Bonus Days

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BONUS DAYS

BY A.C.L.

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with UNIVERSITY HONORS 4/16/2021

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Introduction and Research Question

In the following research described, I have encountered a significant body of evidence to support that teens struggling with eating disorders and/or body dissatisfaction are often “triggered” by how eating disorders are portrayed in the media. (In the context of this defense, I will be using the word “triggered” as defined by Families Empowering And Supporting Treatment for Eating Disorders, which states that a trigger is “a person, place, thing, event, or emotion that sets an eating disorder into place” (FEAST, 2008)). My theory based on the research is that teenagers with eating disorders are likely to seek out content that destructively celebrates eating disorders, because it legitimizes their experiences and therefore fulfills a social need for acceptance which is especially crucial during the teen years. Since family and friends are not likely to support self-destructive behavior, teens may turn to other people with eating disorders in order to fulfill their social needs and to avoid unwanted concern or intervention.

The main question which I intend to explore in my project is: How can I meaningfully respond to the harmful portrayal of eating disorders in the media in a way that provides an honest, healthy, and supportive perspective that still appeals to teens seeking validation for their struggles with eating disorders? As a person who began struggling with anorexia and bulimia in
middle school, I often sought out websites and books about eating disorders seeking validation for what I was experiencing. Unfortunately, I felt that the eating disorder related media I was consuming did me more harm than good. I have been considered recovered for years now, but I want to prevent current teens from experiencing the same struggles that I went through. Thus, I believe it is important to create something with the intention of counteracting the damaging messaging that teens receive.

Literature Review

I decided to begin my research by retracing my own steps. As a teenager, I was particularly affected by a book called *Wasted* by Marya Hornbacher (1998) as well as by ‘pro-anorexia’ websites which gave tips for how to most effectively lose weight and cope with symptoms of eating disorders as well as how to trick doctors. These websites “present graphic material to encourage, support, and motivate site users to continue their efforts with anorexia and bulimia” (Borzekowski et al., 2010). Interestingly, “many anorexia nervosa patients describe using *Wasted* to exacerbate their anorexic thoughts and behaviors” (Seaber, 2016). One of the reasons why this may be is because of the almost competitive way in which eating disorders behave. For example, throughout her book, Hornbacher describes what she has done to herself almost as if it is a challenge to be topped, such as in the following quote: “the term ‘starvation diet’ refers to 900 calories a day. I was on one-third of a starvation diet. What do you call that?” (Hornbacher, 1998). As I began to do more research, I was shocked to find that the sense that there was a “competition” among people with eating disorders was extremely well-documented. Many patients, such as Nora, a Pro-Anorexia Research Group participant interviewed for Anna Claire Lavis’s doctoral dissertation, expressed sentiments like the following: “If I know the
person that I’m looking at is anorexic, then it appeals to my competitive side and encourages me to starve myself” (Lavis, 2011).

At this point in my research, I felt that I had definitely confirmed that books and websites play an irrefutable role in encouraging teenagers to engage in dangerous behaviors. My next question was, why? Based on my own personal experience as a teenager struggling with such troubling thoughts and behaviors, I felt like no one understood what I was going through. Seeking a place I belonged, I looked towards online communities, social media, or even books about eating disorders. On the surface, I thought I was trying to be a “good” anorexic by learning tips for being “better” at being sick, but in hindsight, I think I just wanted to feel accepted by people I could relate to. I discovered that there were scientific reasons for this: teenager’s brains are neurologically predisposed to seek approval from others, and especially from ages 14-16 teens are neurologically programmed to take considerable risks for social reward (Sparks, 2013). Additionally, according to the American Counseling Association, teens with similar behaviors and attitudes are likely to form unified groups, even in the absence of true emotional support between group members, as a means of satisfying their needs for conformity and acceptance (Erford and Mayorga, n.d.). It makes sense to reason that these groups may take the form of online communities, especially since teenagers with eating disorders experience increased difficulty making friends and an increased likelihood of being bullied, and so they may be fearful of judgment from those who do not have eating disorders (Patel, 2016). Unfortunately, this fear of being seen as “weird” and rejected for having an eating disorder creates a vicious cycle of silence, because “these individuals are unlikely to disclose personal information to their friends and family and as a result have a lower probability of seeking professional treatment for their eating disorder” (Center for Discovery, 2019).
It now made sense why teens turn to other people with eating disorders to meet their biologically driven need for acceptance. However, this was a frustrating discovery because I can’t change adolescent biology. Doing something to create positive change seemed like an impossible challenge, given the depressing but unsurprising reality that teens with eating disorders only feel comfortable opening up about their eating disorders to other people with eating disorders, who see each other as competition. However, I was heartened to read the following recommendation on interventions to stop risky behavior by Jason Chein, the director of Temple University’s Neurocognition Lab: “It’s not that you are trying to convince the individual that they shouldn't be influenced by their peers; they’re not aware at a conscious level of the effect their peers are having on them” (Sparks, 2013). “Rather than focusing on preventing adolescents from doing bad things, Mr. Chein suggested that educators focus on leveraging positive peer pressure” (Sparks, 2013). So, with that in mind, it seemed to me like the obvious solution to counteract the negative pressure I felt from the eating disorder community as a teenager would be to leverage my peer influence, as a young person who truly gets it and can relate, in a constructive way. Since Wasted had such an adverse effect on me when I was younger, I decided to write a book for my Honors Project which could be the exact opposite of Wasted.

The Project

In the Literature Review, I discussed my findings as to why teenagers are likely to seek out triggering content, both online and in print. My theory based on the above research is that teenagers are likely to view these resources because they want to feel accepted in spite of their mental illness; and then as a secondary effect the material that they view makes them more
inclined to lean into illness-driven behaviors to “prove” that they “deserve” to be part of the eating disorder community, as if they were hazing themselves into a toxic fraternity or sorority. As Anna Claire Lavis reported, “proving’ one’s anorexia thus mingles pride with a subjectivity of suffering” (Lavis, 2011).

If the goal of viewing eating-disorder focused content, deep down, is actually to enjoy a twisted sense of camaraderie, then perhaps the worsening of the illness could be nipped in the bud if teenagers weren’t triggered by what they read about eating disorders in the first place. What if there was something about eating disorders that covered the emotional side of what it feels like to have one in depth and validated those feelings without encouraging destructive behaviors? I wanted to create something that people going through experiences similar to my own could identify with emotionally, without glamorizing the disorder itself or giving any specific numbers, images or behaviors that a person in a negative headspace might internalize. I started keeping a journal years ago when I first began really trying to get better, and it brings me a lot of happiness to see how far I have come since I began keeping the journal. For my Honors Project, I elected to translate the last several years of journal entries into a collection of poems and short personal reflections with an integrated collection of artwork about the process of recovery, in hopes of inspiring others to pursue a healthier relationship with food and ultimately with themselves.

I have chosen to call my collection of writings and artwork *Bonus Days*, in reference to the fact that I had been told I would not live past my junior year of high school when my eating disorder was at its worst. I choose to think of every day that I have been alive since passing my “expiration date” as a bonus day, and this has given me a uniquely positive outlook on life because I realize how lucky I am to be here, today and every day. I think this title has a lot of
meaning, because had I not recovered I would have missed out on so much that has happened since I committed to getting better. The day I passed my “expiration date,” so to speak, I started keeping the journal which inspired the poems and anecdotes I have been writing. My book will span a wide range of topics, because the eating disorder affected almost every aspect of my life and I think it is important to show that eating disorders, and therefore recovery from eating disorders, do not happen in a vacuum. With that, I will be writing about all of the things that motivated me to recover and all of the ways that my life improved as I did so: including my ability to rebuild my relationships with my family, find meaningful friendships, develop goals that are more meaningful than just being small, and develop healthier romantic relationships as I gained self-respect. I will also be writing about the frustrating parts of recovery and the setbacks, and how I overcame those obstacles.

Methodology

I knew I wanted to write a book, because as a teen I felt that I was the most negatively impacted and inspired to push myself further into a self-destructive state after reading Wasted by Marya Hornbacher. Social media, movies, songs, etc. can have profound impacts on their audience, but I believe that books have a unique ability to strike a unique chord with their audiences and that out of all of the various forms of media, books have the capacity to produce the most powerful effect on their audiences whether that effect be positive (or negative, as was the case for me with Wasted.)

Instead of a traditional autobiography, however, I chose to model my writing in a more poetic style since my story is very much a coming-of-age story, and I find that this genre lends itself well to narratives told through poems, such as in the works of Elizabeth Acevedo and Jason
Reynolds. Their books, *The Poet X (2018)* and *Long Way Down (2017)* respectively, have largely informed my writing so far. I was also largely inspired by *Mouthful of Forevers* by Clementine Von Radich (2015).

Von Radich has written a powerful book of freestyle poems, many of which are about healing from trauma and learning from past experiences, themes which tie in strongly to *Bonus Days*. Von Radich writes about love, losing loved ones, personal traumas such as sexual violence, and the beauty of having real friends and appreciating small moments. Her poem *The Lion* in particular made me realize that I could use poetry as a means of explaining the surreal experience of becoming a new person after shedding an identity that had defined my life for a long time. *Mouthful of Forevers* also allowed me to realize that by describing the little moments I am now able to enjoy, I could give my own story a happy ending even without a grand finale.

My decision to include lengthier reflection pieces in addition to the poems came from reading prose and personal essays, such as those in Melissa Broder’s book, *So Sad Today* (2016). I felt it was important to frame many of my pieces with context, since not everyone in my audience will have an innate understanding of what it is like to have an eating disorder. Through her candid and sometimes even uncomfortably raw personal essays, Broder succeeded in helping her audience truly understand what it was like to walk in her shoes, and I felt that including some more detailed pieces in *Bonus Days* could add a similar depth to my overall collection of writing.

I was also inspired by works which were seemingly unrelated at all, but which addressed themes that were strongly emphasized in my book. One such source was *Bombshell, the Hedy Lamarr Story*, a documentary about the famous actress and not so famous inventor who never received proper credit for inventing the frequency-hopping technology that led to modern GPS and Bluetooth. Sadly, she was never taken seriously as a result of her sex-symbol image. This
documentary informed a poem I wrote entitled “Bombshell,” in which I comment upon how much time young women waste trying to be prettier in the face of the irony that a woman considered the most beautiful in the world was resentful of the beauty that distracted the world from her innovations. I also wrote some poems influenced by interviews with Grace Woodward, a former TV fashion stylist, who has offered many valuable insights into the challenges of growing up with an anorexic parent and how the fashion industry fosters eating disorder culture. She eventually left the fashion industry because it gave her “body anxiety” (Woodward, 2019), and a few of my pieces reflect on her testimonies about how eating disorders affect the family members of those suffering as well as her statements on the interaction she describes between diet culture and fashion.

In addition to the poetry and reflections, I have composed several pieces of abstract art. After completing my first draft of the written manuscript, I received some feedback that the order I had arranged my poems and reflections in was not as effective as it could be. I got thinking about alternative ways that the writing could flow together that would seem to transition more smoothly, and I found my inspiration in the idea of a color wheel and decided to group analogous chapters/colors next to each other. So, I organized my chapters by “color” instead. Each color serves as a metaphor for how I felt at the time of writing the poems in each chapter, and the colors have been assigned to those emotional ‘eras’ based upon color theory and literary metaphors.

Notably, the order in which I have chosen to place these colors does not follow the order of a traditional color spectrum. I began with green as the first chapter, so as to introduce the subject matter somewhat neutrally, since green is the color in between blue and yellow. I actually chose blue to represent the eating disorder itself, and I chose yellow to represent recovery. This
choice was inspired by the following belief held by famous abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky: “for Kandinsky, yellow and blue are the core instances of ‘warm’ and ‘cool’ respectively. Every colour theorist would agree that blue is the quintessential ‘cool’ colour, but yellow is a much less usual choice. Kandinsky’s intuition is based primarily on the inherent link between warmth and light: yellow is, intrinsically, the lightest colour, closest to the white. There can be no ‘dark yellow’” (Maslova-Levin, 2015).

I arranged the other colors of the rainbow in between blue and yellow as follows: blue, indigo, violet, red, orange, yellow. This shows the progression from one shade to the next, as I did not put any colors that are not analogous on the color wheel next to each other so as to keep the sense of a smooth transition intact. I chose which colors to assign to which emotions I wrote about based on an article which appeared in art publication YourArtPath about the implication of colors according to common psychological associations, for example, orange is associated with energy, red with aggression etc. (YourArtPath Contributor Emma, 2017).

