

Craft Essay

When I began my academic studies at Auburn University, I was full of insecurity that my best writing was behind me, and that I had emptied the well of my life. However, during my first semester, I realized that wasn't true; I just needed to push past my anxieties of being misunderstood and write about experiences that were shameful, embarrassing, or difficult. The work in this portfolio represents healing through memory. There's stories of familial discord and mental anguish that I tried to forget or bury, but through writing them, I've been able to rid myself of the burden they once held over me, which I can only attribute to the techniques like braiding and incorporating sources that I've learned in my creative writing courses.

An explanation of the themes evident in the portfolio

Womanhood

Regarding womanhood, this theme appears in most of my creative work. Womanhood was the easiest theme to write about, mostly because it's the subject I've spent the most time negotiating in my head and reading about. I'm still trying to figure out what womanhood means to me, which is why there are different vignettes of it across my work.

In "Misery Loves Daughters: Searching For My Mother Through the Myers-Briggs Personality Test," I wanted to explore the complexities of being a woman and a daughter. As an adult, I've realized that womanhood, at least to me, means facing the truth no matter how uncomfortable it is. For me, one of those truths was that in a lot of ways, I am like my mother, who is a complicated and emotional woman, and this essay explored the realization of generational patterns, especially with the inclusion of my grandmother.

In "Sovereignty," I thought about womanhood from the perspective of legality. In 2022, I interned at a non-profit directly next to the Supreme Court. Since the overturning of *Roe v.*

Wade, I've pondered why women's bodies are legislated and how this legislation affects how I perceive my own womanhood. As a woman who is ambivalent about motherhood, the ability of states to decide my future regarding children is quite odd.

Lastly, in "The Burden," I articulated a struggle that I have as a female writer. In my first semester at Auburn, I became wary of sharing too much information about myself in my work. However, I also wanted my audience to identify with the subject matter in my poems, and so I had an internal battle over how relatable I should be and how private I should be. I often find that with women writers, audiences expect them to air out every minute detail of their lives so that they can feel closer to said writer. I find this kind of parasocial relationship to be disturbing, yet fascinating as someone on both ends of it.

Mental Health

For a long time, I never wanted to write about my struggles with mental health, partly because I didn't think they were interesting enough, and partly because I was afraid of coming off as unstable.

When I wrote "Misery Loves Daughters...", I realized that I couldn't tell the story without mentioning my anxiety, and so, that somewhat eased my fears around the subject of mental health.

"On Submission" was a challenging essay to write because I didn't want to face the fact that a large part of my religious devotion was undergirded by religious OCD. Most people don't know what it is, and so attempting to write about it well enough to ensure it's not confused with non-religious OCD was difficult yet rewarding.

For “Am I Beautiful to You?,” I was actually inspired to write about my body image issues from a fellow classmate who touched on that theme in one of their nonfiction essays. I feel very detached from the younger version of myself that experienced those issues, so writing this essay was easier than the other two.

Family Dynamics

Before I took Creative Nonfiction, I vowed to never write about my family negatively. Like most families, mine believes that outsiders should think we have no issues with each other. For most of my life, I felt obligated to maintain this façade.

I started to change my mind when the first essay prompt in nonfiction was assigned, and it was a source collage. For “Misery Loves Daughters...,” I knew I wanted to discuss *Lady Bird*, a movie that was pivotal to me understanding more about my relationship with my own mother, which inevitably meant that I was going to break the vow I made to myself. Ultimately, I think this step was necessary for the development of my writing.

Though I portray my father in a somewhat wholly positive light in “Misery Loves Daughters...”, over the years, I’ve evolved from being a starry-eyed daughter to a grounded adult who can see who my father is as a person. In college, his pushiness for me to get a theology degree made me examine how compliant I’ve been to him, even in adulthood. I realized that my obedience was a reaction to his disappointments in both of my brothers. I’ve sat on this thought for a few years now and writing about it in “On Submission” was painful because I was rewriting the memories I had of him as a perfect father, but it was vital for me to move past that chapter of my life.

“Am I Beautiful to You?” is the second essay about my mother, and is more focused on how some of her actions have led me to assume terrible mindsets and habits. When I originally wrote

this essay, my mother wasn't included in it, as I had forgotten some of the harmful behaviors she engaged in. Making her a character in the essay provides more insight into me, and also a look into how body image issues don't disappear with age.

Stylistic Techniques

Nonfiction

Though nonfiction is my specialty, I hesitate to write about myself. When taking Creative Nonfiction, I was pushed to expose parts of myself and my life. While learning to go against my inclination toward privacy was uncomfortable, it resulted in me becoming a better writer.

The primary tools I used for my essays included playing with structure and associative leaps; in particular, I was drawn to the lyric essay for both "Misery Loves Daughters..." and "On Submission." The lyric essay allowed for more experimentation with my writing style and for me to combine interests which aren't primarily rooted in a narrative about my own life.

"Misery Loves Daughters..." is a source collage, which includes utilizing sources about a topic to make an argument. By discussing the complexities of mother-daughter relationships through my own experience, pop culture, and the Myers-Briggs test, I was able to compare my sources, and have the reader make connections about how similar my relationship with my mother is to the other ones I mention. The diversity in sources helped me to argue that ultimately, most mother-daughter relationships are in a state of flux, whether due to life circumstances or age.

When I was first introduced to the idea of the braided essay, I had little confidence that I could write in this structure. It seemed too complex, but with examples such as "Lost Wax" by Jericho Parns, I found my footing. One of the biggest affordances with the braided structure is its ability to surprise its audience with its strands and associative leaps. For my narrative strand, I knew it

was going to be primarily rooted in my experience deconstructing from Christianity. Since the other strands needed to be unrelated (at least at first glance), I was able to bring in Beyoncé, the periodic table, and the emerald ash borers. The strands in my braided essay contradict and complicate each other and my own narrative relating to control. The associative leaps, such as my mentioning of Jay-Z's infidelity and the infidelity admitted by the pastor at the church I visited, help collapse the strands.

Poetry

When I first started writing poems as a teenager, I often poured out every thought and feeling I had into them, leaving no subtlety or interpretation for the reader. When I took poetry in my first semester at Auburn, I learned how to balance explicitness with restraint.

One of the most important techniques for me to utilize when trying to be less straightforward in my poetry was structure. In "Sovereignty" and "The Burden," the poems are intentionally formatted in such a way so that I have to make every word count. For "Sovereignty," I made each stanza have six lines, as six judges voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. For "The Burden," I was inspired by Rose McLarney's "How to Proceed." I found the structure of the overhanging first line to be interesting, and I wanted it to reflect the oversharing the speaker does in contrast to the restriction she's drawn to, which is illustrated in the shorter second lines.

Another technique I relied on was enjambment. With this technique, I found that I could subvert the expectations of my readers, which encouraged me to become more creative with my language. I was more strict on creating enjambment, and therefore surprise, with "The Burden," but I also used enjambement with "Sovereignty." An example in "Sovereignty" is when I write, "Did those six feel / that their decision was simply another act / of administering justice?" Since

the first line of that sentence ends with “feel,” it allows for the reader to briefly pause and reflect on the emotional weight of this statement before reading the full line of the poem.

Lastly, I utilized multilayered diction to ensure that every word of my poems had intentional yet multiple meanings. For example, in “The Burden,” I used the word “sentenced” to refer to the imprisonment the speaker experiences, but also, because this poem is a metacommentary on writing, I wanted to use a word that referenced this act. In “Sovereignty,” I similarly used the word “gallery,” to either reference a court or museum, the meaning of which is up to the reader.

Revision Analysis

My braided essay, “On Submission,” is an exploration of my relationship with order, chaos, religion, and my father. More specifically, it’s a meditation on how my desire to be the perfect daughter led me to attempt to win my father’s permanent approval through rejecting the disorder he believed came with not being a Christian. My attempt failed, and Christianity ended up bringing more disarray into my life. Additionally, I confront my own fears of chaos by discussing Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, atoms and the periodic table, the origin of my name, and the emerald ash borer. For my revisions, I focused on ensuring that my argument remained consistent throughout my strands and that my strands were detailed.

One of the major revisions I made was restructuring the essay. Ironically, the original order of the essay was too rigid, contradicting my theme of being a structured person but wanting to embrace chaos more. As such, I shifted my strands around so that there was an element of surprise as to what I would explore next in my essay. An example of this is the final “track” strand that’s on page 45; originally, it occurred much earlier in the essay, but I moved it to create more unexpectedness with the rest of the “track” strand.

Another major revision I made was excising some material in the strands or entire strands altogether. In my first draft, I had many more Beyoncé songs. I ended up cutting around three or four of them because they bogged down the flow of the essay and were redundant to my point. In my first draft, I also included a strand about 18th century New England preacher Jonathan Edwards and his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” as it was a somewhat pivotal work that shaped my fear of God and Hell. However, I removed that strand because it muddled the argument of my essay.

In many of my drafts, I failed to include details that were crucial to understanding either more about my life or the subjects of my strands. For example, in the original version, I mentioned my brothers Kelvin and Isaac briefly, but never went in depth about their relationships with my father and Christianity. In my revisions, I included a paragraph about each of them so that my readers could better understand how they influenced my own relationships with my father and Christianity. When it came to the Beyoncé strand, I intellectualized the songs, but if someone had never listened to them before, my essay didn’t help them to actually envision what they sounded like. As such, I wrote more about the sound of the songs.

One critique I received was that I should further explore the idea of my, or rather my brain’s, similarity to the emerald ash borer and ash trees. In one of my drafts I did this, but it wasn’t clear enough to my readers. I rewrote the emerald ash borer strand and wrote a new section explicitly comparing the left and right sides of my brain to the relationship between the emerald ash borer and ash tree.

Overall, with these changes, “On Submission,” became an essay that I’m even more proud of because of my unflinching honesty.

Important Texts

Nonfiction

There were a number of texts that contributed to the development of my nonfiction essays. Some texts were instrumental when it came to themes I explored, while others were beneficial when it came to form, structure, and technique.

One memoir that aided my technique was *The Mountains and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry* by Joe Wilkins. While my essays don’t center on place like Wilkins’ book does, his use of metaphor, particularly his blending of it with the use of second person, was foundational when it came to revising “Misery Loves Daughters…” and “Am I Beautiful to You?” More specifically, the ghost metaphor on p. 31 and the two extended metaphors on pp. 49-50 and p. 56 were inspired by how Wilkins immerses readers in the metaphors he writes.

Hanif Abdurraqib’s “Fear: A Crown” from his book of essays *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance* was a guide for my writing. Abdurraqib’s use of the crown sonnet form to further link his strands together helped me to do the same in “On Submission.” By intentionally repeating phrases and words such as “chaos,” my strands felt less randomly chosen and more intentionally related through associative leaps.

