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Personal Essay Fortune found in a cookie from Tak Shing City

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Personal Essay

I'm beautiful,
she writes in the margin of her notebook,
the letters are almost too small to be seen.
She wants to say it—to yell it.
She wants to bang her fists against her desk
Taunted every day:
bits of paper in her hair,
notes taped to her desk
fat-ass.
she lowers her head
and tries to make herself as small as she can,
hoping one day she'll learn to disappear.

Fortune found in a cookie from Tak Shing City

You will soon meet an old acquaintance. You will be at work. Teaching. She will knock on your classroom door. A girl. Seventeen. A student, although no longer yours. She will come to your room instead of going to environmental science and you will let her stay because you see she's upset. She will talk to you while your class is working. Or pretending to work. She will tell you expected things: she's tired of school; people in her classes irritate her; boys are stupid. Then she will tell you she cuts herself. She does it when she's pissed. She does it a lot. She will say she stopped for a year and now she's doing it again and she won't ask you for help but you know that's why she came to you. You will give her a journal. Tell her that if she's confused by mixed feelings to sort them out. Write them down. Columns. You will tell her of your best friend in high school who was smarter than you and more popular and got better grades and was a better musician and even got the girl you liked. I like Dave, you will say, and I'm happy he was voted most musical, but I'm also envious of his talent and the ease with which he talks to people. It won't make the feelings go away, you will tell her, but if you un-mix them—on paper—you can understand them. It won't work. Of course it won't work and she'll be back a few days later and when you go to your door you will see she's going to cry. I did it again, she will say and she will look at you like you're supposed to fix it. It will be at that moment, looking into her eyes, that you will see reflected the true breadth of your ability to fail.

Ethan Tinkler teaches Language Arts and Creative Writing at Atlantic City High School and is a graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson's MFA program.