It may seem like an unusual choice to pair writing with paintings, but I was excited by the prospect that perhaps paintings could communicate something which writing could not, thus adding a deeper layer of meaning to my work. By using paintings to communicate what each chapter will “feel” like, I have employed a phenomenon known as qualia, which is defined as “conscious, subjective experiences which cannot be shared between people (at least not in any direct way)” (Maslova-Levin, 2015.) In this way, at least on some level, my audience can not only read my words but see my paintings as well, and on some level know what I felt.

The term for this synthesized interpretation of a poem combined with artwork, according to the Poetry Foundation, is an ekphrastic poem. “Ekphrasis has been considered generally to be a rhetorical device in which one medium of art tries to relate to another medium by defining and
describing its essence and form, and in doing so, relate more directly to the audience, through its illuminative liveliness” (Wikipedia, 2021.) My goal in using this device is to establish what feels like a personal connection to the audience, because I feel that this will make the social connection a person reading this book may be seeking feel more real to them.

Therefore, although the paintings were not part of my original idea for this project, I feel that they have become a crucial part of it because by relating my writing to another form of media, in this case visual media, I have allowed my writing to become something bigger and more complex than writing itself. The element of ekphrasis which emerges from the pairing of paintings with writing has made it possible for this project to evolve into something which transcends genres and becomes about my work’s meaning and intention itself.

Conclusions

Through my research for this project, I have had the incredible pleasure of discovering several amazing books and works of art. I have also learned a lot more about the science and research focused on factors which caused and contributed to my eating disorder, which I myself did not understand at the time. It was eye-opening to see that there have been entire studies on hundreds of people like me, and to fully realize for the first time that I am not the only one who has felt exactly what I used to feel. To see those thoughts and behaviors that I used to have formally documented by scientists and researchers was a bit surreal. Although this was validating in its own way, it also made me realize that while I may be okay now, there are countless people still in the thick of their eating disorders.

This realization affirmed my choice to create something which provides a supportive and healing experience for those still struggling. Through research and experimentation I arrived at
the conclusion that the best way to achieve such an effect was to do so on both a visceral and an intellectual level, through both writing and painting together, because ultimately recovery itself is a combination of putting in both intellectual and emotional work. I hope that my work will not only offer a sense of solidarity to those in recovery, but that it will serve as a way to allow the families, educators, and friends of those with eating disorders to gain some insight into the disorder affecting their loved ones and enable them to better support and reconnect with those eating disorder survivors.
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Introduction

*Bonus Days* is a collection of poems, reflections, and artwork that I have created from a series of journal entries which I wrote over the course of several years while actively recovering from, and then later reflecting upon, an eating disorder. I decided to turn these writings into a comprehensive body of work that shows the progress I made during that period of time, in order to express what I wish I could go back and show the young girl I was when my battle with eating disorders began. As a teenager struggling with such troubling thoughts and behaviors, I felt like no one understood what I was going through. Seeking a place I belonged, I looked towards online communities, social media pages, or even books about living with eating disorders, where I found harsh words and guilt trips declaring that it was “weak” or “giving up” to want to be normal again. I also found other people’s weights, caloric intakes, and generally unsafe ideas to measure myself against, instead of the support and validation that I had wanted so badly.

*Bonus Days* is intended to provide a voice that kids (and people of any age) dealing with similar issues can relate to. I was once given the advice to think of the disorder and myself as separate entities, and I found that there was a lot of content in the “eating disorder community” for the *disorder* to feed upon, but not enough for *me*. I wanted to create something that people going through similar experiences could identify with emotionally, without glamorizing the disorder itself or giving any specific numbers, images, or behaviors that a person in a negative headspace might internalize. Almost everything we see in the media about eating disorders is focused on the body or the externally visible aspects of the illness; my writing and art is about how healing looks on the inside.

Mental illnesses are complex things, so even if you have not had one yourself, this collection is still for you. There were a lot of areas of my life that were affected as a result of what I went through, and I address those as well. If you are struggling or have struggled with healing damaged relationships, whether it be the relationship with yourself or with your loved ones, this collection is for you.

I do not pull any punches in the following pieces, because I think that complete transparency is necessary. For the forementioned reason, I have chosen not to leave any relevant events or interactions out of my narrative, but I have changed the names of all individuals mentioned in this book in order to protect their privacy, which have been denoted by (*). It should also be established that I have no tolerance for entertaining or romanticizing self-harmful ways of thinking, and I’m sure that will come through in my writing. However, despite my rigid stance in favor of recovering, it was important to me to handle the subjects mentioned above with empathy and love as well, because ultimately, *Bonus Days* is the hug I wish I could give my younger self.

I hope you feel that it embraces you as well.
Color Vision
(Chapter Guide)

I suppose the best way to tell you my story is to help you see the world as I do, and I see the world as expressions of color. I have not organized the contents of this book into chapters by number, because the writing is not necessarily arranged in exact chronological order. It is arranged by how I felt when I wrote each piece. So, each chapter has been composed by grouping pieces that came from the same emotional place together.

For that reason, I have named each chapter with a color that represents it. The following short poems explain the tone you can expect from each chapter to come. Each chapter will be introduced by a corresponding painting that shows the "essence," so to speak, of the respective color. As an art student at heart, I’ve always been better at showing than telling, so it’s only fitting that I would translate my first book into my own native language of images.

With that, the next seven poems are my “table of contents.”

Green

Green is the hope with which I will begin.
Green is still halfway Blue,
but it is blue that has been changed by the joy of knowing Yellow.

Green is looking at the world with fresh eyes,
The morning after a teary night when you wake up
and things don’t seem as bad anymore
as they had seemed when you went to bed.

Green is having a long way to go, and yet, being present where you are.
It is endless opportunities to start in a new direction.

Green shouts, “GO!” and at its signal, you take off running toward something unknown,
the grass wet on your bare feet with the dew of a new day.

Blue

Blue was the worst of it.

Blue was wanting to cry when the cold touched my bones
as I stepped into the garage each winter morning to warm up my car.
Blue was being constantly frozen,
just as much by my fear and fixations
as I was frozen in any room with the AC turned on.
Blue was being numbed and unfeeling to the world around me, as if it were frostbite afflicting me that caused me to constantly shiver. Blue showed in my hands and feet, especially if I crossed my legs for too long.

It visibly crept into my skin, making me look as dead as I felt.

Indigo

Indigo is the ink that dried on the pages as I began to put words to my feelings.

Indigo is the last storm cloud in the sky after it has rained, a darkness that lingers before the light returns to the sky.

Indigo is a sadness that surrounds you like the night sky of the same color that holds twinkling stars of hope.

Indigo is the wave that breaks on the rocks and slowly erodes the cliffside, a dark sea washing over the seemingly unbreakable silence and carrying it away in pieces.

Violet

Change happens in Violet--
Red and Blue, the two extremes which caused me the most discomfort, are neutralized in Violet transformed into a color which absorbs them both.

There are shades of Violet closer to Red, just as some are closer to Blue. But neither can overpower completely.

Each of its diverse shades are Violet all the same and it embraces all forms of itself, existing on both sides of the color spectrum comfortably,

a symbol of the sense of balance that I have struggled to reach.

Red

Red is the cinnamon gum that my Granddad kept in his red truck,
which we chewed as we drove to the museums he took me to
to keep me entertained during our visits.

He always found stuff for us to do
and made me feel special the entire time I stayed with him,
even when I was there for up to two weeks at one time.

I used to go stay with my Granddad as a teenager
when my dad and I were arguing.
Maybe that’s why Red feels like rage,
rejection,
and being loved all at the same time.

It is the fear of needing too much,
and it is the counterintuitive urge to immediately feed every impulse
that crosses the feral part of my mind.

Red is greedy and indulgent,
it is the equal counterpart to the other extreme,
derivation,
which manifested as Blue.

But Red is vitality,
and flushed cheeks,
and raspberries from Granddad’s weekly market visit.

It is an uncomfortable color, hot to the touch,
and yet I need at least a little bit of it to stay alive.

Orange

Orange is the best friend that gives you tough love
and bad ideas that become fond memories.

Orange is erratic and energetic,
a week of feeling manic after a period of stillness.
It is the burst of energy that makes you impulsive,
the mornings when you get up at 4 a.m. to write.

It is the one tequila shot too many
that causes you to stumble into the TV.
Orange can be dizzying to look at for too long
it is the color of being out of control.
After a lifetime of clinging to control,  
I fell in love when I discovered the freedom of Orange.

It is refreshing and tart  
the kind of taste that wakes you up in the morning.

I like myself the most when I feel Orange,  
and I wish I could feel that way all the time.  
But Orange is exhausting.

Yellow

Maybe Yellow is perfection.

Yellow melts slowly in your mouth like butter.  
Yellow is a sunny afternoon when for once,  
you don’t feel like you owe the world anything.

It was the marker I used as a child,  
to render pictures of sandy beaches offering up seashells for collecting.

Yellow is a visitor: it never stays long, but it will come back if you let it.  
It is hard work to stay ready for its company all the time,  
but it is worth the extra housekeeping  
to be able to spontaneously open your doors to Yellow  
whenever it might arrive.  
It pours you a glass of lemonade and puts daisies on your table when it walks into your house.

Finally, in its company, I am not alone.
Chapter One: Green
One day, years later, I woke up.

The sunlight came streaming through my window.
My plants sat perched in the windowsill uncurling their leaves.
My feet hit the floor gently
and the moment I had waited for all this time finally arrived:
I was glad to be alive.

They told me that I wouldn’t make it past junior year of high school.
To think, I would have missed out on everything that has happened since then
had things continued as they were.

There are bad days: but even the bad days are bonus days.

Any time I have had beyond what I was given
is time that I have reclaimed
to spend feeling my feelings
and winning my achievements
and learning from my failures

and sometimes, just watching the clock
waiting for the day to pass
so that I can find out what happens tomorrow.
Contentment

I recently finished reading an autobiography by a famous eating disorder survivor, a woman who ended up learning to love her body by making it big as a curve model.

I am happy for her, of course.
Yet, I am unconvinced by the claim in her book that a lifetime of distorted thoughts and obsessive behaviors can simply be shut off like a faucet at will.
You cannot shove years of self-hatred under the bed to collect dust by simply deciding to stop being ill overnight.

If it were that easy, we'd all do it.

There is no “before and after.”
There is no magical point at which your old life ends and the new begins.

The whole point of an eating disorder is the belief that one can escape oneself, that at some point, if you change enough, you can be reborn as a new person.

You cannot.

The past can’t be escaped, because it is part of you.
But it is never too late to add more parts of yourself that can ‘tip the scales,’ so to speak, towards a better overall average quality of life.
You cannot subtract negatives, but you can always add better decisions and better days to shift the balance towards the more desirable side.

Perhaps acknowledging the permanent nature of mental illness made for a less satisfying ending to her book but reality is still worth being proud of.

There isn’t a definitive “happy end,” as one might want to believe, but there is a calm place.
A Calm Place

I live my life standing in the ocean.

The waves never stop, but there is still peace in the ups and downs. They rock me, and I must be careful to keep my head above water, even when it is calm. Yet, I can still enjoy the feelings of the salt in my hair and the sand under my feet. Sometimes a swell sneaks up on me and knocks me under, but I can reliably regain my footing now.

I once was out in the deep where I couldn’t touch at all, but over the years, I’ve swam to where I stand now, swaying like seaweed but firmly planted.

I may never reach dry land, where the “normal” people sun themselves. I watch them as they play on the beach, and sometimes I still find myself longing to be part of their world of seemingly effortless contentment. Yet I know that realistically, very few people ever truly get to lie in the sun for long, before life’s siren song lures us all out to where we must sink or swim once more.

When you have spent your life treading water, just to know that you can stand back up on your own two legs again feels like safety.
Why do I want to share this body?

I used to want to take off my clothes just to force someone to look at me and see a manifestation of discipline. I wanted someone to look at my bones and interpret their outlines as evidence of self-control. I wanted to be admired and validated, so that I could tell myself that the means that it had taken to look the way I did were justified. But that wasn’t intimacy.

It was a display.

I do not submit my body for approval anymore.

Jayden* has a hand on my stomach and a hand holding my thigh as I lie beside him on the couch. The alarms in my head cry out, but I resist the self-conscious urge to move him. I look at his sleepy face, and he is smiling. In fact, he is looking at me with the same admiration I have wanted all along. He pulls me in closer, and I am almost disappointed that my body fat, which now covers the bones that I was once so proud of, didn’t ruin anything.

This means that the fear which had controlled me for so long was really all for nothing. If I can be loved as I am now, then I can no longer make that excuse for trying to change myself. My guilt is overtaken by contentment and I wonder how many nights like this I could have enjoyed before, if I had just given myself permission to.
The Cycle
2018

I can taste freedom on my tongue again
the wonderful thing about light is that it always finds a way to filter back in
I’m waking from a long sleep, my tired eyes are open
and I feel the strength I need
to heal again
to become whole
everything that I fear is in my control.

