

KNOCK OUT

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*To everyone who knew
there was more to the story.*

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Who am I?
I am Levi.
I am small
but fast
I am smart
but dumb.
If you move the letters
of my name around
you get live.
So here it is.
This is my life
This is what it's like
minute by minute
match by match
to live a Levi Life.



PART I

KNOCK OUT



Mom would die,
keel over dead,
if she saw me right now.
If she saw me up here.

★

Got my schedule today.
First day of seventh grade
right around
the
looming
corner.
Mom wanted to come with me.
Timothy wanted to come with me.
(to get my schedule
not to seventh grade)
But I asked,
I begged
to do this myself.
Just walk the halls,
strut along,
saying Hi to friends
figuring out where my classes will be.

I can't believe they let me!
And!
I can't believe I had extra time
afterwards
to hang out in my tree.

★

The world spreads out
from the top of a tree.
I can see everything,
everyone,
and no one can see me.
I can be anything up here.

I can imagine

walking down the street,
a man with a cane,
a woman with a bike,
a kid with a bunch of friends.

I can be anyone.

I can be anything.

★

I spy
with my
little eye
a
bird.

Not a bird in the tree
but a bird on the field—
enormous head,
big flapping wings,
running around,
crazy.

A kid in a suit
zoom
zoom
zooming.
Everyone's laughing eyes
on that beak
on those wings—

cheerleaders hoot
the coach, too,
and the bird stops
takes off his head
wings on his hips
and he's a she!

She's so funny
running around.

★

Hello up there?
Helloooooo?

A voice I know.
A voice that makes me smile.

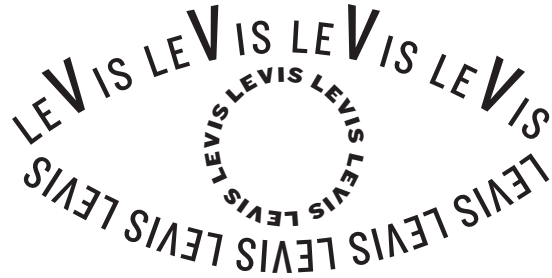
Only squirrels in this tree
I yell down
Only birds,
and leaves.

Leave-eyes?

Ha!

Yes!

The



see everything

you do

so YOU

better watch out.

★

My best friend in the whole world

is a girl

I met

in kindergarten.

She is practically twice as tall as me,

she's a skinny twig, too.

If I look in the mirror

and see me,

she must look in the mirror

and see e

e

e

e

e

e

e

e

e

e

e.

m

She was born early, too.

She was a two-pound baby, too.

She has an inhaler, too.

But she did not have a trach;

she does not drink high-calorie protein shakes,

and her mom doesn't make her stay home

and constantly wash her hands.

So much in common

and yet

so much apart.

★

Tam pushes her way up,
the fat branch
our bench
as she sits
and waves a piece of paper.

Show me

a wrinkle in her forehead
the only tiny sign
of her worry.

I hold my schedule
we compare
and just like that
there's no air.

★

Only one class!
Only one class together!
Tam and I have been together
every
year

since
kindergarten
and now
only
one
class!

★

My watch says it is precisely
definitely
thirty minutes later
than I thought.

Dang!
Timothy!
Tam and I leap from the tree,
flying squirrels

B A M

my ankles creak at the impact
but I shake
shake
shake
it off.

Wave to Tam
as she runs home,
make it to the car
—late—
look through the driver's window,
Timothy's mad.

It's not like I'm
THAT late.
It's not like I'm
a tiny baby, can't take care of himself.
It's not like I'm
going to keel over any second.
It's not like
it used to be . . .

just don't tell Timothy.
He won't believe you.

★

You should keep better track of time.

My brother's voice is deep,
growly,
a sleepy bear waking up.

*You should've let me know,
if you'll be late.
You should've known
I'd be worried.*

He keeps talking.
I put in my earbuds,
turn up the Band with No Name.

Let him talk until he's blue in the face.
Talk talk talk, man.
Because my face?
It isn't blue anymore,
and it never will be.
That means
there's no reason
for him to keep nagging me.
Jeez.

