

In the Middle

By: Daian Martinez



TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

Introduction

02

Bullying

04

Anxiety

06

Love

08

Mental Burnout

10

Body Image

12

Reflection Piece

13

Acknowledgments

Introduction

My project , In the Middle, is about the pre-mature experiences of middle school students living in a fast paced and technologically-defined society. I drew inspiration from 1) my past experiences and 2) from interactions I had with middle school students during a week-long youth camp I volunteered for last summer. I learned about the minutiae of their lives: current crushes, favorite classes, aspirations for their future and so forth.

However, I was also burdened by the negative experiences that left them feeling small and invisible. I realized that many of their you struggles were connected to their social lives on online platforms, such as social media or text messaging. Through these platforms, they are exposed to an overwhelming amount of information, where it becomes difficult to filter truth from lies, which can lead to social comparison and feelings of inadequacy. Moved by this encounter, I wanted to bring awareness the theme of lost innocence prevalent in our youth.

I fashioned my project into a zine touching on five topics: bullying, anxiety, love, mental burnout, and body image. Each topic is broken into sections containing a poem, art piece, and vignette.

Bullying:

I take my sweater, the-larger-than-me one
and I glimpse at the mirror, but only a small glimpse

I wanted to see if my sunscreen had left a white cast
last time my classmates made fun of me for it

They smothered mayonnaise over their faces and
stuffed their sweaters with backpacks and said,
“Who am I? Guess, who am I?” And it was me

And I knew it was me, and it wasn't really funny, but
they all laughed anyway
and the few who didn't laugh stayed quiet, just like me

Except I was quiet from the shame
I viewed myself just as they did to me

That day, before getting into bed, I put an extra tally
on my whiteboard
counting down the end of my middle school days



The first time I registered my reflection I was four years old. My eyes were wide and brown. My hair was straight and a dirty-blond. My body was round and short. I don't remember how I felt looking at myself, but I just knew that was me.

I didn't change much as I grew older. I still had my mom's facial features, my dad's straight hair, and his stout figure. I was a melting pot of both of them, unlike my sister. I couldn't understand who the different one was—me or her. She didn't look like me, and she hardly looked like our parents. But in middle school I was the different one.

The first day in 6th grade I sat next to a girl, her name was Anna. She scrunched her nose and glared at me, then she moved to another table. I thought maybe she had been saving a seat for her friend. But as the rest of the students filed in, I was the only one sitting alone. I looked around and wondered if they had previously known each other, maybe from elementary school, or if they were childhood friends; I just wanted something, some reason to make sense of why I was alone.

That day I talked to my mom. She'd say not to worry, that it was just the first day. That I'd find friends soon, and then she grabbed my whiteboard to tally my first day in middle school. And then the next day she'd say the same thing and do the same thing, and the next and the next and the next. And one day I lied to her because her voice wavered when she said don't worry and her face looked like a rainy day, the ones that come without notice, where the water threatens to break free at any moment. After that day my mom no longer tallied my days, I did.

