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Staring at Myself Through a One-Way Mirror

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Recommended Citation

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Staring at Myself Through a One-Way Mirror



Carrie Steingrubby

Fontbonne University

Senior Thesis

Staring at Myself Through a One-Way Mirror

Submitted to the Humanities Faculty

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for a Degree in Professional Writing

Carrie Steingrubby

May 15, 2021

Exploring Fragmentation Through Genre Blending

While seemingly independent by nature, the genres of narrative, poetry, prose, and even visual art can work together to function as individual pieces of a larger puzzle. Both traditional narratives and poems have ways of conveying messages on their own. However, when these independent works are included in the same composition, readers can develop new interpretations of their meanings. This is due to the nature of intertextuality—the idea that “each text exists in interrelation with all other texts” and that those interrelations contribute to one’s overall “comprehension” of the texts (Glinka 148). In other words, context contributes to our understanding. As readers and viewers, we are always experiencing a creative work within the context of something else, whether that be our preconceived notions and values or the historical or social context of a work. Therefore, the physical placement of a work within a larger composition also matters.

Intertextuality is especially important when thinking about differing genres and how they relate to one another. Through a more contemporary method of writing known as genre blending, authors compose one larger text by incorporating works from a variety of different genres. The individual pieces can function independently, but they can also frame and contextualize the other works within the composition, potentially revealing an overall message or theme. Many authors have already experimented with hybrid genres, including Claudia Rankine, Alain de Botton, and various writers for a sub-genre known as the verse-novel. These writers have discovered that because of intertextuality, different genres no longer have to remain separated; instead, they can work together to illustrate ideas that a single genre may not be able to explain on its own.

In contemporary literature, genre blending arose in the modernist era to capture the feeling of fragmentation as it relates to the human experience. Around the turn of the twentieth

century, the world was amidst war and chaos, and as a result, many people faced feelings of brokenness and uncertainty, particularly when it came to understanding their place within the world. Authors turned to fragmented forms to illustrate this fractured sense of self. Since then, contemporary writers have expressed feelings of fragmentation using adaptations of traditional fragmented forms, such as the hybrid genre. By blending narrative, poetry, and other traditional genres using strategic methods of organization and form, writers demonstrate how independent pieces, alongside one another, can work together to tell an overarching story about human self-concept and self-fragmentation.

A Brief History of Modernist Fragmentation

Modernism first arose in the 1850s as an artistic movement that encouraged experimentation with different visual forms (Winkiel 12). It was not until the 1960s that “the term Modernist became widely used as a description of a generation of writers and of a literary phase,” characterized by its expression of fragmentation in both theme and form (Childs 14). “Fragmentation” in any context describes the process of breaking something into many individual pieces. In Modernist literature, however, fragmentation refers to a way of thinking about the brokenness of both literary forms and the human experience.

During the peak of Modernist literature, between the years 1890 and 1930, writers rejected more traditional forms—such as iambic pentameter—and instead chose to experiment with free verse, symbolism, and other new ways of writing that demonstrated the complexity of the human experience (Childs 18). More specifically, they turned to fragmented forms as “a response to an increasingly chaotic, unknowable world in which the coherence of any one culture

and any single narrative is irrevocably lost” (Winkiel 7). Fragmented forms rose in popularity because they could genuinely reflect the complex emotions and perceptions of the human self. They had the ability “to render human subjectivity in ways more real than realism: to represent consciousness, perception, emotion, meaning, and the individual’s relation to society” (Childs 3). Because of the Modernist tendency to explore non-traditional forms, writers looking to illustrate feelings of fragmentation were no longer limited to a single method of written expression; rather, they could experiment with new literary forms to discover what best suited their needs.

Genre Blending as a Means of Exploring Fragmentation

One specific method of writing that arose in response to fragmentation is called genre blending. The blended, or hybrid, genre is a genre that combines qualities of two or more recognizable genres. It serves as an example of a fragmented form because it incorporates individual works from multiple genres to create one larger composition. For example, poetry and narratives each have their own unique conventions—including narration, form, length, and word choice—which set the two genres apart. Though they are distinct from one another, both poems and personal narratives can exist within the same work, showing how qualities from more than one genre can function together to convey an overarching message or theme.

When it comes to exploring the human experience, multiple forms and genres are able to demonstrate the conflicting nature of the self. As humans, we feel physical sensations through our bodies while simultaneously processing the thoughts, emotions, and associations that come with those experiences. We identify with our bodies and the ways in which we physically experience the world, but we also associate with the inner narratives that run through our minds

in response to different experiences. Therefore, the human self is a combination of both mind and body, and our perceptions of self can take many forms. Similarly, a literary work can consist of both narrative and poetry, and it can adopt conventions of each of those genres. So, as author Adena Rosmarin notes, “To choose or define a genre in order to explain seems counterintuitive” (Rosmarin 8). Unlike single genre works, hybrid genres give authors the freedom to explore different ways of communicating messages to their readers: “The painter or critic alike have innumerable topics to paint or say and innumerable ways of painting or saying them” (Rosmarin 15). Poetry elicits imagery in ways that narratives cannot, just as narratives incorporate dialogue and detailed written descriptions in ways that art and photography cannot. When illustrating topics like self-concept, writers can adopt multiple genres and creative conventions to explore the complexity of the human experience. Because our human perceptions are so subjective in nature, Modernists of the humanities argued that there are multiple versions of reality. Likewise, there are multiple genres and literary forms that can work together to encompass the full experience of being human.

One hybrid genre that brings together individual fragmented works is known as the verse-novel. While its formal definition is still evolving, Joy Alexander describes the verse-novel as a series of short sections of non-rhyming free verse that all comprise one longer narrative (270). Each verse is usually less than a page in length, but they all have common ground in a central theme or narrative technique (Alexander 270). While this form consists primarily of independent verse poems, it still functions as a novel. All the individual pieces come together to illustrate “the process of making ‘many into one’” (Benjamin 185). The verse-novel possesses qualities of both poetry and novels, making it a clear example of genre blending. In addition, it serves as a

fragmented form because each of the verses function independently but come together to tell one overarching story.

As a type of fragmented form looking to illustrate the subjectivity of the human experience, the verse-novel stresses the importance of authenticity (Alexander 281). For example, in Steven Herrick's *Love, Ghosts, and facial hair* (1996), Herrick employs a first-person narrator named Jack. First-person narration offers a close look into Jack's inner thoughts and perceptions. Jack sees himself as an average sixteen-year-old guy and often reflects on his relationship with his family. In addition, his narration relies on informal language, "is lightened by humor," and often lacks punctuation, which demonstrate a realistic perspective of a teenage boy (Alexander 272). Short verses, like those in Herrick's work, create an intimate perspective in literature because they focus on one individual's subjective thoughts and perceptions (Alexander 271-272). Furthermore, hybrid genres, like the verse-novel, show how human thoughts—which are sometimes broken up into many fragmented pieces—can come together to illustrate how an individual perceives the world. Using fragmented forms to authentically illustrate the fragmentation of the human mind can "provide layers of understanding...using the form to support the telling" (Alexander 272).

Invoking Intertextuality Within Fragmented Works

The global organization, or the order in which pieces of a fragmented work are arranged, also contributes to its meaning. The most straightforward way of organizing a sequence of events is by placing them in chronological order. However, most stories in the real world are told out of order. The central storyline is intermixed with side plots and other background information, and

as a result, the order of events is not chronological, but it is still coherent. Therefore, when it comes to fragmented literature, there are many organizational options, such as grouping pieces together based on their theme or arranging them in an irregular order. And while there is no singular “correct” way to structure a fragmented work, intentional organizational choices can help elicit particular meanings. When illustrating feelings of self-fragmentation, for example, focusing on a work’s “‘uncanny’ disorder, and its richness of substance” might be more effective than simply putting events in chronological order (Rosmarin 16). Because the ways in which humans think and reflect about their experiences are disordered and messy, chronology may not always communicate feelings of fragmentation most accurately.

One example of a multi-genre piece that employs a nonlinear narrative technique is Alain de Botton’s *The Art of Travel*, a non-fiction travel narrative published in 2002. In this composition, de Botton writes about his own travels while “placing them in the context of journeys (both real and imagined) taken by others... He creates a layering of experience, linking individual episodic tales of travel with previous narratives of travel and reflections on the art of travel” (Doloughan 137). Alain de Botton deliberately invokes associations between his own work and the works of others. His controlled placement of episodic pieces relates back to the idea of intertextuality, which states that there is “a dialogical connection between the text and preceding texts (recursive connection) as well as the further text generation (procursive connection)” (Glinka 147). By framing his own travel narratives within the context of other texts, de Botton situates his voice as one among many. He documents each of his reflections and experiences separately, and he carefully selects other works with which to frame his own. His methods are not random but instead involve “motivated connections” that string together the different pieces of his work (Doloughan 137). In other words, de Botton takes fragmented

narratives—each telling unique stories about the art of travel—and situates them in a dialogue with one another, showing how intentional organizational choices can invoke intertextuality within a larger work.

