

The setting sun dribbled golden light across the park's fields, dark shadows tumbling down hills. Under an awning oak, I flexed my tendons, warming up my muscles in gentle contortions. Before every cross-country meet, I sacrilegiously prayed to my body. First, deftly kneading my thighs, supporting myself on the bark, to loosen up my legs. All punctuated by rolling breathwork, pierced by the electric cortisol in my veins. This was the final race of senior year, and I couldn't afford to falter. When chafing against your personal best time, pushing beyond possibility is expected.

Much of what comes after is a blur; runners packed like sardines atop the chalk start line, jitters reverberating through the throng. The blank gun echoes, and for a fraction of a second, the world stands still. Even droning songbirds mute. Then the pubescent bodies tumble forward, drowning in a sea of limbs. I never felt more free.

These memories slip through my grasp like the silt I kicked up. In Midas' meadow, butterflies bobbed and boys bounded. Sweat fountained down my face, legs blurring down hills and valleys. In that moment, it felt like I had been running since the start of time. Tirelessly, heroically, unforgivingly. I fiercely repeated to myself "how bad do you want this", and "pain means nothing, go harder". When the finish line rolled around the horizon, I pumped harder. Stronger. More pain. I flew across the grass, soles barely touching the ground, orchestra crescendoing. When my consciousness emerged, no breath could sate my seemingly impaled lungs. I craned my neck and let the pink above swallow me whole. I don't even remember my time.

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Memory may be fickle, but its mechanisms are grounded in biology and neuroscience. In a dense web of neurons and glia, moments entangle in its latticework. It's only during sleep that prey caught during the day are enveloped, and bundled into silky cocoons we mistake for permanence. The minty eucalyptus breeze and the clinking of medals from race day are but preserved mementos, slowly dissolving in the maze of my mind. Yet, the arachnid shows no justice in its archival. Memories revisited are reinforced, while atrophying what is neglected.

In a sick twist of biology, preservation originates from rehearsal, not truth. I've overzealously combed, picked, smoothed over that day, in pursuit of reliving victory, that I've reduced it to its broadest strokes. Memory is but a muscle exercised into shape, given form to our identity through repetitions of existence. Is remembering a reward, or just another form of endurance?

When I first attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, I was admitted as a biopsychology major. I wanted to get lost in the cocktail of neurotransmitters, studying the lobes and hemispheres of the mind. My grand, albeit short-lived, dreams of medical school were dashed. They left as quickly as they had come. Perhaps I was romanced by prestige, swayed by a hefty salary. I repeated, "Pain means nothing, go harder," but switched to psychology less than a year later. Forcing a misalignment is a costumed violation. Some tendons are unyielding, no matter how much you stretch.

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I still remember the unforgiving tropical heat, the type of warmth that tanned the soul. Emerald flora crowned kingly cliffs, and crystalline turquoise seduced us to dip in. While the white-hulled catamaran we inhabited rocked, I knew my future didn't. My lover and I danced

barefoot to 80s disco, hands clasping, slick with sweat and sunscreen. The world was the oysters we dove for, shucked and lapped clean.

It was only last summer, but in my mind's eye, our bodies still ripple in virgin waters. Muscles caught in the sun, beaded with pearls. My lover's skin glowed underwater like a white-hot sun. Every evening was a union of skin and linen.

One afternoon after a lengthy snorkeling excursion, he dove off the yacht's top deck. Nothing short of routine. He surfaced in guttural yelps, body thrashing like a caught fish. The next scenes come like Renaissance paintings framed in anguish. Twenty hands hauled him into the catamaran's lowest deck. His limb contorting out of its socket, angular bones nearly ripping through his skin. Through blood-curdling screams and seagulls cawing, paradise became a glimmering wasteland.

Yet my love for him was affixed in blood, in the bulging mass that lurched forward. I would never wish fracture upon anyone, but seeing his mangled body fretted my heartstrings. This memory occupied more than neuronal webs in my mind; it was felt. The constriction of my chest, lips kissing his tortured face. Experience was no more than proof of existence. I'll forget the details of the dislocation, the specifics of the intoxicating scenery. But what the mind discards, the corpus retains.

Love is the memory felt, not just kept. My lover will keep his weakened joint long after his recollection of the trauma. I will keep the butterflies in my stomach from our dinghy rides at sunset until I am dust. In foresight, my future is etched with reverent scenery and cities. It is also embossed with our broken bodies. What a blessing to bleed and break!

With a final howl, things popped into place.

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A shot can be measured in countless ways. As a profane picture, a depraved attempt, or the firing of a loose cannon. Or in a glass, esophagus soon burning with bliss.

The euphoric deluge of neurotransmitters begins with a single swig. With molecules small enough to permeate the blood-brain barrier, alcohol directly floods the brain within minutes. Chemical inhibitors activate, excitatory valves shut down. Thoughts trickle in slower, a lisp ties words into knots. The body scrapes between reality and perception. Organs inflame and buckle; memories blur into a spill.

Yet, the body keeps meticulous score. Black bruises adorn hip and knees, intestinal lining thorny with dehydration. A bottle of booze is the courier of false endurance, a shot glass a vessel of borrowed confidence. After raging midnights and fluorescent escapades, the body bears the weight of every drop.

During my first week of college, I gripped my solo cup like a pacifier. I still evoke the thumping of cheap speakers in dorm rooms, the soothing slipping of consciousness. One fated night, a celebration soured into the jaws of a coma, into a maw of quickly spewing vomit. Was I paying reverence to my youthful physique, or destroying the very machine that sustained me? The blistering acne on my face in the morning betrayed me. Scarlet, irritated, raw.

Scars remain long after memories fade.

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It was cold in the Florentine museum, the first time my eyes grazed his. I lingered upon his perfectly sculpted forearms, veins blossoming around his hands, brows furrowed in anticipation. At seventeen feet tall, Michelangelo's David poised for a battle that would never come. His stone-cold skin was unblemished, gleaming in alabaster luster. Detailed in the marble were tense tendons, faultlessly carved abdominals awaiting a contraction. Expecting a breath.

"It's simple. I just remove everything that is not David." A curious feeling crested within me; how could perfection endure five centuries? David doesn't recall the pounding chisel against skin, nor did he rehearse his pain into permanence. He is the product of subtraction, stripping away burdened excess.

I thought of golden afternoons running, chasing improvement beyond possibility. I recalled the rocking of the yacht, how pain inextricably entwined with love. The ridges of my lover's bones and chaste isles we explored were one and the same. I muse on drunken midnights, tearing supple flesh, licking my wounds with the Band-Aids of my youth.

I thought of my own body, ravaged by age and endurance. Holding onto a form it knows cannot last.

In truth, I've long forgotten what I've forgotten. Still, something remains.