

Published April 5th, 2017

## Teen Writes

By Alexandra Reinecke

In the car, it smelled like the new paint on the pencils. James Taylor warbled. I jiggled my leg. The oatmeal colored Birkenstocks my friend called 'those weird 70s shoes' and whose presence prompted my father's casual inquiry as to the state of my spiritual enlightenment-Jesus shoes, he taunted amicably, with the tone betraying the syllables-shook with my anxiety.

As my father drove I looked at the collection on my lap-a new pack of Ticonderoga pencils, an M&M spangled bag of trail mix, an oversized Starbucks drink too large for the cup holder in my father's BMW and too small to squelch my nerves. The thought of something carried-over from a CNN documentary whose name I had long since forgotten: the same candies that studded my break-time snack had been manufactured specifically to resist against such clamminess of hands like mine.

As I joined the groups clustered around the testing center I felt a simultaneous camaraderie and competition with the other test-takers. A girl from my Pre-Calculus class-large brown eyes, general meekness, a Patagonia fleece the color of Ocean Spray cranberries-small-talked me as I flipped through the packet of SAT grammar rules I'd drawn up that fall. Don't COLONize without a complete phrase, it told me; when in doubt, punctuate with a comma.

We were assembled in a hall of lockers but were soon herded out, directed by adults drunk on the borrowed authority lent them by their stopwatches. As I returned to the realm of the pale mustard tile I thought momentarily of the cows we used to visit such a long time back, great black cows with marble eyes and orange ear tags the shape of houses. Policy, they said. Procedure. My fellow test-takers murmured expletives as they shuffled out of the building, some seeking refuge under the outside overhands, others the menial heat provided in the bathroom.

Beside me an Asian father sang the quadratic formula to his daughter; a group of boys jostled each other, repeating a name to whose fame or notoriety I was unfamiliar. Taking up a place beside the faded mustard-tiled wall, I noticed how little squares devoid of tile sat lonely, the concrete like gaps of missing teeth. I scrutinized those around me. The white 'Y' leading 'Yale' on a T-shirt reminded me of a martini glass holding a honey-hued curl; Cal's buttercup script colonized T-shirts, both long-sleeved and short, sweatshirts with bears and without. As I analyzed my fellow test-takers I wondered whether they were similarly analyzing me. What impression did they gather from my newly cut hair pulled back into its chestnut ponytail? What from the 'P' on my chest? Did they see what I had in my mirror's reflection that morning: a loose mouth, a weak nose, a determination in the eyes which atoned those other pieces, which gave reasonable claim to use of such a letter?

The room was cold, a deliberate precaution, the proctor informed us, against sleepiness. It was upon finding the abundance of life colonizing the walls-a pensive Martin Luther King Jr. poster, drawings of animals with the Spanish words for them beneath, a case filled with age-crinkled D♦a de Los Muertos chrysanthemums, handwritten notes affirming the character of the teacher whose instruction this space was usually privy-that the frank impersonality of the test became clear: how the answers were automated so that you had no increased likelihood of guessing correctly if you guessed C, that the essays were graded with numbers and not feeling.

When the test began, I bubbled answers in sets of eleven the way my prep-book had instructed me, reasoning the answers first, vehemently crossing out those which were wrong, and stringing the circled correct ones in the answer sheet in an almost methodic manner, like stringing letters for forming words, names, in friendship bracelets or going along a rosary's motion. I was triumphant when I corrected where I'd first chosen the option whose modifying phrase meant a Chinese New Year dragon's teeth had walked down a Chinatown street and snatched a bit of festival paper instead of that that dragon had walked and then snatched the paper with its teeth; I wrote an imagery-heavy essay in which I described the silver of NASA's rockets as being robbed of stream-trout's scales.

When it was over we filed out of the classrooms, the hallway, the school; the purple fleece I had stood beside earlier now appeared magenta in the sun. I returned to my father's car where I was subjected to tacit encouragement and more James Taylor. I returned to our house, to the butter bourbon wood block of our kitchen island. I returned to catch up with CNN, to dress for the march that night, a fight more important than that arbitrated by the College Board and its bubbles, the testing center with its pale-yellow walls and college-sweatshirt-wearing students. I watched the other marchers in the street, and I did not try to reason with them. I watched the other marchers with a rage in my chest stronger than that towards reading-section reasoning questions, or sums asked the no-calculator math section, or the lack of help given the guess of the letter 'C,' all of which, by comparison, were problems to which my attention was little matter.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA