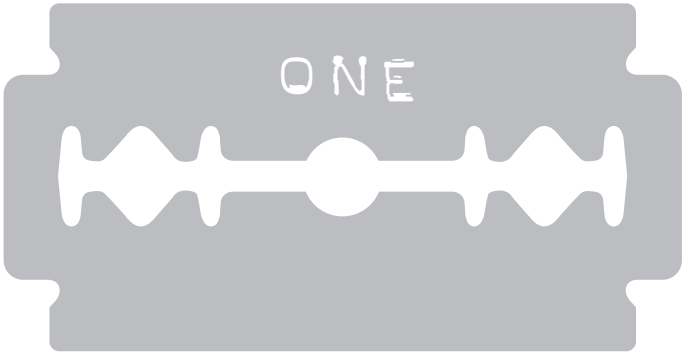




FISHTAILING

Wendy Phillips



Tricia

Her glance
across the crowded classroom
speaks louder
than the droning recital
of paragraph structure.

I know you

it says

You are mine

Something inside
shifts.

Miguel

In dreams
I swim through
underwater hallways
slapping my head
against the lockers
fighting the current
down the staircase
fishtailing forward.

They watch me
school eyes
do not blink
my scales shine
sleek
slippery.

I awake
mouth
open
fins
morphing
into fingers

to: Margaret Farr
from: Janice Nishi
subject: Natalie Anderson

Natalie Anderson (student number 062372) has been enrolled in your English class. She comes to us from a district secondary school where she had some difficulty with peer relationships. Please make her welcome and keep me informed of any difficulties.

Natalie

First day
at the new school
I can tell
it will be
like shooting
fish in a barrel.

Birthday

They're wrapped up here
in neat packages
bow on top
a little girl's birthday present.
I'm crashing this party
like always
A mark on my forehead
warns parents off
but draws innocents
like kids
to a clown.
Behind my makeup
a long-fanged
hook-clawed
monster.

by Natalie

Mrs. Farr

You have an admirable grasp of syntax and a rich vocabulary. However, your images are disturbingly violent. Perhaps you can find more optimistic diction to flavour your poetry. We can all use optimism.

Tricia

I know
my mother loved my father
once
wore a kimono
to please his family
learned to say *arrigato* and *sayonara*.
Jason is a carefully
friendly
stepfather

but where am I in this?
The mirror
shows my mother's round eyes,
my father's black straight hair.

I wonder
why she couldn't choose
someone
a little less
white.

Kyle

She doesn't know
I'm here.
Her hair
from the back
is like
black velvet
shiny
soft
my hand wants to stroke it.
My fingernails
are stained with grease.
I keep them tapping
my desk.

Miguel

Voices here
in fast English
talk of things
I don't know.

I know
the burn of hot sun
and blue water
the length of my father's back
in the bow
the thud of a soccer ball in the dust
the hum of my village at night.

My hands know
how to
paddle against an incoming tide
gut a fish

assemble
and shoot
a mobile
rocket launcher.

Natalie

Mum sold another house today.
She's passed out
on the couch
wine glass cradled
in her elbow.

Macaroni for supper again.
extra cheese
throw it all up later.

Mum's snores
float down the hall
to the TV room.

Jay Leno kisses me goodnight.

Miguel

In biology class
we do “dissection.”
The other kids watch
as I cut open the perch
pin back its skin
on the wax tray
lay bare
its vital organs.

Kyle

My lab partner
may not talk much
but his fingers
know one end of the scalpel
from the other.

Tricia

Standing beside her
in the caf lineup
my flowered sweater wilts.
Her slouch just so
black-lined eyes
leather over belly ring
— something lithe in the line of her elbow —
in her hands
fries and gravy.
I look at my veggie wedges.
She cocks an eyebrow,
leans, shrugs.
Easy come, easy go.

Kyle

In Social class
we do a skit on Canadian immigration
Sarah Yang, Kathy Lee, Miguel and me.
The girls make Miguel the star
because his accent is real.
I'm the bully who learns
his lesson.
Sarah and Kathy are peacemakers.

At the end
of course
we all belong.

Miguel smiles
at the applause.

Natalie

In English
it's silent
writing time.

Dust motes dance
on the earphones of the quiet
guy tapping his fingers

shine a halo
around the dark hair
clenched jaw
of the guy behind him.

He looks back.

His eyelids
close
and open

close again.

Feelings poem

Black, black, black
is the colour of my true love's hair.
Her lips are something roses fair,
The purest eyes and the neatest hands.
I love the ground on where she stands.

I love my love and well she knows.
I love the grass on where she goes.
If she on earth no more I see
My life will quickly fade away.

Black is the colour
Of my true love's hair.

Kyle

Mrs. Farr

I am glad to see you are reading poetry, young man. However, “Black is the Colour” is a traditional Scottish folk song. Presenting it as your own constitutes plagiarism.

Please rewrite and see me.

Kyle

September sun
draws us to the soccer field.
Miguel leans against the fence
until I invite him in.
His footwork is beautiful.
He slips like a ghost
between defenders
sends it into the top corner.

As we head to the change room
we bump shoulders.
Our sweat dries in the cool afternoon.

Miguel

The new girl has a look
that cuts right
through the scales
to my cold fish heart.
I read Pablo Neruda
in bed
Spanish on one page
English translation beside it.

*Into the night of the heart
your name drops slowly
and moves in silence and falls
and breaks and spreads its water.**

Nata Natalie Natalia
Sounds like music

* from "Slow Lament" by Pablo Neruda, trans.

Donald D. Walsh