I don’t need a faith because I’m already saved
by the letting go of yesterday’s shame.

I let myself sink so low,
I have only myself to blame
but they say what goes down must come up again.
The same force I once abused
I can turn the other way.

Maybe I’ll always walk this line.
Maybe I’ll always play this game.

Change always hurts but I want to feel the pain
because the only way to win
is to heal
again.
A Math Lesson

It’s funny how many innocent things I feel guilty for:

Even now I feel like I have to sneak around.
I left my bathroom scale on the floor this morning
instead of putting it back in the cabinet when I was done with it.
Most people don’t hide their scales when they aren’t using them.

I still remember my mom forcing me to get on backwards,
so that I couldn’t see the number on the little screen.
She was checking to make sure I wasn’t continuing to drop weight.
I remember her crying when I hit my lowest,
because despite her best efforts,
she felt helpless to stop me from slowly killing myself.

It’s bizarre to see scales just sitting on the floor in other people’s houses--
don’t they know the number is supposed to be a dirty secret?

But it’s not.

That number is just as meaningless as all the other numbers that I shouldn’t know, yet I do.
I wish I didn’t have the nutrition facts for every food under the sun memorized
but I know off the top of my head
how many calories are in any given slice of bread from Panera.
I can’t get rid of that knowledge
but I can choose to eat the bread anyhow.
The Very Thing We Fear

I was out for a walk and I saw a little toad sitting in the road.
I kept walking, telling myself it would make it to the other side on its own.

My doubts got the best of me, so I grabbed a stick and turned around.
I used the stick to nudge it out of the road,
just as a red truck came hurtling towards me
I kept a wary eye on the driver as I stood hunched over the dirt
prodding at the oblivious toad.

I watched the toad as he reached the grass,
as he struggled to clear the tall green blades with his short little legs--
every muscle in his little body working to clamber away from me in desperate terror.

It made me think;
the toad had no idea the truck had ever existed,
or that several cars which could have easily crushed him
(without even realizing they’d done it)
had since passed over the exact same spot where that I had found him sitting
within just in the short amount of time
that it had taken for me to oversee his journey to the ditch.

To him, I was not a rescuer, but a predator.

What else do we run from,
fearing it will harm us,
when in fact it is the very thing that we fear that will keep us from harm?
The Fear Of Letting Go

I think the reason why so many people struggle with relapses is because it is easy to forget what we have to live for.

You spend so many years of your life trying to fix yourself, trying to become the version of yourself that visits you in your dreams.
You think that if you just lose ten more pounds you will finally be that person.
Then, yes then, surely, you will feel loved, beautiful, graceful, and confident.

Maybe you don't have an eating disorder.
Maybe you think the next fix will give you the high you felt the first time.
Maybe you think the next drink will finally bring you comfort.
Maybe you think that if you can get that person to stay, you will finally get your Happily Ever After, no matter what it costs you to keep them from leaving.

If you have arrived at the point where you are single-mindedly focused on obtaining a happiness that always seems just out of your reach, maybe you lash out at your loved ones who try to come between you and your pursuit of this elusive sense of being complete.
Maybe it has affected other areas of your life: your job, your health, your sanity.
How does it feel to think about letting go of that hope?
How does it feel to think about giving up the one thing that you’ve sacrificed everything else for?

You have to.
You need to mourn the death of a reality that will never exist.
And you will be left with nothing.
*Temporarily.*

You will be desperate to go back to your addiction, whatever it was to, just to have hope again.
But if you do, you will once again be at its mercy.
It’s a scary thing, to live in a void for a while.
But your only options are to go back or push through.
The time will pass.
Your new reason to wake up in the morning will reveal itself.
Mine was to make things right with my little sister.

I made it here.
Marle, The Radioactive Snowman

You asked me what my fondest memory was, and I knew right away.

It was a few winters ago.
My little sister Valerie* had the flu
and she was disappointed that she wasn’t allowed to go play in the snow.

I filled my parent’s bathtub bucket by bucket,
and I raided the kitchen for decorations.
We made the ugliest snowman ever created,
right there in the tub,
with food dye drizzled all over him like a hideous snow cone
and gave him green olives for eyes.

She proudly dubbed our little monstrosity “Marle, the Radioactive Snowman.”

I think this memory is my favorite,
because by surprising my sister I surprised myself.

My struggles had caused my family a lot of pain and unusual challenges that year.
But on this one particular day,
the girl I had been keeping buried
beneath fear and resistance emerged again
and I caught a glimpse
of the sister I wanted to be reflected in myself for a change.

I looked at Valerie* with rainbow sprinkles stuck to her lips,
standing ankle deep in the snow-filled bathtub and ignoring her own numb feet.
She was radiating mischievous glee as she ate the sugary embellishments
(that were intended to be for Marle’s face) while our mom wasn’t watching.

I watched the colors of the wet candy run down her chin,
and for once I saw that there was still hope for us.
Tough as Nails

The best way to gauge how I’m doing, I think, is to look at my nails.
I’ve always had a nervous habit of biting them,
and back when I when I was constantly worried about what I would eat
(or even scarier, what my parents would make me eat,)
back when I was sucking in my stomach all day,
afraid of being caught looking like an anatomically normal person,
back when I was walking into high school classrooms
which swirled with rumors about the reasons behind my changes in size:

I bit them a lot.
And when there was no nail left to bite,
I would dig at my cuticles with pencils.

My gross looking finger-nubs disgusted the boys I dated,
so I started gluing on fake nails.

I became known for the fake nails as I got good at doing them myself.
I would chat about them with the nice older women where I worked at the time,
comparing our manicures as I handed them their drinks.
My granddad’s girlfriend, who has a habit of giving backhanded compliments,
told me how much better my hands looked
now that they weren’t all chewed-up looking.

I must have spent so much money on those fake nails over the years.

But I don’t buy them anymore.
I finally grew out my real nails after years of hiding them.
They feel like little trophies to me now.
The longer they get, the more time they show
that I have endured with my composure intact.

Not only are they pretty now,
but they are tangible proof that my nails,
like I myself, are getting stronger.
Tough as Nails

(The top picture was taken in 2020. The bottom picture is from 2013.)
Chapter Two: Blue
When you realize that you deserve basic necessities like food and sleep
You may realize
that you have been senselessly depriving yourself
of other such basic rights that you are entitled to as well.
You may find you have been tolerating inexcusable disrespect.

I had my first love, Bennet,* while I was at my most fragile
we started dating when I was fifteen.
He would give me the silent treatment,
brag to his friends about how far he could get me to go
(right in front of me,)
spread damaging rumors about me,
complain about my appearance,
and tell me I was lucky he stayed with me...

It did not occur to me that I should be mad at him
because at the time, I thought he was right.

I felt lucky to be the girl on the arm of the cute freckled boy everyone knew and loved.
And when we broke up for good, I blamed myself for it.
I thought I had caused him to resent me
by depending on him for too much support to ask of a teenage boy.
I wondered if we might have had a happy ending had I been “normal”.

In 2019, four long years after that breakup, I got my answer.

I was at a good point in my life when Bennet* reached out to catch up with each other.
Within a month of letting him back into my life,
I felt the same old feelings of inadequacy
and the unpleasant “craziness”
of second-guessing the legitimacy of my own feelings creeping back in.

Only one factor in my life had changed, so the cause was clear.
I knew he had to go.

I told him it had been good to catch up,
but I felt like we weren’t good for each other and it would be best if we cut ties.
Finally, I saw his intentions with clear eyes
as the insults and accusations that followed
struck me like rain pounding against a windowpane.
And I was relieved
because here was the evidence
that the feeling something was wrong hadn’t been “all in my head” after all
and that he was never the one that got away--

I was.

I take comfort in knowing that someday,
when I have my first fight with my future husband, whoever that is,
that even when I sit alone, sulking in the living room,
that my first love has left no unresolved “what could have been” to wonder about.
Water
For Bennet*

I wish I could cry out a river
cry out a sea
I wish I could make you feel--

I’d make you feel what you did to me.

When I said “you’re hurting my feelings”
you said “then I guess I’ll just leave”
so I froze in my tracks and I swallowed my pleas.
Oh, you took away my screams.
You took away my screams.

Now it’s been four years since you lost your hold
but you made me so numb I’m unharmed by your coldness
my skin is like leather
my eyes are like beads
I write rage on blank pages and burst at the seams.

Oh, you took away my screams.
You took away my screams.
I know what I need, and said I need you to leave
now when faced with my new boldness
you buckle at the knees.
I know you’ll take this out on someone else,
so your “defeat” is bittersweet:
the same rain that feeds the flowers also nourishes the weeds.
Before You Read The Next Poem:

_Fearless_, the following poem, is the first poem I ever wrote, from back in 2014. It was written shortly after I was told that I was not likely to live through my junior year of high school.

This particular piece is worth prefacing, because I do not want it to be misconstrued as being “good.” _Fearless_ is an insight into a cycle of toxic thoughts that I have since worked hard to break free from. (Some people may wish not to read it and skip ahead for this reason.) I want this book overall to relay a message of growth, perseverance, and taking one’s happiness into one’s own hands. The following poem is a stark exception, but it has been included anyway, because I believe it is important to capture and illustrate the moment right before I finally reached the tipping point of realizing that I had to change before I ran out of time.
Fearless
Written in Winter of 2014

The water matches my eyes
icy and blue, growing colder,
and I tell myself goodbye.
It’s the end and I know it, but I’m not going to cry.

I watch the bubbles rise
as the last of my breath escapes towards the sky
I see the sunlight gleaming through the water,
creating a kaleidoscope within the tides.

Suddenly it all makes sense
I am so tired of asking why
now my mind is at peace
as I sink, I accept that I might not survive.

The ocean is my friend, but it’s holding me down
and I can’t stand back up, because I’m already half-drowned
I feel so weak, and so overpowered that I can’t even scream.
How did this come to be?
I know I’m never going to win, when it’s me against the sea.

The waves crash around me,
fight or flight instincts kick in
and I’m coming to my senses
seeing how serious it is
the waves have me in their clutches, and they throw me around.
My only last wish is that my body isn’t found.

The ocean was my friend, but she was too strong
I’m too tired to keep fighting, I’ve been struggling for so long.
Just let the tides carry me away, so that I can float on in peace.
How did this come to be?
The ocean was my friend: and now she is my release.
The Bad

I have learned to control them, but the urges to “make up for” what I have eaten still arise from time to time.

I slumped on my couch after a bad day at work and ate a huge bowl of ice cream. I had a heavy lunch out with my parents when they came to visit. I came home from a date the other night, and immediately opened my box of leftovers from the restaurant then devoured what was “supposed to be” tomorrow’s lunch. I felt increasingly anxious as the week went on and the water weight following large portions of salty food made my jeans tight.

I stared in the mirror agonizing over irrational worries somehow convinced that I had looked like a completely different person a week ago.

I found myself playing the roles of the kidnapper, the hostage, and the hostage negotiator simultaneously as I bargained with myself for my own mercy.

“You’ll damage your teeth permanently if you start this again” I reminded myself, “you don’t want to be dizzy when you drive to work tomorrow.” And so on.

I managed to talk myself down off the ledge, and I resigned to brushing my teeth and going to bed. This short conversation with myself would have once been an all-night struggle, which still might have ultimately ended with the voice of reason losing the game of tug-of-war.

The temptation of a quick fix to stop feeling out of control will never fully leave me alone, but I have become far more efficient at dealing with it.

I knew that the next morning I would be glad I made the right choice tonight. I knew I would probably wear loose clothes the next day. I knew that the next day I might be tempted to skip breakfast but I did not, because one day’s heavy lunch cannot not get me through the next day’s eight-hour shift.

As my dad always says: *one day at a time.*
The Ugly

I’ve found that if I suppress a problem long enough, it will just find new ways to manifest itself.

For a while, I had been actively trying to avoid writing on days where I was struggling, because I wanted to prevent my devil on my shoulder from sneaking her way into my writing and casting a hypocritical shadow over my message.

Two weeks before I wrote this, I relapsed for the first time in over a year. It had been over a year since the time before that, as well.

As I reflected on this apparent failure, I realized that if I’m going to share my high points, I need to talk about my low points too, even though they are rare these days.

These “low points” became rare because I learned how to confront them properly.

I learned that sometimes the bravest thing you can do is to drink lots of water, sit in your sweatpants, maybe call your mom, and then try to figure out which problems that you’ve suppressed for too long are now rising up to the surface and demanding your attention in the form of old bad habits.

The last time this happened, I became angry with myself. I was scared that this slip meant all of my progress was lost. It is almost a violating feeling, to find yourself possessed by the familiar enemy which you thought you had finally rid yourself of.

