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Sinking Into My Skin: An Exploration of the Mind and Body Through Multigenre Creative Writing

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SINKING INTO MY SKIN: AN EXPLORATION OF
THE MIND AND BODY THROUGH
MULTIGENRE CREATIVE WRITING

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa
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This Study by: Ana Eagan

Entitled:

Sinking Into My Skin: An Exploration of the Mind and Body Through Multigenre
Creative Writing

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation
University Honors

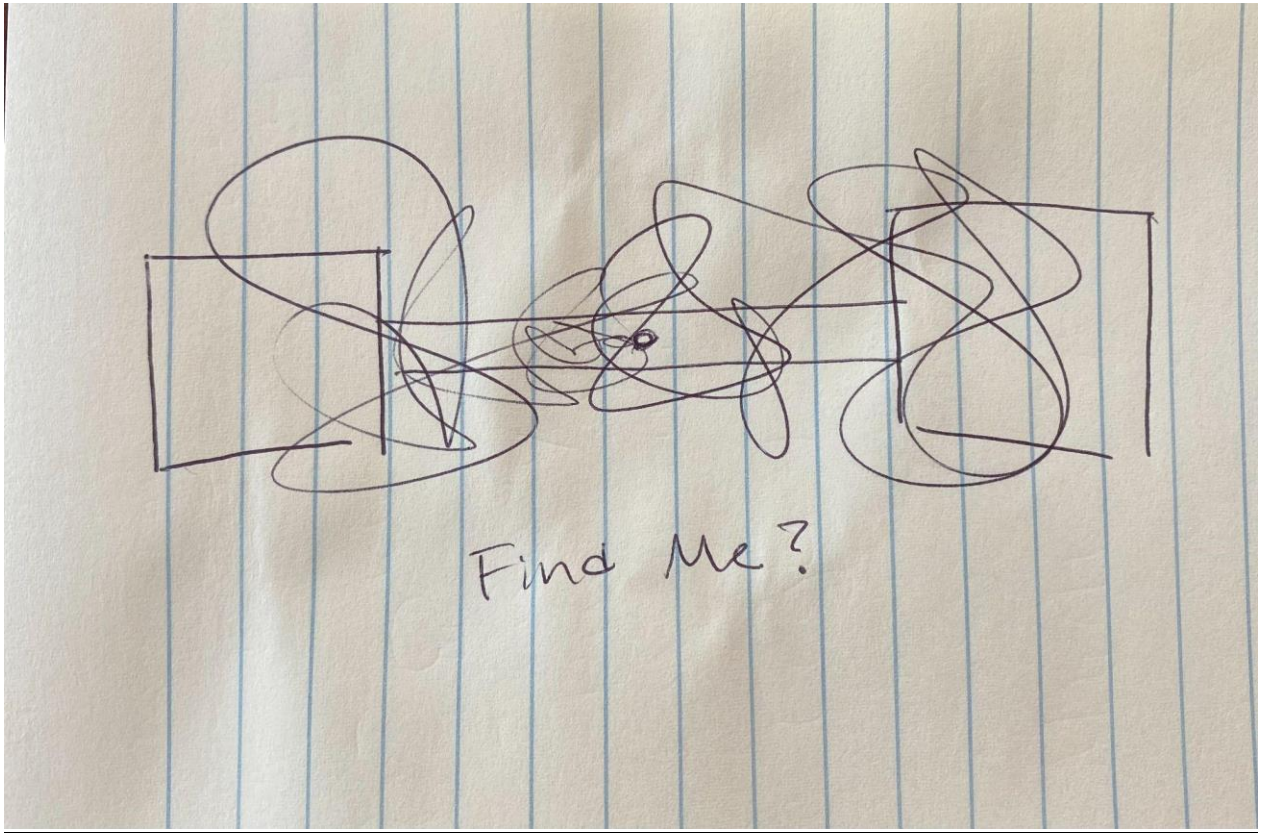
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TRIGGER WARNING:

The following pages include a variety of content that may be considered harmful or traumatizing for readers. In this creative work, sensitive subjects, including mental health episodes and diagnoses, are mentioned and discussed throughout many pieces of writing.

Readers, please use caution when reading this creative work.



March 7th, 2022

an author's note on angel numbers

On a scale of one to ten, where do you find yourself situated? On lucky number seven? Stable number four? Infinite number eight? Or a tricky number six?

Every day, every moment, we find ourselves with energy flowing at different capacities. I feel these changes in myself often, regulating my emotions and my responses to them. Another homework assignment turned in at the last minute—stress washes away as I sigh with relief and shut down every tab on my computer. My best friend reads a text message and doesn't respond—my breath hitches, my stomach clenches and I worry about the state of our relationship.

In the darkest moments of my life, I held on to these numbers in the same way I would desperately cling to my soft lavender baby blanket in my childhood. I rode the sine waves of my emotions as I oscillated between the worst of times, and the best of times. How did I process the range of experiences I was going through? I paid attention to the signs around me, creating meaning out of the nothingness.

Angel numbers are found in repeated, predictable sequences. They show up in ordinary places, on a forgotten price tag you find on the floor, on the blinking alarm clock that wakes you up every morning, on the license plate you find on the Chevy Tahoe in front of you on the highway, or in my own 777 telephone prefix.

Even my birth was a sign from above. I was born on January 1st, 2001 (01/01/01) at 2:22 in the afternoon. Talk about luck from the angels!

I have always interpreted any occurrence of an angel number in my ordinary life as a sign from the universe to pay attention; to soak up the moment I feel the breeze rustle against the fine blonde baby hairs on my cheeks, to treasure the sound of laughter coming from a dear friend in the backseat of my racing car as we pass a billboard, to notice the sensation in my body as I lie still and quietly stare at the clock reading 12:34 in the morning.

It's certainly a cliché, but I believe that everything happens for a reason. Throughout the following pages, pay attention to the angel numbers and their supposed significance—then create your own. There is no set way to interpret anything that appears before you. In the same way I present the pages before you, I urge you to design your own experience.

What is the point of this explanation anyway? I can't set the record straight for you. It's your reality—form your own conclusions.

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braided

don't
get it
twisted.

first,
and foremost—
this is NOT about a boy.

he may have been a catalyst,
a spark that ignited
the path down into
the cavernous
malformations
of my brain,
the wick
of my candle
slowly burning,
our twin flames
searing, etching our
initials in the melted wax.

but he is not the center,
not the knot of meaning
that tied the noose together.

watch the weaving
of wistful stories
that seem to hold
no significance,
for the substance
that matters flows
between my lips,
gaseous flower
filling my constricted
lungs—i cough up
formalities like *please*
or *thank you* or *excuse*
my shitty actions.

she says:
we all have issues
and **you** said
what you meant
and *i accept your*
apology.

yet, i cannot apologize
enough for the terrible ways
in which i handled these situations.
i have no defense,
only presentations of facts,
only interpretations of reality.
i have no rebuttal.

i do not condone
my conduct,
my thoughts,
my beliefs.

i can only ask you
to look between the gaps
and the finite cracks
of my fragile, egocentric
mania.

this is not a cry for help,
nor a sadistic appreciation
for the toxic words
that spilled
from my mouth,
or for the actions
that riddled my limbs.

instead i offer
grace—
not solutions,
nor resolutions—

only hope.

