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## Two Pokemon

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## TWO POKEMON

002. Ivysaur

*“The bulb on its back grows by drawing energy. It gives off an aroma when it is ready to bloom.” – Pokémon Yellow*

The bulbs on my back grew regardless of precaution. The dermatologist asks about my habits: How much chocolate do I eat? How much grease? Am I taking anabolic steroids? I am thirteen, and I am afraid of anything that might puncture my body, anything that could bruise or burn or maim it. But one summer your parents played a trick on me, and I applied coco butter to my skin instead of sunblock. I spent all day in the water, then I two weeks in bed. My skin bubbled and broke and oozed. I stuck to the bed sheets. When I was all new skin, pink and tender, I figured myself cured. But the old acne soon followed. It was, according to the dermatologist, the pH of my skin. Or that I was lying to him about what I ate. Or puberty. Or stress. Or the aluminum flakes they put in deodorant to keep men from sweating. My theory was that I didn't sweat enough, that the dirt and oil on my skin tunneled through my pores, internalized and festered until I discovered the affliction as growths, red and violent. I was given soaps and salves, pills and pieces of looped steel. I was told not to pick, but how could I not? I obsessed over my body, tortured every inch of skin. Beyond the spots of blood and oil on my shirts where bloomed a pimple, my problem was invisible unless I stood naked, unless one were standing close enough to detect a bouquet of creams and chemicals. No longer so marked, I still examine my pores in the mirror, flinch when I press a handful of moisturizer to my face. Someday, I hope, my skin will yield to the touch. Until then I skim my surface for flaws and imperfections, something to cut out or squeeze. Rarely do my sentries fail.

089. Muk

*“Thickly covered in a filthy, vile sludge. It is so toxic, even its footprints contain poison.” – Pokémon Red*

Everything between us is so toxic that my mother sends me to Catholic school. She dresses me in business clothes and cuts my hair short. I wear Hush Puppies and learn how to knot a tie. I step into a lawyer’s van for the first day of carpool and know that I am an impostor, that I have traded one kind of poison for another. I pull all day at the starched collar of my new shirt, which jabs sharply at my neck. When I take it off at home, I learn that garment manufacturers put pins in the collars so their shirts won’t look rumpled in the box. The pin gives me an invisible tattoo. It heals quickly, but my new way of living always reminds me of my place. The lawyer behind the wheel agrees with the radio that auto unions are sucking our city dry. A classmate asks me what it is like, being raised by a single parent in a state of sin. Another wonders where my father lives and what he does, if he’s a deadbeat. They’re curious about my mother and her factory, the job she performs on the assembly line, the people she knows, the fact that one day she will be replaced by a machine. Every day there is a new question, unless my mother is driving. On those days, she buys us all McDonald’s. We are quiet then, sated by salt and fat. But it’s not all bad. In homeroom, I meet the first person my age I can identify as gay. He never says it, never says, “My name is X, and I am gay.” Or maybe he did and I wasn’t there. But he is beyond such gestures. He has an aura about him and everybody respects his decision, which is how

our priests referred to orientation. I admire him for knowing what he is so early and for being so cool about it. It will be years before I know myself, and I will struggle with that knowledge. Until then I think I missed something by going to a new school, but really the only thing I missed was you.