You go into autopilot for twenty minutes, and come back to your senses on the bathroom floor wondering what have I done.

Last time it happened, I saw it as a whole year’s worth of self-improvement lost in less than a half hour of hazy trance-like submission.

This time,
I know better than to be mad at myself.
I have come to realize that only way to truly move forward
is to treat myself with kindness and understanding,
not by punishing myself for “messing up.”

I have accepted that relapses of my eating disorder
are not the real issue that needs to be addressed--
relapses are *symptoms* of emotional problems that need to be addressed.
No amount of eating, or starving, can prevent them,
because it’s not about the food.
It was *never* about the food.

Bulimia is a maladaptive means of releasing pressure,
and nothing more.
It deserves no more power than that, and fear is power.

The big lesson I have taken away from this
is that recovery is not like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.
You don’t just break out of a cocoon, permanently transformed,
and spend the rest of your days flying.

Maybe recovery is about treating your body not like a temple,
but as your home.
Like owning any home, your precious investment will take damage
and you will have to repair it,
inside and out.
My foundation feels unstable right now,
but I refuse to tear out my own support beams in frustration.

Someday, I will inhabit myself comfortably.
The World’s Most Useless Lifeguard

My former therapist, Dr. Nichols once said to externalize the disorder and think of it as something outside of myself.
If I were to personify an eating disorder and write a poem to it, it would be this:

I remember when you filled my head with empty promises and dreams
I looked into your eyes and thought I saw the strength I needed there
I’d go running straight to you
just to get back what you’d taken from me.
A vicious cycle, a hurricane
you broke my bones but numbed the pain
that you had created, then soothed and sedated.
An endless circle around the drain
you sucked out my blood, then refilled my veins.
You made me weak to begin with, and then kept me dependent.
You’d plunge me underwater
just to bring me up and breathe life into me
each time I gasped awake and saw your face
I thought an angel was saving me.
Brainwashed
A Confession, About the Winter of 2015

I saw an episode of *Criminal Minds* in which a cult deprived new members of protein, sustaining them only with sudden spikes of sugar to induce a mental state detached from reality.

Whether this is based on real events or not, it makes sense to me, because the practice described bears an alarming likeness to my diet (and mental state) from my sophomore year of high school. If you combine such conditions with a prolonged period of sleepless nights, you have a recipe for disaster.

I did the worst thing I’ve ever done. I was sixteen, and my mom came into my room to make me eat some soup. As she pressured me to eat it, I resisted, screaming “get away from me” and scrambling to get out of my bed.

In hindsight, it was probably my own flailing limbs that knocked over the bedside lamp.

But in my delusional state at the time--

(The same delusional state that had me convinced that I couldn’t drink the coffee my parents made me in the morning, because I suspected them of lacing it with “calorie powder” which, no, is *not* a real thing)

--I thought my mother had thrown the lamp at me.

In a fit of senseless terror, I grabbed a book sitting nearby and I threw it at her. My weakened little arms failed to launch it even just to the edge of the bed. But it didn’t matter that I failed to hit her, because the fact that I had even tried to do so hurt her more than any projectile book ever could. Even now, years later, I am ashamed of what I had become and frightened by how easy it had been to become like that without even realizing it until it was already too late.

Next time you see an ad for the stupid appetite suppressant lollipops or teas, or some shirtless guy on YouTube claiming you need to follow his special get-abs-fast plan, consider the warning label that marketers don’t list.

No “magical” product or “goal weight” is worth your sanity.
Survivor’s Guilt
About Winter of 2015

When I was fifteen
I had already been walking on thin ice for some time.

In January of my freshman year of high school, I fell through it.

I had lost more weight,
and the doctor told my parents that she would call social services
if things didn’t turn around.
She offered them a solution:
an experimental treatment program that she, herself, was conveniently involved in developing.

With the fear of losing their last chance to fix me planted in their minds, my parents agreed.
I was supposed to lead a class debate the next day:
I didn’t get to go back to school.

I spent a month in a glass room with a handful of other patients,
and all of their demons too,
all feeding upon each other’s.
Poorly led group therapy sessions
only taught us each other’s techniques for avoiding and purging food
and allowed us to absorb each other’s insecurities in addition to our own.

The clinicians supervised us in the bathrooms to make sure we weren’t throwing up
and didn’t believe us when we all got food poisoning from expired alfredo sauce.
We all had to drink chalky protein shakes that night to make up for getting sick.
I once had to drink a cup of ranch dressing
because a dietician calculated my macronutrients incorrectly that day,
and I wasn’t allowed to leave the dressing unfinished.

I felt violated, and humiliated, and resentful as hell.
You could say I was uncooperative and resistant to this treatment at times.

One day during occupational therapy, a fellow patient’s heart monitor flatlined.
A medical team rushed her unconscious body out of the activity center,
and the rest of us were quickly herded back into the glass room.
We spent the rest of the day thinking Anna* was dead,
and no one bothered to tell us otherwise.

I was told later that day that my meal plan was being increased
because I wasn’t gaining weight quickly enough.
I protested and pleaded with the clinician not to make me eat more
And she shut me down with more malice in her tone than I had ever heard before.
Calmly, her voice an insincere caricature of regret,
the clinician chided me,
“Anna* wasn’t the one who deserved what happened to her;
she was at least trying to get better.”
I sat dumbstruck for the rest of the appointment.

Anna* later turned out to be alive.
It took me years to stop wondering why I still was.
Fine Again

The most unexpected keys can turn out to unlock us.

Dr. Nichols* was a therapist who had worked in the treatment center with the glass room. She quit because she believed (correctly, I think) that the place was unethical.

Even though her wait list at her new practice was months long, for whatever reason, she had remembered me and liked me enough to take me on.

When I started seeing her back in 2015, I didn’t trust her and still had no strong intention of recovering. But early in our relationship, it came up that she liked one of my favorite bands at the time. She asked me if I knew that the band, Seether, was from South Africa. (I did not.) For whatever reason, having a favorite band in common with her was the key it took for me to finally let my guard down. I liked the no-nonsense way she talked to me, and her darkly sarcastic sense of humor. I lived for my family, but I committed to getting better because I wanted to make Dr. Nichols* proud.

She once explained to me the concept of extinction bursts: sudden flare-ups of the disorder that one has to push past right before a breakthrough. About two years after I finished therapy with Dr. Nichols,* I had one.

I made an appointment to get a laser fat melting treatment. I rationalized this to myself, telling myself that people who were perfectly mentally healthy got them all the time. But I knew deep down it was a seriously bad sign. Even though I had sustained eating and exercising normally for about two years by this point, my discomfort in my own skin was still eating me alive. I got cold feet and confessed what I had tried to do to my parents. They helped me back out of the procedure and get my money back. In return, they stipulated that I had to reach out to Dr. Nichols.*

She had since moved her practice, so I tracked down her new work phone number and left a manic-sounding voicemail, spitting out words at a mile-a-minute pace. I forgot to leave a callback number. I don’t know if she simply couldn’t respond due to my lack of contact information, or if she never got the voicemail, but I hope it was the latter.

I hate to think that one of my weakest moments was the last snapshot of my life that she saw, especially knowing that she had really believed in me when we had parted ways two years prior.
Therapy taught me how not to be sick anymore, but it didn’t quite teach me how to think “normally.”

It took finally realizing (too late) that I cared more about living up to Dr. Nichol’s* expectations than I cared about vanity to straighten out my priorities.

I wonder if she knows how much she affected me... I hope somehow she sees this, and believes it when I write that like the Seether song of the same title, I am “Fine Again.”
I sat in my bedroom and closed my eyes. I pictured how I felt, and I drew it.

I drew a monster, standing with his chest thrust forward. His arms were held out tensely behind his shoulders, his long ribbony hands clenched into fists. His teeth stuck out at all angles, visible in his open, screaming mouth. More hands like his own ripped through his skin, clawing their way out from within his torso and grasping at the air.

Black goo poured out of the holes from which these arms protruded. It sat in dark pools around his feet. He had dozens of beady eyes, all glistening with terror and looking up to the blank top of the paper.

The creature, on its own, would have been terrifying, but I think anybody who saw the drawing would have been sympathetic to the poor creature.

Changing is painful, messy, and ugly. It feels like being torn apart, and you just want it to stop. You question if it is worth it, as you are ripped to shreds by the hands forcing their way out of you in their attempt to reach out for help. Still, you must let this new version of yourself which has been incubating inside of your ribcage escape, even if that means the cocoon that is your current self is destroyed. Growth is the process of breaking free from yourself.
I wish I knew where we got so f**ked up.
How have we grown so distant after we came so far?

I understand why you never reach out,
but it breaks my heart
because I’m trying so hard.
My darling,
I feel I’m losing you.
Maybe you just need space,
I won’t force this on you.

Is it just a phase that we’re going through?

I know that I’ve hurt us both
you don’t trust me, and I get it.
So we just ignore the ghosts:
I see them everywhere, the guilt is haunting me.

It makes me so damn angry that you see me as so weak.
I’m clawing my way from hell and fighting demons every day,
trying to be a good example so that you don’t turn out this way.

Maybe this is good
maybe you just need a break;
but maybe I need answers
I need to know that you’re okay.
Chapter Three: Indigo
Unconditional

I used to have a recurring dream:

glossy black mannequins dressed in doctors’ clothes were chasing me
around an empty and dimly lit hospital
through an endless maze of hallways.
They always cornered me in a dead-end room,
and I would climb onto the exam table.

The last thing I always saw just before I woke up
was a ring of their dark faceless figures in their white coats
surrounding me and looking down at me as they held me to the table.

Each night when I jerked awake,
my cat, Lizard, was always sitting on my pillow right next to my face,
staring at me.

It was funny,
but nonetheless comforting,
that a tiny eight-pound animal had taken it upon herself
to watch me sleep every night and make sure I was ok.

Gradually, over the last few years, the dreams have subsided.
Even now, though, every time I stay at my parent’s house,
I wake up to a tiny self-appointed guardian beside me.

She has witnessed the worst things I’ve ever done
from a front row seat on the floor of my old bedroom
and somehow, she isn’t scared of me.
Without understanding any sort of explanation or apology for the chaos I’ve caused in her home, she
wants to be beside me over anyone else.

I don’t know how to express gratitude to a cat
but I always fluff the pillow for her.
Hiding By Light

I’ve handled worse than this, but it’s been a long time.
I’ve gotten so accustomed to an easy, stable life.
The burdens that I shoulder
I place upon myself
trying to prove that I deserved to be the one to rise from hell.

I am always so aware of what the others like me have lost
life is beautiful now, but it comes at what cost?

I was there watching as lives like my own fell apart
somehow I did what they couldn’t,
but when I close my eyes I’m still there with them in the dark.

I look ahead to the future
as a rescued hostage must look at the sun for the first time
since being forced into captivity underground.
I feel grateful and afraid of what’s next
as my eyes adjust to the blinding light.

I fought so hard to escape,
but now I’m finding
that there’s a sense of guilt that makes its home inside me.
It seems like no matter how far I go
the past always finds me.
Uninhabitable

There are some parts of me that my eating disorder managed to soak into that I don’t think I can fix.

I will never say never to adoption, and I truly think I’d find fulfillment in being a stepmom, but having biological kids (if I’m even capable of doing so anymore) may never be something I can bring myself to do.

My skewed relationship with my body has given me an acute phobia of pregnancy. I once told a boyfriend of mine that my deepest, darkest fear is that I would marry a man who would talk me into having his kids, and that then he would leave me because he wasn’t physically attracted to my subsequently altered body anymore.

What if the loneliness and self-hatred I was left with in such a scenario caused me to resent the resulting baby unfairly? I am convinced I could not possibly be a good mother to a child I carried myself, because I am terrified that I would hate it for taking away the feeling that my own body is mostly a safe and predictable thing to inhabit.

How could I ever live with myself for saying “I love you” to a child if I didn’t really mean it because having that child had made me undesirable (and therefore unlovable?) A child I secretly regretted?

No one should be subjected to having a parent like that.

Jayden*, the boyfriend at the time, simply responded, “Who hurt you?” The answer to that question is myself.

I know this fear is irrational. I know there are plenty of women who have children, whose husbands don’t stop loving them because of their stretch marks or for having seen them in the unsexy position of giving birth.

Yet, I once completely freaked out while watching a comedy special in which the comedian described her friend’s post-partum genitals as looking like a Star-Wars monster. It was objectively a funny joke, I just couldn’t handle it because it spoke so strongly to my oddly specific fear. I know it was an extreme reaction.
I know it’s not normal to equate my ability to be loved with my ability to maintain a certain figure. And yet, I can’t untangle my fear of rejection from my fear of my body being “ruined.”