There was a sense of relief when I left him on that first day—I feel a bit ashamed to admit that now. I had been suffocating in our relationship for several months, realizing every day that I had settled for a future I didn't realize I had signed up for. We already lived together, cramped in space cluttered with millions of my clothes, cat litter sprinkled on the carpet, and an Xbox teetering on the edge of my Walmart dresser that he constructed—I knew what the next steps were. I knew he was so far deep into the relationship, but the pressure had gotten to me. I didn't want the white picket fence, two dogs, three kids, and a loyal husband type of lifestyle—one that *he* imagined for *us*. I felt the need to get out of the shell we had cocooned ourselves into when we started college, when we started our relationship. I wanted adventure, something ecstatic, something new, something *electric*. We had passion, for sure, but it seemed impossible that he would be the only person I could love romantically for the rest of my entire LIFE.

Plus, he wasn't a woman—something that I unwittingly held against him. He was a straight, cis white man that I had shaped into the perfect boyfriend—he cooked for me, kissed me before leaving for work each morning, and generously complimented me (almost always). We were molded to fit each other, in our habits and in our minds. We were so reliant on each other for social and emotional wellbeing, that it was hard to differentiate between us. He was the loud and boisterous one, and I was the quiet girl barely piping in with a “yes” or “totally agree” or “No way!” in every social situation. I know I loved him, but I didn't love the *idea* of him. What I did know, however, was that he would be the last man I ever loved.

When I broke up with him, he left without a real goodbye. He packed up his things while I was out of the apartment—the sliver of his closet, the random empty shoe boxes, his now stationary Xbox—leaving behind nothing but a chicken scratch note stating that he couldn't bear saying goodbye. Of course, our breakup had to conveniently line up with my high school best friend visiting town—I had left the apartment to get coffee with her—right after we had just spent a solid hour crying and sitting in complete silence. I don't blame him for leaving the way he did, not really. There's nothing like being told, “I don't see a future with you anymore.”

I spent that night downing drinks and dancing at the bar. There's a video of me taking a shot with one of my friends—her eyes widened in shock at how quickly I knocked it back. It was probably just a cherry bomb, but that video encapsulated the night for me. I jumped and shouted and sang at the top of my lungs, silently screaming *LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME! Don't you know? Oh, I haven't told you yet? It happened this morning. I swear—I'm okay. I'm happy, even. Can't you tell?*

- February 26th, 2022

denouement

Where is the big bang of clarity that punches you in the face, like the pungent smell of growth you find in the back of your throat after days of not brushing your teeth?

Where is the squiggly sense of confidence you often find hidden in the speckles of red blemishes sprayed across your face, in the marks that have been squished and dug out of your miniscule pores?

Where is the line of self-certainty in your voice, intricately hidden in the spaces between every vowel and consonant of sound, between the shiver of vocal cords rubbing against the grain of your self-doubt?

You'll find that it swirled in one ear and out the other, without touching any cell of meaning.

Where are the images of spray-painted hearts and smiley grins, placards on the cracked cement that loiter on the pixelated screen of your phone?

Where are the spinning webs of truth that stick to the pads of your fingertips, the inky black stains that leave behind prints of your swirling sense of identity?

You'll watch as they unravel and peel from the surface of your skin.

What about the searing pain of resentment that bubbles beneath the skin of your blister ridden feet, that walks along the edge of your searing heart rate and tangled breaths?

What about the unbearingly familiar sense of comfort that builds in the depths of your belly, reminding you of the sharp daggers of hunger slicing their way into the pit of your chest, barely allowing you to breathe?

You'll see them staring back at you in the reflection of water that whirls around in a porcelain bowl.

Conclusions have never been your strongest ally. Maybe it's better to leave the door cracked, barely open, barely letting the light creep through your sleep laden eyelashes. Don't you dare—

WAKEUPWAKEUPWAKEUP.

Is it even possible to ignore the blatantly obvious signs of your refusal to simply *end*?

ALIGNMENT

When I woke up the next day, I was amazed I did not have a raging hangover. I slept into most of the day, sprawled across the shabby full size mattress, taking up as much space as I could. It was the closest I would get to a full night of sleep—at least for a while.

Honestly? I don't remember much of that day. Or any day following the breakup. I was staggering through life, stuck in a drunken stupor. There are spots in my memory filled with excruciating detail from this time of my life—moments where I would stare at the minutes passing by on my digital clock, or seeing my warped image in the hexagonal mirrors I placed on the popcorn ceiling of my room. Other moments are gaps in my memory—completely blank, blocked out. I lost the memories I tried to process too soon, the moments where I said too much or did too little. Now, over a year later, February 27th, 2022 is a blank spot.

I only have the physical evidence of what I shared on Snapchat, on my private stories for my friends to see. I have two things saved for the date of February 27th. One is a video I took of a street sign with a friend's name on it, in a town nearly an hour away from my apartment. As to how I got there? I couldn't tell you. I was in a car, obviously, but I was alone in the video, blasting music with the windows down. Being alone in a car doesn't really count as being totally alone anyways—it's a separate reality that I still frequently disassociate from, suddenly appearing at my destination with no memory as to how I got there. The video presents another moment, another escape to avoid an acknowledgement of the problem.

The other memory is a screenshot of my sullen face, staring aimlessly at my closet. "*I used to love coming home to an empty apartment,*" I wrote on the post, thinking of the four other roommates that I lived with at the time. We were normally packed tightly, squeezed like sardines in our tiny four bedroom apartment. We used to be a band of couples—now I was the odd man out, isolating myself to the corner of my bed and never venturing out into the kitchen or the spacious living room. Even my cat was out of the room more than I ever was.

With no roommates in the apartment, this usually meant peace and quiet for me, a place where I could unmask my true, authentic self. There was no pressure to socialize. Or, to fit into a certain version of myself that I would attach to certain people. I could finally get down to the core of myself, and exist freely.

Except, that reality had suddenly shifted overnight. This switch didn't matter when I was drunk, not when my friends surrounded me. I wasn't truly confronted with being *alone*, until I arrived home from my adventures out and about.

“Now it’s just the worst feeling in the world.”

Was there really a version of myself that was separated from him? I had fully melded with another person—he was a function in my day to day, he was the usual, he was the norm. What happens when you take the biggest cog out of the machine?

It spirals, cranks in place, shuddering, trying to move.

- February 27th, 2022

applique

blended colors of vibrant
hues stain your eyelids,
with glitter raining down
onto your blackened lashes.

you peel off the plastic sheet
of masterful makeup plastered
and sealed against the junk
wedged into your pores.

your mask clings to cut
creases, yet you wipe away
the prickly foundation
that streaks across your skin.

you dust away your hollowed
cheekbones, the contoured
lines of your jaw, so sharp
and witty with banter.

your tiny lined eyebrow hairs
fade quickly in shade, left prim
and plucked from the little
conversation you actually made.

your cheeks become puffy
balloons, and your eyes more
plump than your pale pink lips,
so chapped, you barely smile.

under the peppered layers
of silky shades of cream
and powder, your skin
glistens, scaled crimson—

scrubbed raw.

SUPPORT

On the Monday following the breakup, I finally opened up the drapes, letting a stream of light cast through into the gloom that was my life. I am someone that loves to use blackout curtains. Growing up, I always struggled to wake up in the mornings when the sun never blasted its rays into the double paned window of my adolescent bedroom. No cracks of light were allowed to peak in, or I would be up all night tossing and turning. Sleep was my blessing, my curse, my sacred time to rest.

In my mind you're either awake, or you're asleep. You bathe your body in the piercing light, or wade aimlessly through the murky dark. Or in my case, you flip over your shoulder and cover your face using the nearest cross-stitched weighted blanket. Living in the concreteness of black and white certainly wasn't my philosophy—rather an observation of my being.

I rubbed my eyes hoping to relieve the ache behind my skull, barely having slept the night before. Yet throughout the day, I was running on the delirious sort of high that left me with abundant energy and focus that seemed to have avoided me for most of my college career. Professors marked me present at the beginning of my classes, I took notes during lectures, and I worked diligently on my writing assignments during my free time at work. My mental health had been on the decline in the few months leading up to the breakup, so this was absolutely unheard of. But, I took the blessing and ran with it.

Winterguard was my focus of the day, the competitive colorguard we formed from members of our fall squad. It was the wonderful waving of colors printed on acrylic silk material in the shape of a curved flag on a six foot pole. Our show, *still feel*, was the pride and joy of our guard. The show was challenging with technical dance moves and complicated tosses—kicking our butts in cardio almost every rehearsal. I lost nearly fifteen pounds as the season had progressed, and my feet were filled with blisters and calluses.

Practice that day was a whirlwind. Fellow members made me giggle with their funky dance moves. I poked fun at the way I moved and danced instead of keeping my stoic face focused and tightly locked on doing everything perfect to a “T.” I certainly knew I wasn't the best member of the guard, but that didn't mean I discounted myself completely. But I let the confident facade fade a bit that day, focusing on my relationships with other members of the guard. It was a blast—one of my favorite days in the guard by far.

At the end of practice, us captains stayed behind and messed around, trying out new tricks and flailing our bodies around in weird ways. We kept the doors open with nearby trash cans, letting the cool air soak into our skin as we melted in the heat of the decades old West Gym. Together

we flocked to the open doors, watching the radiant sunset of pinks, reds, and blues as they filled the sky of the parking lot outside. I joked that everyone would be posting videos or pictures of the Iowa sunset, just like us—a million eyes turned towards the horizon in wonder. I snapped a video, marking the moment in my brain.

- February 28th, 2022

universal scratch off

you coat your face with ceramides
almost four separate times, hoping
to scrub away the little whiteheads,
the lingering mountains of sebaceous
cysts, the gnatty little plugs of keratin
that solidify your pores. you can never
wash away the scars that dot your
face, the complexion of mistaken freckles
that form constellations on your skin.
you splash the frigid water on your
swollen face, which rejuvenates your
mind, brings back the fizzle of being alive—
until your eyes meet the glass mirror.
there, the stars have reached the heat
of their death, where space meets
skin, pouring black spots over the tip
of your beautiful, bristly, bulbous nose,
simply waiting to be mined for the bacteria
beneath.

PROTECTION

Days and nights had finally begun to blur together—but doom had settled in. Sleep had become a sweet mistress—one that I loved but could never entertain completely. The hours ticked by every night, as I filled them with anxious thoughts and apocalyptic reasoning.

*No one wants you here. Why even bother trying, when all they do is whisper about you when your back is turned? No one will ever love you. How could they, when you nodded YES instead of NO, when you teased and trifled with unspeakable subjects? Your language is savage—you're erratic, blind, completely unaware, and **selfish**—you don't deserve a place here.*

There was no logic to anything running through my head, but the paranoia had taken hold—the whispers of my roommates, the side-eyed glances of the classmates in my major classes, the silence of my ex-boyfriend—reality inside of my head had shifted dramatically. Thank heavens I could partially recognize those thought patterns as toxic. Yet, they still rang true in my mind, and I was riddled with panic, every day.

I noticed that the barriers between my mind and my mouth were slipping, and I could tell that I was speaking without truly thinking. Was that what it's like to be outgoing? Letting thoughts filter out with little conscience? I struck up conversations with coworkers, classmates, and friends that I didn't usually partake in. I became the happy-go-lucky sweetheart ten times over. I couldn't define the difference, but I noticed it all the same—I was finally *that* girl, with all the confidence and boss ass bitch attitude I could possibly muster. The post breakup glow was INSANE.

I needed to compartmentalize. I created different private stories on my Snapchat to keep track of the main areas of my life: “ana's fucking bananas” for all of my favorite people, “hi thots” for those that partook in my partying and weird, random, and existential thoughts, “forever feet on the dash” for my music recommendations, and “xtra xtra read all about it” for my closest friends that *knew* me better than I knew myself.

It felt as though a thousand eyes were on me at all times. I suddenly felt like the most important person in the world. I positioned my camera in certain angles, capturing different sights of my life: from the greatest heights above in x0.5 view, to the abyss that I was slowly sinking into. I realized that everything was meant to be recorded—I contemplated every thought—every moment was meant for reflection. A new month meant a new me!

- March 1st, 2022

speech during mania

if you follow a certain pattern
of possibilities—the words
that needle and meander
around every stitch, every
sentence stenciled and
sketched out, or a template
for thoughts that could form
from the folds of your tongue—
nonsense will soon slither out
of your throat and choke you
with the sting and hiss
of a flickered tongue
in cheek honesty.

these words are not elegant.

phrases will snap
between your teeth—
their string pulled taut
between your vocal chords,
weaving through polka dotted
expressions and sweet silk
sayings—puncture wounds
fastened to the fibrils of frigid
mannequin figurines.

these words cannot rest.

caught in a spiraling spool,
try to salvage the scraps
of every syllable of truth
you spit, sew the lines
between your intentions and
alternate pockets of existence,
bind them with the braided
cords of twine that stream
through the intertwined
chambers of your heart—
don't let the tendrils
slip out of your mouth.

these words have no substance.

My sanity was a stale, five day old cookie that sat on the shelf of the pantry in my shared apartment. I was picking up each morsel of sweetness from my shattered relationship and examining its purpose, trying to place each crumb into my own version of the truth. *Why am I here if I can't contribute to the happiness of someone else?*

I was confident I could navigate the wonders and woes of my new “eternal being” all on my own. Why would I need the help of others when I could finally be my own person? I wasn't attached, no longer molded to the perfect cookie cutter relationship. I was proud to be a lone puzzle piece, a fragmented version of myself—yet I still found myself yearning for the fully formed picture on the box: the healthy mind, the snatched body physique, the supportive family system, the significant other. Even still, I couldn't really stand the thought of being alone. I was truly losing all sense of control over my mind *and* my body.

Five days post-breakup, I could barely keep anything in my stomach. Nothing more than a few bites of my favorite foods could pass through my esophagus. I would make packets of rice almost everyday, but split a single serving across several meals, slowly but surely eating away at the grainy particles of food. Even the thought of food sliding down my throat sent a wave of nausea throughout my digestive system. I had to force feed myself, but I had to regulate some part of my life when my mind started fracturing into starbits—so I chose to let go of my eating habits.

I ignored every spidey-sense that told me I needed to provide my body with some sort of nutrients. Instead, I went from eating rabbit portioned meals to scraps of sugar to survive the day. One piece of chocolate candy could supply all of the carbohydrates I needed to function. Chewing gum became my best friend, as I would swallow each piece just to feel the weight of something in my stomach. I didn't even hydrate myself—by the end of the day my piss was a bright mix of marigold and brown—TMI, I know, but the stench really imprinted into the back of my nostrils.

I passed it off as fasting—to my family, to my friends, even lying to myself—I knew I was losing weight, and my appearance almost mattered more to me than a functioning body. If I could control my body, maybe I would finally recognize the girl staring back at me in the mirror. I saw the curve of her cheekbone, her lips ripped to shreds from pulling at the chapped skin, her unplucked eyebrows, the spotted scars and dark marks, even the glitches of blue, green, and hazel surrounding her pupils.

Others started to notice the changes in my body—the tuck of my tummy, the weaning of my waist, the trimming of my thighs—despite the inflated billowing of a body that demanded my attention through the reflective glass. But if I looked great, I had to feel great...right?