Parms’ “Lost Wax,” the titular essay from her book, influenced the structure of both “Misery Loves Daughters” and “On Submission.” In the essay, Parms weaves together a story about lost love and art in a way that feels refreshing and unexpected. Parms’ leaps from paragraph to paragraph are unexpected, even when the reader is familiar with the content of her strands. As

such, I also tried to structure both “Misery Loves Daughters” and “On Submission” so that from paragraph to paragraph, my essays didn’t feel predictable.

Lastly, there were three essays that informed my choice of subject matter for my work. Mary Wang’s “Sad White Women” was a catalyst for “Misery Loves Daughters...” Her detailed look into her own insecurities and how they affected her relationship with her mother served as a blueprint for how I explored my relationships with myself and my mother. James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” served as an influence for how to write about my own relationship with my father. Baldwin’s raw depiction of his father and his shortcomings inspired me to tell the story of the relation between my father’s past and his feelings toward my brothers, and how that affected me. Lastly, Leslie Jamison’s “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain” from her book *The Empathy Exams* and its focus on the multiple ways women suffer led me to write about that through the lens of body image issues.

Poetry

For poetry, the most important works were those that explored familiar subject matter in an interesting or visceral way and had intentional and unique structures.

Mary Szybist’s “Annunciation Under Erasure” was an inspiration for both “Sovereignty” and “The Burden.” Szybist criticizes the lack of agency Mary has in the Bible when it comes to being pregnant with Jesus. This sort of forced compliance Mary engaged in reminded me of abortion laws and led me to want to write about the lack of agency contemporary women also have regarding their bodies. Additionally, the tone of “Annunciation Under Erasure” is blunt, even though Szybist only used Bible verses. This sort of detached tone is what I employed in “The Burden” to make the poem more raw.

One other poet that was instrumental both in form and theme to the development of my work was Rose McLarney. Her poems in the collection *Colorfast* strike the perfect balance of personal and public, of introspection and critique. Her reflections on the ways in which the culture of Appalachian North Carolina has shaped the girls and women around her, along with herself, was a reason as to why I focus on the female experience in my poems.

Regarding womanhood, her poem “The Collectors of Local Minerals Are Likelier to Find What They Seek” led me to think about what a woman’s value is when it’s determined by forces and people besides herself. The poem’s emphasis on men determining the value of women was a theme that I translated into “Sovereignty,” although with the background of reproductive rights. Additionally, I carried this interest in women’s value to “The Burden,” with the focus of female writers and their audience. As mentioned earlier, McLarney’s poem “How to Proceed,” influenced how I structured “The Burden.” Because the second lines were intentionally shorter than the first ones, I felt that it pushed the poem to be both concise and purposeful in its diction. I wanted to challenge myself to employ this structure for “The Burden” as sometimes in my poetry, I still figure out ways to be verbose. I’m glad I used this structure, as in my original writing of “The Burden” and in subsequent revisions, it helped me to focus on the most essential parts of the poem while still retaining its emotional depth.

I’m proud of the progress I’ve made in both my knowledge of writing and in my creative writing skills. From the readings, authors, and techniques I’ve encountered, my writing has become more experimental, sharper, and overall, better.

Resume

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Summary

Second-year English Master's creative writing student at Auburn University with an interest and passion for nonfiction. Highly versatile writer with experience in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and, outside of creative writing, in technical and professional communication. Meticulous editor who has experience in literary magazine publishing. Detail-oriented leader with both graduate teaching assistant and Core Composition instructor of record experience.

- Education** Auburn University (August 2024-May 2026)
- Masters of Arts in English
 - Creative Writing Concentration with a minor in Technical and Professional Communication
- Birmingham-Southern College (August 2020-May 2023)
- Religion Major
 - English Writing Minor

- Experience** Assistant Editor at Southern Humanities Review (August 2024-December 2024)
- Read submissions for literary magazine and evaluated which needed to be seen by editors and which did not
- Hess Fellow (May 2022-July 2022)
- Interned at the General Board of Church and Society; worked internally and externally to track social and political developments internationally and maintained a database of inclusive literature for children

- Extracurricular Activities** Auburn University English Graduate Association (August 2024-Present)
- Creative Writing Representative (May 2025-Present)
 - Co-Chair (September 2025-Present)
- Published in *The Western Border* Literary Magazine (April 2023)
- "Lorenzo's Farm"

- Certifications** Technical and Professional Communication (In progress)

- Awards/Honors** Recipient of the Dr. Ward Allen Annual Graduate Award (May 2025)

- This award is granted to a student pursuing an advanced degree in the Auburn University English department who is studying poetry, prosody, or poetics.

Summa Cum Laude Graduate (May 2023)

- Those with a grade point average of 3.900 are graduated summa cum laude.

Job Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant (August 2024-Present)

- Assisted Auburn University Core Literature professors with classes, including teaching two small Friday section classes
- Instructor of Record (August 2025-Present)
 - Teaching Core Composition classes to incoming freshmen at Auburn University

Tutor at the Birmingham-Southern College Writing Center (August 2021-May 2023)

- Evaluated the written work of students
- Checked in students when they visited
- Created educational resources for students

Creative Work

Misery Loves Daughters: Searching For My Mother Through the Myers-Briggs Personality Test

When December ends and my reflective melancholy inevitably creeps into January, I take the Myers-Briggs test. I spend at least a half hour pondering the sixty or so questions, feigning self-contemplation, as if I don't know my answers.

I started this psychological tradition about eight years ago, when my self-hatred evolved from an angsty aesthetic into an affliction. When I was fifteen and received INFJ as my result, relief filled me. Four letters now pathologized every insecurity and negative trait. My self-hatred wasn't hatred at all; it was a combination of self-criticism and unrealistic personal standards. What an encouraging diagnosis!

Throughout the years, I've received the same Myers-Briggs result. Because I dislike change, I'll probably always be an INFJ. However, a decade almost passed before I realized I wasn't taking the test for an understanding of myself. I was taking it for my mother.

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I: Introverted

Question #21: You enjoy solitary hobbies or activities more than group ones.

The Myers-Briggs test was developed by Katharine Briggs. Confined to motherhood and wifedom in the early 1900s, Katharine diligently cared for her only daughter, Isabel. Believing children were naturally curious, Katherine removed Isabel from school and educated her, encouraging her daughter to “spend long hours reading and writing on whatever topics interested her.”

If you ask a casual fan what they most associate Lana Del Rey's lyrical content with, they would probably respond with men, specifically older men. Take for instance the opening lyrics of "Off to the Races" from *Born to Die*: "My old man is a bad man / But I can't deny, the way he holds my hand." An album later on *Ultraviolence*'s "Brooklyn Baby," she croons, "They say I'm too young to love you." Men are central to Del Rey's musical universe, whether they're loving her or leaving her. Because of her predilection for older men, she has become synonymous with the phrase "daddy issues."

As an avid listener of Del Rey, there's little credence to this particular belief. In her music, she portrays herself as a lost woman tortured by alcoholism, self-hatred, and other neuroses. She desperately needs to be alone but finds comfort in the arms and sorrows of her romantic partners. She often self-blames, attributing her issues to neediness; hence the assumption of an absent father figure.

This assumption was proven false on 2023's *Did you know that there's a tunnel under Ocean Blvd*. In the song "Fingertips," Del Rey asks, "what kind of mother was she to say I'd end up in institutions?" It wasn't Del Rey's father who caused her to resolve her lonesomeness with doomed romances. It was her mother.

I was a shy child; though I had friends, I preferred seclusion. It wasn't as if I had much of an option. My brothers were much older than me, and so, I relied on myself for companionship. My parents indulged my solitude, letting me play with my stuffed animals and write short stories without interference. Whenever I was in an outgoing mood, I usually spent time with them; to some extent, I believed I owed them parent-daughter bonding time following my hours of isolation.

Though I got along with both of my parents, my father was my favorite. I clung onto him literally and figuratively. I searched for his gaze and craned my head to hear his words, as if he were some kind of oracle who had the answers to my deepest questions. I remember him driving me to preschool, our khaki colored minivan the host for conversations about my adolescent life. My paternal attachment wasn't because he was the more present parent; it was the opposite.

My mother didn't work until I was in high school. She prayed for a daughter for years after having my brothers, and when she was finally granted one, she ensured our time together counted. She orchestrated playdates, packed my lunch, and primped me with glee.

As a child, I didn't acknowledge her unwavering devotion and attention as anything special. When my dad arrived home from work, I ran from her. He would pick me up and hold me in his arms, my mom, and her prayer for me, forgotten.

When Isabel entered college, she met her future husband, Clarence "Chief" Myers. Katherine realized he had a different outlook on life and the world compared to Isabel and the rest of the Briggs family. Katherine decided to find out why Clarence saw the world the way he did, sensing that understanding him would keep Isabel in her orbit. During her quest to uncover why Clarence was so different, she read Carl Jung's 1921 book *Psychological Types* and was so intrigued with the information presented that she corresponded with him, seeking further information about his personality theories.

In *Psychological Types*, Jung posited that people fit into three binary categories. The first category is introversion or extroversion (I/E); introverts receive energy by being alone while extroverts receive energy from others. The second is sensing or intuitive (S/N); those who are sensing are more pragmatic, while those who are intuitive are more head-in-the-clouds, dreamer

types. The third is thinking or feeling (T/F); thinkers process problems logically while feelers process issues emotionally. Later, a fourth category was added for perceiving or judging (P/J); perceivers are spontaneous and play things by ear while judges are organized and like to plan.

My mother was born in July of 1966 in Perry, Georgia. In some ways, the town's a farmer's dream: long stretches of unpopulated land, bearing thousands of ripe peaches perfect for picking in the summertime. Cows and horses welcome you before any person does.

Like me, my mother was the only girl in her family, but unlike me, she had four brothers. Her father meandered in and out of her life, leaving her mother alone to work tirelessly while raising five children.

She attended college for less than a semester before she met my oldest brother Kelvin's dad. Not heeding her mother's advice about altering her life for a man, she dropped out, got married, and had Kelvin in 1987. But, like a broken bone, a person can only function for so long before they experience a reset. Eventually, my mother divorced Kelvin's dad, who was a violent and neglectful husband. Finding herself alone, she became a single mother, just like her mother.

In the early 90s, she met my dad, and within a decade, had not only given birth to two more children, but had also moved to Prattville, Alabama, which at the time, mirrored Perry's country desolation, but eventually grew to mimic every other nondescript suburb.

By the time I was in first or second grade, she was balancing taking care of me and my brother Isaac while also returning back to college to get her degree.

She graduated in 2011 before resuming her dream of being a stay at home mom.

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N: Intuitive

Question #36: You are drawn to various forms of creative expression, such as writing.

In 2017, Californian filmmaker, actress, and screenwriter Greta Gerwig released *Lady Bird*, a film set in her hometown of Sacramento.

