

Jean Racines

TOP 10 TIMES I STOPPED TIME

(according to my proximity to bodies of water)

#10: When they were pulling my wisdom teeth out

I'm 19. The syringe is huge, as if it was meant for an animal way bigger than myself. "It doesn't hurt. You'll just feel some pressure, champ." Pressure deep inside my jaw, against flesh and bone. So much pressure. My mouth feels numb. My face feels heavy. The doctor asks me if I'm ready. How should I know? Yes? I pull up my thumb. He gets comfortable and maneuvers his tools inside my mouth. "Pressure," he says, but he's pulling. Swirling. He sweats. Something starts breaking as he builds his circular momentum. Pressure deep and omnidirectional. "Inhale," he says. I close my eyes and hold my breath. Everything stops. No pressure. No momentum. No creaking of my anesthetized bones. If I let go, everything will come back in an instant. No buildup, no inurement, no natural flow of physical exertion. "Just some pressure," he'd say, if he could talk to me now. But all that pressure, all at once. Deep and omnidirectional. Bullets are just some pressure too. I brace myself. I breathe out. Pressure, sharp. Something cracks. "Good job, champ. Three more to go."

#9: When I counted up to 1000

I'm 7. We gather behind the soccer field during recess. "I can hold my breath the longest," says the chubby boy as he puffs his chest and cheeks. We count, "1, 2, 3," his face begins to redden, "33, 34, 35," he starts flapping his arms, "64, 65, 66," he exhales, eager. He pants. "Who's next?" he asks. I step forward. Point to myself, demand attention. I take in a fat gulp of air, close my eyes and hold my breath. Silence. But I don't need them to count for me. I know how to count myself. "1, 2, 3," I start "33, 34, 35," I keep going, "64, 65, 66," this is easy, "83, 84, 85," are they still there? "114, 115, 116," he looked so tired. "137, 138, 139," maybe it is because he is chubby, "151, 152, 153", or maybe he was nervous. I get nervous as well. Sometimes. Where was I? Hundred something. This is boring. Quiet, and still. I've held my breath for so long. It must be like 800 now, or a 1000. Yes. 1000 seems right. "998, 999, 1000". I breathe out. "I can hold it longer, but I got bored," I say, smug. They laugh. "He didn't make it to 2! Not even 2!"

#8: Before running over a stray dog

I'm 22. It's almost midnight and I'm tired. I just want to get home, so I speed a little bit. I'm thinking of tomorrow's breakfast. Banana bread. Milk. A dog jumps out of nowhere and in front of my car. As if by instinct, I close my eyes and hold my breath. Was it a dog? Yes. Medium-sized, wooly. Definitely not a cat. Was it a stray? Probably. Most likely. It looked unkempt. Dirty. A stray, yes. I think about my options. Can I stop? No. It's too close. I'm going

too fast. I may lose control and crash into one of the barriers. Can I dodge it? How far was it? 10, 20 meters? At this speed, that is less than a second. It's too dangerous. I have to keep going. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, stray dog. You shouldn't have jumped in front of my car. You really shouldn't. Why would you do that? Stupid dog. Stupid. I'm sorry. Dog, I'm sorry. I open my eyes. Less than a second. Thump. A yelp. Barely audible. I'm wide awake now. I try not to dwell on the dog. Banana bread. Milk. Maybe a piece of chocolate.