- March 2nd, 2022

possession

she stares at my body & i
 scream *mercy* for the sake
of my stomach, as its acid
 lines the ridges of my throat—
there's the choking euphoric
 sensation of the 'feminine
mystique,' that weight
 loss physique found wiggling
in every stretch mark
 and etched into each
captioned instagram post—
 she whispers *tighter*
and claws back my hair.

REFLECT

Day six, and I was running on fumes—insomnia had struck my hypothalamus. Without the pressure of another body cradled and curved against my own, I had lost all sense of comfort. I stacked a million of my pillows against the wall where he used to sleep; a plush body of fluff and blankets I could bundle up with.

I had already exhausted my options *and* advice for sleeping soundly:

Don't eat before you sleep!

I'm already barely eating!

Are you taking melatonin?

Nearly 10 milligrams.

What about your medications?

Taking 20 milligrams of hydroxyzine too!

It's supposed to make me sleepy...

Have you tried counting sheep?

Been doing that since I was 5.

What about a warm glass of milk?

Ew.

Instead, I found myself reorganizing my bathroom closet at three in the morning, sifting through old makeup products and abandoned bottles of lotion. I probably made so much noise, but it was something tedious that kept my mind buried in the monotony of the motions. I treated it like Tetris, finding the perfect slot for every item in my possession, creating a system that worked in sync with my makeup and skin routine.

My brain became hyperfocused on the state of my skin. Throughout the night, I would wash my face at least twice—applying my CeraVe cleanser to my dry face, then applying it again after my face was drenched in water. I would repeat the process at least once, sometimes even more throughout the night. I applied my spot treatment multiple times, probably even more than recommended. I was attacking my face, desperately hoping I would eliminate my tendency to break out. Of course, it never worked.

When I would finally get knocked out of my groove, attempts to sleep actually came to fruition. I would still wrestle around in the blankets searching for comfort, but I found if I could stay still long enough then my body would trick itself into falling asleep—but my mind never came to rest. Instead, I drifted into endless possibilities, seeking out a pinch of feeling in a forest of numbness.

- March 3rd, 2022

strawberry skin.

I shave my legs for the first time in 5th grade. I dig through the abandoned bath products in our cupboard drawer under the sink. Our family shares one shower, so my mother's pink razor gleams back at me—I always liked shiny things.

I know nothing of moisture; I'm cracked and faded and splotted with marks. Little mountains of keratin form a range of bluffs down the back of my arm. I complained for years of my dry skin—a classmate simply told me to put lotion on, but I don't like the feeling of its cold, creamy texture. Who cares about building layers upon layers of protection against the cool air of winter, the beating sun of summer, when I can be rough around the edges, or get the perfect golden tan like the other girls in class? My mother nags and wags her finger at my nose, pointing out the constellations of freckles dotting my skin—someday they'll spurn the golden kissed skin with shiny scalpels, peeling away the cancer layered within my epidermis, in the same way they scrape the bridge of my grandmother's beautiful furrowed nose.

I take the dry razor and feel the scrape of its sharp edge snagging against my plugged pores. I hear the rip of each hair follicle as they split neatly at the peak of my skin, as if I were slicing off the green flowery tops of my strawberry hills—my favorite fruit, with a splash of sugar to dip the sweetness in. Each pass of the razor begins to fill me with an alluring sense of dread, as I feel the compulsion to finish buffing out the edges of every inch of my skin. I come out unscathed, with little prickles of hair left behind by the inexperienced guidance of my hand against the blade. I'm left with ingrown hairs and red splotches, dotting their eyes for all to see.

Shortly after my burst of impulsive shaving, I sit in the back of a musty school bus, traveling on a field trip around my hometown. A young, on-the-cusp-of-popular girl in my grade takes the seat across from me. I'm turned away from her, but I can feel her glare searing into the back of my head. She takes one look at my legs in the sweltering heat of May and wrinkles her face in disgust. *Ew, are you contagious? I don't want to get sick.*

Her pre-adolescent voice haunted my mind for years. The hairs of my prickly pear skin became a fidget, as I would run my fingers over each follicle in the hopes that the oil from my skin would eventually wear them down. Shaving was a temporary solution, one that was full of nicks and nooks and crannies. I would watch the slice of the razor over my skin, seeing the blood retreat slowly from the sliver of open skin. It meant that I was smooth, closer to silky perfection. I felt the sting of water washing over the cut, and I couldn't help but *enjoy* it.

INNER STRENGTH

On the seventh night of my downward spiral, she was ignoring me. Rolo, my temperamental, fluffball princess of a cat had opted to sit stoically on the floor, I was devastated. She normally slept with me every night, curling up in the crook of my calf and thigh. I called her name, over and over, patting my mattress near the foot of my bed. Nothing I did would convince her to venture up to me. I sobbed, croaking out her name, begging her to come lay with me. *Rolo! Come here, bebs. Please, just come here!* I could have easily gotten out of bed and scooped her into my arms, but it was more than that—I needed to be *wanted* by someone, anything.

Fatigue had clearly set in. I was at the point where I could finally acknowledge the real problem—I couldn't sleep without someone next to me. I had finally reached the extent where it had developed into a physical need. My brain was dead set and wired in such a way that I had to have the reassurance of another person, the pressure of their body curled against my own. I couldn't deny the facts anymore, even though I knew my friends would be skeptical.

Eventually, Rolo graced me with her presence on the bed, hopping quietly onto the corner of the mattress. Even the pressure of her tiny donut of a body was enough for me to find a peaceful sleep for the first time that week. I didn't fall asleep until nearly four a.m., but that was enough for me.

I slept in through my classes, instead hoping to attempt going into work for the day. Yet, my brain was so drained of everything, that I could not mentally handle anything that day. I called my manager, on the verge of tears, explaining, "I am literally incapable of making a phone call today. I could barely call you." That was enough, so I was given the day off.

In order to cope with the day, I required some sort of serotonin in my body, something to make me feel like I had earlier in the week. I raided the dollar section of Target, which tends to quickly rack up when cheap individual candles are still \$5 each. I bought three different Squishmallows to console me in bed, alongside several mugs with comedic sayings on the side. I brought the whole lot home, showing off my new prized possessions. I spent over \$300 on knick knacks, unnecessary items and simple conveniences that my father definitely qualified as an impulse buy—but, as far as I've learned, comfort can only get you so far.

- March 4th, 2022

alice

the
mirror
 simply
 bends
 to
 her
 will,
 creating
shapes
that
fit
her
 into
 inflated
 figures,
yet
she
remains
 bodiless
 without
 nature
 to
 guide
 her.
she
watches
her
phantom
reflection
morph
 into
ripples
of
her
past
selves,
waiting
for
her
frame
that

shifts
so
easily
into
its
prime.

BALANCE

Dawn was lightly creeping into the windows of my apartment bedroom, sunlight slinking through the shades as I tried desperately to keep my thoughts still. The subtle waves of fear and anxiety tousled in my brain, wrenching my body back and forth underneath my twisted, raggedy weighted blanket. The pressure of the sand within did little to soothe my nerves going into the day. It was approximately 7:11 a.m. and I knew sleep was not coming.

I sat in my bed, trying to shove the thoughts of a quiet death off of a cliff I had conjured in my mind. I had no room for those realizations, yet I couldn't help but let the fear of my state of mind drive the bus. I have 15 minutes worth of videos on my phone documenting one of the scariest moments of my mania. I thought I was finally experiencing an original thought, an original experience I had never gone through before. I was disassociating, but on a level I had never seen.