★

I don't remember
the hole in my neck,
the trach tube I needed to breathe,
the medical equipment in the house,

the almost dying,
the surgeries.
I don't remember any of it.
It's all just stories,
and it's very weird
to be the main character of a story
that's technically yours
but feels more like everyone else's.

★

Timothy
Timothy
Timothy says a lot
usually beginning with
You should . . .
and continuing with
blah blah blah . . .
and starting over again
until there are so many shoulds
he probably keeps a
Should Book
to keep track of his one million

TIMOTHY'S RULES FOR EVERYDAY BLAH-BLAHS

★

It's very interesting he has so many rules
considering
he apparently broke every rule
ever made
when he was my age.

He was a legitimate delinquent!
(And he won't say what he did!)
But now,
now
I can barely sneeze
without getting the third degree
from Timothy
who thinks he is
Levi's Supreme Brother/Dad/Boss of All Things.

★

The Band with No Name
blisters my eardrums
while Timothy grips the steering wheel
both hands
curled tight
and I wonder
what blisters Timothy's ears

when he wants to drown out the world?
Or is he too much in control
to ever want the world
to shut up?
Is Timothy's world just like the steering wheel,
and Timothy is too afraid to
loosen
his
grip?

★

Hand sanitizer
in the kitchen
in the car
on the shelf
never very far.
Gotta kill the germs, Levi.
Gotta stay alive, Levi.

There's a bubble trapped
in the green goo,
stuck there
trapped bits of air
in an antiseptic world.

I feel you, stuck bubble.
I feel you, trapped air.
My world keeps me close, too.

★

Leaving the house is not exactly forbidden,
but Mom doesn't love it.
Timothy doesn't love it.
They want me safe
and healthy
and obviously
bored out of my mind.
I think they forget
being alive will not make me die.

★

Mom and Timothy keep me close,
keep me well.
It used to be I didn't care.
It used to be that's just
How It Was.
But now . . .
now . . .

something is changing.
My insides feel like leaves
blowing blowing blowing,
a storm coming.
I want the wind to catch me
carry me off
break me free.
I don't want to be stuck inside
tangled
caught in the branches
anymore.

★

When I need to be alone
I sneak away,
hide in my tree.
When I'm in my tree
I can be
me.

★

I am short,
not tall.
I am small,
not big.

I like to moooooove
zoom
-d -a -s -h
fast

I am Levi.
I am fine.
Can anyone see that?
Can anyone see me?

★

Timothy reaches over,
pops out one of my earbuds.
Breathin' easy?

This is what Timothy and I say
instead of *Hi*

or

How are you?

or

What's up?

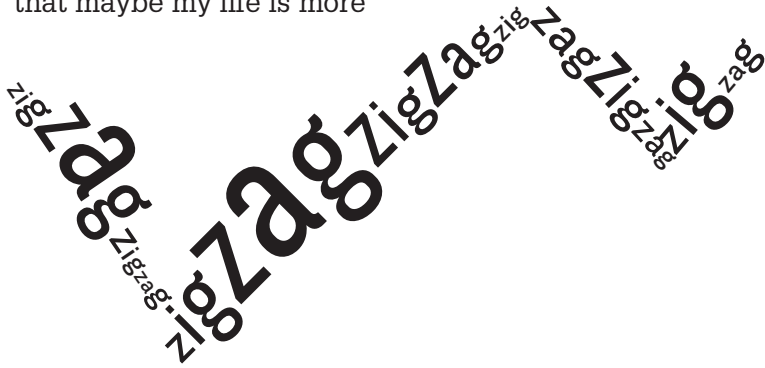
We've said it as long as I can remember.

I used to think everyone said it
until on the very first day of kindergarten

Tam said

Huh?

when I asked her: *Breathin' easy?*
And that was my first hint
that maybe my life is more



different
than everyone else's
straight line.

★

Breathin' easy

I answer,
popping my earbud back in.
His eyes glance from the road
to me
to the road.
He wants me to say more,
but right now
Breathin' easy is all I got.

★

I try not to feel different
even though I'm small,
even though all vacations
are to Cincinnati
where I am knocked out
scoped
poked
X-rayed
released
like an animal caught in the wild.

I try not to feel different
even though
I am.

The good news is that I can sit in my tree
and know that Cincinnati
isn't until summer.
And even then, it's just a quick check.
They promised.