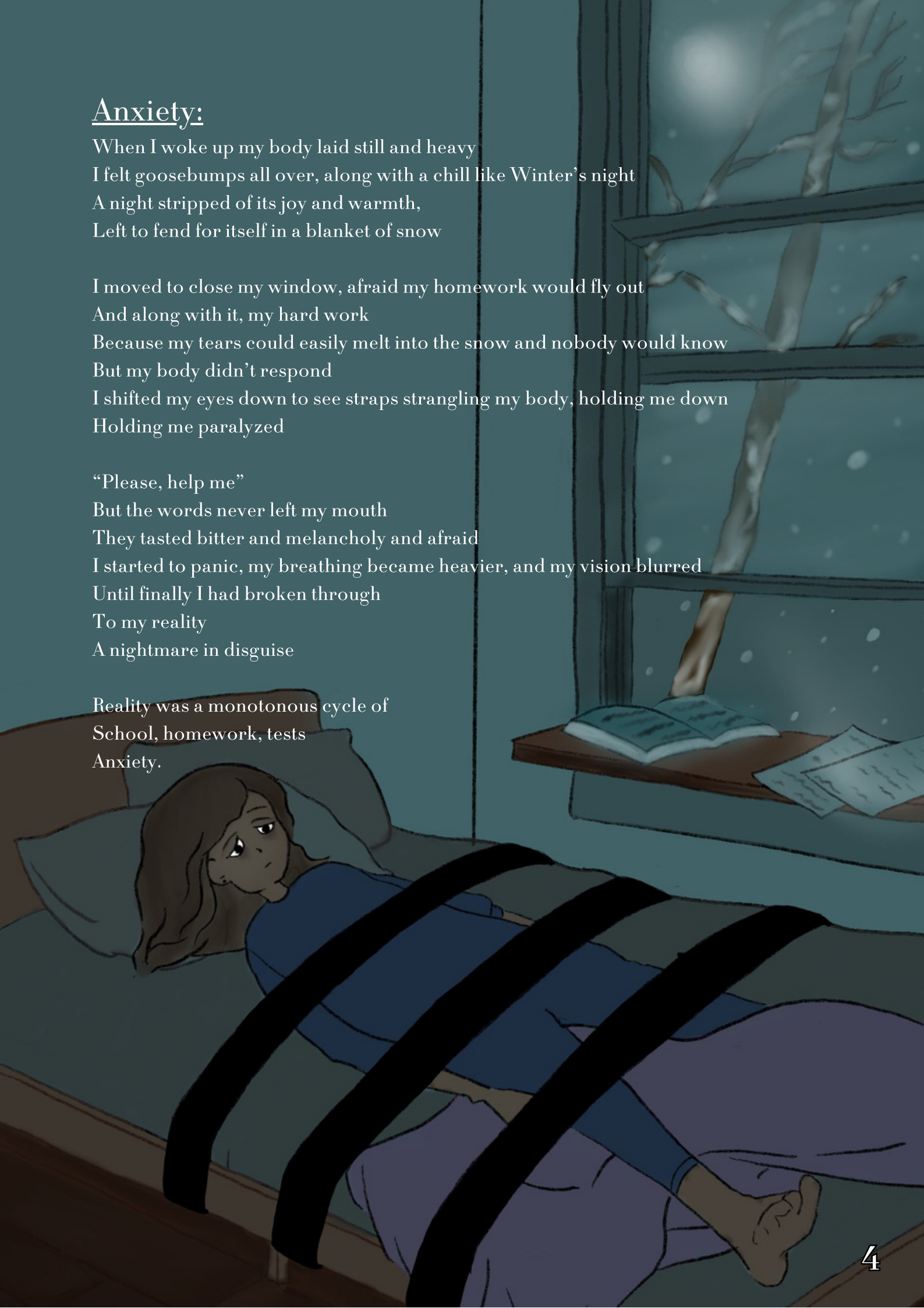
Anxiety:

When I woke up my body laid still and heavy
I felt goosebumps all over, along with a chill like Winter's night
A night stripped of its joy and warmth,
Left to fend for itself in a blanket of snow

I moved to close my window, afraid my homework would fly out
And along with it, my hard work
Because my tears could easily melt into the snow and nobody would know
But my body didn't respond
I shifted my eyes down to see straps strangling my body, holding me down
Holding me paralyzed

"Please, help me"
But the words never left my mouth
They tasted bitter and melancholy and afraid
I started to panic, my breathing became heavier, and my vision blurred
Until finally I had broken through
To my reality
A nightmare in disguise