I was convinced my disassociation was switching between different parts of my personality. That wasn't the truth in the slightest, but I watch back the videos now and I see my eyes flicker in and out of the full consciousness of my body, going from a brain without function to the gears rapidly clicking in place, running over the same thought over and over. *I'm not really here. I shouldn't be here.* I held my hand over my chest, clutching the rapid beating heart that pumped toxins through my brain, altering my state of mind. I stared off into the back edge of my bed, shifting my gaze between the ginormous stuffed animals nestled peacefully together, clouds of pillow that beckoned me. *You could sleep, you know. Forever.*

I was almost hallucinating: my thoughts were tightly coiled, threads bound together like a corded rope that wrapped around itself, as if I were looping the thoughts around my forearm, trying to organize and put them away into a separate corner of my mind. In this blank space of my brain, I watched bubbles of toxic ideas float around. *You know it's time to go. You don't belong here,* echoed within the empty space. The lethal impulses popped, splattering the walls in a sticky, black substance. It stained the edges of the room, and I was consumed by the substance of these thoughts. They were real manifestations, real images that passed through my neurons.

As time continued to inch forward, I slowly realized I was ready to wake up, to get out of the nightmarish black and white walled room that I had placed and stripped my consciousness. Absent no longer, my awareness of reality snapped back into place, cogs sputtering to life. Disorientation took over my senses, and I face planted into my pile of pillows, my ribs expanding rapidly as I tried to catch my breath. My body trembled as I tried to process—I had ventured into the core of my mind and barely emerged. I broke out into a cold sweat, ready to shift away from the solidification of my fears.

My dissociative episode certainly set the tone for the day. Immediately following the disastrous spiral, I had to jumpstart myself to prepare for the long day ahead. But the remaining sludge was clogged, stuck inside the gutter of my brain.

UNI Colorguard auditions were being held that day. As a captain, I had to be on top of my game. I would be evaluating and noticing the skills, movements, and work ethic of potential new members for our squad. I needed to entertain, to persuade them to join, just as much as they needed to show off their abilities.

I dusted myself off, barely acknowledged the events of the last hour, and began prepping for the day. I strapped myself into the cutest workout gear I owned—light mauve leggings with a semi-matching purple sports bra. I scooped up a Red Bull I had been saving from the fridge, cracking it open with a sizzle of slight carbonation. I wrangled myself out of the door, makeup bag in tow to prep for the Winterguard competition following auditions.

Consuming Red Bull was a mistake. After being hyped up on no sleep, the caffeine kick sent me over the edge. I couldn't shut up. I interrupted other captains while we were teaching new choreography. I bounced around the room, making little comments and constantly bringing attention to myself—I joked with the potential new members, hoping to make them laugh, hoping that they would remember me. I sprinted and jumped around the gym, flipping and flourishing my flag in all sorts of ways.

My coach and fellow captains could tell that something was wrong—they knew I couldn't handle myself at that moment. I asked them to help redirect my thoughts, focusing on the task at hand. I had to separate myself from the group at times, overwhelmed by the excitement of the day and the lingering sentiments from that morning. I felt like a little kid being sent to the corner for misbehaving: I couldn't control myself.

The world around me seemed to start reflecting the atmosphere of my brain: absolute chaos. Soon after auditions had come to a close, I was speeding down the interstate towards Waukee, Iowa, in the passenger seat of my car while my best friend Heidi drove. We arrived in the metro area to violent sirens blaring, warning us of an oncoming tornado. Racing into the building hosting the competition, we were quickly ushered into storm shelters. Trying to locate other members of the team, barely having an internet connection, and a multitude of thoughts wishing I could be anywhere but in that high school—it all absolutely consumed me. I couldn't focus—I was running around frantically searching for an answer to all of my problems.

When the warnings subsided, we huddled into our homeroom for the night. I masked myself in layers upon layers of makeup, all while gossiping about my week with former members of the UNI Colorguard that were visiting. My words were jumbled, frantic—I couldn't stop crying.

Disordered motions took over as we prepared to perform. I bounced up and down, trying breathing exercises and dance warmups to keep the energy flowing out of my body. Jitters wholly took over me. I was sick to my stomach with anxiety, and everyone was ignoring me, except for Heidi. I could sense something was wrong, but I couldn't even focus on anything else but giving the performance of a lifetime—I had to give *everything*.

We bolted onto the gym floor, unraveling our tarp, straightening it out, setting our equipment. We scurried around, hoping to save the few precious seconds of our 8 minute time slot. We set up in our bursting circular formation, and my stomach squeezed.

Performing their show, still feel. please welcome the University of Northern Iowa Winterguard!

Dramatic punches of the music hit my body as it pulsed with the rhythm of the funky instrumentals. I dragged my feet, pointing and flexing, spinning and turning on my tippy toes. I twirled the flag every which way, tossing and catching the pole with lightning precision. My chest heaved, trying to maintain my breathing as the music thumped in my ears.

Flags waved in unison—our big impact moment—the roar of the crowd filled the gym. I got into our linear formation, tossing the flag straight up into the air. Another member of the guard launched herself into my arms and I caught her as the flag landed perfectly into her outstretched hand. *I did it—we did it!*

My chest hammers as I try to keep my excitement in check. Relief washes over me, and I start to pay attention to the lyrics of the song. My body goes into autopilot as we reach the peak of the performance.

*Oh, and I still feel alive
When it is hopeless,
I start to notice
Oh, and I still feel alive
Falling forward,
Back into orbit*

The words pierced my ribcage, and I panicked as the weight of their meaning collapsed my lungs. *Why am I here? What has this all been for? Why do I feel so much? Will it ever stop? Am I even worthy of being alive?*

I hit the final pose. Applause erupts from the crowd, but I could do little to stop my gasps of air. My stomach lurched. I ran quickly out of the gym, bursting through the emergency doors without hesitation. I launched myself towards the cemented entryway, curled over the curb. I vomit

nothing but stomach acid, hurling over and over. I balanced my weight between my forearms, hunched into a ball. I sobbed, knowing I had pushed myself over the edge.

There was nothing left but the fall.

- March 5th, 2022

what were we talking about again?

i can barely form a line,
connect dot A to dot B
and back again through
the alphabet of names
i need to forget,
nevermind the regret
of never reaching out
to the spaces between
the hash marked lines
of personal contacts,
where my thoughts grind
to a skidding halt.

there is no way
to see the lengths
between each mark,
only where the footpath
meets my perpetual noise.
yet, backtracking through
the sporadic noise
of passing cars, only
to find save points—
the highway markings
from which we sling
forward—they do
nothing to relieve
each part of the motion.

the path winds,
crosses over itself,
always seeking out
new directions of
change. our clocks
sit idly by while
we take on novel
perspectives, as we
watch all our
memories on

rewind.

