waterline. It turns my eyes into liars. Instead of windows, my eyes become a sinister funhouse mirror maze.

Burned into my mind are the images of a house in the distance with cornfields in the forefront, a hot air balloon at the end of a long road, and a cartoon house with a red dot in the middle. The images were meant to distract me from whatever test they were taking. They became the setting of my most disturbing nightmares. When I was younger, I would spend hours in ophthalmologist offices. I didn't feel pain in my eyes like I did in my knees and ankles, so I never had any idea why I was there.

I had no idea what my eyedrops were for. I knew I had to take them three times a day because my mom would do it in the mornings, the school nurse would do it at lunchtime, and my nanny would do it after dinner. I knew that they had to change the prescription because the first drops made me feel like I had shampoo in my eyes all day. I didn't know what was wrong with me, I could see fine.

It makes me want bad vision. I want my eyes to stop me in my tracks instead of slowly, quietly threatening to blind me if left untreated. I hate forgetting that my uveitis is there. I hate how they have taught me the sinister art of hiding. I hate how often I practice that art. It makes me want contacts. I want to wear my vulnerability on the surface of my eye. I don't want the option of hiding my disability, because I will put it in my bottom desk drawer or hide it under a clean pillow any chance I get. While I copy the writing on the lecture slideshow from the back of the room, the lining of my uvea is bubbling and growing. While I speed-read that weird and lovely book you recommended to me, white blood cells are bouncing off the inner walls of my

eye. I can read that road sign a hundred feet away. I can spy your face in a crowd when I am all the way across the quad. I just can't let you see me.

Through these windows the truth lies

Emotionally nothing hides

Clear for all to recognize

Displayed to the world in one's eyes

Painting with Blood



Saturn Devouring a Son, Peter Paul Rubens, 1638.

Don't look at my hands. Don't look at the uneven tips of my nails, edges begging to be cut or filed or groomed in any way. Don't look at the spotty dark green remnants of an amateur manicure from about a month ago. Don't look at the black grime trapped where the neat white of my tips meets the pale pink of my nail bed. Please don't look at the stick and poke on my right pinky. It was a high school mistake, an attempt at a smiley face that was done too small and messily so now it just looks like a weird mole. I tried scratching and picking it off the next morning hoping it would scab over and disappear forever. It didn't. It's never going away. Yet, I still pick.

Don't you dare look at my cuticles. The fresh rips are calling for your attention. Don't match the terrible stare of the shredded skin around my nails. The white, jagged peaks of hanging skin are tears suspended in time, tears yet to be snatched. The redness of my raw cuticles is the same

redness of puffy eyes after hours of crying, begging for your sympathy. The jutting strips of skin squirm, kick, and scream— begging for any other fate than to belong to me. You want to look away like you look away from a couple fighting in the bar or a baby having a meltdown on the plane. You don't look away though, so I pick.

My hands are a graveyard. Hold your breath as you pass by. Ghosts of my cuticles' past laugh among themselves when I can't grip a pencil without pain. They make my fingertips so sensitive that even lukewarm showers feel searing. They wrap the band-aid around my nail a little too tight so that my entire finger pulses with resentment. They hide my thumbs in the palms of my hand as I type, slowing my speed and productivity considerably. They yank my hand back after I shake yours, trying to shield my exposed flesh from judging eyes. They remind me of when I didn't pull away fast enough. When I was practicing handshakes with my friends in middle school and Piper Cohen grabbed my wrist before I could react. She lifted my hand, as if I had won a boxing match, and presented my ripped cuticles to my friend group. I tried to curl my fingers into a fist, but I didn't realize that it presented the most destroyed finger, my thumb, with even more emphasis. My friends ogled my thumb, asking me how I could do that and if it hurt. I pretended to not care. I met their questions with halfhearted fake laughs and reassurances that it did not hurt that bad, that I just picked when I was nervous. I don't think they believed me. With the ghosts of my past cuticles, reminding me not to, I pick.

I'll fiddle with a cuticle throughout the day, antagonizing and loosening it before I go in for the kill. I'll dig my nails under the loose skin, priming it like a farmer massages a baby calf for slaughter. Each time I loosen it, I feel a pinch. The sensation is pure energy, concentrated in a spot the size of a pinpoint. It is tension. It is a rush. It is fleeting. I dig more to feel it again.

I dig until a strip of my skin is hanging on by a weak line of collagen. The strip hardens throughout the day, and yellows at the slow cessation of blood flow and nutrients. The skin begs for mercy in its last moments, fires a final plea to my brain— *you don't have to dig further*. I am merciless, I don't listen. I have a fierce focus on my victim. It's not getting away. At this brink, I am so unyielding that I would pick a crucial vein off if it was hanging from my nail. With hungry eyes, I go in for the kill. I pull up on the dying strip of skin, the tension lifts my finger up with it. The last connection starts slowly ripping, nerves writhe and fire in agony. Endorphins rush to my cuticle and I feel all the power between my fingers. With a final fierce tug, I sever my skin's last hope, sever its last connection to my body. Pain morphs into satisfaction and tension morphs into overwhelming ease.

It stings. Stings with the intensity of pouring alcohol on an open cut. Stings with the shock of burning my hand on a curling iron. It stings with excitement and energy. My finger throbs. Its own little heartbeats, aching for its skin back. Unripe flesh is exposed, wet, and light pink. Sensitive to the touch, raw. I feel relief. I executed the kill. I didn't leave it hanging. Blood starts swelling up through the newly exposed pores. It pools along the crevice of my nail. It trickles down my knuckle. I try to wipe it on my shirt, but the dried blood stays trapped in the rugged terrain of my cuticle. It will stay there for a while. My dead skin falls on my keyboard, my jeans, my blanket. It will stay there for a while. It's gory, the way I pick.

I am ashamed when I escape my bestial trance and look down at my hands to see a bloodbath. I closely scan my hands the way you scan yours after you get a fresh manicure. I'll bring a finger so close to my face that I get cross-eyed, just to try and survey the damage. I get lightheaded, nauseous, and taken aback at my cruelty and lack of self-control.

When I was seven, I would wake up humiliated, cocooned in bloodied sheets from picking my mosquito bites. Red bursts tie-died the fresh linens. They don't scrub out. Discolored dots, scars from picking and re-picking, tie-died my bony legs. They don't fade. My mom would offer me gifts if I could go a week without picking, trying to control my bad habit. Ashamed because she was monitoring my legs, I would pick even harder, even deeper. I never received a gift. I pick.

When I meet you, I look at your fingers first. The way I look at stomachs at the beach because I am self-conscious about mine. The way I look at mustaches first when I didn't have time in the morning to groom mine. The way I look at the grade on the paper next to me when I am unsure of what letter will be handed back to me. I'll pick at you, but not even a quarter as deep as I pick into myself. I pick in the mirror. I pick in the library. Even here, I pick. I am human, susceptible to the cycle of tension and relief, pain and pleasure. I pick.