Maybe I’d feel differently if I actually had my own child, but I don’t feel like it would be responsible to test this theory, considering the fact that the child would have to live with me as his or her mother if my fear proved correct.

To some people, this is a sad decision. I don’t have an argument for that, but I would rather that other people feel sad for me for being childless than to have those people be sad for an actual child.
A Vision

Lately when I’ve been stressed, I’ve been watching a TV show called 100% Hotter. It’s just your typical fizzy makeover show.

I wondered, a few seasons in, why my favorite stylist left the show. So I found her on Instagram. Interestingly, Grace Woodward quit the fashion industry because it gave her what she refers to as “body anxiety.” Turns out her mother died due to complications caused by an eating disorder just eight weeks after the birth of Woodward’s son. Woodward talked about growing up with an abusive and unstable mom, who lashed outwards at her and shrank inwards away from her.

I saw a glimpse of what my future could have been. And I realized what my recovery has spared my future potential children, if I were to end up as a parent one day.

My hypothetical kids won’t remember dinners that I hovered over tensely, refusing to eat while forcing them to do so so that I could partake vicariously. (As I’m sure I would have done, had I remained sick.)

Instead, my hypothetical kids will remember birthday dinners at otherwise forgettable chain restaurants. They will remember pizza and movie nights sitting on the couch together when I am too tired to cook, and singing along to the next Frozen. They will remember talking about their school days over dinners that I will lovingly prepare, and they will inevitably complain about, as normal children with normal parents do.
Dysmorphia

To A Reflection Of Myself

I want to give you my love
I know I don’t deserve you.
Only I can treat you right, and only I can hurt you.

Strangers say you’re pretty,
they envy you, they say.
they praise you for your style,
and for the ideas that you relay.

I wonder what you look like to them
because I don’t even recognize from you day to day.

Some days I think that you’re an angel.
Some days I think that you’re just a dream.
Some days I wish I could cut you apart at your seams.

I question my reality when I see you in the mirror
have you really changed, or am I projecting my fears?
Maybe you’re too fat, maybe you’re too thin.
Are your boobs too small? Is that a double chin?

I’d give anything to have one day to step outside of my own skin
to see myself objectively, from the outside looking in.
Valentine’s Day
February 2020

I had an interview downtown in the city near where I grew up today.

I followed my GPS to a turn at a stop sign, right in front of a familiar building. Nausea hit me, as I tried to place where I had seen the graffiti in front of me before. It was the side of the tire shop across from the parking lot which my mom had dropped me off from years ago.

I spent the darkest days of my life in the clinic at the top floor of the skyscraper overlooking that parking lot. Every day, between the force feedings and the badly conducted group therapy sessions that usually ended in tears, I found myself in the glass room staring out of the transparent walls at the streets below watching the cars and the people outside, wishing somehow that one of those people would see me up here and come save me. I remember the frustration and helplessness of watching those strangers going about their daily routines, completely oblivious to the malpractices occurring within the inconspicuous grey high-rise overlooking the tire shop.

I wonder if that program still exists, and if it is still as humiliating and dysfunctional as it was back when they studied me like an insect. I wonder if some kid, like my fifteen-year old self, is looking down at me from the glass room right now, trying to telepathically communicate with the driver of the little blue car at the stop sign. I try to mentally send a message back to them, just in case.

“If you can hear me,” I think towards this hypothetical patient, “Someday you will get your freedom back. Someday you will be on the outside too, wearing dress pants like these instead of a hospital gown. You will be like me, free to drive wherever you want. Free to take or leave whatever is offered to you as you please, whether that be a job or a donut. Just do whatever it takes to make it out, and nothing in comparison will ever be able to intimidate you again. Just watch.”

I apply a fresh coat of lipstick and push the clinic out of my mind. I refuse to give that place, or rather its memory, the power to ruin today for me like it has ruined so many days of my life in the past. I walk into the lobby of my destination, determined to prove to the glass room
(or perhaps to myself)
that I am unfazed by its looming presence as I shake the hand of my potential employer-to-be.

In fact,
I feel like I finally have some power over that place now

because I drove past that building and I didn’t look back.
Remembering You
For An Old Friend

I wonder if you’d believe me if I told you I turned out okay.

I don’t know why you chose to leave
it’s been so long since I last broke down
I hope that you’d be proud of me
if you could see me now.

You always said I was like a sister to you,
but maybe I was too much like the brother who was slipping away from you
while you were trying to save me.

I want you to know that you succeeded; it just took time.
You were so grown, and you seemed so wise to me.
I didn’t believe in much back then,
but I believed that you could fix anything, just like the race cars you loved to work on.
I miss the nights we spent driving around in Johnny, your beat up old truck,
bumming our heads to Bodies by Drowning Pool on 97.9
I wish you were still in my life,
but I know you gave me as much of yourself as you were able to.

Thank you for not giving up on me when it mattered most.
Timing is everything, and although our friendship was not forever
I think it was meant to be nonetheless.
I would wish you the best, but I don’t have to.

I already know you would never settle for anything less.
I’d Like To Live Where It’s Warm Year-Round (So That Maybe I Could Ignore Time Passing)

September 2017, Around My Birthday

I’ve been feeling so alone lately
my nineteenth year draws nearer
I’d been doing so well, until lately.
What brought me back to here?

I find peace in the gardens around me
but when winter takes my roses,
I don’t know what I’ll do.

Something I’ve never told you about me
is how I’d love to live down south,
to walk on cobblestones of aging streets
with the taste of honeysuckle in my mouth.

Fall always brings a sense of longing to me
I’ve been watching the leaves, their changes happen so fast
and I’m afraid of the changes in me
I’m afraid of the changes in me, yeah.
It seems like these feelings always come back
as the days are getting colder

I wish I was somewhere unfamiliar
where winter can’t find me, and I’m not getting older

I like to picture houses covered in ivy
and Spanish moss in the trees
I’ll be pretending I’m down in Savannah
with the sun warming my cheeks
as the roses freeze.
Bombshell
About A Woman Who Has Been Everything, Except Herself

Have you ever heard about the actress
who fled the Holocaust to become a Hollywood star in America?

Did you know
that the same woman
invented the frequency hopping technology that made victory over Germany possible?
The very invention that led to modern GPS and Bluetooth?
She never saw a cent of the 30-billion-dollar market value of her invention.
She died a source of ridicule
because she lived long enough for the world to witness her iconic beauty fading.

Not enough people know about Hedy Lamarr.

Her biggest obstacles
were the pretty face
and the “perfect” body
that made her an object in the eyes of the public.

What a waste that I,
and so many other young girls,
have thrown away years of our lives,
convinced that we aren’t pretty enough to get anywhere in life.
So many useless hours spent preening in front of the bathroom mirror,
unaware that the most beautiful woman on Earth would have given it all away
to have what we have:

a chance to be seen instead of looked at.
Birds

I am walking and I see two sparrows the size of mice in the grass
I approach them carefully hoping to get a closer look
just as they are nearly within my reach, they fly away.

I am disappointed,
until it occurs to me that if they were to let me approach them,
what else would they sit still for?
A cat, or a cruel teenager holding a stick?
The birds have no way of knowing that I am harmless,
and their instinct to flee is crucial to their self preservation.

In a way, I am glad that they have chosen their safety over taking a chance on me.

I asked myself, what can I learn from this?
This is the answer I came up with.

Although you may want something
which slips through your fingers
every time you get nearly close enough to hold it,
it may not be meant for you.

Some things, like birds, are meant to be admired from a distance.

And, if you consider it from the position of the bird,
it is better to miss an opportunity to be held and cooed at
than to put your well-being at stake
in hopes that your pursuer has good intentions.
I’d Rather Be Judged By The Cover

Jayden* once told me that he chose which poetry books to buy by grabbing one in a bookstore, flipping it open to a random page, and reading whatever poem he landed on. If he liked the poem, he bought the book.

It almost made me want to cry to think of someone judging this book by the same metric, with such a lack of the context I worked so hard to create.

Later, I realized the way Jayden* judges books is the way we all judge each other in life. You will form your opinion of me based on one conversation you happened to overhear or by the role I played in a group project or by how I answer questions in a job interview or by my bio on an online dating site or by a comment I made on a social media post.

And whatever assessment you might draw from your brief interaction with me is accurate, but possibly very different from someone else’s assessment of me. Jayden*, now in the role of an ex boyfriend, would describe me very differently than a friend or a classmate would.

You cannot consistently present as the same person to any two people, because they have all read a different page of the same book. Nor can you please everyone, because what one person wants may directly contradict the desires of another.

What I’ve realized is this:

don’t waste time trying to perfect yourself because you are not one person, but a thousand different people and you cannot possibly “perfect” all of them.

Each interpretation of your story is unique to each person who has encountered you. I am a collection of poetry for sale on a shelf in a coffee shop, as are you and any random person passing through might pick us up and thumb through us. You can’t customize every single page
nor every single poem

to appeal to any given person who might pick you up
and carelessly flip you open.
Some people will invest in you enough to read more of your story than others will.

Just write the best book you can.
Chapter Four: Violet
The Weird Kid

I remember one day Dr. Nichols* asked my family
to share what they remembered of me from before my eating disorder.

They remembered the stupid cat-themed website idea I hatched when I was ten,
the glittery tutus I begged to get from Justice that I wore everywhere,
the awful band I started with the neighborhood kids
and the nonsense songs we performed in our basements,
the bottle caps I planted trying to grow “beer trees” for my dad.

I cringed at the memories as my family spoke of them,
remembering the kids who made fun of me for “looking fat” in the tutus
and the way I skipped around the hallways in elementary school.
I winced thinking about my adolescent body
forced into the stretchy neon dress I made at fashion design camp
(and the fact that I broke six of the sewing machines there.)

I grimace thinking about the fourth grade journal we had to turn in each week,
and how I pretended I was the editor of a magazine,
formatting all of my entries as tabloid articles.
My fourth grade teacher used to tell me I’d end up on Broadway someday,
little did she know I have no singing or dancing skills at all,
but she was right about one thing:

I’ve always been good at being noticed.

There are still moments where I wish I could be invisible.
Sometimes I still long to make myself smaller
so as to attract less attention and take up less space,
or at least better able to fit in.
But, with that said,
it is comforting to know
that I am not the type of person to be easily ignored or forgotten.

In the end,
I am glad I failed at trying to shrink until I disappeared.
Norma Jean

I once read that Marilyn Monroe was described by a friend as being able to “turn on” her star power as if she were flipping a switch. She could blend into a crowd unnoticed as she walked down the street, but one day she turned to the friend and asked, “Do you want to see me become her?”

And allegedly, Monroe shifted her demeanor in such a way that she was instantly recognized, and suddenly traffic stopped and every head turned towards her.

Regardless of whether the story is true or not, it resonated with me because I think I do the same thing.

Just as Norma Jean became her famous alter ego Marilyn, I can transform myself too. Even on the days I feel the worst about myself, I know that if I carry myself in a certain way, people will still believe I’m the person I want to be if I play the part.

I pretend to be a lead actress in an old-Hollywood romance movie. I put a sweetness in my voice and a sparkle in my smile just as easily as throwing on a worn-in jean jacket. And somehow, I receive the same privileged treatment as those effortlessly perfect girls who seem to populate every sorority house.

Fake it until you make it, I suppose.

Perhaps it’s a self fulfilling prophecy: if I carry myself with enough confidence to make people think I have a reason to be confident, then they will treat me like I’m someone who deserves that respect thus reinforcing a sense of confidence.

Perhaps what started as a charade can turn into something genuine. Maybe I can truly become “that” girl, not by changing myself to look the part, but by “marketing” myself well enough to have the exact same quality of life that I had once hoped to achieve by physically morphing into some better version of me. After all, did Norma Jean not have access to all of the same things that Marilyn had?
Surrealness

Sometimes, as the years go on, it feels as if everything was a bad dream. My dreams are fleeting and strange now, and like a dream forgotten upon waking, there are several years of my life which are only faintly sketched upon my memory. I do not need those years back anyways. But the past has a way of staying on your mind, like an ex that only reaches out once you’ve moved on.

It has occurred to me that the other young adults I met back in the glass room were the same age that I am now at the time. It feels almost as if I had an unfair advantage, by being younger than them when I arrived there. If my time in the glass room did nothing else for me, it forced me to look at what the next few years would hold for me. Those other patients, most of them college students, had to hit pause on their lives as soon as they started. School, careers, relationships, plans, all interrupted by illness.

Yet my adult life will not be much different than if I had never gone through the ordeal at all.