Contemporary Genre Blending and the Embodied Human Experience

Like Herrick, de Botton, and other authors of verse-novels and travel narratives, contemporary writers continue to use hybrid genres as a means of expressing Modernist fragmentation and the subjective human experience. Contemporary genre blending integrates the intimate nature of the verse-novel with the conversational aspects of travel narratives to show how fragmentation can exist both internally and externally—both within the mind and body and through interactions with the outside world. One example of a contemporary blended work that illustrates Modernist fragmentation is Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. Rankine's piece consists of a variety of fragmented lyric essays, photography, and other forms of writing, all centered around the topic of racial injustices. Because *Citizen* embodies a very culturally relevant theme, it speaks to a large population in both the individual lyrics and the composition as a whole. In addition, Rankine's work shows how perception of self—both psychologically and racially—is internally and externally influenced; it involves both the outward interactions with our environments and the internal narratives that form after making meaning from our experiences. Rankine's use of different forms reflects the internal and external influences on self-concept. Her work creates a conversation that is both "private" and "public," using individual human experiences to address the bigger social structural issue of racial injustice. (Chan 139).

In doing so, *Citizen* elicits a clear connection between lyric and the concept of “body.” Lyrics give voice to the experiences of the body, establishing a relationship between the mental and the physical. This relationship, otherwise known as embodiment, generally refers to the ways in which the mind relates to the body and vice versa (Bergen 11). Within the context of fragmentation, however, a cohesive mind-body relationship becomes disrupted. The body instead feels like a distinct part of the human self—an entirely separate entity from the mind. This is in part because for some, the body is less controllable than the mind:

The body is malleable, but not infinitely so...while the human body can only develop into a recognizable person with culture, adopting many aspects of the practices, beliefs and values contained in social relations, it cannot respond to every social demand. A body can be worked too hard, placed under too much stress, and the person may not be able to control some functions of his or her body in a way that would suit social codes. (Burkitt 17)

Within the context of Rankine’s work, a fragmented relationship with one’s body is the result of their racial identity. One’s race is not a controllable quality, yet it still plays a huge role in one’s relation with society. By combining lyrical essays with visual art, Rankine successfully illustrates the ways in which a person’s body reflects the physical and emotional trauma they have experienced (Chan 141).

Connecting Contemporary Examples with My Work

Claudia Rankine discusses “body” in terms of race, and in doing so, she reveals how fragmented literary forms can also be used explore the notions of body in relation to self-esteem,

self-concept, and fragmentation of self. The human self is a multifaceted concept involving a complex interplay between mind, body, and experience. It is not static but “active, forceful, and capable of change” (Markus & Wurf 299). The ways in which people express, represent, and reflect about themselves vary greatly from person to person, and even the same person’s feelings and expressions of self can change over time. Therefore, fragmentation refers to “not a fixed conceptualization but an active, exploratory process” (Brown 2).

Self-fragmentation occurs when the various facets of the “self” do not align and instead present themselves as disparate identities. Discomfort arises when the “ideal self” does not match up with the “actual self” (Markus & Wurf 307). This discomfort exhibits itself in many forms, including dissatisfaction with one’s physical appearance, failure to attain a particular social status, or difficulty performing a set of physical or mental tasks. But many times, it results from some sort of disconnection between the mind and the body.

However, having a fractured sense of self can be viewed as an opportunity for growth and a chance to initiate “the process of self-concept change” (Markus & Wurf 303). One way to spark this process of growth and change is to engage in some sort of writing practice. Jessica Benjamin explores how the process of writing relates to sense of self and conscious awareness of the world. She argues that creative writing encourages a journey of self-discovery and self-awareness (Benjamin 188). Documenting thoughts, feelings, and experiences in written form offers its own way of connecting the disparate pieces of the self to form a bigger picture. In addition, writing gives perspective on past personal achievements and continuously provides opportunities for future growth.

The idea of writing as a means of integrating the disparate facets of self has been integral to shaping my thesis project. Because of its multidimensional nature, my own self-concept

cannot be confined to a single source; rather, I find that my identity takes many forms, just as works of literature can adopt the conventions and forms of many different genres. Therefore, my thesis demonstrates how the self can perceive its mind and body as two distinct identities. My project also explores a third part of the human experience—integration—which bridges the gap between the two facets of self. I illustrate each of these fragments through poetry and visual imagery, while simultaneously having a non-fiction narrative running throughout the piece, connection all three parts to form one larger story.

In order to illustrate my personal experiences with self-fragmentation, I was intentional in choosing which genres and specific poetic forms to use in my piece. When discussing subjects of the mind—such as my thoughts, anxieties, perceptions of self, and overall battle with mental illness—I chose to use more open poetic forms, demonstrating how the mind wanders and cannot be confined to a singular space. On the other hand, when illustrating the concept of body, I used very specific, restricting forms—such as the pantoum and the sestina—to show the limited nature of the human body. Lastly, when exploring integration, I combined narratives and poetry with my own original artwork to show how different genres can work together—just as the mind and the body can work together—in order to create something beautiful. Ultimately, each individual piece can be enjoyed and experienced independently, just as the mind and body can be viewed and understood separately. But when viewed as parts of a whole, the work adopts an entirely new purpose, with each experience putting the others into a broader, more meaningful context about my personal growth and self-concept change.

