

Hollow

There is a voice inside of me. Right down in the long lost tunnels of my stomach, so deep that every sound she makes echoes from the rough skin underneath my feet all the way to the crimson tips of my ears. Her voice sounds old and rusty, like the churning engines of a dying car. She has never believed in me, doubt poisoning her words. The contempt that bounces off the walls of my stomach always causes my insides to churn in protest. Her words are sharp tongued and wicked. They used to affect me in some way: beat at my dignity. But now she speaks so often, her words seem to have merged with my own. She used to be quiet. My thoughts used to overpower hers. But those were in the days where your shoes were always off your feet because of their urge to feel the ground beneath them. When the maple tree had leaves bursting in color and kids swinging off of its limbs. When you could stand in the corner and see everything with your eyes shut because the details were ingrained in your head. Your friends were your family, the day you had met had become blurry with time. Everyone in the cozy school knew your name, knew you voice, your opinions. They knew you.

That was when my life had been as perfect as any dream that lived in my sleep. The grades, the stress, the tests, were a small worry, sitting, small and unnoticed, in the back of my mind. But that time was gone. Now I am here.

Everything was so new. The walls, the faces, the classrooms. Nothing fit; the school surrounded me like a crowded street, my voice, my smile, my gestures lost in the sea of people. The trees that sprouted from the cemented ground seemed crooked and bent, nothing like the trees I knew, with the gentle leaves bursting with color and large, proud

trunks that stood so tall they danced with the clouds. Even the sky, the place that I had used to look up to as a sense of relief, was now alien to me. It was almost unnaturally blue, taunting me with its clear, calm perfection.

She sprang to life the minute my feet had touched the floor that morning. My own thoughts were already muddled and heavy on my shoulders with the thought of it. She loved that; she loved my pain.

You're never going to pass. You are so unprepared.

I tried to tell her that all I did was prepare. That my nights had been filled with learning the new equations. Equations that looked foreign to me on paper. That the frustration of mindless memorization, had caused many tears to fall. That I had pulled at the roots of my hair until my head had begun to thump with a dull pain. But she never listened.

You will be the biggest failure this school has ever had. The teacher will be disgusted with you. They are already so much smarter than you. No one is even worried. Just look.

Around me stood children, old and young. Everywhere I looked, they were radiant with life. Their smiles touched their eyes and they spoke with their hands, all scattered around the crooked trees. I dodged the lump of their backpacks, the weight of her words causing my shoulders to mold into a curve and my head to study the cracked pavement.

I entered the classroom, the desks lined up in rows, like growing corn on a farm.

You're going to fail.

Inside everything flipped and flopped like a fish outside of water. I sat down at the first desk I touched. I hugged my stomach and clutched the comforting sweater on my back. I squeezed my eyes shut so tight, I started to see streaks of color in my own darkness.

The room made no effort to ease my insecurities, as it was blindingly white. The polished floor gleamed in the white lights that peered over the top of my ruffled almond hair. White shutters were tightly shut against the small windows framed with wood, preventing any splash of color to enter the room. It looked as if someone had sucked out all the life and put in a box that was placed on the highest shelf, so close that your fingertips barely brushed it, but so far you couldn't possibly grasp it.

Stupid. Getting good grades is impossible for you, school has barely started and you are already stressed. Worthless.

The woman that sat in the corner fit in to her surroundings like a puzzle piece. Her skin was like chalk, blending her into the wall behind her. Her outfit looked freshly ironed and unused. She sat with a rigid back and hands gracefully tucked in her lap. The hair on her head sat like straw atop her stern shoulders. Dark circles ran underneath her navy blue eyes, and her cheekbones fit her skin like a tight sweater.

She looked at me, at my hands, and then back up at me. Her head tilted to the side, her straw-like hair whisking with it. Her eyebrows scrunched up like blankets. Sympathy.

Even the teacher can tell that there is something wrong with you.

I gave her my toothless smile, the one where my lips curled back into my mouth.

The bell screamed, its cries echoing across the bleary room. Footsteps thundered then stopped, replaced by the sound of chattering children that now surrounded me.

I lifted my hands off my lap to see them shake vigorously. Fright joined Panic in a race against my stampeding heart. Tears formed in my eyes once more, my breaths becoming shallow as the disarray of emotions raised to my throat. I didn't know how to do this.

You are alone. You have no more friends. You have nothing anymore. You are nothing.

She never made me cry anymore but this time she did. Slowly and silently, the way the night snuck up on the sun. The crying shivers shook at my shoulders, and my cheeks hollowed as I swallowed and swallowed. A few escaped and splattered on to the marble white floor. But I swallowed and swallowed and they rolled back down to my chest like a snail slithering against the damp concrete.

The woman picked up the stack of white papers and thumbed through them, her eyes counting the heads in the rows as she did.

A paper gently landed on my desk.

Failure.

I picked up my pencil but instead of scrawling down equations and numbers I looked.

They sat around me, their muscles relaxed, their posture awfully poor, with eyes innocent and carefree, the way children should be. How could they do that? How could they sit there with their eyes singing like that? Why couldn't I?

Because you are nothing. You can't do anything right.

I flipped the paper in an abrupt motion, almost like if I kept my hand there too long it would eat at my fingertips. I studied the page streaked with black lines, before scrawling my name in the corner, my grip moulding around the yellow pencil. The equations I knew, I studied. But everything paled in comparison to her sharp words.

You are pathetic, this is supposed to be easy. Why can't you be like everyone else?

But she didn't stop there. She went on and on.

As she talked my pencil slowly joined the sounds of the scrawling on paper all chatting in a chorus of sounds. And she kept on talking, our voices joining into one.