

TERESA ATTRIDGE

Planet Mass

You're afraid of falling down and leaving a stain. The temporary tattoo of sweat on the blacktop would be even more embarrassing than earlier today when the boys made slurping noises while you ate.

"Eat faster, Planet Mass!" You felt the snickering trace up your back and neck, an un-itchable itch.

They call you a planet. No matter how hard you try, they keep you in orbit, your gravitational pull holding the torment along your flesh, sinking into the folds of insecurity and pity-motivated second servings.

Your skin is wet. You have to wear boys PE shorts, because they did not have your size in girls. You are trying. You run, but not fast enough. You try to catch the ball, but it bounces off your sunken chest, and on cue everyone groans. "Way to deflect a comet, Planet Mass!" Suddenly, you are funny. Boys reenact the fumble; girls wrap ribbons of hair around their fingers and wasp comments with each other at your expense. You can't help but stare enviously at the long, colt legs that will never be yours. Yours sag almost to your knees, highlighting every blemish underneath. You pant out loud. You have nothing better to say.

Switch. Your team is kicking. The politics of fifth grade kickball mean you get to stand in the back of the line so that there is a chance your team will actually score. You are relieved to be out of the open, relieved to be out of the outfield, relieved that every kicker won't notice how you look like a bowling pin in a pile of pick-up sticks. Your team is doing well, which worries you; you don't want a turn. But your team has only one out when you have to approach home base.

You hear the familiar stab of "Mooooove iiiin!" while kids saunter forward, lips in their half smirk, like they are trying to fake enjoying a bitter taste in their mouths. You miss the first pitch entirely and toss your head down in a blur of "Can't you just kick the ball?" and "How could you miss that pitch?"

The second pitch comes. You need to get this right. You taut your leg, you close your eyes, and kick.

The ball soars. You are dumbfounded. You feel the push of the word "Go!" and you run. You did it—you kicked the ball! Elation pounds with you as you approach first base. "Keep going!" you hear them call. Are they cheering? You feel like you're flying. You start to round first.

Boom. You're down. Did you really just feel that kickball hit your temple? Or was it the skinny ankle across your shin that made you fall? Opening your eyes, you see a gray, endless sky. You're flat on your back, and no one is cheering.

The moment you're aware you aren't hurt is the worst. The laughter starts. If you had bled, or even if you had cried, faces would have been pulled solemn, at least until you left. You hear the scratch of athletic pants as your PE teacher runs forward. "Get up," she instructs, but not unkindly. You can't. You lie there like a bloated sea star, clinging for mercy to the ground. "She's faking!" yells a boy you think is cute to the others, and they groan again, hoping to resume their game without you. You still don't want to get up; now you'd rather only see that pale, naked sky, instead of sit in the office with the mushy warm ice pack avoiding everyone's gaze. The office will call your mom, and you'll hear her sigh over the intercom, and you'll know she'll have a piece of cake for you once you get home.