It has taken me a long time to reconnect with my sense of feeling—how my mind feels, how my body feels, how my body often reflects what my mind feels and vice versa. In other words, it has taken me a long time to bridge the gap between what have often felt like two very

distinct parts of myself. Coming to terms with what I have been through—both mentally and physically—has required me to use both my mind and my body to process my feelings and make meaning from my experiences. And as someone who has experienced trauma and has struggled to maintain a healthy perception of self, my mind-body integration often comes in the form of writing. Writing is a reflection of my experiences. I can put things into words so that I can see them and understand them and share them with others. Writing is also a reflection of me. It gives a voice to my frustrations and offers a listening ear to my worries. It shows who I was, who I am, and who I hope to be. It presents seemingly fragmented pieces of myself, but it strings them together to form a full story. It integrates contemplation and substantiation—my perceptions as they are facilitated through my body, my fingertips making my thoughts come to life.

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to each

trouble

today.

I'm sorry.

I wanted to tell

, but I stayed quiet

cold

suspended

I'm sorry

I have no

idea what to do

I can

only

watch

As a kid, I loved to do puzzles. Second to reading, it was my favorite activity. When I was around four years old, I had a collection of wooden jigsaw puzzles. The pieces were about a fourth of an inch thick, and each set had maybe 15 to 20 pieces. I think most people would agree that the process of putting a puzzle together is a very visual activity. The point is being able to look at the individual pieces and see how they can come together to form the bigger picture. Interestingly enough, however, I preferred to do these jigsaw puzzles with my eyes closed. For me, it was almost easier if I could just block out what the image was supposed to look like at the end and instead focus on *feeling* how the pieces fit. Completing the task entirely from my sense of touch was oddly rewarding. I knew when the pieces went together based on how they felt in my hands—noticing the shape, the size, and how the edges pointed in specific directions. And I knew the entire puzzle was complete once I ran my hand across the wooden blocks and felt that they were all in place. Then, I could remove my blindfold and see the finished result.

I did this over and over again, each time getting more and more used to the feeling of wholeness. My dad used to time how quickly I could complete each of these puzzles, and my competitive nature always left me eager to top my score. I'm not sure what my record time was, but I almost guarantee that young Carrie would have a leg up on adult Carrie when it comes to puzzle building. I don't do it nearly as much as I used to.

Noises Keep Me up at Night

Aggressive pounding grows louder, faster. I sound the alarms, though

No damage appears on the surface. Look closer.

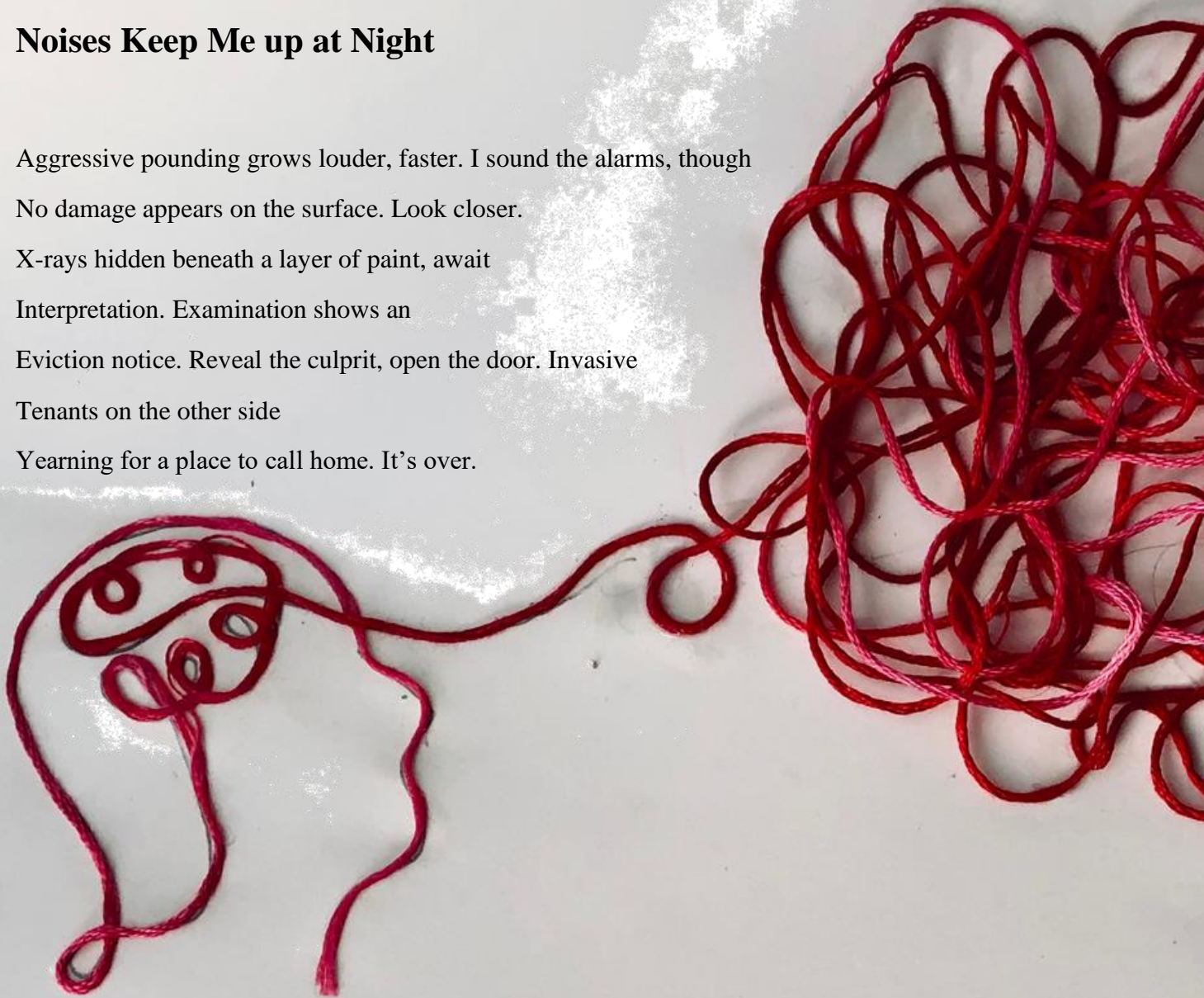
X-rays hidden beneath a layer of paint, await

