



2020

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Recommended Citation

(2020) "An Image of Perfection," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 7, Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol7/iss1/16>

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An Image of Perfection

DO YOU WANT TO PLAY MY FAVORITE GAME?" I ASK MY mother, and begin counting off on my fingers each thing I'd eaten that day. A glass of orange juice, half of a grilled cheese sandwich, a handful of crackers. . . . I never said it out loud, but there was one very obvious way to win—keep it all on one hand, as few fingers as possible. I'd stopped eating lunch, saying it was because I didn't have time with classes and work, noticing that as my stomach shrank, I ate less at dinnertime, too. This was self-control. This was power. This was beautification.

My freshman year, my roommate was planning for her first pageant back in our home state. She'd never done beauty pageants before, but we'd both done competitive Irish dance—and that was nearly the same thing. As we'd gotten older in dancing, it had become less about technique and more about how we looked: the dresses, the hair, the makeup, the sparkle. The judges specifically awarded points based on how each competitor looked, which girl had the trendiest (translation: most expensive) costume, who had the best hair, and who sported the most fake tan, even though they weren't supposed to. As time went on, our teacher seemed to care less about our emotional stability than she did about what we could win for her. The biggest difference between my roommate and me was how we reacted to the toxicity. Although I'd collected trauma like dust bunnies and finally turned my back on the whole thing, she'd continued to love Irish dance; while I'd shaken off the entire Irish dance community with an angry stomp of my feet, she'd clung to the psychotic mess of it all, and this pageant was her next step into completely buying into the objectification industry. The first week of fall semester, her mother gave her ground rules for the cafeteria: no desserts. She was constantly reminded by family members that she needed to avoid "getting fat" for the pageant, avoid the dreaded Freshman Fifteen. She'd vocalize her nutritional anx-

ieties during meals and at other times, and we spent most of our time together in our tissue-box-sized dorm room. Needless to say, the constant “fat” threat grew until it was a storm cloud I felt hanging over me as well. Then, it wasn’t only my friend who was obsessed with policing and guilt-ing and restricting—it was me too.

In 1989, *Seventeen* magazine ran the first article to ever reference the Freshman Fifteen, regardless of the fact that, four years earlier, a medical study—the first to indicate freshman weight gain—found that the average number of pounds put on by first-year students was only 8.8 pounds. Nevertheless, nods to the so-called “fifteen” phenomenon began to pop up in various pro-skinny magazines such as *Shape* and *American Cheerleader*, and few of these actually consulted experts before going to print. The trend quickly took root, appearing in more and more magazines and newspapers, with a notable surge in popularity in 2006. The majority of articles promoted ways to avoid the fifteen-pound weight gain; of course, these publications failed to acknowledge the Fifteen’s lack of substantiation.

Growing up, ballet was everything to me. Not for the entirety of my childhood, but during the last years of high school, the art was consuming. I rebranded myself to become “the girl who does ballet.” I wanted to be the ballerina friend, after years wasted identifying with hobbies my friends already held and performed better than I could. I wasted hours watching videos online of the best ballerinas, spent my time scrolling through photos and reading biographies of great dancers, then went to class and stood in front of a mirror. If you google “ballerina image statistics,” immediately at the top of the page of 2,350,000 results is “How tall should a ballerina be?” and “How much does the average ballerina weigh?” and “What is the ideal ballet body?” Ballerinas are thin, with one dancer famously being fired from the prestigious Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow for hitting 110 lbs. Even disregarding the body type of a ballerina, the art revolves around appearance and perfection—focused on nitpicking every movement and line of the body. Comparison can easily—and usually does—become the name of the game. In the winter of 2018, I took an hour-and-a-half ballet class every morning, and I wonder now if that may have contributed to the utter collapse of self-esteem I experienced over the course of that semester.

Seventy percent of 18- to 30-year-old women are unsatisfied with their bodies, compared to 43 percent of men. Fifty-eight percent of college women feel pressured to weigh a certain number of pounds. I once was shown a video of how an advertisement billboard is created—from the model’s hair and makeup process to the photoshoot, Photoshop, and the placement of the enormous sign. Caked with makeup, fake hair pinned

to her head, the photo stretched and manipulated, eyes superficially enlarged and neck elongated—even the model didn't have a "good enough" body; even she couldn't reach the impossible bar. No one tells us this, but only 5 percent of women actually naturally possess the type of ideal body portrayed in American media.

"Why don't my clothes fit me anymore?" I sobbed to my mother over the phone, articles of clothing strewn across my bed and floor and all over the room. My roommate was gone for the weekend, again, and I lowered my voice to keep the girls in the other room from hearing me break down, again. My mom told me I couldn't keep my teenage body forever, that the ballerina shape I'd treasured in high school wasn't the actual cultural ideal, that I should be happy about my hips. But it is still hard for me to let go of the tiny, unassuming girl I'd gotten so used to being, with her flat chest and skinny legs and little arms. The girl people would call thin and make jokes about needing to eat more Christmas cookies; the one who was always considered the smallest of her friends; the one who no one thought weighed much. Tall, small, skinny.

One of my best friends—another roommate from freshman year—was recently hospitalized due to her eating disorder. Anorexia. We all knew it, that year when she lived with us; we saw her hardly eat, heard her list (or rather not list) what she'd eaten each day, like slowly starving was an accomplishment to be proud of. Back then, I'd encourage her to eat something more, something better than a can of Redbull and a CLIF bar or a bag of hot Cheetos as her one meal for the entire day, while feeling like a bit of a hypocrite because I secretly wished I had the self-control to limit myself, too. We all knew it was unhealthy, but we couldn't deny we felt the pull. At the end of winter semester this past year, my friend checked herself into a psych ward, and I was proud of her, knowing only 10 percent of those who suffer from an eating disorder actually seek professional help, and knowing how hard it is to admit even to yourself that you have a problem that needs fixing in the first place. Because even if you notice what is happening, you don't want it to stop. You want to be thinner, thinner, thinner. Then I scrolled through her Instagram profile and my eyes stopped on a photo from back in the middle of that nostalgic freshman year. She was posed on top of a tall rock—she'd gone hiking with a group of friends one Saturday. Her legs looked perfect—really skinny, I mean. Looking at that picture, I hated myself because I wished I had those legs, even knowing full well how they'd gotten that way.

It always scared me—that pull, every day, to make myself throw up after dinner, the little voice that said any bite meant becoming uglier

and uglier. Someone took my head in their hands and forced me to look through a pair of binoculars which made everyone else in the photos look like absolute perfection but twisted and contorted my view of myself. Because if we saw ourselves the way we really are, no one would pay for makeup or shaving cream or eyebrow wax. If someone had told us the billboards and magazine covers and perfume ads are actually lies, we would not have bought the million different products which profit after first making you feel inadequate and wrong and unpolished; their image of perfection is unattainable and insincere, yet it is enticing all the same. Perfect isn't real—but I wish I'd found that out sooner.

Author's Note:

I chose to write this essay in collage format. A collage essay, also known as a patchwork essay, discontinuous essay, or segmented writing, is built from disconnected sections which may or may not seem to fit together, at first. The lack of transitions allows the reader to come to their own conclusions about how each piece is related to the whole. I felt that this style of essay fit my experience with disordered eating and problematic body image because there are so many factors, seemingly unconnected, which combine over time to create this messy, destructive force which can lead to so many health and confidence issues for so many people. Alone, perhaps each factor could be considered harmless. Something I believe is very important, however, is recognizing these harmful elements and calling attention to what they are doing, and are capable of doing, together.