I walked on a bridge of my peers’ bones and uncertain futures, and the steps I took to avoid becoming like them were the first steps I took toward saving myself. I feel an immense pressure to live for all of us now. Sometimes I stalk their social media pages to see if those other patients were ever real, if perhaps the program we were in together was just exaggerated or imagined in my mind but when I look them up, there they are, just as I remember them, some more well-adjusted than others.

I look at the old pictures of myself, and she seems even less real than the others. Her clothes aren’t in my closet anymore. I can’t feel her body when I wash in the shower I can’t find the outline of her bones.

Sometimes I feel hesitant to tell people about what I went through because I am afraid they won’t believe it… I barely do. The visible evidence that I was sick is gone. The only confirmation that it was all true is the occasional photo that comes up, or a “remember that time when…”,
or the soft whisper of an intrusive thought, which I have to remind myself that not everyone has.

When I talk about what I went through, and sometimes even as I write, it feels like I am telling someone else’s story, because I don’t look or feel like someone who once had an eating disorder as severe as mine was.

But that is exactly why I need to tell my story: because I am living proof that the nightmare finally ends once the sleep is over and I believe myself.
Wandering

I’ve never easily believed in what I can’t see--

When I started rehabilitative therapy with Dr. Nichols*, I didn’t see the point.
I didn’t want to eat my snacks
I didn’t want to buy new clothes, in case I needed a size up.
I didn’t want to see my friends,
because spontaneous plans might interfere with my plans for what I was going to eat that day...

and I was afraid they would notice I was starting to look different.

I didn’t want to talk to my parents,
because I was afraid of being interrogated about when and how much I was exercising
and whether or not I was following my meal plan.

My mother told me, “You’re never going to get past this phase of the program that you hate so much if you keep putting up a fight about doing the bare minimum.”

“I know,” I broke down,
“But I can’t make myself do it, because I don’t really believe anything will be different if I do what they tell me to do. Right now I’m just miserable, but I’m afraid the program will make me fat and I’ll still feel miserable. Nobody can tell me what the end will actually look like, and it feels like I’m just doing these things that make me feel disgusting and infantilized for nothing. I feel like I’m chasing unicorns-- how can I keep making myself do this shit tomorrow and the next day and the next, blindly trusting that if I keep doing it long enough eventually I won’t have to anymore?”

My mom was quiet for a moment. She simply told me she didn’t know.
I was lucky that she had enough faith both in me and in the methods prescribed for both of us.
My mom followed the family-led recovery model like a lost man following a cult leader,
and she dragged my ass along every step of the way.
At first I was just jumping through hoops, but over time, I started to feel better.
Not happy, but less afraid.
Gradually, “less afraid” became freedom.

Everything I write is for the those who are just as I was:
unwilling to trek a long and difficult route that leads to a destination only rumored to exist.
I hope in these poems I can create a map of sorts,
though you may take different roads than I did to get here.
The secret is, this postcard is not from my final location.

The final location is not nearly as important as getting away from where you started at.
I am still wandering.
Before and After

I’ve seen a few too many Instagram posts featuring ‘before and after’ photos of people who have had eating disorders.

“Then” is often a severely underweight or extremely lean person posing in a bedroom mirror.

And the “now” is often a not-much-bigger person with a six-pack, claiming that everything is easy and effortless now and you should try their new “lifestyle.”

The problem is not the fact that some people have six pack abs. The problem is that most people cannot achieve such a physique unless they are still very much keeping track of their food and workout plans, so perhaps it is, at best, questionable to suggest that a lifestyle centered around fitness is an escape route from a lifestyle centered around food and body measurements.

I actually do not believe that the influencers making such content are trying to be misleading.

I think that life is better for these people now than it was when they were at their worst, and it is hard to know when you are truly out of the thick of an eating disorder or an exercise addiction, because any improvements that you have made have already been such major changes. You get a part of a normal life back and think, “surely this is freedom!” But is it “normal?”

You want to say everything is great and manifest it into reality. You want to tell everyone that you are ALL BETTER, so that you can convince yourself of this too. But there is no sudden revelation of wellness. You don’t necessarily gain ten pounds and return to perfect health, and eating a donut doesn’t mean you’re fine if it still dwells on your mind for the rest of the day.

You must simply endure without the identity you have created around a physique, and slowly wellness will find its way to you.

Someday, you will be able to say yes to spontaneous plans without anxiety about missing part of your routine. Someday, you will not feel compelled to bring up your diet or size during conversations. You will not feel bad when you skip the gym because you are tired or busy. You will stop caring what size your pants are. You won’t feel overwhelmed by having free time without distractions, and you will come to actually enjoy it.
These things will not always be possible all in the same day, but you will reach a point where more of them are doable than not.

And someday, it won’t be painful or embarrassing to reflect on what you’ve been through or to talk about the past anymore. Your past, like your stomach and thighs, will become just another part of you and you will one day be able to let people see it without a rush of shame.

These things, and nothing you can capture in a photo, are “after”.
Self-Preservation

Discomfort does not exist
it comes not from pain, but from perception.

The tickle of a spider on the skin.
The cold object that feels deceptively wet.
The slimy caress of an unseen fish brushing against your leg.
The sense of unfamiliarity when you look in the mirror.
The sound of footsteps following a little too closely behind you.
The humidity in the summer air that makes your clothes stick to your back.
The fear that just one more bite will mean the difference between nourishment and gluttony.

None of these sensations can hurt us
and yet we perceive them as being so “wrong” that they demand our full attention:
even in the absence of real danger.

So, then, where is the reflex
to retract our hands in disgust
when we feel ourselves doing wrongly?

It seems deeply flawed
that our instincts jerk us away from imagined danger
and yet there is no such involuntary flinch
away from the real danger we can pose to ourselves.
Self preservation is not fully programmed into us by nature.
It is a choice we must teach ourselves to make.
The Dedication

2020

I called my mom for an hour today, and we laughed until we cried:
a sharp contrast to the tears she used to shed while locked in the bathroom,
so she wouldn’t make me feel guilty
for the fact that taking care of me was wearing her down.
I have never met anyone else who experiences their emotions as strongly as my mom does,
and yet she goes to such great lengths to hide them
for the sake of protecting her daughters.

I wish I could lift the fear of the world that keeps you up every night.
Do you remember how when I was little and you were sad,
I used to sit in your bed with you and make lists of pleasant things to cheer you up?

You worry that you messed up your children by being too intense
but I don’t know anyone else who grew up feeling as intensely loved as Valerie* and I did.

You taught me how to draw
you taught me how to do my makeup
you taught me how to read,
even though it meant re-reading Goodnight Moon for hours every day,
and more importantly
you kept all of my secrets (an impressive feat in a small town.)
Maybe I never would have felt ready to open up
if you hadn’t been so adamant about protecting my right to do so when it felt right to me.

You never gave up on me, even when everyone else thought I was a lost cause.
Every meal time, every lost friendship, every doctor appointment.
You were always so understanding, yet you made me tough it out--
no, you toughed it out with me--
and here we are.

I feel like I can never repay you, even though I know you don’t expect me to.

As a child, I copied everything you did
and I succeeded in a lot of ways: we dress, think and talk alike.

Yet I cannot imitate you, because your strength is quiet
and quietness has no echo.
Relic

You are holding it together, but only like a keystone
afraid that if you move, then your world will come crashing down.
Spare yourself the burden of stillness
for should you change position
and if everything collapses:
ancient ruins still inspire though their bricks lay on the ground.

Nothing is meant to stay in a fixed state
nature gave us motion so we could keep up with the rate
of life, and death, and health, and other shifts in fate.

Your chest rises and falls
the tides creep high and low
the Earth is always spinning
the stars swell with heat until they explode.

Have you considered that even if you made your body perfect
it would only last a moment?
You obsess over the pursuit of a trophy
that you can never hold.
Each sip of water that you take
each kiss of sunshine on your skin
will in its own subtle way alter how you are composed.

What you think you are today will no longer be tomorrow
marble statues fade and crumble and you’ll change even more than those
for you are flesh and bone, not chiseled stone
and you will endure, and age, and grow.
Bonus Days Pt. 2

There’s something sobering about the feeling of my feet hitting the ground
I go for long walks
just because I can now.

I shouldn’t be here,
but I took back my place
every day I’m cheating death
with a smile on my face.

They don’t know where I’ve been
they don’t know what I’ve seen
they don’t know the horrors
that have found me in my dreams.

They don’t know the secrets
that make me feel like a stranger to everyone who knows me
there’s so much that I’ve revealed
and yet so many cards I still hold closely.

I’m just grateful to have normal problems
I wish those who envy me could know this
I make the most of every minute
because even bad days are still a bonus.
Chapter Five: Red
Frustration

The chosen one
the star of my own movie
the narcissist
the seconds tick by.
I do nothing.

I watch my potential trickle away
drop by drop
like leaking rainwater falling into the mop bucket
below a yellowing spot on the plaster ceiling.

I’m so special.

I dream of fame and recognition
of adoring crowds who see their own pain in me
I want to be known
not by name but by effect
I want others to know what I have felt
and to in some way feel it too.

I crave intimacy that no physical touch can make me feel
(I’ve tried that already.)
Fingers on my skin fail to give me the feeling of being loved that I’ve been seeking.
I don’t need to feel understood, I suppose
but I need someone to want to try to understand me.

My history sits untouched inside of me waiting to gush out
but no one will pull the knife from the artery so it can finally flow.
I want it to bleed.
I want the secrets inside of me to finally be seen,
as they pour out and puddle on the floor.
Fuck You, Your Son Deserved Better

There was a boy in the glass room.

A boy who used to sneak out at night and run to punish himself for eating,
until he passed out--

he ended up in glass room after he was found collapsed in ditch one morning.

He hid his face when we walked past each other in our hospital gowns.
His father disowned him for having a “girly” disease that wouldn’t affect a “real man”.
He must have felt so alone,
even in a room full of people with the same affliction that he had

because his gender made him an outsider.

Our society teaches young men to be ruthless and relentless,
but when these same traits become self-destructive,
the men who become victims of their own coping mechanisms
become objects of shame to a culture that hates victims:
a culture that hates to acknowledge men’s pain
so much that some fathers like this boy’s father
would rather lose their son than allow their son to show “weakness.”

Perhaps my own father could have been different
if his own father had shown him empathy,
in the way that every tear I have ever shed
has dripped from my mother’s eyes as well.
Why can we not allow men that same softness, that tenderness, that solidarity?

I write about my feelings as colors, and if feelings are colors,
our society trains men to be colorblind.

Why are we so surprised
when sometimes the blackness left in the absence of color consumes them?
When some of them turn to the same methods that I used to numb my feelings?

The suppressed colors inside of this boy moved to his eyes,
saturating them until they appeared bloodshot and zombielike.
I wish I could have made that boy’s father look at his son’s face and apologize.
If you could have seen this boy’s eyes,
like I did,
you too would see red.
Reconnecting
For Dad

They say the best apology is changed behavior
And I must give you credit for that in a book about changing.
Dad, we’ve come a long way.
It is difficult to reconcile sometimes
that the same man who once believed I had invented my illness just to spite him,
and the same man who grew up in a household
where a poor state of mental health was a punishable offense,
is the same man who gives me dating and career advice,
and who listens to rock covers in the garage with me now.
I consider how much effort we both put into learning to love each other again
to be one of my biggest accomplishments in life so far.
Thank you for all of the gifts over the years
they weren’t the words I was listening for,
but now I know that they were your version of saying “I love you” or “I’m sorry.”

And thank you for learning to say those things out loud as well.

Thank you for buying vegetable stock for your black bean soup
when I became the V-word (vegetarian.)
Thank you for your praise when I showed you my final project last semester.
I didn’t know it meant so much to you,
but I was touched that you were so proud of what I’ve learned to do.

I watched you tearing up as you looked at my work,
and I didn’t know what to say at the time except for “thank you.”

I think what I left unspoken is that I’m proud of you too.
Think As I Say, Not As I Think

“I found a subreddit a long time ago that was promoting eating disorders. I read the first 5 threads and it was really depressing seeing how much guilt was literally eating these people alive. There’s a lot of shock stuff on there that is like ‘oh god, why.’ But this subreddit was just sad because it made me realize how oddly normal it was to have an eating disorder.”

-Reddit user DemeaningSarcasm

How does it feel
to see what someone who doesn’t have an eating disorder feels
while reading that sort of content?
It makes me so angry
that these digital cults, like the one DemeaningSarcasm stumbled across, exist.

As a teenager looking for people who understood what I was going through,
all I found were “thinspiration” Tumblr blogs, chat rooms, and even Pinterest boards
sharing the insidious goal of pitting people like me against each other.
Setting us up to compare ourselves to each other,
to prove that we were extreme enough to belong
to this dark little corner of the internet,
as if it was some sort of frat or sorority we had to haze ourselves into.