The movie centers on Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson, an early aughts teenage girl in her senior year at a Catholic high school. Like any coming-of-age film, the audience observes Lady Bird as she aggressively (and sometimes quite embarrassingly) attempts to figure herself out. She dreams up various versions of herself, acting on her idealized personas by joining the school play to romantically pursue a boy named Danny, and lying to her school’s resident popular girl Jenna about the house she lives in. She abandons her best friend Julie when any opportunity to climb her way up the social ladder presents itself and despises when any of the characters in the film critique her selfish behavior.

You could say *Lady Bird* is about a number of things: Lady Bird learning to self-improve, the intimacy of girlhood, or how much Gerwig loves her hometown. But, at its core, these subjects are accessories to the real story of the film: Lady Bird’s relationship with her mother.

After graduating from college, Isabel married Clarence, and became a mother to two children. Most of her time was spent raising them, and when she wasn’t, she wrote as a hobby. Isabel authored short stories, novels, and plays, even winning a contest for mystery novels. Katherine attempted to involve Isabel into her personality theory work, but to no avail.

My relationship with my mother remained unremarkable until I turned thirteen. The problems seemed to start when I extinguished the candles on my birthday cake. Her sacrifice of

staying home to raise me became smothering. Her protectiveness over me created embarrassment. All the angst in my body became an arrow and aimed itself at her.

At the same time, I became obsessively insecure, hyperaware of my ever-growing flaws. I stared at myself in the mirror, ignoring minutes passing by. I inventoried what needed fixing; I vowed that at eighteen, I would surgically alter my nose, which I share with my mother. I was satisfied knowing that my aspiration of becoming more conventionally attractive allowed for part of my mother to be physically removed from me.

The aspects of myself I hated the most related to my personality, specifically traits I shared with my mother. My ability to be ensnared by my emotions reflected her; she unabashedly shared her feelings, coloring our house in the shades of her capriciousness. My anxieties about my body mirrored hers. Empathy for her didn't exist at this time, only judgment.

In general, psychologists decry the Myers-Briggs test for its unreliability, origins, and binary categories. It is useful for one thing: entertainment.

On Mother's Day in 2020, Del Rey uploaded a series of photos to her Instagram featuring photos of her mother. The caption stated, "1 million reasons why I am grateful."

In her poetry collection *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*, also published in 2020, Del Rey celebrates the city of Los Angeles in the poem "LA Who Am I to Love You?" While chronicling all of the other Californian cities, like San Francisco, she lived in before settling down in Los Angeles, she ruminates on her life. She writes that she's a "daughter to no one" and that she's "never had a mother."

In *Lady Bird*, she and her mother go prom dress shopping. As the two peruse the store, they animatedly converse with each other, the racks of dresses framing their kinship. Lady Bird finds a pink dress and after she comes out of the dressing room, Marion doesn't tell her she looks nice.

An argument ensues with Lady Bird declaring, "No, I just wish...I wish you liked me." Marion replies, "Of course I love you." Lady Bird questions her mother: "But do you like me?" Marion stumbles before answering: "...I want you to be the best version of yourself that you can be." Lady Bird heartbreakingly asks, "What if this is the best version?" Marion doesn't reply.

INFJs are nicknamed "The Advocate." Reportedly, only 1% of the world's population has this personality. We are notoriously empathetic, usually privileging the needs of others above ourselves. We also possess a rare combination of idealism and practicality. Some of our strengths include self-awareness, loyalty, and our intuition.

Our weaknesses include sensitivity to criticism, unrealistic standards, and guardedness. Because INFJs are dreamers, we also tend to be perfectionists who hate when our imagined perceptions of anyone or anything fail to match reality.

I wasn't a horrible child outwardly to my mother, but internally, resentment festered. Since I disliked myself so intensely, self-blame wasn't enough; someone else had to share in my culpability. My mother was the undeserving accomplice. I truly believed that every negative aspect of myself originated from her. I thought if she fixed herself, then the insecurities I projected onto her would cease.

Because of my contempt, I resolved to never have kids; “like mother, like daughter” was a fantasy I was trying to run from, not recreate with posterity. More than being my mother, she was a nuisance.

To further distance myself, as if ceasing to pass on her genes wasn’t enough, I also considered changing my first name, which she gave me. Ashtyn was too difficult for people in my hometown to pronounce most times, and they constantly wished my name was Ashlyn or Ashley instead. I began to think those people were right and that my name should be different. When I casually mentioned these musings to my brother, Isaac, he shut me down. He was washing dishes in the sink, and he quickly turned his entire body to face me as his eyes, full of incredulity and disdain, met mine. “Don’t do that,” he scolded. “It’s disrespectful, and it would hurt mom’s feelings so much.” Name change abandoned, I developed a new strategy of keeping my mother at arm’s length to detach myself from her.

The Myers-Briggs test isn’t accurate, as about half of the people who take it receive a different result on their second attempt. The first time I actually took the test was not when I was fifteen in my bedroom, but when I was fourteen in a class. My result was ISTJ, or The Logistician, a type described as “practical and fact-minded individuals whose reliability cannot be doubted.” There’s a part of me that wishes I was The Logistician; who would I be if I was unburdened by my emotions?

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F: Feeling

Question #20: You are prone to worrying that things will take a turn for the worse.

If my mother was the source of all my maladies, then my father was the cure. Secrets and laughter punctuated our conversations. If I spent more time with him, I imagined the parts of myself that were similar to my mother would flee. I assumed his more logical nature, trying to shove my emotional tendencies down.

My mother wasn't privy to this kind of relationship with me, though she wanted it. If anything important happened, I let my dad know, and most times, she would find out from him. When my mother remarked, "You always tell Dad everything," I indulged her occasionally, thinking I was doing her a favor.

ENTJs, which is my mother's Myers-Briggs personality type, are known as "The Commander." They are characterized as strong-minded leaders. When they have a goal in mind, they won't stop until it's achieved. Their strengths include being self-confident, strong-willed, and strategic thinkers.

Their weaknesses include being stubborn, cold, and handling their emotions poorly. Unsurprisingly, ENTJs are authoritative, which means that their dominant nature overtakes them, even when the occasion is inopportune.

I don't believe in the platitude that "everything happens for a reason," but I believe it wasn't a coincidence that the first time I watched *Lady Bird* was in the fall of 2018.

My mother and I got into petty arguments over my attitude and propensity for talking back. Because we were similar, we knew how to hurt each other. She would accuse me of being too emotional and I would accuse her of being a callous mother. We didn't apologize to each other after these fights.

Besides my complicated feelings toward my mother, this time in my life was one of interpersonal chaos. My best friend of four years had abandoned me for a boy who, in addition to engaging in racism and misogyny as hobbies, visibly detested her. Witnessing his eyes roll every time she spoke and telling her to shut up led me to abandon my non-confrontational nature; seeing her softly glare at me when I defended her began my lessons in self-restraint.

I was used to her discarding me for other female friends, but this was the first time she chose a boy over me. I couldn't handle the feelings of betrayal and rejection I felt, but mostly, I couldn't understand why she would choose someone so terrible over me. I could feel the distance lengthening between us and when it finally overcame us, I emotionally succumbed to the abandonment.

The troubles with her mother aren't the only thing plaguing Lady Bird. After becoming acquaintances with rich girl Jenna, she regards Julie as an uncool friend of the past. After Julie switches her math class, Lady Bird confronts her. She asks why she transferred; Julie questions, "Aren't Jenna and Kyle [Lady Bird's fling] enough?"

Lady Bird, who pretends to be into pop cultural touchstones and that her family has more wealth than they actually do in order to bond with Jenna and Kyle, is hurt. Julie can see right through her, that no, they are not enough. But ever defensive, Lady Bird asserts, "I'm sorry that you're jealous."

Anxiety accrued inside of me, but I didn't show it; I put on a smile and pretended like I wasn't lonely. By then, I knew that my peers, and my friends to an extent, thought of me as always cool, calm, and collected. To them, I was emotionally unaffected by anything, so much so

that a classmate jokingly referred to me as an “unemotional robot.” I was the girl who had her shit together, and I was going to maintain that façade for as long possible. At some point though, my forced smiles and false blasé attitude had to crack; it did a few months later in March.

I was supposed to meet a classmate, Lauren, for dinner. We were school friends, the kind who curate camaraderie in the classroom but regard each other as strangers outside of it. Half an hour before we were supposed to meet, she sent me a rushed excuse of a text message. She’d forgotten about our plans and made new ones with someone else.

In hindsight, my reaction was the result of my emotional fragility. Lauren reneging on our plans shouldn’t have been as dramatic to me as it was, but since I’d been castoff by my best friend, I was sensitive to the idea of other friends not being there for me. I re-read her text as tears attempted to escape my eyes. I thought I could stop them; I couldn’t. I just kept crying and then I started sobbing.

My dad, aware of my plans, opened my bedroom door and asked why I was upset if I was about to leave the house. I told him quietly, while my throat clogged with tears, that I didn’t have plans anymore. He asked me something along the lines of “What happened?” I then screamed at him to get out, and he left, muttering that something was wrong with me.

Unbeknownst to me, after he left my room, he talked to my mom about it. My night passed in sorrow, with me pitying myself. In the morning, I woke up to a message from my mom. She texted me, “Hey, Ashtyn. Your dad told me about what happened last night. It’s okay for you to feel hurt. Your friend treated you wrong. You’ll find better friends. If you want to talk, I’m here. I love you.”

I was surprised; I usually went to my dad with friend problems. It never once crossed my mind that my mom knew how I felt. At a time when I viewed her unsympathetically, I forgot that that's not how she viewed me.

I walked into my parents' bedroom, laid down in my dad's empty side of the bed, and curled up next to my mom while she told me about her failed friendships of the past. Listening to her, I realized we were the same. I thought she was a self-assured woman who didn't need friends, but she did. She had people abandon her and treat her terribly when she needed them. She was my mother, but in that moment, she was a girl like me.

On 2021's *Blue Banisters*, Del Rey lamented on the song "Wildflower Wildfire," that her "father never stepped in when his wife would rage" at the singer. Del Rey didn't consider herself attached to her mother, even if the truth revealed that genetically, she was.

It wouldn't be until the 1940s that the Myers-Briggs test as we know it today was developed. Not by Katharine, but by Isabel. When her own children went off to college, she became interested in personality theory. Though Isabel initially dismissed Katherine's interest in personality typing work, she came around after seeing a magazine article referencing a quiz that matched people with their ideal careers. Wanting to do this type of work herself, she wrote excitedly to her mother, expressing her desire to become involved with creating a personality assessment, and Katherine provided her knowledge about personalities to Isabel. Because of their collaboration, Katharine's dream of the test promoting self-improvement became fully realized. By the 1950s, the test was utilized by universities like Berkeley and hospitals. In the 1980s, the test went corporate, and now, it's a pop psychology staple.