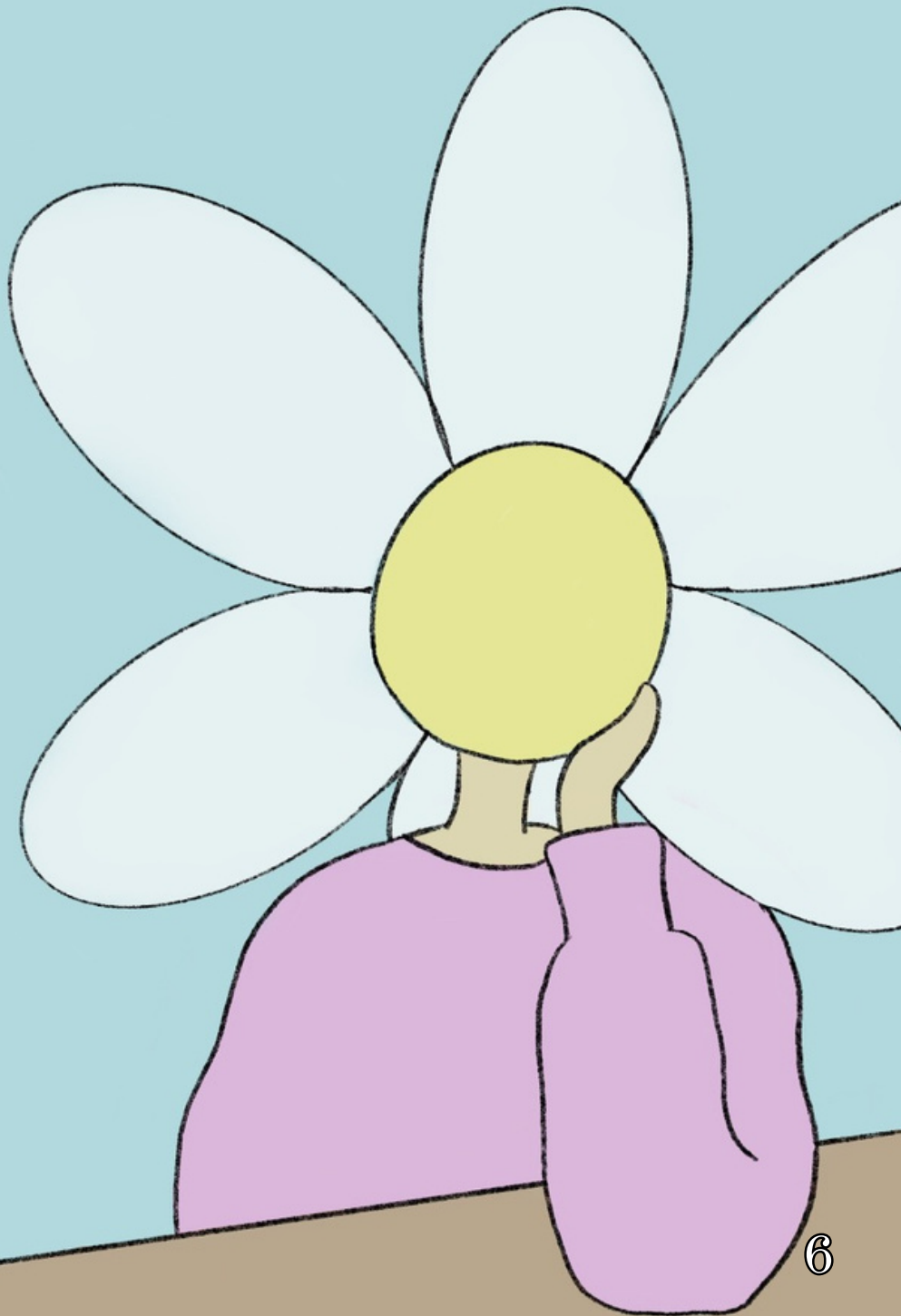
Reality was a monotonous cycle of
School, homework, tests
Anxiety.



I'm a cursed "gifted" student. I stay up late finishing homework or studying, then I go to school the next day acting like being a student is the easiest thing in the world. How do I tell my teachers I'm not actually gifted, just cursed. I don't easily understand their questions, their math, their English, or their history. I just try, really, really, hard. I have this voice inside my head, it's incessant and inconsiderate. This voice tells me to keep going. What if I'm tired, I ask it, and this voice says keep going. What if I'm sleepy, I ask it, and this voice says keep going. "What if", I have so many what-if's, but I keep going because this voice is inconsiderate of my feelings. I'm sure I'm cursed.