Interpretation. Examination shows an

Eviction notice. Reveal the culprit, open the door. Invasive

Tenants on the other side

Yearning for a place to call home. It's over.



In 2016, I was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis —a lifelong genetic disease that affects the respiratory, digestive, and other organ systems. Receiving that diagnosis left me at a loss. Up until that point, my life had been pretty secure; I hadn't encountered any extreme life-altering events that led me questioning the ways of the universe. I had considered myself one way for 16 years of my life, but suddenly, everything had changed. I now had this new label attached to my sense of identity, not to mention the drastic physical adjustments I had to make to my lifestyle. Between treatments, medications, doctors' appointments, more medications, weight gain, weight loss, and just about and every other responsibility that a typical teenager must attend to, I was exhausted. I didn't know who I was anymore. I didn't know what to do.

Before my maternal grandmother died, she used to always say, “Cross that bridge when you get to it, or else you'll have to pay the toll twice.” I hate to say it, but I've probably paid the toll about 35 different times when it comes to questions about my health. Following my diagnosis, it seemed that every thought I had either ended with me being dead or forever alone, and to be honest, I wasn't sure which of the two was worse. At such a young age, I was overanalyzing my life to an unhealthy extent:

Will I live long enough to be able to get married and have children? Well, that would first require me to find someone who's interested in marrying a person with a chronic illness. Will I ever find that person? Wait. Will I even be able to have kids in the first place? And even if I can conceive, will all my kids end up having CF, too?

Looking back, I now realize how catastrophic and irrational my questions were because the answers ended up being far better than I anticipated. I quickly learned that I am more than capable of living a happy, “normal” life. But in that moment, as someone who had barely even heard of Cystic Fibrosis prior to my diagnosis, I faced a lot of unknowns.

Learning to Swim

I am swimming
in a pool of
my own thoughts.

The heaviest ones

S

I

N

K

to the bottom.

I am not strong
enough
to pull them back up.

So, I float

On the surface,

Held up by words.

But little do I know,

My life-raft is filled with

Holes.

Unwanted Weather Advisory

The smell of rain before it hits
The sky presents a likely premonition.
Shutters crash against the windowpanes.
The wind cries, somber and sad.

A storm is brewing

While her kitchen smells of brewing tea.
A gentle whir of steam
Escapes the kettle. She sips
From her cup, though it burns her tongue

as she swallows

She feels the rain before it falls
Upon her skin and rolls down her cheek.
She wipes her nose on her shirt sleeve.
It smells of rain and tea and

distasteful regrets.

The tea kettle screams.
The wind howls back.
Blowing branches smash the window glass.
Flowing rain seeps through the

Cracks

She closes the curtains to dampen
The sound of the storm,
But they grow heavy, soaked with tears
From the sky. She knows they

cannot be repaired

She shuts off the lights to
Blind herself from the blow.
Lightning strikes back brighter, illuminating
The spots on the water-stained ceiling

with force.

The shelter should have protected her,
But now the rain runs through.