If the Myers-Briggs test tells me traits I already know about myself and my mother, why am I still drawn to it? Why do I refuse to move on? It's because I can reaffirm what I already know about myself, and about my relationship with my mother. For so many years, good days dried up, and left, in their wake, bad days that seethed like wildfire. Receiving an INFJ result affords me some stability; it's my form of control through knowledge reinforcement. If I stay the same, then I'll always know what our dynamic will be, which means it can't get any worse, or, on the inverse, significantly better. But that would mean my mother would have to stay the same too, which isn't guaranteed.

—

J: Judging

Question #42: If your plans are interrupted, your top priority is to get back on track as soon as possible.

As the film nears its conclusion, Lady Bird applies to out of state colleges; her father, Larry, helps her with her plan to abandon Sacramento. This has been a long-suffering argument between her and Marion, with Marion declaring earlier in the film, "You should just go to City College. You know, with your work ethic just go to City College and then to jail and then back to City College and then maybe you'd learn to pull yourself up and not expect everybody to do everything."

Marion can't understand Lady Bird's desire to desert Sacramento, especially when there are plenty of colleges close to home. Lady Bird doesn't understand why her mom wants to have such an ironclad grip on her and her life.

When Lady Bird eventually finds out she has been waitlisted at New York University, she doesn't tell Marion, but it doesn't matter. Marion finds out from Larry and she stops talking to her altogether. Silence is the only thing between them.

When I graduated high school, I didn't expect the isolation. The ceremony wasn't at the local stadium in town, outside in the humid, late May air. Instead, I entered my high school gym socially distanced from the next graduate, with only my parents there to celebrate me. I walked across the stage in our dingy auditorium, smiled at a camera, and left.

The summer was hell. Every pre-college trip and outing I had devised ceased to exist. I was confined to my house, only allowed to go out on walks. I became a stranger like everyone else to the outside world. With nothing else to do, I watched the death toll from the pandemic rise, videos of George Floyd's murder loop endlessly on the news, and celebrities feign awareness to convince us that they understood average people's opinions about these events.

It was a strange time, and because of that, I needed to anchor myself to something normal. So, I began counting down the days until I moved into college. I would reinvent myself, securing freedom away from my parents, which was a precious commodity to me at eighteen.

The heat vacated and move-in day arrived with mask-muffled hellos to hallmates, boxes carried from the car to my dorm room, and unpacking. It was during this time, when my cinderblock room looked more like a sterile jail cell, that my mother decided to go all out.

The summer ends and Lady Bird, off the waitlist at NYU, is now preparing to move to New York. Her parents drop her off at the airport, with Larry going in to see her off. Marion refuses to go inside, but after a few minutes has a change of heart. She frantically gets out of the

car and tries to see Lady Bird leave before Larry tells her it's too late. Marion sobs before collapsing into his arms.

If there's one thing my mother can't stand, it's the fact that at any moment, her three children might be uncomfortable in a living space. If the lighting is off, the pillows aren't arranged correctly on a bed, or the color scheme is incongruent – these seemingly innocuous details will burrow themselves in my mother's brain and take up residence there until she decides to evict those thoughts. So, my mother spent copious amounts of time buying more throw pillows, trinkets, blankets, and other décor imaginable for my freshman dorm room and planning its appearance.

I was more than happy she embraced this project, mostly because of the fact that since my mind constantly spins with dozens of neurotic thoughts, I couldn't conceive of caring the tiniest bit about how to ornament my new home. I told my mother that my only condition was that the color scheme be light blue.

At first, the decorating was fun. We chatted about where to place a vase of fake flowers and where my lamp would go as my dad heaved heavy boxes up the stairs. But, as time wore on, my mother kept asking me question after question about the décor. I fielded her inquiries, but anxieties about college entered my mind. As she talked, I shifted from being anxious, and her presence began to overwhelm me. I became annoyed and then snappy, wanting nothing more than for her to leave.

She asked me my opinion on how I wanted my rug arranged, and I replied sharply, “Mom, it's a rug. It doesn't matter. Just put it on the ground and I'll figure it out later.”

She responded in a tone equally as cutting, “I didn’t get to do this with my mom when I was your age. So it does matter.”

I was so enraptured by my own feelings and worries that I forgot my mother’s first college experience was cut short. While she obtained her degree in the end, I realized she was right. Where the rug went did matter, because for her, me going to college and graduating at the same time as my peers mattered.

One of the issues with the Myers-Briggs test is that it places people into binaries, which Jung affirmed “were useful ways of thinking about people,” but that “there is no such thing as a pure extrovert or introvert.” I’m sure he would affirm that there is no purely good or bad mother-daughter relationship either.

Isabel developed the questions that would be included in the Myers-Briggs test, but by that time, Katherine was less involved with the test’s creation. She wasn’t familiar with the statistical methods Isabel was using to assign specific personality types to test takers, and requested for her last name, Briggs, to be left off the name of the test. Isabel refused, and now, the test is a reminder of their devotion to each other.

If you’re wondering whether or not *Lady Bird* ends happily, it does. As she unpacks a suitcase, Lady Bird discovers stacks of half-finished letters. They were written to her by Marion, and when she calls her dad, he explains, “She was worried that there would be errors, or mistakes or something... that you’d judge her writing abilities.”

Lady Bird, who thought her mother hated her, finally grasps that she doesn't. Marion isn't an unemotional tyrant who terrorizes her daughter; she's a mother struggling to let go of her daughter.

At the end of the movie, Lady Bird retires her moniker, and starts going by her birth name, Christine. Standing outside of a church in New York City, she calls her mother, telling her, "Hey, Mom. Did you feel emotional the first time that you drove in Sacramento? I did, and I wanted to tell you, but we weren't really talking when it happened. All those bends I've known my whole life and stores and the whole thing ...I wanted to tell you. I love you. Thank you. I'm...Thank you."

The rest of move-in day passed in strained silence, with my father none the wiser to my spat with my mother. She continued placing trinkets around my room, while I unpacked my belongings and he ensured that the headboard he built didn't fall apart. Our labor eased the awkwardness and advanced the time; soon, my parents were saying their goodbyes to me.

For the first time all day, I was alone; it was a funny feeling. I thought I would feel overjoyed at finally having the independence of my own living space; instead, I felt isolated, which wasn't part of my planned college persona. I looked around at the décor of my room. My mother hadn't missed anything, matching the scores of blue throw pillows perfectly to my comforter. She had smoothed down every crease in my bed when she made it up. She couldn't have the traditional college experience, but she would ensure that I did, starting with a seemingly irrelevant part: my room.

I began to weep, overcome with the realization of my mother's love. I wished I could tell my parents to turn the car around and come back. I wished my mother could hug me and tell me everything would be okay without her there, but she couldn't. I wiped away my tears.

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In an interview with Vox, about the validity of the Myers-Briggs test, organizational psychologist Adam Grant stated, "There's just no evidence behind it. The characteristics behind it have almost no predictive power on how happy you'll be in a situation, how you'll perform at your job, or how happy you'll be in your marriage." For Grant, the Myers-Briggs test cannot accurately indicate anything about anyone, despite Katharine and Isabel's design for it.

I disagree with him. Before I took the Myers-Briggs test, no personality test fully understood who I was to my core. Other tests would just tell me I was shy and quiet and leave it at that. The Myers-Briggs test saw underneath my veneer of aloofness and exposed my emotionality. So, while the test obviously can't predict who I, or my mother, will become in the future, it can see us for who we are.

In the end, Lana Del Rey still hasn't reconciled with her mother. On *Did you know...*, Del Rey laments on the song "A&W," "I haven't seen my mother in a long, long time."

When I listened to this song for the first time, I wondered if Del Rey decision's was spontaneous, or if she had decided years ago to live a life without her mother in it. I also wondered if my mother and I would assume these positions someday, going years without talking to each other, and being fine with that choice.

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Narratives, unlike real life, have a definitive ending. Isabel fulfilled the work Katharine started; Christine and Marion reconciled; psychology sees the Myers-Briggs test as nothing but personality pseudo-fiction. All of these tales are finished; the tale with my mother isn't.

The Saturday before Labor Day last year, I received a call from my mother about my grandmother. "Her breathing is labored," she told me in between fits of sobs. "I think she's ready to go." She had already been dying for the past few months, as dementia tore more and more of her away from her family, and from herself. But the technicalities didn't matter.

Watching a relative die is like seeing a ghost. When you first see it, it can be shocking. Fear might fill you at the sight of the unfamiliar, of behaviors that seem foreign to you. If you can separate yourself from what you've experienced, you may breathe a sigh of relief that, at least when you're away, what you viewed is in the past. However, whispers of other people discussing it or your own flashbacks can bring you back to that moment of terror.

For years, I watched my mother, without much help from her brothers, take care of my grandmother, who only furthered regressed back into childhood. You can only mix up relatives' names so many times before it stops being an accident and turns into an ailment. You can only mumble incoherently for so long before you have to have a baby doll to keep you preoccupied. Your only daughter can only bear you cursing her out so much before she resorts to crying to her own family about you.

Someone had to ensure that my grandmother didn't escape her room at night. Someone had to portion out her anti-dementia medication. Someone had to bathe her when she couldn't. Someone had to notify the family when my she passed away. And that person was my mom.

In the moment following the phone call, I felt our dynamic switch again. Grief's stripped everything away from my mother except her status as a child. She seeks parental comfort, but

now, without either parent, I've assumed that role. I call her to make sure that she isn't sleeping or staying in bed all day. I try to make sure that her depression doesn't overtake her. I've become my mother's keeper, in the way that she was her mother's.

Of course, this dynamic won't last. My mother will heal and start to smile with ease, and not strain, again. The grief will still be there, but will have faded into fond remembrance of my grandmother. And when some misfortune inevitably falls on me, she'll take care of me, like she always did.

On Submission

When I was a kid, I thought I would get baptized at 13, as a signal to God that I would devote my life to him. I pushed the event back to 15, then 18, then 21, and then, it never happened.

When I observed the Christians around me who had been baptized, they appeared to act no differently. They weren't any kinder or more devoted to Jesus. It seemed like submerging oneself in water was merely another act that granted a believer religious and social capital. If I wanted to prove that I was a faithful Christian, lowering myself in water wasn't going to cut it.

The word "submit" was first used sometime in the 14th century. It originates from the Middle English word "submitten" which came from the Latin word "submittere." "Sub-" means to lower while "-mittere" means to send. In essence, submission means sending oneself lower than, presumably, anything.

Track one: On "Pray You Catch Me," Beyoncé pleads with her husband, rapper turned billionaire Jay-Z, to confront her when she overhears the conversations he has with his mistress. The song starts downtempo, with a simple piano arrangement reminiscent of gospel music accompanying her words. It slowly builds with strings and organs complimenting her voice.