Love:

I know it's stupid
And outright unreal
But the joy of plucking out the last petal
And it's "He likes me"
Makes me believe in fate
And as I close my eyes I can see him,
He's holding the last petal
And it's "She likes me"



As soon as I spotted the brunette locks and hazel-green eyes, I took out my phone to look busy, and to hide my creeping sun kissed cheeks. Oh my god, oh my god, he's coming closer I sang excitedly in my head. By that point, my palms were clammy and my anxious left foot started rearing its head through every tap.

I heard the muffled ding of my phone notification. I realized I had been gripping tightly to my phone, afraid it would slip through my sweaty fingers. I checked my messages, it was my best friend. She knew everything about me, from my favorite foods, to my favorite people. Of course she knew about Andrew. She asked if I had seen him already. Andrew and I took the bus home together from school, but I hadn't mentioned to her that we sat together last week. He had approached me and pointed at my seat. I could only nod, and hold my breath as he sat next to me. We didn't really speak much, but why else would he sit next to me? I think he likes me. Today I even played with the daisies near the cafeteria. They whispered their enchantment: "He likes me".

Mental Burnout:

On days when time is frozen

The sun shines brighter than other days,

It's warmth is burning, like a fever

And the wind is more violent

And sometimes the rain is heavy, or maybe I'm just light

My head feels light, like it's full of that violent wind

And my body is weighed down by the heavy rain

All I can do is stay in bed and

Wait until time is no longer frozen



I dread Sundays, because Monday follows and that begins a new week of classes and learning and homework. I used to really like learning. I would ask questions about the stars, and the earth and the ocean; and sometimes, when my dad was fixing his car I wondered how cars could move and sometimes when I watched planes flying overhead I wondered how planes could fly. But now, the world isn't that interesting anymore. My world shrunk. Now, I have to wonder about how well I'll do on my history test tomorrow, or what my parents will think if I get a low score. I have to think even further ahead and wonder when my homework for math is due, and if I also have an upcoming test for some other subject.

But today I don't feel like doing anything. I don't feel like studying, or worrying. I have no energy for that. I feel like staying in bed watching Youtube or Tiktok videos. Usually, I can only do that at night. I lose sleep, but I gain freedom. That's when time freezes, and sometimes I wish it stayed frozen.

Body Image:

Scroll. Scroll. Scroll. Pause.

Like.

Comment.

#bodygoals

#couldneverbeme

The woman on my screen is beautiful

She is thin, like a stick and tall like a tower

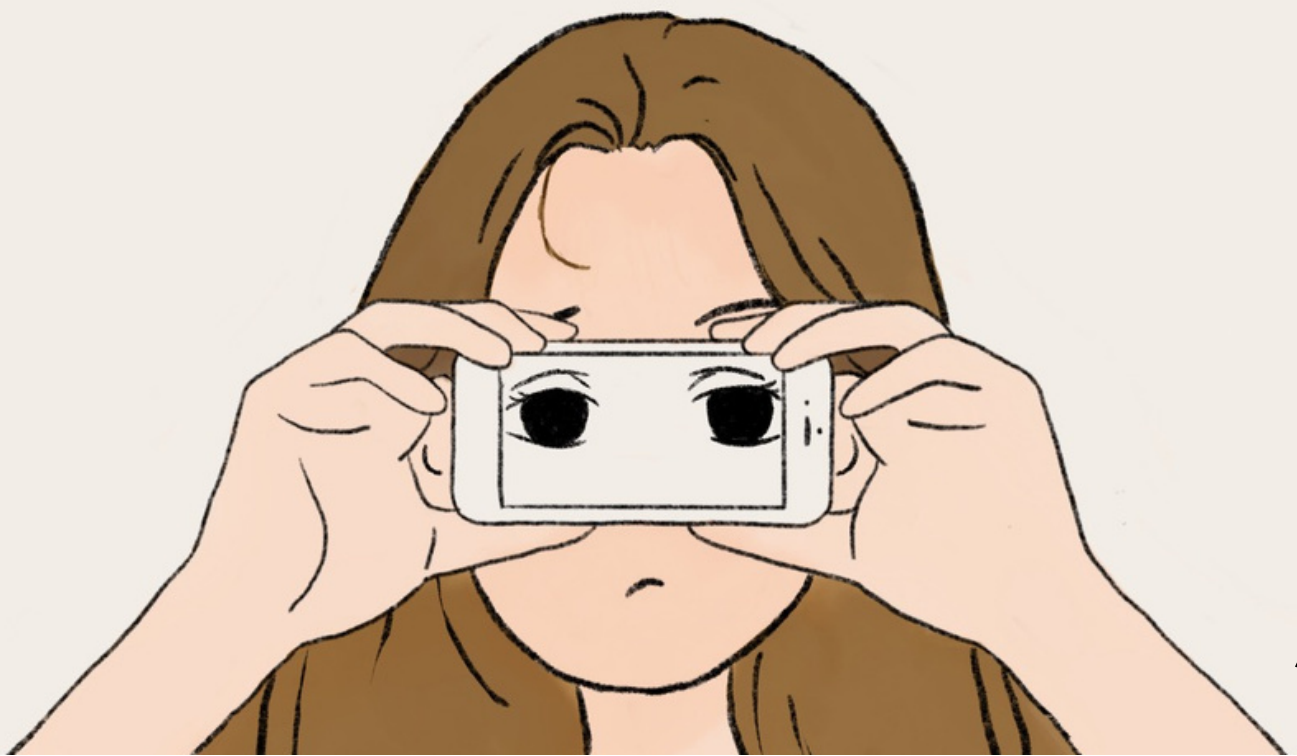
She doesn't have acne, her skin is made of glass