craving

i see the outline of the old me—in snapshots, in videos—in the vapors of fog that cling to the bathroom mirror—the manic me, the “only eating once a day” me, the blurting everything out loud me—and i want to inherit her clothing—her grandmother’s high waisted jeans that actually looked good around her butt for once—but not the genes that may have predisposed her to unchecked mania that is still triggered every year around march (at least since the pandemic)—or maybe i would borrow her cinched waist that fit into my mother’s 90s long flare dress—the black one that’s covered in little florets of pink and green and red petunias—the one my mother wore in high school and passed down to me after a shopping session in my grandmother’s closet—oh no, it doesn’t quite fit anymore—the buttons are popping out—i just want to bite off the overflowing bits of my muffin tops—slice off the rolls of pudge flowing over my abdomen—deflate the massive balloons on my chest—i see the slim shape of her and i want to shave off everything that doesn’t fit into *her* cookie cutter definition of perfection—

instead i scrape off the plaque of my yellowing enamel—even manic me couldn’t brush her teeth in the morning—that’s a lie—at least she scrubbed her gums until they bled every night after the breakup—she needed to feel something again—she needed to materialize her pain—she needed to be something manageable, something palpable for others—she imagined grinding her teeth to a pulp in her sleep—she had a cavity sized hole in the midst of her bed and she stuffed it with empty pillowcases and chocolate stained sheets and silly little squishmallows—she stacked them high against the window, against the ripples of her spine—they fit into every slope of her vertebrae, every chunk and lump of her slim thick thighs—she snuggled into a socket of space where no one could look in, where no one could see—she would not be observed by a concave mirror on a rod, peering into the corners of her mouth—what happened to the junk food remains sitting in the ridges of her molars?—how could she not be perceived??—she was an inconsistency, an irreplaceable, inexplicable dichotomy—still, she talked to anyone and everyone—late into the twilight hour, where the moon controlled her tides—but now i know why she needed to be alone—

because i can function now—better than she ever could have imagined—she “forgot” to take her meds—and i know she envies me more than i could ever know—she wanted to erase what she hadn’t even written on the red inked lines of her therapy notebook, yet—she scrubbed her face multiple times every night—hoping to wipe away the muck and gunk within her pores—only she burrowed them deeper into cavernous holes—she blanketed doses of acne cleanser onto her face—pretended to be healthy—falsified her intake forms—I SWEAR I’M OKAY—to establish a routine—(her routine was the flick of her vaped pen pressed to her lips)—when her anxiety crawled into the bronchi of her lungs and rattled their knotted structures—inhale tetrahydrocannabinol, exhale relief—her reality distorted, her body numb—but her thoughts never matched pace with her trembling tendons—they sprinted forwards—leaping and

bounding—a jumbled parkour—does she pay attention to the patterns—locked on illogical—a zigzag rubber band ball that snapped back and forth in her brain—in MY brain—and i'm transported right back into the recycling receptacle for emotions and bodily experiences—because why would my confession of self ever be separated from the grubby, gritty girl that spit blood from between her gums and savored the taste.

RELEASE

I wake up with my mother sleeping beside me. A faint glow from the TV illuminates my bedroom, and the audio of my favorite comedy special rings in my ears. Synthetic melodies flow through my eardrums, the reverb of autotune from Bo Burnham's voice echoing against the hardwood floors.

*get your fucking hands up,
get on out of your seat—
all eyes on me,
all eyes on me.*

I had no clothes packed. My mother forced me to come home after the Winterguard performance and I certainly had not planned on coming home—no shirts, no socks, no underwear to my name. We ventured over to Costco, wading through the isles of fabrics and bulk deals. I select different items of clothing—a soft ribbed sweatshirt, two pairs of thinly veiled sweatpants with peppered elastic fabric, a pack of brightly colored high waisted underwear, several pairs of cushioned socks, brand new bralettes with annoying triangular pads. I carefully selected each item, binging in my selfish wants using my mother's credit card. She didn't mind, though. Her heart was in the right place, protecting and distracting me all at once.

*Are you feeling nervous?
Are you having fun?*

*It's almost over,
It's just begun.*

What happens next? There was a muddy puddle of thoughts breaking through. I pranced around the living room, kicking my legs, pirouetting and waltzing to the lull of Burnham's melody.

*Don't overthink this,
look in my eye,
Don't be scared,
Don't be shy—
Come on in,
The water's fine...*

I DM'd my ex-boyfriend from high school, reminiscing over the childish relationship in a way my current broken relationship had never felt. We bickered and fought, had deep conversations about life, and I accused him of taking advantage of our relationship, and of me. He didn't apologize or legitimize my thoughts, instead opting to light the fickle gaseous form of our relationship on fire. It sparked, exploding as I told him the truth. I was harming myself, I was causing harm to those around me—but I wanted to hurt him the most. I thought of my newly formed ex and his snuggled embrace. I felt nauseous at the thought of losing him like I had lost others in my life—all from my own selfishness. There was no end, only...

*GET UP.
GET. UP.*

*I'M TALKING TO YOU
GET THE FUCK UP*

- March 6th, 2022

make a wish

i once believed
i was cursed
to never shed
what i perceived
about my own
body i know
i don't show
that i'm prone
to release
and neglect,
to live
and regret
the words
i whispered
to my
swelling
blisters
and
those
deep
seeded
splinters—
together
they
whimpered:
just.
let.
us.
breathe.

—1010—
COMPLETION

I think—no I know—I didn't want to die.

Interstate 235 was blanketed in brown slush, with tire tracks flicking the wet snow in every direction. The rush of the road was a steady pulse in my ears as other cars continued past my mother and I in her Mazda CX5. I remember sitting in silence, or maybe listening to the low murmur of “I Am The Antichrist To You” by Kishi Bashi. It was my anthem, the embodiment of my experience. I was reigning hellfire in my life.

My mother was nervous—joyfully letting me play my own tunes for comfort—and I could feel her energy buzzing its way into my ears. Yet, I felt a stillness wash over me, even as the brilliant shining motor vehicles whizzed by us. My head pressed against the middle of the faux leather passenger seat—my shins were splintered by the indents of the plastic glove box.

Sometimes when my mother hit the brakes, we still skyrocketed our way forwards, pulling up just inches behind the back bumper of the car in front. We never, ever crashed, but that didn't stop me from pressing my heels into the rubber mat on the floor of the car, as if *I* was the one in control of the brakes. I often squished myself into a fetal position in the passenger seat, ready to be *crunched* in half if my mother happened to rear end an oncoming semi. Not that she ever would—I imagined my entire body curled, snapped into pieces, like a silly slap bracelet wrapped around my wrist—she was a good driver, a careful driver.

I let these thoughts invade my stream of consciousness—as if they had value, as if they were meant to consume my reality—until they became a one track in my mind. I stared ahead, waiting for the task in front of me to appear, resolved. Mental health, check. Seatbelt? Clicked.

Snowflakes crusted the windows of my mother's car, their crystals whipping in the wind one by one. I wondered if my brain was playing tricks on me, whispering sweet, nasty nothings into my ear: *you don't belong*, *I want you to leave*, *you don't deserve me*, *I can't do everything*, *they hate you*, *I love them*, *there is no way out*, *but*—why am I even here?

It was almost time—only seconds (minutes?) until we reached our destination—a one way ticket to stay at a clinic for mental health. A large, gleaming red truck forged on above us, crossing the intersectional bridge with snow stacked on its the roof—it goes sliding off the deep end and I watch it fall, floating, watching weightless, barely breathing, and onto the windshield it goes—SPLAT—and I shriek, jumping back into the wide-eyed lens of my life.