I am not

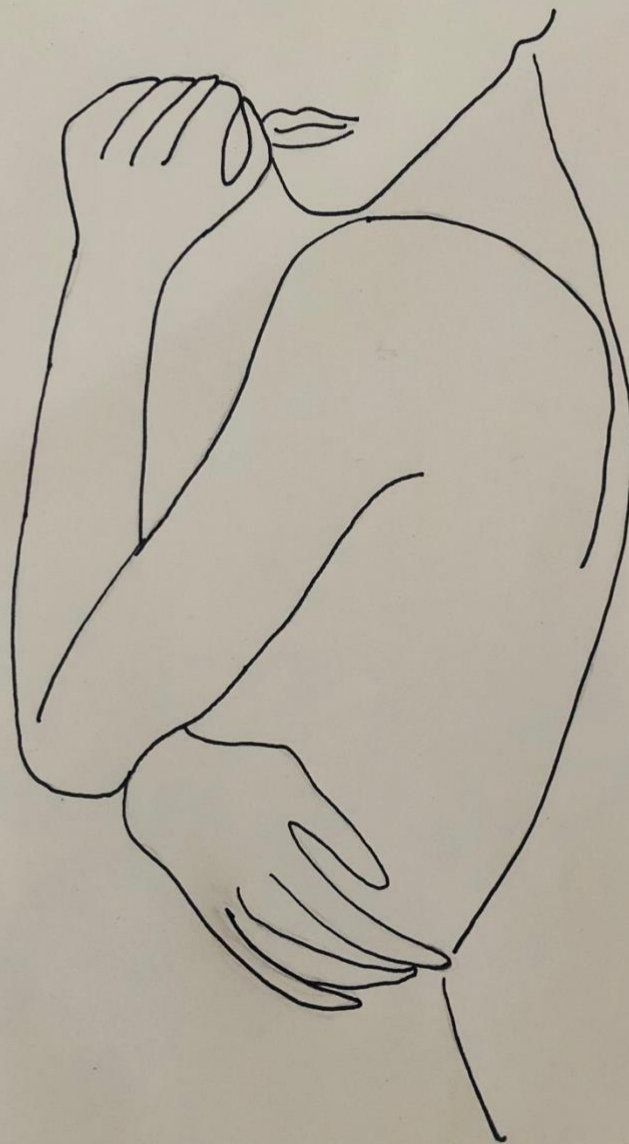
My body.

How can I be

something from which

I am so

Disconnected?



I finally came to the realization that my irrational thoughts did not define who I was as a person. However, I still found it difficult to adjust physically. I began to notice that my fragmented sense of self came from a place of not knowing how to feel in the body I had been given. I felt broken, and I longed for some sense of control. But if dealing with a lifelong struggle of medical issues has taught me anything, it's that some days, my body is just not willing to cooperate. Finding the connection between mind and body is not always easy, considering they are often at war with one another. Just as soon as I start to feel comfortable in my own skin—and mentally and emotionally accept who I am becoming—my body tests me once again.

* * *

In 2019, my kidneys failed. The reason? We're still not entirely sure. Doctors say it was a compounded series of things—dehydration paired with the common cold and anti-inflammatories—and they're probably right. But for a long time, I blamed myself (and my body, more specifically).

My first week spent in the hospital was primarily in the ICU. Much of that is a blur, as I believe my mind tried to protect me from what it so desperately wanted me to forget. After about five days, I was finally relocated to a new room on the medical-surgical floor. It was everything I could have wanted and more: it was quiet, it had a window that looked out into the staff courtyard, and it even had its own bathroom. (What a luxury.)

I remember the first time I got up on my own, taking the liberty of utilizing that bathroom. There was a sink with a mirror just to the left of it, and as I hobbled by—wheeling

around my portable IV pole beside me—I took one look at my reflection and instantly burst into tears. This was the first time I had seen myself since being admitted. I remember looking myself in the mirror, not at all recognizing the person that I saw before me. It felt as though I were in the wrong body.

This is not what my body is supposed to look like. This is not what my body is supposed to feel like. Who is this person staring back at me in the mirror?

After almost a week of IV fluids being pumped into my system without a way to release them, I had put on over 30 pounds of water weight. I felt like a balloon on the verge of popping. My legs were so swollen that I couldn't bend my knees, and my pelvic area had indentations from where my underwear constricted my midsection. Scars covered my body: needle marks dotted along the lower line of my abdomen from daily shots of heparin; purple bruises from where the first of many IVs sat in my arm for too long; the hemodialysis catheter that stuck out of the side of my neck. (This is without mention of the emotional scars that etched into my memories and hid in the crevices of my mind.)

When I was released and finally got to go back home, I was still about 25 pounds heavier than my natural weight. Each day, more and more fluid shed from my body; I lost about four pounds of water each day. But even when I reached my starting weight from before my hospitalization, I knew that my body was still packed with fluid.

One night, as I was getting ready to take a bath, I once again looked in the mirror and realized that underneath it all—the water retention, the swelling, the mental exhaustion—I was just skin and bones. Most of the fluid usually accumulated in my legs, so my upper body was thin. I could tell especially in my arms; the skin was loose, and I could practically see my bones.