The voice in my head that drove me to the brink was not my own voice at all.
It was as if an AI bot had read every nasty post on the internet,
and had created a script for my thoughts
based on the countless anonymous writings
of people who hated themselves
and wanted others to suffer as they had.

The template I compared myself against was a nonsensical abstraction,
extracted from memes about the “perfect girl”
(a collaged frankenstein of celebrity body parts),
pictures of celebrities and models
which had been photoshopped to sexualize their exposed collarbones,
and pictures of dying anorexia patients
which allowed me to tell myself that I wasn’t even sick compared to them.

I assessed my degree of “sickness” according to whether I looked more like a corpse
or more like a swimsuit model.
I decided that as long as I wasn’t totally flat-chested, I must be “healthy enough.”

I was exposed to so much of this rhetoric
that I thought the simultaneous shaming and fetishizing of Kate Upton’s size-8 curves
made perfect sense
and I adopted this paradoxical beauty standard as my inner monologue.

Even now, several years into recovery,
I think it is too late to undo the absorption of this toxic culture
into my own perception of myself.
If I cannot unlearn it, I will learn to live with it.

I am doing my best to be real.
I hope there is enough realness in these words
to offset the illusions fed to you by your phone.
Indulgence

After years of deprivation, I finally gave in to my cravings.
All of them, all at once.
And to my horror,
once I had started,
it began to feel like I could never stop.

I reached into the back of the cabinet and felt around blindly in the dark,
until my hand found my secret box of snacks.
I ate quietly, so as not to wake anyone up.

So as not to be caught.

I ate normally in front of my friends
and yet week after week, I continued to lose control at night.
I didn’t understand what was happening to me.

I didn’t yet understand that this phase of rabid eating
was my body making up for a nutrition deficit,
preparing itself in case of another period of starvation.
I didn’t understand yet that this would eventually come to pass.
I didn’t know how my hormones or hunger cues worked,
or how erratic the process of these things re-setting back to normal would be.

At the time, thought I was just crazy.
I scraped the last of the peanut butter out of the jar
and buried it in the trash to conceal the evidence.
I couldn’t sleep
I thought about food all day
I would get scared when I would think about not eating for a few hours,
as if the food wouldn’t be an option later.

I wondered if perhaps this was my punishment for starving myself for so long
as if the binges were a strict schoolmaster
with good intentions and heavy-handed methods,
who reprimanded me for hurting myself
by hurting me even more.
He might have called this penalty he bestowed upon me “eye for an eye”

but both eyes were mine.

In my blindness, I told myself that this was fine.
I told myself that this wasn’t as bad as anorexia or bulimia,
I assured myself that no one was going to make me go back to the hospital
for having a worse junk food addiction than the average college kid.
But I was becoming worried that this pattern would continue to escalate beyond that.
It was not the first time that I had become preoccupied with food,
I still remember stuffing my cheeks as a child
to distract myself from the scary feelings I lacked the vocabulary to express.

Yet, I was still surprised when I found myself obsessed with eating again.
It made an unfair sort of sense
that one extreme would snap like a rubber band to the other,
sooner or later.
It seemed I had spent most of my short life overcorrecting.
Always too much, or not enough.

I was so tired.

In a rare moment of lucidity,
I realized I just desperately wanted to go to bed.
I threw away the unfinished food on my plate and closed the cabinet.

I felt around blindly in the dark,
until my hands found the corner of the sheets.
I screamed into the pillow, quietly, so as not to wake anyone up.
Forgiveness

I found a list I had been keeping
of mistakes that I've made over the years
tucked away in an old diary.

I know I have been too quick

to jump to conclusions about people
to change my mind at the last minute
to speak, before I thought about my words
to say yes, not knowing what I was signing up for
to open up my heart
to defend myself against deserved criticism
to defend others, whom I loved too much to see clearly
to slam doors behind me
to hit ‘send’...

I crumple the stupid list up and toss it aside.
I held onto my guilt for years.

I’ve realized that my mistakes came not from bad intentions,
but from fearing inaction more than I fear doing the wrong thing.
In times of uncertainty,
I tend to behave like an animal caught in a trap.
I will sooner chew off my own leg
than sit still and wait for the problem to go away.

My sister is patient.
She watches and waits, observant and strategic.
I, on the other hand, pick at my perceived problems like scabs.
Instead of waiting for things to heal on their own,
I fight to hurry some sort of outcome along,
with no regard for the potential scars that I may incur.

I fight for control.
And that’s all an eating disorder is, isn’t it?
A fight for control.
You feel the need to chip away at yourself,
unable to stop, despite knowing deep down that you are making things worse.

I think it is a myth that perfectionists are the most disciplined people.
It seems ironic
that most of my mistakes stem from my compulsion to fix my mistakes.
From the Other Side

I may be at peace now, but I do not write from a place of peace.
I am writing from anger.

Eating disorders are an isolating condition
you don’t just have secrets, you become them.
How cruel
that a condition which strips us of experiencing life outside of ourselves,
which by nature makes us so preoccupied with and overwhelmed by ourselves,
tends to strike during the tender years
when we crave meaningful connections with others the most.

All of us, and especially teenagers, yearn to feel understood and accepted.
How cruel
that the only way to truly understand an eating disorder is to have one
and that the only people who will accept the distorted urges and beliefs
that a disordered mind will contort itself to entertain
are the worst influences to surround ourselves with.

In their loneliness, teenagers, like I did, will turn to the blogs
the magazines
the TikToks and social media pages
the businesses selling promises of escape from their own bodies,
packaged as pills and powders and programs.
Maybe they turn to the people in their own lives who don’t truly want the best for them.

They hear tempting, beautiful, dangerous words
words chosen to appeal to them like a siren’s song
words like

purity
clean
lightness
freedom
perfect
discipline
control
community

and they are led to believe that by making martyrs of themselves, they will earn visibility.
I am writing to slap this idea out of their unsteady hands.
Chapter Six: Orange
Harmless Arson

I am aware of another infatuation beginning.  
I occasionally find myself hedonistically gorging on my guilty pleasures  
devouring the same content in excess until my interest runs dry  
and I must once again look for a new interest  
to sink my claws into and cling to for dear life  
like a lioness on the back of a giraffe she intends to kill.

There was a time when all of my waking hours were spent watching clocks,  
planning excuses and explanations  
and scrutinizing any new changes in my body from one second to the next.  
Now that my fixation upon myself has quieted down to a soft whisper  
I am unsure of what to do  
with all of the space freed up in my mind in its absence  
or what to do with the leftover manic energy twitching in my fingertips.

I thought that when I finally stopped trying master myself  
that my inclination to fixate would go away  
but instead I am left with the same laser-like focus and rapid pace of thought  
and no task that requires these things anymore.

So I find anything.  
A book, a song, a project, a cause, or a tattoo-covered band frontman  
to unleash a wildfire of relentless preoccupation onto.  
I let it burn, blazing through every bit of my muse available to my greedy mind.  
I collect information like kindling, and watch it crackle and glow before my fanatic gaze,  
until only the charred waste of boredom remains.

The satisfaction is temporary-- I will soon find a replacement.
A Coping Skill

I thought I would have grown out of my music taste by now
I thought when I became happier, the songs I listened to wouldn’t be so angry anymore.

But here I am enjoying the sunshine that freckles my skin
with heavy metal still blasting in my headphones
I can fall asleep to it now.

I don’t gravitate to music full of power and rage because it is relatable to me,
which it’s not,
but instead because it is intense enough to drown out my inner dialogue.
It serves as a forced meditation, of sorts.

I don’t depend on this distraction from myself the way I used to,
but I still want to be grabbed by my senses and pulled into the present.
My thoughts are no longer intruders
but they are guests that I need a break from hosting at times.
It seems ironic that my favorite musicians have built their platforms
on lyrics about inner turmoil and chaos

and yet I listen to these songs when I seek silence within myself.
Seraphine

I tattooed a snake on my wrist.
Dr. Nichols* once told me to take care of myself
the way I would take care of an animal that depended on me.
The creature I envisioned was a snake.

Maybe I see myself in cold-blooded animals because
I too,
am seemingly incapable of effortless self-regulation.
There is something about watching a snake move that fascinates me
because even though they appear to have no means of propelling themselves forward,
they move anyway somehow, uninhibited by their lack of limbs
almost as if by sheer determination.
I would like to emulate that.

My needs are simple
like those of a reptile
I need food, water, sleep, and sun.
I do not deny myself these things anymore.

I am reminded each time I glance down
that I am just as deserving of these basic requirements
as the little pet now forever slinking down my arm.
Seraphine

2019
The Sidelines
For Madeleine*

I never imagined I’d be the friend anyone went to for advice
It feels good to be trusted the way that you trust in me
and it feels good to talk about my past without having to explain it.

I hate to see you in the same position that I used to be in a few short years ago
but it is a small comfort to be able to tell you you’re not alone
and to mean it.
It is a small thing to offer,
but I take a lot of pride in being able to at least extend that much to you.

I am so proud of you. You are so self-aware and committed to growth.

Dye your hair all you want
pound your fists on the steering wheel
until the pain moves from your heart to your knuckles
I know the feeling of wanting to grab the curtains and rip them down.

Supporting you is just as therapeutic for me as I hope it is to you.

I feel the sort of pride that I imagine an over-zealous soccer mom must feel,
as I watch you and encourage you from the sidelines
as you slide in the mud and skin your knees
as you drive towards the goal.

I see you winning.
The Itch

I just returned from a family vacation yesterday
And although I feel far from relaxed,
I feel recharged.
A week of sharing a small space with my family
has reminded me of all the things I don’t miss about living with them.
What is it about family,
that the people who make you feel as if you are being torn apart limb from limb
are the same people who make you feel most whole?

I walked out onto the beach the other day
and accidentally interrupted my parents bragging about me to complete strangers.
My frustration dissolved.
I stood in the sand for a moment, listening,
and I suddenly remembered how lucky I am to have so much support from my parents.
I forget to be proud of myself for how much I’ve accomplished,
so I am grateful to have a family who remembers to be proud for me.

Lately, instead of being proud, I’ve been feeling afraid
of leaving my comfort zone to chase my dreams
of feeling unprepared
of not speaking up loudly enough to make any change in the world
of being too loud and taking up too much space
and of outgrowing my own small world.

I have a lot of fear, and fear births anger.
Maybe I am displacing my anger
towards my dysfunctional yet well-intentioned and loving parents.
Maybe I am angry because I am impatient,
and I want immediate results for my every effort.
As I wait for some sort of validation, it is so easy to question “what is the point?”
But giving up is not an option,
even if only because I have never been good at sitting still doing nothing.
My fingers twitch.

I need to do things, and say things, and exhaust myself.
I have said that I see myself as a snake,
and my skin is itching as I prepare to break out and shed it once again.
The confines that I once comfortably fit into feel suffocating,
as many past selves left behind have before.
What I Learned In College

I’ll keep this one short and sweet:
When you take care of yourself first, everything else falls into place.

My freshman year of college,
I sometimes spent fifty hours in a week in the architecture lab,
beating myself to a pulp to produce perfection.

My sophomore year of college,
I decided I cared more about making friends.
Prioritizing rest and my social time meant occasional late-night cramming sessions,
but fewer regrets, and more love in my life.
Interestingly, my precious grades were unaffected.

If I were to give myself as a college freshman some advice,
I would tell her
that being perfect was never possible anyways.
And I would ask her,
who are you really trying to impress?
Do you really care about your GPA that much,
or is it just another metric you use to try to prove your worth to yourself?

I would tell her that you will never get any closer to perfection by obsessing over it
than by just giving a solid effort.
So you might as well change your attitude
and be proud of what you’ve done
instead of getting hung up on what you could have done better.

I would tell her that you haven’t come this far
to waste your time
by focusing on anything other than appreciating your life
and exercising your ability to finally live it.
Chilling Out In The Escape Room

I’ve made myself do a lot of things
in the name of having a better life someday.
I’ve kept myself busy just trying to seem impressive
to the mysterious future employers
who have loomed over me since I took my ACT and SAT.

Here I am, at the end of college and looking ahead to whatever I do
between now and whenever I retire.
Now that the finish line is finally in sight,
I realize I never stopped to wonder what I’ve been running towards.
My problem is not a lack of options
but that I am staring down an endless hallway lined with doors
and I am holding a ring of unlabeled keys.
I have worked hard to earn each of these keys,
but I don’t know which of these doors they will open for me.
I don’t even know what lies behind any of these doors.
The only way to find out is to start putting keys into as many locks as I can.

Up until this point in life,
my only task has been earning credit, awarded to me in pieces of paper.
I’ve gotten what I worked for,
and it is strewn about on a table in front of me
like jigsaw pieces that I have to put together now.