In the visual film for *Lemonade*, viewers see Beyoncé articulate her struggle to accept the revelation of the affair in "Pray You Catch Me" she once suspected but now knows is true. In Chapter 2 of the film, while underwater, she voiceovers lines from the poem "Denial" by Warsan Shire.

“I tried to change / Closed my mouth more / Tried to be soft, prettier / Less... awake / Fasted for 60 days / Wore white / Abstained from mirrors / Abstained from sex / Slowly did not speak another / word”

From this, I learned that there's no amount of deference to one's husband, or to Christianity, that ensures a husband's faithfulness to his wife.

Perfectionism and OCD have similarities, but fundamentally, the conditions aren't the same. Perfectionism, a trait of mine since childhood, is driven ultimately by a fear of failure. I wake up at 6:30 every morning (except for Saturdays), get out of my bed within a minute of my alarm going off, turn on the lights in my apartment, open my blinds, and fulfill the rest of my routine I've spent years crafting. If I don't do this performance, then chaos follows me, its shadow casting me in uncertainty.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is driven by an intense fear of loss of control. Usually, individuals who have this disorder experience ruminating thoughts accompanied by a corresponding action, or compulsion. There are many subsets of OCD; so many, in fact, that a person can suffer from a specific type without having the generalized form of the disorder at all.

I was a Christian from birth, though my family and I didn't start attending church regularly until I was about nine or ten. We bounced around, undergoing short stints at multiple churches in Prattville. Once, we visited a church and the first Sunday we happened to attend, the pastor admitted to having an affair. As I sat in a dark brown stained pew, I remember leaning over to my father and whispering in his ear, “What's an affair?” That was our last time at that church.

When we finally chose a church, I developed my own personal relationship with Christianity. It was attractive because of its straightforwardness: if you pleased God, you would be blessed and ascend to Heaven. If you didn't please God, you would experience suffering and descend to Hell. Easy enough!

As an adult, I can recognize that no religion is as black-and-white as it might seem. But I'm a rule follower, and the biblical commandments appeared unambiguous. Plus, as a perfectionist, all I had to do was please God. Simple, right?

When I was a child, I used to be fascinated by the periodic table. Maybe it was because of how organized it was, the implicit simplicity in its structure. Look at it. The weights and atomic numbers increase from left to right, top to bottom. Every element belongs to a specific group. There's no randomness or spontaneity. What you see is what you get.

You have to start in east St. Louis, Missouri to understand him. My father is the oldest of four children and was born in May of 1958 at the tail end of the baby boomer era. East St. Louis was not a place for children to grow up in; shootings and drug deals were its currency. Because of this, my paternal grandmother sent my father and his siblings to Lutheran North, a religious private school, to establish order in the midst of the random crimes occurring in their neighborhood. My father graduated in 1977 and after briefly attending college and flunking out, he enlisted himself in the Air Force, following in the steps of his military father.

Though the military is structured to somewhat force individuals to conform, my dad didn't. He was stubborn and liked to party since he DJ'd as a hobby, spinning hip hop and house records in crowded clubs from Germany to Florida. He was also married, but the union ended

because he and his first wife couldn't stop arguing. His DJ career also concluded because as the eighties and nineties wore on, his friends traded the club for marriages and parenthood. My dad needed order, and so, sensing that dedication to the Air Force would pay off, he yielded to its policies and procedures more intensely. After twenty years of service, his glowing reputation among his peers and superiors landed him a job that paid well enough to support me and my brothers. He also found his faith, and my dad attributes his redemption arc not to himself, but to God. He finally had perfect order, his coveted reward.

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Radioactivity is defined as a “property exhibited by certain types of matter emitting energy and subatomic particles spontaneously.” There are around 38 radioactive elements, some of which are naturally occurring. Americium, the element whose periodic number is 95, is radioactive but manmade. It's commonly used in smoke detectors, sensing trouble when humans cannot.

Track two: On “Hold Up,” Beyoncé asserts, “They don't love you like I love you.” Who's the “they?” Other women of course, but also to an extent, Jay-Z's fans. Both groups don't see Jay-Z for who he actually is, but rather, who he portrays himself to be. Only his wife truly knows him, as evidenced on “Pray You Catch Me.” An up tempo track, she samples the plucky production of Andy Williams' “Can't Get Used to Loving You,” adding a reggae feel to the song.

In the video for “Hold Up,” Beyoncé recreates the art film *Ever is Over All* by Swiss visual artist Pipilotti Rist. In both the video and film, the women gleefully walk down crowded city streets smiling before turning their attention to parked cars. They smash the windows of

various vehicles; Rist with a hammer shaped as a flower, and Beyoncé with a Louisville Slugger nicknamed “Hot Sauce.”

Don’t be a hothouse flower; fragility gets you nowhere. Submit to the spontaneity. Let wrath consume you. You can do it. Try it. No, really. Pick up something heavy and swing.

The etymology of the name Ashtyn is “ash tree town.” It originates from the medieval period when settlers would notice a prominent topographical feature and name their settlements after it.

God made ash trees so pleasing to the eye that humans had no choice but to name places after them. My mom liked the name Ashton, but took a hammer to the spelling, finding Ashtyn more feminine and pleasant. From my name, it seems I was destined to please.

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Examining my brothers’ relationships with my father puts into perspective why I am the way I am. For most of my brother Kelvin’s adulthood, I was playing with Barbies and winning class spelling bees while he bounced around between jobs and local colleges. At one point, he enrolled in the Navy, fulfilling my father’s wish for one of his children to continue down the military route. After about two months, he was sent home because they lowered him in water, and not knowing how to swim, Kelvin’s body panicked from the submersion. Years later, he did find a stable career. However, I suspect he knows that every time my dad remarks to people that his oldest son eventually found his way, he would rather Kelvin have had a more ordered, and less random, path.

Isaac, meanwhile, had the straightforward life my dad desired of his children. He majored in Computer Engineering with a minor in Math and works as an engineer in Huntsville. He followed in my dad's footsteps with his STEM career, earning his approval.

Religion, however, is the area where both of my brothers fail to meet my father's standards. Kelvin doesn't attend church, read the bible, or profess to believe in God. He will pray and say amen when my father encourages us to bow our heads and speak grace over our food, fellow restaurant patrons be damned. He'll nod earnestly whenever my father decides to embark on one of his religious tirades about how American Christianity has been poisoned by the evangelical movement. Whether it's genuine compliance or pure convenience, he'll always defer to my father during these moments.

Isaac, on the other hand, has always been sort of unconventional. His logic prevents him from blindly following the orders of anyone or anything. When he was in college, he called my mom and told her he wasn't religious anymore. I remember her saying to me, "Your dad's not going to like this." But like it or not, my father had to submit to reality. When my mother told him, he responded with, "Well, that's how I was at his age, but I came back to God." Even today he still believes this, as if Isaac randomly decided to not believe in Christianity, even though the signs were always there, in his quiet reluctance to utter amen or attend church at all.

Emerald ash borers are an invasive species of insects, arriving in America accidentally from a cargo ship from Asia. They are a dazzling emerald green. Their exoskeletons reflect the sun while they perform ordered attacks on ash trees, laying their eggs under the bark. Their larvae then chew the bark and carve tunnels underneath the trees, before maturing. They leave the trees to find a mate, eventually returning to repeat the cycle with their progeny. The trees,

meanwhile, die from the chaos enacted by the borers. The damage done to the ash trees is often unseen at first because the signs of their worsening health are slow to materialize.

In his book *Physics*, Aristotle studied the laws that govern nature. Really, he studied the laws that don't govern nature. He wrote, "Hence it is clear that events which belong to the general class of things that may come to pass for the sake of something, when they come to pass not for the sake of what actually results, and have an external cause, may be described by the phrase 'from spontaneity.'" Per Aristotle, spontaneous events in nature, or the universe, can have some kind of external cause to them. This is counterintuitive, but true.

The routine created a sense of comfort. I refrained from swearing, using God's (or Jesus's) name in vain, prayed before every meal, and attended church joyfully every Sunday. While I was giving everything to God, my brothers weren't. I didn't understand how they couldn't accept and surrender to God's existence like I did. I loved them, but I didn't want to become an unbeliever like them. Church had taught me that the worst thing wasn't the devil, but people who had strayed from Christianity and became "lost."

Track three: A decade before *Lemonade*, on Beyoncé's album *B'Day*, a blaring alarm soundtracks the chaotic drumming in the track and yelling in the chorus of "Ring the Alarm." Beyoncé declares, "Ring the alarm / I been through this too long / But I'll be damned if I see another chick on your arm." Of course, there's no verifiable information that this song is about Jay-Z, but seeing as the two had been dating since 2001, all signs point to him.

In an actual alarm, Americium-241, an isotope (a form of an element on the periodic table with a different number of neutrons) of Americium, ionizes the air in the smoke detector's sensing chamber. When the sensing chamber detects smoke, the electrical current produced by Americium-241 disrupts, setting off the alarm. Yet again, another spontaneous event interrupting order, or rather, another manmade event disrupting manmade order.

The last element added to the periodic table was first synthesized in 2002, the same year Beyoncé and Jay-Z released their first single together, the Spanish-influenced and 808-heavy "03' Bonnie and Clyde," from Jay-Z's album *The Blueprint 2: The Gift & The Curse*. However, the name of the element, Oganesson, wasn't proposed until 2016, the year *Lemonade* came out. It's one of the heaviest elements on the periodic table.

My mom loved the late nineties and early noughties R&B singer, so that's why my middle name is Aaliyah.

Aaliyah has both Hebrew and Arabic origins. In Hebrew, it means "ascent" or "going up." In Arabic, it means the same, but also "high" or "exalted."

In a sense, the singer Aaliyah fulfilled her name; after her premature death in a plane crash in August 2001, about two weeks before I was born, she was granted the reverence that's only appropriate for celebrities who die randomly. I wonder if all of us are beholden to our names.

Suffering occurs when individuals become hyper obsessed with performing their religion perfectly. Those with religious OCD worry constantly if they're pleasing the deity (or deities)

they serve. There is no randomness to their actions; every prayer, thought of their deity, and following of rules is ordered, because it is through order that salvation is attained. Like an element or an affair, the heaviness of this condition is recognized before its name.

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I believed it was a competition. Watching my brothers not fulfill my father's desires for them created a fear in me that his disappointment would progress until he didn't love them anymore. I wanted my father's pride to extend toward me one day and never cease, so I resolved to myself to be the child most compliant to his wishes, and I resolved to God that I would always be the perfect Christian.

My left brain's dominance forces me to present a hardened exterior to the world, like the bark of an ash tree. It's firm and unyielding, steadfast in its decisions and towering over the ground that has no choice but to acquiesce to its will. It fools those who don't know me into thinking that I'm decisive and logical. It's a convincing façade. Internally, my right brain feasts like an ash borer upon me. It's slowly pecked away at the order established by my left brain, advertising its ideas that shimmer like a borer's exoskeleton. No matter how many trees are planted, the determinedness of the borer will always defeat it.