The next morning, however, I woke up and noticed that all the fluid had migrated to my midsection overnight. As I sat on the lid of my toilet seat, I stared down at two legs that could not possibly be mine. I could wrap both of my hands around the center of my thigh without squeezing any of the skin on my leg. For someone who always had muscular thighs that were on the thicker side, I couldn't comprehend how this was possible. My legs hadn't been this thin since before I hit puberty.

Eventually, the weight finally stopped falling off, leaving me 20 pounds lower than what I had previously considered my "normal" size. I had just watched my body extend from one extreme to another—a difference of almost 50 pounds—in a matter of three weeks tops. (And, for someone with my frame and build, 50 pounds was no cake walk.) Throughout that month, I had found myself in what felt like three completely different bodies—two of which were forced upon me without my control. I wanted things to go back to normal, but instead, I felt traumatized, disoriented, and disconnected from my thoughts, my body, and the world around me.

On a Scale From 1 to 400

You are satisfied for a second—you rate it on a scale

—Until you notice that you are still hungry.

A taste of bee's nectar

Might satisfy your sweet tooth

—Until you notice that you are still hungry.

You think a cherry

Might satisfy your sweet tooth.

It, too, tastes like candy.

Yes, you think. A cherry

Can curb your craving.

It, too, tastes like candy.

But as you chew, the pit breaks your tooth.

It can curb your craving

But it feels like a stone.

As you chew, the pit breaks your tooth.

You are choking on

What feels like a stone.

You try to explain the pain, but now

You are choking on

Your words.

You try to explain the pain, but now

No one else is listening.

Your words

Wander alone, deciding what to eat next.

You are satisfied for a second time, but your rating tips the scale.

Beauty:

A single word
possessing enough power to change everything she once thought
about herself. Her mother says beauty is a reflect-
ion of the person within, but in reality,
she is just a girl
staring at herself through a one-way mirror.

Do my actions mirror

my words?

Do my thoughts

reflect

reality?

How is a girl

supposed to embrace being a girl

when trapped in a maze of mirrors?

Fighting words

and recurring thoughts

suggest that the shape of her body reflects

her worth. This is the reality

she lives in; a reality

in which being a girl

asks her to mirror

perfection, choke on her words,

and bite her tongue. She thought

she could fake a smile, but soon her own reflect-

ion becomes unrecognizable. Light reflects

off the surface. She is blinded from reality.

For a moment she forgets that she is not a showgirl.

One more glance and the mirror

shatters. Glass pieces in the shape of words

form the preface to her novel of negative thoughts.

But, she has yet to finish the story. She still has a chance to thought-

fully reflect,

a chance for a reality

check—a wake-up call for the girl

who looks in the mirror

unhappy with what she sees. Words

Are powerful. Your thoughts reflect your words.

Girl, speak kindly to yourself and understand

That each mirror presents its own version of reality.



While I sit here wrapping up the contents of my creative thesis, I am also in the process of recovering from an emergency appendectomy that occurred only a week ago. Right when I found out I was going to need surgery, I couldn't help but laugh because of how ironic it all felt. All semester long, I had been reflecting on a multitude of traits, situations, and experiences that have been outside of my control; and here I am, facing yet another instance of unpredictability—another “why” in the series of “whys” that have comprised the events of my life up until this point.

Two weeks ago, I was pondering how I was going to reintroduce the image of a “completed puzzle” to bring my project full circle. However, the only thing that kept coming to mind were the dozens of puzzles that my mom and I put together during the initial covid-inflicted lockdown—several of which we never fully completed due to there being a single piece missing at the end. Though I desperately didn't want to end with a hole in my story, I couldn't seem to get past the haunting memories of missing puzzle pieces. So, I wrote a draft of a quarantine puzzle story, set it aside for about a week or so, and then my appendix decided to throw a tantrum... Now, I have three holes—one from each of the three surgical incisions—and a literal piece missing from my body.

Since arriving home from the hospital, my thoughts have mostly centered around two things: first, how I am going to manage to pull everything together at the end of this semester; and second, how soon I'll be able to get a bellybutton piercing to cover up the scar that I anticipate will run down the center of my navel. This second thought soon led to a third—that if I'm going to have a bellybutton ring, I might as well get a tattoo to go with it—which ultimately led to this morning when I went on a frantic search to find my floral temporary tattoos that I have

stashed away in one of the cloth storage compartments in my bedroom. (I needed to test out a couple placement options, okay?)