I suppose I should be scared, but for once, I don’t care what comes after this.

I can picture being content with my future in a million different ways,
as if I am glimpsing possible selves that could be
from the alternate realities of infinite possible dimensions.
All I know to do is to keep putting myself out there
and putting my best effort into everything I take on.

I’ll take whatever life offers me in exchange for that.
Chapter Seven: Yellow
Riding Shotgun

For Erin*

I was intimidated by you when I first got to know you and rightfully so.
I realized you were fearless when we went to a haunted house and you scared the guy that snuck up on you with a chainsaw by laughing in his face (while I ran away flailing my arms.)

You don’t flinch at anything.

I am a strong personality myself yet you are even more so, and I respect you for it.
You make things happen, and you make them happen your way.

In the bad times we’ve encountered together, you kept your cool as you handled the most irredeemable situations and you made it look easy every time.
In the good times we’ve had together, summer nights felt like magic.

We stood in a school parking lot somewhere in Michigan, watching fireworks on the Fourth of July.
We tilted our heads back and stared at the sky exploding into sparks all around us.
You have always had a skill for leading your friends to novelty and wonder, discovering it in the most unlikely places,
as if life is a mountain of mundane earth, and you know exactly where to unearth the moments which sparkle like diamonds and define entire years.

I miss being your roommate and I wish we could make a dozen more blanket forts and name a hundred more fictional bands before we graduate.
We’re driving towards different destinations as we approach our futures, and I know we will both find the thrills we seek somewhere along our own diverging routes.

I am excited to take the wheel, but the car feels empty when I’m not riding somewhere with you.
Refinement

I’ve always considered myself an artist. Throughout my life, being an artist has taken on different meanings to me, so my work has taken on different personas as well. Art was once an escape, a rabbit hole I flung myself down into to kill a few hours at a time when every minute felt like a chore. Slowly, my art has mellowed into a way to stay present in the moment and celebrate the time that I am able to allot for creating. I open my windows and turn on my music and I let the afternoon dissolve with the pigments into my paint water.

My true colors remain
But I choose my colors deliberately, and give them meaning and order now instead of filling the paper corner to corner with creepy doodles and jarring reds and neons.

I think this evolution, in the context of becoming what I am, makes perfect sense.

The products of my self-expression have come to look different

as I have cooled from pouring, untouchable lava that burned the eyes of those who looked upon me and charred those who came too close into a still and defined rock which can finally be held in bare hands.
What I Never Knew I Needed

I was convinced that the things I had been through made me “different.”
I avoided befriending preppy, “basic” girls,
rejecting them before they had a chance to reject me,
writing them off as being two-dimensional personalities who would never understand me.

Surely, these normal (and therefore obviously boring) people
could never relate to my oh-so-tragic backstory.

I romanticized the idea of being an edgy, artsy loner
And I stayed up late painting instead of going out
because I told myself it was what I’d rather do.
I didn’t actually realize that I’m truly an extrovert by nature until I met my college friends.

They were nothing like me,
them with their scrunchies on their wrists and The Office stickers on their laptops,
and me with my over-extended eyeliner wings drawn even sharper than my tongue.

Yet, they approached me and embraced me anyways.

And so, I was adopted into their world of pink wine and craft nights,
and deep talks in bedrooms that smelled like strawberry Bath & Body Works candles.

It felt like coming home.

I used to try to avoid being like “other girls,”
but over the last couple years,
as I become a better person—

a more open, warmer, less contrived person,

--I find that I am becoming more and more similar to them.
Erin* and I made cupcakes
(the secret ingredient was coca cola, because we were out of eggs)
and brought them to a surprise party.
We enjoyed our improvised cupcakes with tequila
and got our asses kicked at Mariokart.

I met a stranger for dinner and we sat in the empty restaurant
talking and watching the rain fall for hours.
I don’t believe in love at first sight,
but I believe in immediately recognizing the potential to love someone.

While cleaning my room,
I found the birthday cards and letters that my friends had written for me,
and I sat on the bed surrounded by colorful envelopes
as I treasured their words all over again.

I admire my new tattoo,
which I got myself as a reward for making the Dean’s List.
This one is a seahorse, a nod to my favorite childhood picture book.

I wake up before all of my roommates do
and I quietly daydream alone in the living room as I watch the sun rise.

I don’t always love myself, but I think I’m falling for her.
I love my life and the moments that make it up.
And my goals are finally big enough to daunt me,
because now they are so much bigger than controlling numbers
and this excites me.

This body that I live in allows me to work towards my dreams,
to make them just as real as the simple sensations
like the warmth of a mug in my hands on a cold morning,
which make the experience of life so rich.

I write this as I go to bed,
but I am already looking forward to the first sip of coffee tomorrow morning.
Flowers
For Dylan*, Who Taught Me How It Feels To Be Loved

Watching TV all day
bored out of my mind
you’re so beautiful
without even trying
hold me closer to you, pull the blanket around.
you steal my heart without making a sound.

So I guess this is what bliss must be
you’re driving me wild but I feel so serene
my mind starts to race
as you rest your hand on my thigh
and I think I see the future in your coffee-black eyes.

You sing to me and your voice is so clear
your radio is loud, but you’re all that I hear
we’re driving slow on a fast road because there’s no one but us
you’re driving me home
so we don’t want to rush
I think this is how summer nights were made to feel
I swear time froze around us, mysterious and surreal.

So I guess this is what bliss must be
you’re driving me wild but I feel so serene
my mind starts to race
as your hands cup my face
I said I miss you already,
take me back to your place.
About Transforming

My hair gets in my mouth sometimes during kisses
but I don’t care
keeping it long is about more than a look to me.
I never noticed any hair loss while I was unwell.

Even in the pictures of me from when I was at my unhealthiest,
my hair still looked good.
But while I grappled with accepting an altered reflection of myself,
my mom used to encourage me
by telling me that my hair was getting thicker and healthier looking.
I never noticed a difference,
but I appreciated that she chose to focus on something that wasn't flesh.

Had she told me I looked better because my figure was fuller
or because my face was softer
I wouldn’t have been in a place where I could have taken it as a compliment at the time.

So the hair represented what she couldn’t say.
And now, it is the emblem of a new kind of pretty.
I used to be pretty like a doll.
Now,
with my dyed black hair extending down my back, and my tattoos, and my heavier thighs
I feel pretty like a lover.
“Prettiness” takes many forms
which are equal in value
and subject to changing,
just as fluidly as water transforms into steam.
Jackie and Wilson

One of my surviving pleasant memories of Bennet* is driving around listening to a song he had showed me called Jackie and Wilson. Even after our breakup, which was painful and humiliating, I still listened to “our song” all the time.

Fast forward to two years later, I’m trying to reconnect with my sister. She shows me an artist she likes called Hozier, and as soon as she plays me something, I realize that I know that song. So I listen to more with her. I gulp down songs like sweet tea on a hot day, thirsty to regain her love through shared interests.

Another two years later, Hozier comes to our city and I surprise her with tickets for her birthday. It’s the first concert either of us has ever been to, and the theater is beautiful. The lighting washing our mutual idol in hues of red and purple is beautiful. His voice is beautiful. Watching my sister, my best friend, smiling and swaying to the music is beautiful. Her eyes light up as Hozier takes the stage, and I know I’ve done something good.

Jackie and Wilson starts, and to me, it’s our song now: mine and Valerie’s*. How funny that Bennet* unknowingly gave me this gift just by showing me a simple song so many years ago, a gift which eventually brought me more than enough joy to make up for the joy he took from me.

I feel something clicking into place as the past sets itself right.
The Art In My Apartment

1) A floral skull poster, thoughtfully given to me by friends who get my odd taste

2) A custom canvas portrait of my favorite musician which I got for charity

3) A sea monster print that I bought from an art festival

4) A sloppy, but loved, pour-out painting I made with Erin*

5) A quirky metal plate I bought from a lady in a movie theater, who claimed to be a witch

6) Two amazing paintings that Valerie* has made for me since she started art school

7) A portrait of my celebrity crush from high school, hand-painted by my old best friend

8) A band poster from when I went to Campus Fest

9) Two hand-me-down photography pieces from my mom

10) A ship I painted with an old friend while catching up over Christmas break

11) Three souvenir prints that I bought on vacation in New Orleans

12) The poster from the Hozier concert

Every one of these pieces was acquired in the presence of friends and family. Each of them is associated with its own memories, of places, of hugs, of the reminiscent smells of birthday cakes and Christmas cookies, and the echoing laughter of girl’s nights that produced messy Pinterest craft fails.

I have never had my own place before, but it doesn’t feel empty.

I am surrounded by my best days, preserved and hanging from every wall. My collection keeps growing.
Fed

I made pasta with peas, white beans, and pesto when I got home from work. And I let myself have multiple helpings, because I was too busy to finish eating lunch earlier. I never imagined I’d reach a point where hunger could make me feel nothing. No pride no anxiety no guilt no physical faintness or nausea no desperate need to binge later on the first thing that I get my hands on. Just hunger.

Neutral.

An objective awareness that I need to eat. All this time, I took for granted that frantic feeding frenzies after a long day were normal. I never expected that I’d be able to be patient as I wait for my food to cook, instead of raiding the pantry for any immediately available snacks as soon as I set foot through the door. For the first time in my adult life, my body trusts that it will be fed properly and so it no longer overreacts if I have to wait between meals.

I never even knew I was missing out on the cozy feeling of domesticity or the fragrant scent of steam and herbs as I stand over the stove until I finally got to experience these wonderful things. It turns out, I don’t need to have anyone else over to have a reason to make actual food. To make something nourishing and pleasant for the sole benefit of myself is a worthy occasion all on its own. As I stand in my own kitchen, feeling cared for even though I’m alone, I decide that I think I could get used to living by myself after all.
A Second Collection of Pleasant Things

I sat in the backyard at my parents’ house, listening to the birds sing and drinking a deliciously trashy concoction of rosé and pink lemonade.

I went to the beach with my sister on my day off. It was a muddy man-made beach, but we didn’t care. We just came here to kill some time and to have some time to ourselves.

I threw my first dinner party in my very own apartment. I did an awful job cooking, but I would like to think that everyone will remember playing games and sharing stories, rather than the watery asparagus.

I met up with a friend from high school for brunch, and made fun of her for ordering a dark roast coffee. (This is the same girl who once spat out a java chip frappuccino for tasting “too strong,” after all.)

I finished a watercolor painting that turned out better than I had hoped--I am excited to see that maybe I haven’t lost my touch after all.

I felt good in the first outfit I pulled out of my closet and put on, and I was surprised to feel so confident in the red dress that I wasn’t sure I could pull off.

Perhaps it seems stupid to keep lists of every experience that makes me happy, but to see them all written down, it puts into perspective how much happiness is truly in my life. As I look at the extensive and growing log of all of the good days I have written about, it becomes clear that as time passes, joy adds up.

Even if bad things happen afterwards, nothing can take away or cancel out a good memory. The past cannot be changed

and I am finding myself grateful for that.
Becoming Elsewhere

The arms of the night embrace me like a faceless lover in my mind
my worries and doubts may chase me
but right now they are falling behind.

Wherever you go, there you are.

I know.

But at least to me, I find
that in the backseat I can feel at ease
disappearing by sunrise across state lines.

I don’t care where we go
as long as someone drives.
Whether going east or west,
either way,
I’m never more at rest.

Paradise is a late night car ride.
Seashells
Late March of 2020

The world seemed like it was ending.
My friends and I were already in Florida
when the news broke that states were starting to shut down.
We decided to make the most of our spring break anyways,
but we opted to spend our trip enjoying the beach and the wildlife parks
instead of the crowded clubs and the bars
where the other visiting college students had come under scrutiny for spreading Covid-19.
Florida was one of the last states to shut down,
they closed the beach at the end of the very last day of our stay.

Erin* was collecting shells to fill a mason jar as a souvenir.
At 6:59, we placed the last shell in the jar and screwed the lid on.
At 7:00, a beach patrolman on a four-wheeler approached us
and told us the beach was being closed down.
On our way back to our hotel,
we found the most perfect shell we had seen all week.

We grabbed it and made it the finishing touch on the jar.

I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe this little piece of perfection
and the uncanny timing of it all
was a sign that things would be okay.

I reflected upon all of the good memories we had made on this trip,
like eating takeout cheesecake on the couch and spotting stingrays from the balcony.

I was just so grateful that thoughts of food and insecurity
hadn’t ruined this week for me
as they had ruined so many past vacations.
As we drove home that night,
I thought to myself,
that if this one week had been what I had overcome all of the challenges of recovering for,
then it was all worth it.
If life as we know it is over,
then I am glad I got to experience what it was like to actually live before it ended.
Seashells

2020
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Artwork