#7: When the shrimp had babies

I'm 28. I pour a handful of tiny flakes into the aquarium. The fish explode with joy. I smile. Happy fish, eating flakes. But not all fish. The blue one is swirling and tumbling in the corner. Desperate. I tap the glass next to it. It tumbles faster. He puts his hand on my shoulder. "You are feeding them too much," he says. "When they get fat, they can't swim. Like that one." "I'm sorry," I say. I really am. He smiles. "It's ok. It happens." His voice is soft, but I feel angry. Why isn't he angry? I step back, feeling the hurt of causing hurt by accident. I hear a gasp. "Look," he says, and points to one of the small PVC tunnels he had buried under the sand. A dozen little eyes stare back at us. "The shrimp!" We hadn't seen them in days. We thought they'd all died. "There are so many of them..." I think, out loud. "They're babies," he smiles. Different smile. Big. The smile of finding life in an unexpected place. He holds my hand. Tight. I don't think he notices. Counting shrimp. So tight. Big smile. I close my eyes and hold my breath. He's so happy. I want him to be this happy forever. I wait. Will baby shrimp emerge unexpectedly from the PVC tunnels again? Will he be holding my hand then? Will his smile be this big? Maybe. I

hope so. I think so. I hope someday his smile will be bigger. I breathe out. "Will they all make it?" I ask. "I don't know. But they're alive now."

#6: When I broke my brother's finger

I'm 9. We're playing Power Rangers. "I'm Blue Ranger," he says, certain. But I want to be Blue Ranger. "I want to be Blue Ranger!" I explain. "You can't even say the name of his dinosaur," he argues. But I can. "Trisderatops!" I say, proving him wrong. "That's not it!" "Yes it is!" I push him to make sure he understands. He falls. A thump. Something starts boiling behind his face. Is he going to cry? "Are you going to cry?" He does. An angry sob. I want to help him up, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" Betrayal. He jumps at me, his entire weight pinning me to the floor, his knee lodged in my stomach. He's so heavy. It hurts. He says something I don't understand.

Angrier sob. I can't breathe. I start to cry myself, but he doesn't stop. I wail my arms, gasp for air. He's so heavy. I grab the middle finger in his right hand and push as hard as I can. Something breaks. A lever. I can breathe again. "Trisderatops", I mutter. He screams. I can see him crying, but those are not crying sounds. He is a siren. A firetruck. A plane. He is all the loud things and he won't stop. What do I do? I'm crying too, but his tears are so much louder than mine. I can't think. Shut up. Shut up. I'm scared. Shut up. I breathe in and close my eyes. Silence. I can no longer feel the pain in my stomach, or the heat in my eyes. I can think, and I think that I did something bad. That the adults will come and ask why all the loudness in the world was in our room and I will sob and he will never stop crying. So I wait. I wait until I think I forget the loud, the sharp, and the heavy in his crying. It occurs to me that, maybe, if I calm down, if I behave, if

I go look for help, everything would be alright. Yes. Everything would be alright. I breathe out. A loudness, big. I cry, hard. His tears are still louder.

#5: The time I caught ants eating something they shouldn't

I'm 37. A procession of fire ants carries small, translucent blobs out my kitchen window. Curious. I follow the red thread back to a dark crevice in my cupboard and in that dark I see a broken thing. What is it? A fruit? No. It moves. Ever so slightly, it moves. My pupils dilate. A snail. The broken thing's a snail. As soon as I make sense of the ants' bounty, a primal kinship for living things makes me flinch. I breathe in and close my eyes. A snail. I imagine myself a snail moving in a pointless forward motion as hundreds of minuscule mandibles tear the flesh out of my body. Does it hurt? Do I bleed? I imagine trying to pull back into my shell just to find it full of ravenous thieves tearing me apart. These ants, tearing me apart front the inside out, from the outside in. I am so slow. I move, but I am so slow. I breathe out. The ants resume their march, indifferent to my presence. The snail, as if pleading, extends itself to me. I take some table salt and pour it over the snail's broken body. It withers. I feel thirst.