It's smooth and almost translucent

And her face shines with happiness

I want to be happy, so I have to be beautiful

Just like the woman on my screen



I hate PE. Today we have to run the mile. I'm always last, always. My mile time is fourteen minutes and some seconds, and by twelve minutes everyone is waiting for me impatiently. They're all hot and tired, because of course the school always chooses the hottest days to bring us out to the track. Well I'm hot and tired too, faint even. But no one seems to care that I'm struggling. Push forward, they say. Hurry up, you got this, they cheer. But I have to stop and catch my breath or I really will faint. But they don't see that, they just groan. I'm sorry. I really couldn't push forward. I told them that at the locker rooms, and they said I should lose some weight. It'll make me lighter, faster. And then it happens again, that disgusting feeling that everyone is watching me as I change out of my sweaty PE clothes.

Please, please don't look this way. Don't look at the stretch marks on my legs, don't look at my protruding stomach, or my love handles. Please don't notice how heavily I'm still panting. I try to rush, even if that makes my panting worse, but I don't think it's because I just ran the mile anymore. I'm scared to see the judgment in my classmate's eyes. We all know what's beautiful and what isn't. We all like the same posts on Instagram.

Reflection Piece

Dear middle school-self,
I'm very excited for you to meet me
We are grown, an adult
It's hard at times, but that's the general consensus
Don't worry, that's only one portion of our story
We don't live vicariously through others anymore
Because as the days go by we've realized how big
the world is
The world is full of pastel blues and pinks, purples
and yellows
Of glistening stars, and galaxies beyond
So that even in the darkness, we always see light
The world is truly big and beautiful
So now we cry, and laugh, we're sad and happy
You see there's a balance now
You can rest easy
I love you

Acknowledgements

01

Thank you to the students I interacted with last summer. In my writing I refrain from using their direct experiences, however through our conversations I became aware of shared commonalities they are burdened by.

02

Thank you to my mentor, Bob Krut who gave me guidance and direction throughout this long process. He was present and understood my writing needs, especially as someone who struggled writing poetry.

03

Thank you to the RAAB Nonfiction/Fiction group. I often lack confidence displaying my writing for fear of criticism (knowing full well constructive criticism can only make me a better writer). Still, they gave me constant encouragement!

04

Finally, thank you to Professor Ljiljana Coklin. Throughout this year she has checked in on me and pushed me forward. Talking with her helped me solidify my project and try different ways of expressing it through vignettes and poetry.