- March 7th, 2022

i want

to stare at daffodil petals, to skip over cracks on the sidewalk, to explore the hidden ridges of mountain hikes, to wrap up in a weighted blanket and watch the best sitcoms on repeat, to hear the rustling of leaves across scorched pavement, to see the splatter of raindrops on the front windshield as they run their little races against gravity, to use a lint roller to get cat fur off of my black leggings, to taste the elegant musk of seafood paired with salty soy sauce, to spiral down a school bus yellow tube slide just to crash into the wood chips below, to hang silly doodles of star ships and sea creatures on a stainless steel fridge, to sew up the buttons on my favorite dress shirt, to set the clock forward three minutes so i have a few extra minutes in bed, to etch my initials in pottery glaze for the clay pot i sculpted all by myself, to inhale the scent of sandalwood shampoo on a pillow left behind, to walk side by side and scamper along the road with a dog in tow, to bake birthday cakes from box mixes and eat nothing but the frosting, to stand over a valley and marvel at the way giant icebergs engraved their mark into the earth, to plant watermelon seeds into the pit of my stomach in the hopes that something will grow from its acidic waste, to interlock arms around elbows in an elegant dance that was learned off of youtube, to light sparklers and spell out I.L.O.V.E.Y.O.U. until it burns the letters into the back of my eyelids, to lug my baggage around the maze of an airport only to be stuck on another layover for 3 more hours, to weave my way through the rapids of a waterfall only to plunge into the cove down below, to breathe in the stark air of winter and watch the exhale of carbon dioxide crystallize from the heat of my body, to taste cheap strawberry wine in plastic kiddy cups, to pin up moments encapsulated by the shutter of camera film, to leave sweet little annotations on the margins of my doggy eared books, to hear the gentle strumming of a guitar belonging to my favorite artist on a big arena stage, to eat pancakes for dinner in my best pajamas...

...to remember my life as my own.

OPPORTUNITY

I never thought I'd make it this far.

I remember scrawling the dates on my school assignments as a tiny second grader, loving the way '08 looked on the page with all of its squiggles, curves and circles. Seven was my lucky number, but eight was my favorite. An infinitesimal number I could swerve and scribble on the page.

I knew my kindergarten teacher was 28, and she was my favorite too. Miss Lee seemed like a deity, a goddess. Every part of me wanted to be like her—with her dark, ringlet curls, her gentle smile, and her cool teacher demeanor. I formed my perceptions about life from what I knew of hers.

I didn't understand the process of aging. I knew it would happen, but I had this eerie sensation in the pit of my stomach that told me I might not make it there. As a kindergartener, I could barely imagine what it would be like to finally make it to twelve-years-old, to finally be able to sit in the front passenger seat with my mother (or so she promised).

I've aged, and it hasn't been pretty. The wrinkles have set in, yet the acne still remains. Relationships have come and gone, yet their habits and thoughts live permanently in my brain. I'm older, but I have lost my sense of self. When did I lose her? As a child? As an adult?

I've come to a point in my life where everything seems to matter, yet I can do little to change the environment around me. All I have done, or can do, is change my mindset—to search for the child in me, to fulfill her wishes and dreams—to cement myself in a life that I know I belong to.

A year ago, I tried to start writing in order to process my mania, all while I was still in the darkest spot of my life. My mother gave me a worn down yellow notepad, one that I requested so I could represent the thoughts going through my head. All I could do was draw. I scribbled boxes and dotted lines, swirling my sense of identity onto the page. I found myself clinging to the idea of angel numbers, using them to process everything as a sign of how I was feeling, how I was acting. Most importantly though, I used them as a sign to continue *living*.

When I finally was able to reach the mental health clinic on March 7th, 2022, I was more than a wreck—I had absolutely obliterated every part of myself that I ever held confidence in. I held onto humor and irony, because my life felt like a joke—one that I felt was coming to an end. I wasn't coping—I was being strung along by life. But the thread that tugged me along was fraying, on the verge of snapping completely. Substances were the only way I could function.

I was met with a rude awakening at the clinic. I broke down in the exam room after talking with the nurse practitioner and her assistant. They couldn't give me a proper examination because I wasn't sober.

"I needed to hear that," I remember saying. I sobbed uncontrollably in my mother's arms, disgusted by myself, but absolutely terrified of experiencing life without the comfort of self medication.

After my episode, UNI hosted writing awards, with scholarships being offered to potential winners. One of the requirements was a "Spirit of Life" Essay, or "an essay explaining how the applicant demonstrates in his/her daily life an optimistic spirit, a love and concern for others, and the desire to fully embrace life's many experiences."

I couldn't bring myself to do it. I knew I wanted to live, but I couldn't imagine waking up every day for the rest of my life. I could barely get out of bed. I wasn't really *living*.

Nearly a month after my episode, I remember sitting in the psychiatrist's office across from a gorgeous woman with flowing, ebony hair, who listened to every word I said without judgment. She asked me clarifying questions, asked for the specifics of the events of February 26th to March 7th—so I dove into every detail I could remember. I clasped my hands in my lap, afraid to come off erratic and jumpy in the way I had when I reached the mental health clinic on March 7th. I spoke clearly and consciously, worried that my thoughts might be interpreted as *tangential*, in the same way the nurse practitioner described my jokes and distractions during my original appointment at the psychiatric center in Des Moines.

The woman sitting in front of me finally gave the diagnosis I had desperately been waiting for—Bipolar I Disorder. I almost cried when my psychiatrist immediately heard my story and knew that something was wrong. She didn't discount my feelings, or my experience. She didn't write me off as crazy. She saw how broken I was—she saw that I had smashed every part of myself against the concrete, that I was trying desperately to glue the pieces back together. The symptoms I had noticed throughout my entire life suddenly came into focus. I could finally see a clear path for my life with the medications that I needed to survive. It was time to put in the grueling work to make my mind *healthy* again.

So, I finally took the first step.

- March 7, 2023

oh, see
her beautiful
hazel crested
eyes and
know
the slope
of her collar bone, to
the roll of her shoulders (over
so many waves of nausea) for
her chest heaves rapidly too.
one flick of her flesh and
she simply dissolves into
a fit of dimpled belly laughs.
her hips dip into a smug
pocket of booty, to spin
circles of thick thigh
high boots around the
back end of chunky
divots of fat lined
kneecaps. only she
captures beauty in
this way, only she
leaves behind
spite full of
her feats.
no way
in hell she leaves.

- a ferocious woman

(FIBONACCI) SEQUENCE

Figure 0.1 - So, What Did You Think?

My Honors Thesis was the bane of my existence and the light of my life. It is a culmination of reliving, reflecting, reordering and recording my life.

For that reason, I find it hard to define this project. More than anything, I know that this project was an exploration of myself and my limitations as a writer. I sought to expand my own interpretations of life, to make meaning out of nothing. Mostly, this project serves as an examination of life through the lens of the mind and body, separating yet blending the lines between two of the primary ways we experience our world.

I have always been adventurous in my writing, and my thesis has been my most ambitious project yet. I had no direction in mind, yet I was still completely focused on one idea and structure. I wanted to represent my mental health journey, all stemming from the darkest moments of my life. This work chronicles my path from going untreated, to receiving the diagnoses and medications I now need to survive. My writing sends the reader through a spiral of mania I experienced nearly a year ago through my expression of poetry, flash nonfiction, and personal essays.

There are no set boundaries to the genres of writing I used for each of the pieces I wrote (which I find fascinating because fragmentation and white space are used consistently throughout the work, often serving as a separation between typical conceptions of each literary genre). But each piece bends, twists, and intertwines with the others as the reader moves throughout the body of work. One piece can be interpreted as poetry, while someone else may see it as flash nonfiction. A reader may find that a personal essay section can read like flash nonfiction when it primarily uses poetic techniques such as line breaks, stanzas, rhyme and other sound play. I didn't set any limitations on myself, instead opting to break the boundaries of every genre I have ever dipped my toe into.

Figure 1.2 - What's the Point Here?

Why in the world would I choose a creative thesis anyways? Well for one, I despise research. Though, I still had to do research for this project. Blegh. (I swear it was important though, it served as the foundation for everything I know about writing in these genres, even breaking the conventions).