#4: Before getting hit by a truck

I'm 46. I'm walking down the street that leads to my house trying to recall the beat to that song I loved back in Uni. Tatara, tatara, tarara... I hear a loud horn, turn around, close my eyes and hold my breath. Silence. The world is still. The first thing that pops into my head is the rest of the

beat. Tatara, tatara, tarara, tarararara. There it is. I now think back to the moment before. A horn, loud. A truck, bright red, not ten feet away from me. I remember a clear sense of imminence, a vertigo, a certainty. Could I jump out of its way? Unlikely. Probably worth the try, but I doubt I'd be able to so much as bend my knees before that red metallic mass connects to my body. I don't know how fast the truck is going, but fast, I think. I feel. This is not good. Right, dinner. If I loosen my breath, I don't think I'll make it to dinner. He was going to make pasta. I'm sorry. He was going to make me pasta. I'm so sorry. If I loosen my breath, he'll sleep alone tonight. I think I'll hold on for a little longer.

#3: The time I felt the presence of God

I'm 32. The air is brisk and the sun is hitting this park bench at just the right angle. It's a cold day but I feel warm. I take a deep whiff. Wet rock. Delightful. There's a song in the air. Birds. Critters. A butterfly gracefully descends upon my leg and I feel connected to the sun, and the air, and the wet rock, and the butterfly. A network of pleasant things. The stars. The moon. Galactic. My body feels cosmic. Is this God? God, is this you? If I am to keep one moment forever, this is it. I close my eyes and hold my breath. Silence. No warm light, no wet rock, no deep sense of cosmic connection. God? Are you still there? He must be. I think. I wait. How long should I wait for God to thaw? I count sheep. Three hundred sheep. Six hundred. A thousand sheep. No warm light, no wet rock. I'm alone. I breathe out. The butterfly flies away.

#2: The time I saw a ghost

I'm 11. Past bedtime, but I'm thirsty. I walk to the kitchen. Quiet. I don't want to wake dad. As I pass by the living room I see, out of the corner of my eye, a figure. I gasp. Eyes closed, breath held. A figure. Yes. Human-sized, I think. Or bigger. A human-sized (or bigger) blurry figure in the middle of my living room. Did I see its face? No, I don't think. But maybe. Maybe it was a man, old and grinning. Maybe he had long thin wings and thick fur. Maybe I saw his hooves. Maybe I saw, in that split second, his long, thin, silvery wings, and thick brown fur and hooves, big, firmly pressed against the floor. His eyes, green. His teeth, yellow. Did he see me back? Is he there, waiting for me to loosen my breath? Is his body as still as mine? What if, when I loosen my breath and open my eyes, his old grinny face is right there, inches away from mine. I imagine my heart beating fast. But it's not really beating fast. I don't think. I don't think that when my breath is held, it beats at all. For the longest while, I focus on my calm, still heart. Did I really see his hooves? His wings? His face? Was he all that big? All that old? I breathe out, and as I open my eyes I see, right in the middle of the living room, a small translucent blur, child-sized, smaller than myself. A second later, it disappears. I think I spooked him.

#1: At the pool, with Boris

I'm 15. We're playing in the pool. "Water ninja," they said. We just have to take each other's swimming caps. I like Water Ninja. I'm good at Water Ninja. I dive in and emerge behind the tall kid. He's a bit older, a bigger threat. I snap his cap and throw it outside the pool. "You're out", I say. He grunts and swims away. I manage to snap two more caps before the other team realizes

I'm a priority target. Boris sneaks up behind me and puts his arms around my chest. He holds tight. One of the other boys swoops in and snatches my cap. I'm a bit annoyed, but it was a good play. I'm out of the game, but Boris' arms linger. Did he not realize they took my cap already? His grip has loosened a bit, but he doesn't let go. I lean into him ever so slightly, close my eyes and hold my breath. I can't really feel his skin touching mine, or how his heart beats against my back. But I remember. If I don't loosen my breath, I can remember forever. If I don't loosen my breath, he will never let go. Why did he linger, though? He probably wants to tell me something. Maybe he wants to grab something to eat, or go watch a movie, or talk to me about something important. Maybe he needs help. Maybe he needs help and I'm the only one who can help him. I open my eyes. He lets go. "Sorry bro, I didn't realize they took your cap already."