Well, long story short, I didn't find the tattoos. But I did come across something else that immediately caught my attention: a letter, unopened, with my name on it. I knew exactly what it was from the moment I saw it, but I was surprised by the fact that I had forgotten about it completely. My plan from almost two years ago had actually worked (sort of). Essentially, this was a letter that I had written to myself on the day before my 20th birthday, and I had the intention of hiding it from myself for a year and opening it on my 21st. (Out of sight, out of mind: makes total sense, right?) The letter and I had definitely crossed paths several times within the first few months after I had first written it, but each time, I held myself back from burning it or throwing it away, and instead, shoved it deeper beneath a pile of junk in one of the built-in drawers in my bed frame. Apparently, I had done such a great job of forgetting about the letter that I didn't even think twice about opening it on my 21st birthday. Maybe that's evidence of my superior hide-and-seek skills. Or, maybe, it's just a sign that it's been a little too long since I've done any sort of deep cleaning in my room. Regardless, I found it today and decided to open it, and honestly, I was a bit blown away by what 20-year-old me had to say:

August 4, 2019

Happy 21st birthday! I hope as you are reading this, you are in a better state—both physically and emotionally—than you were a year ago. (And if you're not, that's okay too... growth takes time.) I'm writing this on the day before your 20th birthday. I assume that at this time now, you'll be preparing for your final year of undergrad. Any ideas on post-graduation plans? Any updates on your love life? (I doubt it LOL, but a lot can happen in a year, so you never know!)

My 20th feels kind of anticlimactic to be honest. I'm sure you'll have plenty of fun turning 21. Even at 20, it's still sorta a big deal. You're not a teenager anymore... And maybe that's partially why I'm writing this: because life is short. And I often times get too caught up in trivial, unimportant

shit, and I forget to live in the present. So, I want this letter to be a motivational push for me. I hope I can use this next year of my life to make some much-needed changes and make 21-year-old me proud. No matter what happened throughout the past year, I want you to be proud of yourself. You've been through a lot, and you've survived. I don't know what this year brought you or where you are right now, but I think it's always good to have some helpful reminders moving forward. So as a 21st birthday present from me to me, here's some important advice that maybe will speak to you or remind you of how awesome and capable you are!

1. *You are a work in progress. It's okay if you don't have it all figured out yet.*
2. *Don't worry so much about being perfect. You're so much harder on yourself than anyone else ever will be.*
3. *It's okay to lose control sometimes. Imagine how boring life would be if everything happened how we originally wanted it to. Just trust that things will work themselves out.*
4. *Be kind to yourself. Compliment yourself. Acknowledge your beauty—inside and out.*
5. *Take care of yourself—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Don't neglect any of the three.*
6. *It's okay to have off days. Just don't let setbacks stop you from moving forward.*
7. *Don't ignore your mental health. (I already said this in #5, but it's important!) Take time to rest and relax if you need it. Give attention to all your emotions. Listen to what they're telling you.*
8. *Express yourself. Don't hold back from authenticity because of fear.*
9. *Speak up! You're funny and have good ideas. Let your voice be heard.*
10. *Don't take people for granted. Tell your family and friends how much they mean to you.*
11. *Take a deep breath in...and laugh. Don't take life too seriously. Enjoy it!*
12. *Take risks. You never know what could happen when you say "yes" to new opportunities.*
13. *Thank your body for all the amazing things it can do. Do this every day.*
14. *Live in the present. Worrying about the past won't change it. Worrying about the future won't influence what's meant to happen. Live for now.*
15. *Spend your time meaningfully. Use it on people and things that matter to you.*
16. *Don't compare yourself to others. Just because the sun doesn't look like the moon doesn't mean that they aren't both beautiful and equally valuable. Appreciate the beauty in others and in yourself.*
17. *Communication is key. A lot of problems can be prevented or solved by just being open and honest.*
18. *Not everything is about you. (Take that as you wish LOL... just thought someone should tell you.)*
19. *Set high standards for yourself. Be willing to compromise to an extent, but never settle for less than you deserve.*
20. *It's okay to walk away from what no longer serves you (whether it be people, situations, habits, etc.).*

21. Life is beautiful. Smile, appreciate the good times and the bad, love all who cross your path, and never take a day for granted. You have so much life ahead of you and so much to look forward to. Never lose sight of your dreams. Stay confident, stay sassy, and stay true to who you are. Sit back and enjoy the ride that is the journey of life.

I love you and am proud of the woman you are becoming. Know that you are cared for and loved. Happy birthday! Now, go drink that piña colada that you've been waiting years to (legally) enjoy.

At the time that this letter was written, I had no idea the kinds of moments—the pains, the struggles, and the triumphs—that the following year and a half would entail. I had no idea that my kidneys would fail or that I would come to terms with a long-standing battle against disordered eating and body image issues. I had no idea that for over a year, I would be in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. But I also had no idea that I would rise above, despite the circumstances. I would have never guessed that in the same year and a half that I experienced my lowest points—both physically and mentally—I would also witness the miracle of becoming an aunt, fall in love, land a part-time job as a baker, or run a mile in eight minutes. But, for some reason, when I wrote that letter, I felt that no matter what I was going through, this is what I would need to hear. And somehow, I was right.



Seeds grow in times of darkness.
But what if seeds were conscious of pain.
Would they inhibit their growth?
Or keep reaching for the sun,
Trusting.