I have taken several courses on creative writing, ranging from Craft of Poetry, to a Creative Nonfiction Workshop, to Craft of Fiction. I loved these courses, and they taught me so much about writing creatively. My professors helped me develop my own writing voice, and pushed me into the best writer I could be.

Yet the one downfall for me was the restrictions of the assignments I had to complete as part of these courses. While we never had limitations of the subjects or memories we wrote about, we were still committed to specific subgenres and conventions of poetry and nonfiction. While learning the conventions of these genres was vitally important to my conceptions of writing creatively, I still felt the need to create something on my own. I wanted to build something from the ground up, something that was completely me. That's how this project was born. At the core, my thesis is a reflection of myself as a writer.

Figure 3.5 - Yes, I'm Still Processing...

I started my thesis with a piece I had written in the notes app on my phone, which is entitled "strawberry skin." At the time, creative nonfiction was my strong suit, after having just come out of my workshop course for the genre. The piece itself is a reflection on my childhood, all about the first time I truly felt insecure about my body and the way it was perceived. The reflection, situated in the moment I shaved my legs for the first time, was a natural starting point that birthed many of the themes that this project focused on. Flash nonfiction allowed me to establish myself within the past moment, utilizing present tense to bring the reader directly into the scene. The conventions of flash nonfiction also allowed me to establish my current self in the conversation of the piece, utilizing a reflective voice while still maintaining the present tense.

As I continued throughout my writing process, my experimentation with writing focused heavily on fragmentation and capturing streams of consciousness. My mania, depression and anxiety have pushed me to articulate the thoughts and emotions of these experiences with the hope that others will understand what those moments are like. Prose poetry allowed me to capture the essence of fragmented, racing thoughts by utilizing the absurdity and fluidity of the subgenre of poetry. At the same time, the techniques I used in my prose (such as implied metrical structure, anaphora, apostrophes) blended the lines between the poetry and creative nonfiction in my work.

Poetry brings out an authentic voice in me. It captures the visceral emotions I experience in a way that other forms of writing cannot. With this in mind, the beginnings of this project were mostly poems that took on different shapes, through forms of the genre (with a focus on stanza separation, line breaks, punctuation, etc.) and physical shape of each poem. The final piece in my work, "a ferocious woman," is a concrete poem that I feel captures the essence of the whole body of work. The poem is the first I attempted to create for this project. It marks a change in my perception of my mind and body, moving towards acceptance of all facets of myself—the beauty in the ugly, and the ugliness in beauty and its standards.

To further accentuate the unstable nature of my mind and body, I often separated myself from the subject matter of a poem by using a second person point of view throughout the whole work. While this also invites the reader to directly experience the words and actions of each piece, it also allows me to create a sense of distortion, along with a dissociative nature for each piece. In other areas of the work, I use the invasive "I" to associate with my past self. I use a reflective voice, but directly interact with the emotions and actions as if I am reliving them with the reader.

The main selections from the piece, or set piece “scenes,” are the angel number sequences—one for each day of my manic episode. The eleventh entry is a concluding piece that is written from my point of view exactly one year after the events of my manic episode. These sections were intended to serve as personal essays, with each passage focusing on a different theme guided by the angel number sequences. Again, these entries blended the lines between genres, also serving as flash nonfiction due to their word count, fragmentation, use of white space, and general prose.

The result of my writing process was a disoriented mess, especially as I relived the memories of my experiences. The one year anniversary of my episode threw me off my game as I struggled to cope with the way I acted while living through my mania. However, writing became my lifeline, and I continuously wrote throughout that ten day span in order to process everything that happened, all moment by moment as the reminders popped up on my phone.

When I finally finished my personal essay sections, I printed out every piece in my thesis and laid them out on the ground. I wanted to organize my work in the shape of the “M” story structure, one that was covered in my creative nonfiction workshop. The first leg of my work establishes the needs and wants of my past self, as well as detailing the “inciting incident” that serves as the catalyst of my manic episode. My thesis then shifts into the second leg of the “M” framework, which introduces the conflict and world of the story as I begin to notice the shift that my mania caused. The third leg is designated as “maximum pain,” which details the sharp decline in my mental health throughout my episode, culminating in my “darkest night” and being confronted with my need for sobriety. The fourth leg is the resolution, mapped out by my Bipolar I diagnosis, in addition to getting medicated. The sequence of events detailed in every personal essay is still chronological, but the surrounding pieces are organized according to the “M” structure to emphasize themes of the body, mind and ultimately, hope.

This reflection is the last piece I’m completing for my thesis (ooo, META!).

Figure 8.13 - You Get It Now, Right? (Do I Really Need To Spell It Out?)

sinking into my skin is a hybridization of creative writing genres that dives into specific issues of mental health including body image and dysmorphia, anxiety, depression, mania, disordered eating, suicide, and ultimately finding self acceptance through it all. The work includes a blend of poetry, prose poetry, flash nonfiction, and personal essays.

Figure 21.34 - Promise I Didn’t Steal (That Much)

The biggest inspiration for my thesis was Carmen Machado’s *In the Dream House*. I read the memoir during my creative nonfiction workshop, analyzing the work through the lens of the “M” framework previously mentioned. The narrative strings connecting themes throughout Machado’s work was masterful, where she combined essays involving fairy tales, queer studies, personal reflections, and moments of scene work all with fragmented pieces.

I attempted to do the same throughout my own work, tying strings between themes addressed in personal essays and the shorter pieces of poetry and flash nonfiction. The hybrid nature of Machado's work was something I had not experienced when reading memoir, and it certainly something I tried to emulate throughout the creation of my creative thesis.

Brenda Miller is another author that I deeply admire. My first encounter with flash nonfiction came from her piece "Swerve," which uses a second person point of view to draw the reader into the experience of the speaker or persona that Miller occupies throughout. It is something I have attempted to capture throughout my own writing, especially in this creative work.

From *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry*, I found examples of techniques I wanted to utilize in my own writing. For example, Kathleen McGookey's "October Again" was a piece I found particularly compelling. I appreciate how the title flows instantly into the poem, as if the piece is only whole with every word included in the meaning. The poem is filled with short sentences and stark images of fall and death, yet the poem itself gives life to the words. The poem is grounded in realistic images and words, but their organization is fragmented and seemingly disconnected. Pieces within my work, such as "craving" and "i want..." definitely execute similar techniques that McGookey uses in her work.

I also used Annie Dillard's work as an example for my thesis. In her essay "Seeing," the organization of the piece follows a stream of consciousness on a sentence level and in the general sequence of the piece. Because my own creative work heavily focuses on mental health, I used Dillard's piece as an example of using description to capture streams of consciousness by representing those thoughts in italics, bold, capitalized, or different combinations of the three.

Ultimately, my thesis could certainly serve as the beginnings of a memoir or larger body of work than what has already been presented to you so far. There are so many aspects to this part of my life that I haven't yet touched upon. My hope is to continue reading and take cues from other great authors as I continue to grow as a writer.

Figure 55.89 - In The Grand Scheme Of Things

To be completely honest, I have not found or read very many hybrid works since I started my career as a writer. I believe this makes my thesis stand out as a hybridization between poetry and creative nonfiction. I feel that my work has cemented its place as a legitimate work of creative writing that is unique to the field. Any questions? No? Great, thanks for agreeing with me.

Figure 144.233 - I Swear This Is Valuable Information

Reading is like breathing in, and writing is like breathing out. This work has helped me release a breath of air I never realized I was holding in. Nothing has given me greater satisfaction than creating an honest version of myself that exists within these pages.

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