Track four: Though the title might fool you, "Sorry" isn't a song about Beyoncé actually apologizing to her husband. It's a bouncy trap-R&B fuck you to the rapper, with the singer declaring, "Now I'm the one that's lying / And I don't feel bad about it," before deconstructing into a mid-tempo drum-filled beat. The best revenge is moving on, even if moving on entails cheating on your philandering husband.

The music video for “Sorry” is in black and white, and features women like tennis player Serena Williams and actress Zendaya backing Beyoncé up in her bravado. They support the singer in her quest to no longer submit to her husband, even if that quest lasts just for 4 minutes and 26 seconds.

Rules seemed to be the way to earn God’s favor. I needed all the approval from him I could get to rescue my brothers from Hell. Guilt coerced my father into believing he was failing God since not all of his children were practicing Christians. I, the ever-acquiescent daughter and Christian, resolved to save their souls through godly obedience.

No listening to explicit music; clean versions only. No lusting after boys; I got a purity ring and committed to God that I wouldn’t let lust drag me into sexual sin. No skipping readings of the Bible; I had to read it in the morning and in the night. No crushes on non-Christians; the Bible said that partners should be equally yoked. No swearing, not even in my head; Paul asserted that perverse speech shouldn’t come from a believer. No using God or Jesus’s name in vain; their names were holy, not prosaic.

I believed that if I continually heeded these rules, God would deliver my brothers from the depths of Hell, and they would observe my behavior and change their heathen ways. No such things happened.

What occurred instead was that, once, in a fit of envy, one of my former friends who I attended a Baptist youth group with lamented, “You’re the perfect Christian!” She couldn’t live up to the standard of Christianity I set. I’m sure she would be pleased to learn that I couldn’t either.

Your husband abandons you, not at the altar like when you forsook God, but later, much later. His affair is a part of his nature and might be ordered in some way by God. But there is no unity for you two in this event. God and your husband are chaos; Aristotle posits that they'll continue to be. There's no perfection to be found in faith or marriage, so you abandon both.

There are four laws of thermodynamics, which is the subset of physics that deals with the heat, temperature, and energy of systems as big as the universe or as small as an atom. The second law can be described as such: "the entropy of the universe does not decrease in the course of any spontaneous change." In simple terms, entropy is disorder or chaos. So, if the universe, or anything else, is already in a state of disarray, it will remain this way, even if more spontaneous events occur.

It turned out that they didn't need saving; I did. All of the work I was doing for my brothers was influenced by my religious OCD, which I wasn't aware of at the time. I forgot to read my Bible? God hated me. Unkind thoughts about someone appeared in my brain? God hated me. A fleeting sensual musing about a boy I liked occurred? God hated me. If I could just be better, then maybe he wouldn't hate me.

Later, I managed to convince myself that God didn't hate me. Instead, he was actively punishing me. During the first week of my senior year of high school, I got into a car accident. One of my immediate presumptions, even though a fellow student had rear-ended me, was that because I had watched a YouTube video the previous Sunday in which a person swore, God made the car accident happen. He was teaching me obedience, and I needed to keep in line with the rules that though I had entirely made up myself, he wanted me to follow.

You are radioactive, sensing your own chaos consuming you. Caught in a state of entropy, you refuse to repent for your feelings. You scream and cry and curse yourself, your husband, and your obedience. You continue this way, submerged under the second law of thermodynamics, wondering when your husband will realize it is him dangling from the branches of your anger. Wondering when he will spontaneously submit to you, begging for forgiveness, in order to avoid an eternal separation of body and spirit from you.

Chaos can be a pretty good motivator. In college, I decided to major in religion; God couldn't be mad at me if I devoted my collegiate career to him. Also, my father supported my studying of religion, which was almost as good as godly approval.

During this time, I still believed I wasn't good enough for God. I convinced myself he was enraged at me for being fallible, and I spent most days ruminating on my perceived failures and assumed ticket to Hell. Weariness consumed me, so I picked Hell to study for my undergraduate thesis, hoping my fear might dissipate. What happened instead was that I unknowingly began the process of disentangling myself from Christianity.

While one way to kill the emerald ash borers is to inject insecticide into the trees, this solution is only temporary to halting their actions. The more effective method of exterminating them is to uproot the infected ash trees and replace them with different species to introduce more diversity, or rather randomness, into the forest to preserve the trees' survival. The chaos of the ash borers begets the ash trees to need some of this spontaneity themselves.

If I fully assume the desires of my right brain, and therefore the random nature of an ash borer, my devotion to certainty could be broken. But too often, I let my desire for order, and thus my left brain, overtake me along with doubt. Order is perfect; spontaneity is not. I try to be spontaneous, even though I'm afraid that if I am, I'll invite chaos into my life. I'll construct an altar to it, prostrating myself and serving a new god.

Radioactive decay occurs when isotopes spontaneously transmute. The isotopes' volatility causes their nuclei to randomly decay in order to become stabilized. This process doesn't perfectly follow the second law of thermodynamics, proving Aristotle right. But if stability is what the atoms are after, then it's at the cost of encountering chaos.

Track this. Your relationship with your husband and God are the same. Your knees, bruised and purple, split open like atoms. Decaying from trying to contort your thoughts to understand why he would leave, why you would leave him. What Louisville Slugger sized void invokes you to repeat the cycle of performing perfection? To desire order, where there is none?

—

In 2017, Jay-Z finally responded to *Lemonade* through his album *4:44*. In a *New York Times* interview promoting the album, he alluded to his reasoning for cheating, which on *Lemonade*, Beyoncé can never quite figure out. While discussing the rapper's stint in therapy, the interviewer asks, "You can't connect because of the way you feel about yourself, you mean?" Jay-Z responds, "Yes. In my case, like it's, it's deep. And then all the things happen from there: infidelity ..." He trails off, never saying what else results from his disconnected self.

So, perhaps the cheating wasn't ever really about Beyoncé to begin with. Jay-Z realized that if you don't deal with your feelings then yes, you will be forced to acknowledge them eventually in some form, usually destructive. Or, in other words, your emotions will force you to abide by the second law of thermodynamics, increasing the chaos you already feel and enact.

Knowledge can cause someone to randomly decay internally. In my senior thesis I wrote, "Misreadings of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and non-canonical interpretations of a godless afterlife have contributed more to the contemporary understanding of Hell than the Bible itself. It is ironic how heavily Christianity relies on the idea of Hell, though there are minimal discussions and descriptions of it in its most sacred text." I had spent so much time devoting myself to the Bible, thinking the words in it were true. I started wondering that if I no longer believed in Hell as a Christian, then what else did I not believe in?

Daniel, my surname, originates from the biblical story of the titular character, who in the midst of being surrounded by a den of lions and having apocalyptic dreams, remained faithful to God. Its meaning is "only God is my judge." It's funny that I'll be submitting to my husband like Beyoncé did by changing my last name, as if giving up my faith wasn't spiting it enough.

—

Beyoncé's diet caused a stir, even though most people knew the tactics employed by celebrity women to maintain bodily standards of perfection. Prior to her April 2018 Coachella set, which featured half of *Lemonade*, she gave birth to twins. Headlining a Coachella set takes months of preparation, and as a perfectionist, Beyoncé wanted to ensure that her body could execute every dance move flawlessly. In order to shed her post-partum weight, she embarked

upon an extreme diet and workout regimen. In her documentary *Homecoming*, she narrates, “In order for me to meet my goals, I’m limiting myself to no bread, no carbs, no sugar, no dairy, no meat, no fish, no alcohol ... I’m hungry.” Jay-Z later praises her when she drops the weight and tries on an old costume, repeating, “All right,” with a satisfied lilt before laughing in approval.

Watching this scene, I imagined Matthew 14, where Jesus feeds 5,000 people with never-ending bread and fish. If he came down to Earth, Beyoncé would refuse his offer, instead telling him she must submit to her diet in order to shed the chaos and randomness bodies can bring.

It was not supposed to go the way it did. About a year ago, a friend invited me to a worship night her church was having. It was camp style, with a bonfire, stars blinking at us from the indigo sky, and guitars. She invited me in the spirit of inclusion, figuring that though I wasn’t a Christian, I could get something out of the fellowshiping. I accepted the invitation warily, as I didn’t care to be re-Christianized, but decided to suspend my judgment.

As about twenty-five of us sang acoustic versions of songs like “Amazing Grace,” any attachment to Christianity that might have existed within me faded. When I used to sing worship songs, I would get this feeling in my chest. It was like my heart was swelling and opening to receive God and his presence. But, as I sang these songs, I felt nothing. I recited the words anyway, bowed my head to pray, and said “Amen,” though I didn’t know who I was saying amen to.

You’ve learned to stop expecting perfection and order in institutions where there is none. Strength the size of an ash tree allows you to return to your husband and to embrace spontaneity, but not perfection or order or religion.

I deceived myself when I began writing this essay that it would end with some grand discovery. There is no discovery to be made, no stability to be found. For so long, I molded myself into an ideal. Now I'm having to reconsider what I actually believe about the world and humanity, instead of submitting to dogma. I'm already paying the price of my religious deconstruction.

I FaceTimed my dad about eleven months ago. We discussed the usual topics of grad school and politics for a while before a comfortable silence began. Lent had begun a day or two before, and in the spirit of the holiday, I spontaneously decided to give up lying by omission.

I interrupted the silence and confessed, "Dad, I'm not really a Christian anymore." A look of disappointment and resigned acceptance passed over his face before he spoke. "That's okay," he responded, dismay coating his words, before he quickly changed the subject.

I ceased to bring up the topic with him for a few weeks. During a rant about American Christianity, he asserted that I "was more of a Christian" than most people because of my formal education. Indignation bubbled up in my throat, threatening to spill out of my mouth. I wanted to tell him that my degree was pointless, collecting dust along with my bible. But my compliance consumed me and prevented me from doing so. It's easier to rebuke the words of a god I've never met than those of my father's, but it's also easier to resent my father for not being perfect than to resent God.

My only source of comfort is knowing that the molecules which result from radioactive decay and become stable are called daughter isotopes, while the original molecules that decay are called parent isotopes. I'm certain there's a lesson to be learned from this fact if only my father and I both submitted to it.

Am I Beautiful to You?

When someone compliments my appearance or my body, instinctually, I want to disagree with them. It's not out of humility, but discomfort. Being perceived as beautiful or attractive doesn't mean as much to me as it used to, so I want to reject the compliment and pretend it doesn't exist.

