

THREE LEVELS OF SENSORY OVERWHELM

By Nicole Kubilus

Mild

A honeybee doesn't sting you
But it levitates near your ear
Mistaking earwax for pollen
And your ear canal as honeycomb

It crawls through your hair
Sliding on waves of grease and shampoo
The vibrations from its wings
Reverberate on your skin, causing goosebumps

You are enjoying coffee with a friend
Sweat comes from social labor
And the sun...and the bee
That you're annoyed and afraid of

You roll up your menu
And swat the air
Sometimes waving it like a wand
Make the bee disappear

And it does
You wipe your neck
Straighten your shirt, sip your coffee
And keep talking

The sweat evaporates
The goosebumps flatten
The heart slows
It's easier to make eye contact

Your friend keeps talking

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Moderate

*A wasp, just like the honeybee
Explores your ear
Skates on curves of hair
Beats its wings near your neck*

*You know wasps are worse
More aggressive and persistent
Yellow and black mean caution
For a reason*

*You roll up your menu
Swat the air, grunt and snarl
You're drinking coffee
With your friend, goddammit*

*The wasp sinks its stinger
Into your hand
Like a fork stabbing steak
Like scissors puncturing paper*

*Your hand has a new heartbeat
Ripples caused by the stinger
Embedded in a swelling fleshy hill
A volcano ready to explode*

*Your hand throbs and itches
You pinch at the skin, grit your teeth, wipe tears
Wishing your fingers were tweezers
You fixate on ways to get it out. It doesn't budge*

*But you swallow
Maintain eye contact
And keep talking to your friend
Trying to act normal*

*Your friend doesn't know why you're clutching your
hand*

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Severe

*A black cloud of hornets surround you
Separated from your friend and the restaurant
In the fog of bodies moving like fighter jets
And vibrating wings like turbines*

*They sting you everywhere:
Your eyes, ears, lips
Fingertips, elbows, kneecaps
Even areas hidden under clothes*

*Your skin burns like laying on stovetops
Your nerves tremble like off-tune violin strings
Your body throbs like a heart attack
Your throat is high grade sandpaper from all the
screaming*

*You are stuck in this cloud
For hours, sometimes days
There's nothing you can do
PTSD is imminent*

*Your friend witnesses you in distress
but can't see the hornets*

Wonders if you're overreacting

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Staying Power

*Entering an overwhelm state
Is like eating a ghost pepper*

*Pain is a whip snapping
A firecracker popping*

*“Cooling” breaths make air hotter
Lungs searing like raw steak on a grill*

*You clench your arms and legs
Not by choice because*

*Your joints are eyes
Hit with pepper spray*

*If only it were a conscious choice
To have an out-of-body experience*

*You want to escape your fleshy prison
Shaking the jail bars of your veins*

*Begging to no longer be a prisoner
To a body that “pussies out”*

*You take pills, drink water
Lie down in the fetal position*

*The pain goes away
On its own time*

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Sense-sation

*My nervous system is a symphony
Each tendril an instrument
Each sense a music note
Sometimes played out of tune
My vagus nerve the conductor
My brain the composer*

*The music of my body often
The collection of random notes
Adjusting to tune and breathe
Before the big performance
There's harmony somewhere in the jumble*

*In the symphony are frustrated performers
That cannot make the right sound
Break violin strings, run out of clarinet reeds
Shatter drum sticks in frustration
Why can't things go perfectly, effortlessly?*

*My body is a fine balance between
Creativity for my own sake
And creativity for the masses
Sometimes, there isn't a happy medium
The flow doesn't become natural*

*The greatest works of art
Shouldn't be corrected and perfected
But to hold space for what is authentic
That's where anthems are forged
Where masterpieces originate*

*The symphony in my body
Inspires my own kind of dance
Stimming my hands
Shaking my head
Hopping on my tip-toes*

*It is a sonata only I can hear
My music is more sacred and special
An underground talent
Is more appreciated
Less stressful to express*

*A critic can only enjoy
What is familiar, what is classic
But my tunes are ahead of their time
An original genre
One day, it will be understood*

*My body is a sense-sation
A standing ovation
A round of applause
Even if I'm the only one
Clapping my hands*

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Walk

*Maybe I can't walk
'Cause my feet are pencils
Held at the end of a very long stick
Heavy and hard to control
Uncoordinated as fuck*

*Maybe I can't walk
Cause my joints are toothpicks
Held together by hot glue
Unsteady, very shaky
I fall a lot. The fissures are unnerving*

*Maybe I can't walk
Cause the grass blades are spikes
The concrete is sandpaper
The carpet is chainmail
The spilled water is ice*

*Maybe I...don't want to walk
Cause my bent legs
Remind me of the womb
When the world was small and warm
It's soothing not to move an inch*

*Maybe I don't want to walk
Cause when I curl into a ball
I am meditating. Breathing slowly
While studying the gestural tendrils
Of my sheep's blanket and stuffed animals*

*Maybe I don't want to walk
Cause I want to study what I see
Before I engage, before I feel attacked
By sounds, smells, sights, and tastes
They'll knock me off my feet*

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Walk (continued)

*Maybe I can't...or don't...
I don't know. Neither do you
I want you to. I thought
That when I kicked your belly, outside or in
You could read my morse code*

*You say I can't. Others say I can't
So walking becomes a trial. A test of will
A race to the milestone
That everyone else reaches
Why does that matter to me?*

*I can't...I don't...I won't...
Cause this body is a lot to handle
With gifts and curses in my nerves
I cry in my overwhelmed paralysis
Not even a kiss or hug can break it*

*I can walk...maybe
Coordinating my brain and body
Requires some downloading
That's why I shut down
Why milestones don't compute*

*But I can...I will
I see your smile, your tears
Your camera filming without flash
You celebrate the little movements
That's all I need right now*