**Braids**

Sophie Scolnik-Brower

In Haiti, little girls touch my hair. I close my eyes, feel their tiny fingers on my scalp. Three are at my head while another sits in my lap. One more leans into me, holding my hand. I am here for three weeks, volunteering as a piano teacher at a summer camp in Cap Haitien. The little girls are not my students, but we find each other. Sometimes, while waiting outside the dining area for mealtimes, I leave my hair down on purpose, knowing that it will attract them, that one will see my hair shining in the sun and the others will follow. I am not supposed to like the feeling of their little hands in my hair, am supposed to merely humor them (“They like my hair—isn’t that sweet?”). The truth is that it melts me into the hot concrete.

Everywhere I go there is a cluster of little girls. When I leave the house where I live, I spy them looking for me, peering behind trees and around corners of other houses. When they see me, they run and take each of my hands, leading me around their world. They are the masters of this earth, this dome, the compound. On bus rides they sleep in my lap, and I feel the hot weight of a child for the first time, learn how to keep my tingling legs still so as not to disturb them. Their heads rest on their arms, propped on the seat in front of us, self-sufficient in slumber, too.

One day the girls take my arms and run their hands across my skin. “Look,” they say in proper French, appeasing me, knowing I don’t speak Creole. “Her veins are blue.” They peer into my skin like it is a mirror, like it could tell them something, touch the translucent part on the underside of my arm, map the veins snaking down. “White people have blue veins,” they say confidently. “Black people’s veins are green.” They say this as a fact, one that everyone should know. I wonder when they first learned this, wonder which other volunteer’s arm taught them this important finding years ago.

I take one’s tiny arm in my own lap, curious about the distinction myself. Her name is Sophia, a version of my own name. When I first met her, I became enamored of her precociousness, her sassy confidence. How she’d always give a flirtatious wave as I’d walk by her violin lesson, held under the hazy shade of a mango tree. “Salut, Madame Sophie!” Her tiny violin clutched beneath her chin, like an American Girl Doll’s accessory, her hair with its infinite number of braids like a cloud around her head; I was sure she was only five or six, but later learned she was eight years old, just thin and undersized.

I contemplate Sophia’s arm and remember the night we volunteers spent without the little girls, how we piled into the back of a pickup truck, laughed as the wind whipped our hair frantically around our faces, as the hard metal of the truck jostled our boney asses. My friend Ally and I sat atop the cargo bed’s metal sides, elevated for all to see. We knew our skin glowed in the night, uncovered as it was in tank tops and skirts, reflecting the light from the moon and streetlamps. We held hands as we flew through the streets. At the bar that night men walked up to us, told us we were beautiful, asked if we were married. We expected the attention, joked about our conspicuousness, its novelty.

I cradle Sophia’s hand in my own like it is a small mouse. I can see how her veins might look green, how mine might look blue, but I don’t say this. Instead, I try to play teacher on an afterschool special, douse them with some sort of wisdom. I try to say, “Girls, on the inside, all of our blood is the same color!” or, “Girls, we may look different, but we’re all human!” But I can’t remember if blood inside the body is blue or red, realize too late that of course that doesn’t matter. The moment has passed. Sophia reclaims her hand and leads the other girls galloping away. “Au revoir, Madame Sophie!”

I sit alone and look into the smooth underbelly of my own arm. I look until all my blue veins unravel, until they spool like so much thread. Until my skin cracks and opens up around them.