What I want to tell anyone who has ever complimented my appearance or body is that, for a majority of my adolescence, I wished I looked completely different. I tried a million different methods to run away from the face and body I was given. I tried hating myself into becoming more conventionally attractive, which didn't work. But I don't tell anyone that. Most people just want the person they compliment to accept the praise, and so, I do.

—

For some women, the wound starts with a family member. It's a holiday; Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, Christmas, maybe your parents' anniversary. Clothes cling to your body a little more than they did last year, but surely not enough for someone to notice. You descend the staircase, thighs rubbing together. Finding your way to the dining room that's only used for special occasions like this one, you sit. A relative eyes you from their periphery, until their gaze fully swings to your outfit. They mutter something about your clothes being filled out more. The comment doesn't register fully until your eyes are watering and you feel shame.

Or maybe it starts with a crush. They never really notice you, attention focused elsewhere. On themselves, on making the baseball team, on not failing seventh grade math. Their room is decorated with posters of some movie franchise you pretend to care about, trophies from their youth, and books they'll never read but keep collecting. In the fluorescent-lit hallways at

school, you notice that their attention is on the person who is just a bit prettier than you, just a bit more in shape than you, but never you.

For me, it started with Samantha, a girl in my class with curly brown hair and a smile furnished with missing teeth. Outside of our third-grade school gymnasium, she turned around and told me, “Your stomach sticks out!”

My mind tells me to stop eating, and I obey it by not finishing my dinner one night. My mom asks me why my plate is still full. Because I’m young, lying doesn’t come naturally yet. I reply, “Samantha told me that my stomach sticks out.”

When Samantha’s mother receives a call from my mother, she doesn’t care very much. She shrugs her daughter’s behavior off. My mother yells into the phone, “My daughter’s not eating!”

My mother and Samantha’s mother never reach a consensus on the issue, because I never get an apology from Samantha. My mother reassures me that my body is fine, but I never really believe her.

—

As children, we’re naïve and ignorant, and assume our afflictions are self-inflicted. Scars, both internal and external, serve as reminders to our inherent inadequacies. On the rare occasions we don’t self-blame, God or the universe is culpable. It’s only when we start to grow into adults that we examine the root: our parents. We realize that maybe we were cursed with our problems before we were even aware of them.

My mother used to frequently call herself overweight and unattractive. She would glance in mirrors and hate the reflection she saw. She appraised my body and lamented the fact that hers

was no longer predisposed to thinness. She recalled her skinniness, emphasizing how much better her life was when she weighed less.

Additionally, all sorts of diet foods filled our kitchen, from healthy snack bars to low calorie and low-fat salad dressings. Atkins, Palm Beach Body, and SlimFast were as familiar to me as characters on children's shows. The belief that restricting what you ate was good became normal.

My mother also paid attention to every physical detail on her children's bodies. She always noted hairs out of place or creased spots on shirts. She constantly found something that needed to be fixed, lest her children appear less than ideal. Appearances were most important, as anyone at any time could scrutinize us, and we should be ready to be gazed at. When I began to pick my body apart following the incident with Samantha, I followed her blueprint.

—

There's only a period of time before girls' self-hatred transforms from a mental exercise into a physical punishment. By my preteens, Tumblr had taught me what anorexia was and even though I lost the fat Samantha pointed out, I still desired to be skinnier. For a few days, I drank water, ate a few gummy snacks, and tried to reduce my food intake to one or two meals a day. I kept a journal around this time, and in one entry from August 14, 2012, I wrote that a magazine "said one way to lose weight is to have a low glycemic index." I didn't even know what those words meant.

I thought I was being discreet, but you can only be so secretive about trying to not eat. My brother Isaac must have been observing me. He knew everything about me, including when I was hiding something. One day, when I was unloading the dishwasher, he asked me, "Why do you care so much about what other people think?" I knew the subtext of what he was really

asking, which was, “Why do you care that you’re as thin as possible and that other people notice?” I told him that I didn’t, and he replied, “Yes, you do.” I started sobbing, and he hugged me until I stopped.

I abandoned my journal and realized that I had to eat, in spite of my fears of gaining weight and having my stomach poke out like Samantha said it did. Though for the most part my relationship with food remained healthy after this, I never looked at my body the same.

—

Shame forced me to regard myself as embarrassing for my past disordered eating. If I didn’t think about my hatred toward my body, then it didn’t exist, which meant it wasn’t a problem. However, as soon as someone brings up an insecurity, you remember its presence.

Halfway through my sixth grade year, I sat behind a boy named Max. He was a football player, adamant that he was going to be a star once we got to high school. He wasn’t any different than any twelve-year-old boy in my school at that point; they all aspired for Division One college athlete fame and treated women like objects.

One afternoon after lunch, Max turned around in his desk chair and, looking at me, declared, “You know Ashtyn, I would only date you because you’re so smart.” At that time in my life, I was solely focused on improving my intelligence, but I knew that being smart wasn’t cool or interesting to boys. What was cool and interesting was being pretty. Even though Max’s comment was supposed to be complimentary, I considered it to be backhanded at the least and an outright insult of my appearance at the most, because I wanted my beauty praised, not my brain.

I started wondering that if I wasn’t pretty, then what good was I? I already had a complex about my body, so developing one about my face seemed to be the next step in furthering my low self-esteem. I began to fantasize about turning eighteen and getting plastic surgery. I wanted my

cheeks, which were round, to be thinner and smaller. I also wanted my nose to be thinner and smaller, because I assumed it was too large. Unfortunately, my desires would have to wait six more years to be fulfilled, so I found an alternative.

I began to wear makeup. My mother, who had worn it for as long as I could remember, was thrilled. Not because she had a daughter who was interested in traditionally feminine pursuits, but because we could bond. She rarely left the house without it on, whether she was going to work or running errands. It seemed that for her too, makeup was a method to distract people from noticing her body.

She let me have her well-loved Estée Lauder Foundation Powder and allowed me to wear that, along with eyeshadow and mascara. I remember her excited squeaks of approval when she saw me with my face done up before school. The powder felt too heavy on my face, like I was wearing a mask. The mascara weighed down my eyelashes, and every time I blinked, I knew my insecurities reflected in the eyeshadow more than glitter pigments. I was beautiful though, so wasn't that all that mattered?

—

At some point, I gave up my performance of beauty and stopped wearing makeup. I hated putting it on and I hated removing it, my skin tugging with the aggressiveness with which I scrubbed the cosmetics off. I also wasn't talented at it. In the midst of its absence, I still didn't believe I was beautiful, but I tried to think about my appearance minimally.

During this time, every compliment someone gave me became twisted. Anytime someone told me, "I wish I was as thin as you," all my brain heard was that I was only valued for my thinness and I should stay thin. When one of my classmates in ninth grade mentioned that I

should “be a model because of my height,” in my head, I questioned her, thinking, “So, you don’t think my face could make me a model? Just my height?”

I constantly desired validation from others, wanting them to act as a mirror that would dissipate my insecurities. I attempted to tell myself I didn’t need outside opinions, positive or negative, to dictate my self-esteem, but I could never be praised enough. As soon as someone said something kind about my appearance, I began to doubt them and I craved for someone else to compliment me.

Additionally, most girls my age began entering their first semi-serious relationships, and so I began to hold out for my own Prince Charming. I watched as acquaintances and friends got asked to school dances and on dates. Weeks, months, and eventually years passed, and nothing ever happened to me. My friends always told me that my singleness didn’t matter and that I was beautiful. I assumed they were feeding me platitudes, pitying me but too nice to say so. I decided my lack of suitors was due to the way I looked. Despite my aesthetic flaws, I hoped that one day someone would love me.

Around the beginning of ninth grade, I developed a crush on a boy named Ryan. It started out stupid, as all high school crushes do. I only began liking him because in our biology class, our teacher had assigned us some trivial worksheet to do. I finished with it, and as I was about to stand to turn it in, Ryan stood up and offered to take it for me. The way he had performed this action mindlessly trapped me in his world. I wasn’t used to boys being kind, and I categorized his action as more meaningful than an innocuous favor.

Over the years, what hurt the most, besides my own delusions of mutual pining, is that the girls he dated looked nothing like me. There was Ella, the short, blue-eyed, blonde girl. Or Katherine, the girl two years younger than us who had curly, brown hair, freckles, and blue eyes.

I compared myself to them, wishing I was petite and cute like they were. I never got chosen by Ryan, and so I considered myself unwanted, unattractive, and undesirable; no boy could deliver me from that.

—

For women, our bodies are subject to the tidal waves of our emotional capriciousness. When we're confident, the waters are clear and steady, touching the coastline of our minds with ease; when we're insecure, we try to divorce our bodies from us, submerging them into the sea as deep as possible. There are only so many red flags that can be put up before we inevitably drown.

Researchers from the journal *Body Image* define body neutrality as the following: “(1) our feelings about our body change constantly and so, are best mindfully observed without judgement, (2) a central focus on what our body allows us to do and appreciating this will lead us to respect and care for our body, and (3) acknowledgement that our self-worth encompasses both intrinsic qualities and extrinsic passions and de-emphasises our appearance.”

Body neutrality seemed like a lifeline. I was desperate to be saved from myself, and while this philosophy could help with that, I had to depend on myself to change, which was the scariest part.

In the early stages of my self-improvement, I ate lunch with a mutual friend. She had struggled with her weight, and over the previous summer, went on a diet and worked out until she lost it. When she showed up to school, I had never seen her be complimented more. She kept up her habits, wanting to maintain the thinness she had achieved.

I was eating some kind of pasta dish, and she glanced over with disgust. “Do you know how many calories there are in that?” She pointed, emphasizing her repulsion. Samantha's

comment flashed in my head. That familiar bodily shame floated up, and for a second, I regretted eating. But I refused to let her determine how I perceived my body. I replied, “No, and I don’t care.”

I thought about her comment later, but not from a standpoint of shame. She had become hypervigilant about food following her weight loss, and in some attempt to make herself feel better about the control she exercised over her dietary choices, she tried to exert that same power over mine.

—

Some people regress into their bodies. They hunt on the Internet for pictures of better-looking and better-bodied people, looking for inspiration to fulfill the latest aesthetic trend. They wake at 5:00am, suffer through weightlifting or Pilates or some other workout. They take precise care of their body just to have it professionally mutilated. Botox, filler, rhinoplasties, liposuction, and other cosmetic procedures are aspirations. Their appearance is their downfall and their pride.

You might be one of these people. You touch your face with the precision of a Renaissance sculptor, dreaming that you’ll look like one. Immovable. Delicate. Perfect. On display. A body not meant to be lived in but experienced by others. A body built for admiration.

My former best friend Taylor is like this. When we were seventeen, she got her first boyfriend, Luke. He was a class clown, always cracking jokes and earning laughs from our classmates. He was the only person I considered an enemy, as once, he had referred to me as “homely,” without blinking an eye.

