

“Yes or No”

Maggie Stiefvater

So much rides on yes or no.

"Hey, Steven!" Some kid in a Shiny Toy Guns hoodie that I recognized but couldn't name shouted across the parking lot at me. "You have anything new for tonight?"

I wordlessly waved my battered little notebook at him and he nodded in confirmation. Together we headed into the school, silence hanging between us, nothing left to say now that our roles had been established. Inside the school, the hallways were half-lit, transforming the building into something entirely different from the school we both attended during the day.

There was a sort of magic to be found in alleys and cafeterias and classrooms after-hours. Every month the Priory Club hosted an open mic night for the students of Loisdale Senior High, and three or four dozen students crammed into an accommodating venue to play music or read poetry or just shout a soliloquy to whoever is listening. None of us could change the world on our own, but together — it was a kind of collective genius.

The Priory had commandeered one of the larger classrooms for the night; the lights had been turned out and a single spotlight illuminated one end. Abby Weiss, the girl who had spent September through January slowly building me up into something new and amazing and then February through April slowly tearing me up into pieces of Steven, glanced up at me from her post beside the drink counter. I didn't even have time to meet her eyes before she looked back to the girl she was chatting with. The smell of Pepsi reminded me of a movie theater.

Then it was the blur of pre-performance activity; performer list shoved into my hand, guitars held above the reach of careless elbows and

soft drinks, the MC for the night tapping a microphone and saying "is this working?" amidst a howl of electronic feedback.

A hand touched my elbow, and a voice whispered in my ear, "Are you the poet?"

With the voice came a whiff of breath across my face, smelling of flowers and dreams and wanting and things I, for once, didn't have words for. "I'm a poet," I said.

The girl attached to the voice came round to face me, though she didn't release my elbow. She was beautiful in the way that I used to think Abby was beautiful; all shining red hair and long pale neck. Unlike Abby, though, this girl had blue eyes. Ocean eyes. Fall-in-and-swim-or-more-likely-drown eyes.

I couldn't help but glance through the silhouetted crowd at Abby, to see if she was looking. She was, the set of her mouth slightly wrong. The girl in front of me followed my gaze, her mouth quirking into a smile on one side. She took hold of my jaw to turn my face back to her. "Tell me something. Are you any good?"

So much rides on yes or no. I could've been modest and said no. But the truth was poetry was the only thing I was good at. They didn't listen to me here because they liked me, a too-tall boy who was only good with words when they were written down beforehand. They listened because they liked the poetry. "Yes," I said. "That's what they tell me."

"I thought so," the girl said, and her lips curled in a beautiful way that reminded me of creeping tendrils of ivy. "Will you read me some?"

She looked so like Abby when she asked that I remembered when Abby and I first met, at one of the Priory Club open mics.

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It was September and school was still brand new when I first met her.

"Will you read me some?" Abby asked. "Samuel says you're good."

Normally I told people they had to wait until I was in front of mic. I didn't like reading my poetry unless I was alone, and with the mic in front of me, I felt alone. But she was so beautiful, like something out of a Waterhouse print, that I couldn't say no.

I said, "Watching the crawling tower crumble, savage doves fly free, freeing the prisoner, loosing the beast, and my pieces fall together."

Her lips were pursed like she was going to say "who?" but she said, "that's beautiful. What's it mean?"

"It's how you make me feel," I said, and regretted it immediately.

But she said, "Write me something else."

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"I only read in front of the mic," I told the new girl. I'd learned my lesson.

I thought she'd press me for more, but she just smiled. "Brianna," she said. "That's my name."

Something about the way she said it, or her summer-sweet breath, or the way her eyes made my lungs stop working, made me think she was lying. So I didn't say anything. I just turned my face to watch the first performer, a lanky guitarist who only played bar chords, singing an Alanis Morissette cover.

Brianna leaned forward and said into my ear, just for me, "Do you want to be a better poet?"

So much rides on yes or no. I could have said no, and told her to go back to wherever or whenever she came from. But the truth was this: these words had to come out of me, one way or another. And I wanted more. More than the little buzz that came from the magic of the Priory Club meetings. I didn't know how to get that more, but I was sure it was my deficit, not the Priory Club's. So I said, "Yes."

"It's your turn to read," Brianna said. "Will you come see me afterward?"

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It was January when Abby told me, right before I was supposed to go up and read, that she loved me. She tugged my hair, pulling my head down close enough for her to speak into my ear, and she whispered it like it was just another one of our secrets. And she laughed afterwards, like it was a funny one at that.

That was the first night when I didn't want to get up onto the stage. I wanted to stand there and make her say it again. But she pushed me up to read my latest poem. She said, "Come see me afterward."

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I stood on the makeshift stage, the spot light blinding me, my head closer than everyone else's to the ceiling as usual. The group was quiet, hushed whispers, the gurgle of soda into cups, the shuffle of soles on the bare floor. I could hear my breathing in the speaker next to me.

Brianna looked at me from the front row, her arms crossed over her chest in a way that was suddenly not-Abby. Abby had always watched, enraptured. Brianna watched in a so-what-have-you-got? way. She was waiting for me to prove myself.

My new poem didn't seem so great anymore. But I didn't have anything else written down. So I read it:

*What's this I feel, that clots in my throat?
The taste of nectar, the feel of wasp stings
The fond attention that makes me note
the shape of your hands and other things
that do not matter.*

*Never so sad as seeing your smile
Never so false as you being true*

*Never so dead as seeing you alive
Never so alone as when I'm with you.*

Brianna's eyes narrowed as I read more and the crowd clapped. When I stepped out of the lights, she gripped my arm. "Steven," she said, and her voice had a sort of ringing urgency, a gasp of more. "Steven Slaughter, do you want me to make you a better poet?"

I looked at her, her ocean eyes, and I saw that I'd been right. There was magic in them, and death both.

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It was February. I stood in front of the mic, a notebook scratched full of poems in my hand, and the light hurt my eyes. I could barely see into the audience, but I could not mistake that shining red hair when she came in the door. A guy came in the door behind her and stood behind her. I saw the playful shake of her head, and then I saw his hand flat on her belly, fingers snaking inside her waistband, and saw her laugh and turn her face to his.

That was when I realized that words didn't mean the same thing to her that they meant to me. My words were meant to last, to stand forever, and hers were only true the moment she said them.

Abby caught my eye, and she slapped the guy's hand. Then she shrugged at me and shook her head a little, as if she'd caught him tugging her ponytail.

From then on, my words were for me alone.

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So much rides on yes or no.

Brianna held her hand out, not so much as if to solicit mine, but turned toward the sky as if she were waiting for a gift.

"What will it cost me?" I whispered.

"Everything," Brianna said.

I believed her.

I took her hand and said, "Yes."