

Wetsuit

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Over the summer my mom cleaned out her walk-in closet. I remember standing among the bulging zippered boxes, and for once, I could see through the whole room to the little window on the other side. To my right was a partially disassembled wall of suitcases and archived clothes. It was in this little cranny, behind the cases and shrouded by the dangling clothes, that I loved to hide, back when I had an excuse to be cute and burrow like some animal into a pile of fabric. My eyes and my fingers sweep lazily along the clothes above. Old blazers, outgrown button-ups, graduation gown—fresh addition. At the very end, smushed between my mom's favorite olive-green jacket and the whitewashed wall, is a full body wetsuit. Completely black, thick chest pads, and O'Neill logo across the torso.

I find myself putting the thick, spongy fabric up to my face and taking a sniff. The smell is faint, and unconsciously, I stretch the black material to let some of it out. Winter break, 2010, I remember, I am wearing a much smaller wetsuit than the one in the closet, blue-accented instead of camo-black. The jutting pier is to my left, and a surfboard to my right, and I'm on my knees, playing with a handful of sand. Richard the surf instructor towers over me, and in his hands he holds a stub of wax. He is a native Hawaiian, with coffee-brown skin and salt-curled hair.

On the surfboard Richard has drawn a smiley face and two deformed ellipses. That's where I am to put my feet when I stand up on the board. He makes me try it out on the beach first, so I climb onto the tacky, waxy, candy-blue surface of that surfboard and stand with my feet firmly centered in those traces, arms outstretched, while he pokes and prods, shaping my body into a surfer's.

Richard puts me on the board, prone, as he drags me out to

sea, towing me by the board's upturned nose. The first rolling foam wall smashes into the white underbelly and breaks around my face. The suit is tight and I feel an odd sense of compression-chilling that wraps around my chest and legs as the water soaks in. My teeth are chattering comically as I tell him, "woah that's a big wave!"

Richard, muscular and terse-worded, mocks me. "Nah, that's a baby wave. A baby wave."

And the next wave comes and I repeat the my same nervous chatter and he repeats his dismissal. A baby wave, Max. That's a baby wave. The next wave comes, and we repeat, bouncing our salty, useless phrases like the maniacs in wetsuits that we were.

The next thing I remember, I'm thrown off the board by a double wave. The board shoots out from under me and disappears, tugging at my leashed foot. I paddle and claw my way up to the wavering surface, and I see the convulsing, distorting outlines of the palm trees and the barnacled pier. The neoprene of the wetsuit is buoyant, but it also restricts my movements and I pause for an imperceptible moment in this underwater haze. I realize that my eyes are open underwater. The chlorinated sting of the YMCA belonged only to communal swimming pools, and my eyes are darting, seeing.

After the hour of coaching Richard and I sit on the beach, still clad in our dripping suits. He shows me how to dig for clams. I sift through the sand for piles and piles of color-streaked bean clams, but he shrugs that off, as if it were another "baby wave." Pointing at a little hole in the sand, he plunges his meaty hand down and emerges immediately with a long clam the size of my hand. Then, he puts it back. It was in this moment that I catch a smell of myself. The sun warms my artificial skin, and my plump body tests its limits. I emit a strong chemical odor, and it intertwines with the stink of the surf and the sand.

In that closet I try to put the suit on. I stretch it over my legs

and ease it past my waist. These memories are things painted by the pure hand of a child. Gone were the burning of saltwater, replaced by the wavering of palm trees. Gone was the itchiness of trapped sand, replaced by the warmth of the sun. Slip my hand through the narrow sleeves, feel the chafe of the old fibers. Fingers in the finger holes, reaching back to pull up the long ripcord, but the zipper catches on my Stanford tee-shirt.