A couple months into their relationship, he started criticizing her appearance, pointing out the acne on her face. To appease him, she began wearing makeup. She wasn’t the best at it, and

he made fun of her for that too. Sometimes her foundation would oxidize, turning a bright orange color on her face, while the rest of her body remained pale.

Eventually, like most high school relationships, theirs ended. After the break up though, Taylor flitted from one fling to another. If her romantic partners complimented her appearance, she embraced them for a week or so before distrust set in, and she left them before repeating the cycle with someone else.

In college, I periodically checked her Instagram. In every photo she posted, her makeup was done perfectly. Her naturally dark blonde hair was platinum, and she sported a well-maintained spray tan. If it hadn't been for her username, I wouldn't have recognized her.

—

The pursuit of beauty never stops coming for any of us. The sorority I joined had the tagline of “building confidence.” For eighteen years, I complained that sororities were shallow, money making schemes that feigned sisterhood. However, faced with anxiety about friendlessness, I put my criticisms behind me.

At first, everything was great. They nominated me for leadership positions and by the end of the fall semester of my freshman year, I was being primed to eventually become president. They doted on me, offering me endless compliments about how thankful they were that I was a member of their sorority. I ended freshman year with my ego never feeling better, believing I was valued and treasured.

When sorority recruitment occurred during my sophomore year, and this time I was the one recruiting, the superficiality of my sorority surfaced. There was a freshman girl who waxed poetic about wanting to join our sorority, but some sorority sisters complained that she “didn't

have the right look.” It was then that I understood that I had passed some test of beauty, in which my appearance was deemed good enough to represent the sorority.

One day, following recruitment practice, the Vice President of Recruitment, in complete seriousness, looked at all fifty of us and said, “None of you are beautiful enough to show up to recruitment without makeup on your face. Put on mascara, lipstick, foundation, something!” As I scanned the faces of my sorority sisters, they had no expressions, as if they were used to hearing that their bare faces held no beauty.

When recruitment came around, some of my sorority sisters spent a couple of hours applying makeup to their faces, running around our sorority house trying to find every reflective surface possible to make sure their appearances were up to our Vice President of Recruitment’s standards. I watched them, with mascara haphazardly coating my eyelashes, and realized that despite their compliments, I would always be held to some standard regarding my appearance. A couple weeks after recruitment, I took a leave of absence and eventually dropped out; ironically, being in the sorority instilled me with enough confidence to leave it.

—

I can pretend that I’m much further evolved when it comes to my opinion on my appearance, but that’s not true. I still beg any mirror I’m in front of to show me that I’m not as unattractive as I fear I am. I still intentionally buy products advertised to keep my skin clear. I still care enough about my appearance to put an inane amount of effort into maintaining it.

And even though I really am uncomfortable with compliments, my preoccupation with my appearance hasn’t fully gone away. Instead, it’s mutated. There’s a hidden desire within me that hopes that when you read this essay, you’ll think to yourself, “She’s beautiful.” I want my beauty universally perceived but not universally spoken about.

You feel this way too. When you finish reading this essay, you'll leave whatever room you're in, and wander outside, passing by strangers on the street. Perhaps you'll silently wonder and pray that they'll remark on how attractive you are, answering the question you internally ask of them: am I beautiful to you?

Sovereignty

Late June sunlight illuminated
the protesting bodies facing
the historic courthouse. Slogans
on posters whizzed by my eyeline.
“My Body, My Choice” and
“Bans Off Our Bodies”

mostly appeared. Thick, black ink graced
white posters, a contrast mirroring
modes of thought. Other times ink
adorned pink posters to remind those
celebrating the ruling that the women
mourning it were once girls too.

Some still were. I walked past tear-
streaked and irate faces. Action
wasn't mine to take; I was an unpaid
youth at an organization that believed
my despair should center on international
sorrows, not domestic suffering.

I entered a white-walled, barely furnished
office. I sat down, thinking of the privilege
I had to perform that action. To seek rest
while the right to sovereignty over
women's bodies was terminated
by six justices. Did those six feel

that their decision was simply another act
of administering justice? Did they hear
the same cries I did? Maybe they did
but struck the gavel down anyway.
What a way to exercise power,
by taking it away.

The Burden

I'm sentenced
by you

to the pen. You, who
consume me

and the poems I create
like gluttons unsated.

You crave someone
who showcases

their eternal loneliness
and sheds,

like a dog, their privacy.
For your pleasure, I

craft revealing phrases
about self-loathing.

I cut myself open
and dissect

my brain, desperate
to find

a new fact or memory
about my life.

This poem is your lover,
sister, and best friend.

It assumes the roles
I cannot

so that my relatability
isn't squandered.

It severs more
and more

of me from
myself,

burying a heart that
once was mine

in the words
you devour.

You beg for more
to read,

and I give it to you.

Book Review

In the first five paragraphs of the prologue to *The Mountains and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry*, Joe Wilkins repeats, like a refrain, the phrase, “What I remember...” From his memory, he takes readers through being awoken by his grandfather, who takes him, his older sister, and younger brother to the hospital to say goodbye to their dying father.

Through his recollection, Wilkins implores readers to remember alongside him by experiencing his father’s death, but also, to remember the moment where their own childhood innocence ended, and adult anxieties began. For Wilkins, “remembering is the opposite of pretending” and “is the beginning of telling the truth to yourself about yourself.” In telling the truth about himself, Wilkins doesn’t shy away from exploring both his shortcomings and successes; he, like the people he writes about, is neither hero nor villain, but simply a person.

Across five numbered sections in *The Mountains and the Fathers*, Wilkins narrates his coming of age in Montana, specifically the Big Dry, an area in eastern Montana afflicted by droughts, poverty, and sorrow. Section I introduces the audience to the five main characters in Wilkins’ life at this time: his mother, his father, his grandfather, the Big Dry, and himself. Section II recounts the men he relied on both before, and after, his father’s death. Section III focuses on the land of the Big Dry, balancing between discussing water and fire. Section IV centers on Wilkins’ adolescence and the future he imagined beyond living on the Big Dry. Lastly, section V describes Wilkins’ life after the Big Dry. Wilkins’ writing style shifts across the five sections. In the beginning, Wilkins adheres pretty strongly to the lyric “I,” utilizing vivid descriptions and imagery to capture his adolescence. As the book continues, he trades the “I” for the “you,” placing the audience into his detailed scenes and immersing them in his metaphors. Additionally, he employs the collective “we” to illustrate how those in the Big Dry are ultimately united by their shared economic and personal troubles.

In the midst of witnessing the tragedies of the Big Dry, Wilkins is a boy looking for guidance. For him, surrogate father figures teach him about himself. There’s Donnie Laird, a family friend who, while wearing a “button-up work shirt” leads Wilkins to think “if this is just what you do when you are a man: get big and thick and wear a blue shirt to work.” Or, Frank Hollowell, an English teacher, who, with his wife, has “ambitions beyond a good footstool and a six-pack of Coors.” These men offer a glimpse into the kinds of masculinity available to Wilkins; either the rugged manliness native to the Big Dry, or a milder one that requires him to aim outside of what’s expected of him.

The book shines when Wilkins explores what his place is not only as a man, but as a person. One of the central questions of the memoir centers around becoming: is it a passive process, in which we let nature overtake us, or is a series of intentional choices, in which we construct our own path? Wilkins’ teenage years illustrate the tension between these two perspectives.

When an older boy's girlfriend dumps him, the situation that follows is narrated with a stark matter-of-factness that emphasizes Wilkins' complicity:

"We tailed her through town. We yelled when we got close, swore and said all kinds of things. And when she took off down the highway, we came after her. We cranked it up to a hundred and pulled even with her and threw pop cans at her windshield. We followed her when she turned off onto a gravel road, when she turned off into a field of sagebrush, when she skidded to a dusty stop in the middle of nowhere."

Wilkins' ability to assimilate into this behavior shows how in the moment, sometimes we can assume roles and behaviors that we would, at least consciously, never want to. The "we" in this passage underscores how widely normalized this type of behavior is, as none of the boys think twice about the actions they're engaging in. The violence enacted isn't simply teenage angst, but a reflection of the Big Dry itself, which is also cruel and punishing.

Despite sometimes assimilating, Wilkins still retains that he's "a fumbling, bookish boy," who can't resign himself to the Big Dry and his life there. So, if one doesn't feel tethered to their hometown, what do they do? For Wilkins, he makes community with other outcasts. When's he sixteen, Wilkins meets a boy named Justin. The friendship between them provides an atmosphere where the two aren't defined by the loss (or abandonment) of father figures. Together, the two aren't outsiders, but are young men truly caring for each other. They encourage each another to carve out a version of masculinity that privileges progressive politics and kindness over violence and power.

While both boys feel a sense of isolation living on the Big Dry, Wilkins is encouraged by the promise of college to leave it; for Justin, the Big Dry was his place to escape from absentee parents. How can one survive the place that was meant to be their refuge? They don't, and often have to find safety themselves. After Justin's attacked by his abusive uncle, Wilkins and Justin eventually convince his mother to let him stay with them, but Justin disappears. Years later, Wilkins hears that he's in Arizona as a member of the Job Corps. Justin represents how a person can take ownership of their life and make decisions for themselves. Even if the decision Justin made to leave still haunts Wilkins, it shows him that the act of staying can harm you more than leaving does.

Wilkins escapes the Big Dry; by the end of the memoir, he's in Iowa, a teacher, and married with two children. He's carefully constructed his life to have peace and stability. He "tried hard to hate the place of [his] boyhood," faulting it for "disaffections, drunken violence, deaths." Yet he still comes back with his family sometimes. He writes, "On summer afternoons, we sit on my mother's porch and watch storms roll west, see the sky go white with lightning, shake with thunder. At midnight, we stand on the rutted stretch of gravel that leads to the house and crane our necks back to look at the great wash of stars that is more beautiful and strange than I ever remember."

In his quiet acquiescence to the land, Wilkins shows us that we can't run away from the environments that made us. Instead, we have to make peace with them, and perhaps, honor them, like those who've passed, through remembering.

Reading List

Nonfiction

- Books
 - *The Mountains and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry* by Joe Wilkins
 - *A Little Devil in America* by Hanif Abdurraqib
 - *Girlhood* by Melissa Febos
 - *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel
 - *Places I've Taken My Body* by Molly McCully Brown
 - *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon
- Essays
 - “Lost Wax” by Jericho Parns from *Lost Wax*
 - “Sad White Women” by Mary Wang
 - “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin from *Notes of a Native Son*
 - “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain” by Leslie Jamison from *The Empathy Exams*

Poetry

- “Annunciation Under Erasure” by Mary Szybist from *Incarnadine*
- “How to Proceed” by Rose McLarney from *Colorfast*
- “The Collectors of Local Minerals Are Likelier to Find What They Seek” by Rose McLarney from *Colorfast*