

May 2022

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### Recommended Citation

Bernhardt, Aubriana (2022) "Growth in Three Dimensions," *Writing Waves*: Vol. 5, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/writingwaves/vol5/iss1/4>

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# Growth in Three Dimensions

Aubriana Bernhardt

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CW: Semi-graphic discussion of self-harm, disordered eating, and societal beauty standards

Keywords: memories, bodies, trauma, disordered eating, mental health

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I never cut myself. It wasn't so much a matter of principle as it was a matter of convenience. Even now, I'm not quite sure how to get the blades out of a razor. That's fine, I guess; it's not knowledge I feel inclined to know anymore. Not cutting myself was a saving grace, as it turned out. Because when my high school counselor asked, "Do you hurt yourself?" she wasn't asking about the toothpaste I put on my lips because it stung or the burns I scratched into my arms with my nails, or the five days I could go without eating before anyone would notice, she was asking if I cut myself. And I could say no.

Eventually, she caught onto the burns, and I was forced to tell her that I had scratched my arm raw with my nail to feel the way my skin would roll between my nail and nail bed. She called my mom, and that night my mom cornered me in my room and scratched her arm raw like I had mine.

"I get why you like this so much," she had told me.

She thought it would help.

It did.

I learned counselors snitch, and if I want scars, I have to hide them. So I got caught on the burns, and that was fine. No one ever noticed the eating, though.

*For all of my childhood, all of my family members (especially my mom) would always make comments about how skinny I was, how nice my body was, and how they wished*

*they still had a body like mine. As I grew up, I felt pressured to maintain the body that they all talked about. Whenever I look in the mirror, I'm overcome with dread if I feel like I gained weight, and then I might start to skip meals to "balance" it out. — Anonymous*

When I was a toddler, I was told that my big brown eyes were pretty. I was told that my dimples would win me boys. The freckles I got in summer would make my grandma kiss my cheeks and my parents ruffle my hair. I'd scrunch my nose at them and wipe away any trace of their affection. I didn't want to be pretty. I wanted to play in the mud and be strong like the boys were. I wanted to win against boys, I didn't want to win them.

Kindergarten brought me friends, first grade brought me boyfriends. I don't remember any of them, but my mom told me I had six. She said I made them fight over me at recess to see who would get to hold my hand at lunch. The grown-ups laughed at my silly little 'romance' and told me I'd be a heartbreaker. I didn't understand why that was funny, I didn't want to break hearts.

I was a thin kid. I had spindly arms and legs and a belly that stuck out but never too much to be told I looked small. I got that a lot.

"You're so skinny! Lucky girl."

"I wish I was still as thin as you."

"I could never eat like you and be that thin."

I only ever really got praise for being small. The less space I took up the more praise I received.

It became apparent very quickly that it was important to my family that I be thin and continue to take up as little space as possible. Cowering was never exactly a game to me, but it was a friend. Something to be returned to when all else failed. When my dad chased me I would pull my knees to my chest on the floor by my bed; when my mom yelled at me, I would let her back me into a corner and curve myself into the nook it made; even when nothing in particular happened, I would close myself in the darkness of my closet and wait. I don't know what I was waiting for. I think I wanted them to look for me, to miss me, to come find me. They never did. That was fine, I wasn't taking up any space at all, I was being good.

I guess when I turned 11 and then 12 . . . and even 15 without getting over 95 pounds, that was why no one turned their head. I had been a thin kid. I wasn't taking up space, I was being small, and in doing so, I was being obedient. As long as I remained small, I would be praised for it. If I could be nothing if I could do nothing, it would be okay because I had thinness, and that was all I needed to be worth some form of praise.

*I was naturally pretty thin my whole life, which meant that people commented on it a lot. For as long as I remember, I constantly got, "Wow, I wish I was as skinny as you!", "I would have to starve myself to look like you!", "You are so lucky you don't even have to try to be that skinny!" It was always framed as a good thing, so it began to be a big part of my self-worth. As I got older, I started to gain a healthy amount of weight, but I stopped receiving those "compliments," which led me to believe that I was doing something wrong and that I was becoming undesirable. I began to starve myself and eventually developed anorexia, and the worse my eating disorder got, the more of these "compliments" I began to receive again. — Anonymous*

I didn't truly start restricting my eating until I was 10 or 11, but I can recall the moments that led to it as early as I have memories to look back on.

"I look so fat."

"I need to lose weight."

"Girls, let's go on a diet."

The mantras of my childhood, spoken mother to child, became my own conscience. As I ingrained them into myself, I became nothing more than my body and size. It feels like it's been years since I've told myself anything else at all.

At my seventh birthday party—and every year before that—I had a pool party. I was a summer baby, and the hot weather made the pool in my backyard irresistible to my friends and me. Our parents would swim with us sometimes, but most of the time, they would just watch the sidelines as we swam. My mom was about to dive into the pool with us when I asked why her legs jiggled when she walked. She yelled at me and refused to swim with us for the rest of the day. I don't think she ever swam with us on my birthday

after that, but I didn't know why. I hadn't meant to be mean.

*I've struggled with weight gain, like many women in my family, and the way my mother and grandmother talked about their bodies affected me and my body image because I was growing to look like them. — Anonymous*

It's been over a decade since that moment, and every time I notice my legs—which are now much larger than my mother's have ever been—jiggling, I remember that day at the pool. My legs have muscle and fat that move with me when I step, and that is something to be ashamed of. It's the kind of thing that stops a woman from swimming with her kids.

*I think a lot of my body image issues stemmed from how I watched and listened to my mom talk about her concerns with her own body. The way that she idolized supermodels and viewed skinny women as the pinnacle of beauty had an impact on how I viewed my own body. — Anonymous*

In second grade, Evan kissed me on the cheek at recess. I remember our friends giggling at us. I don't remember what Evan looked like. He had a second girlfriend, though, and he kissed her on the cheek too. I do remember Paige, his other girlfriend. She had brown hair she always wore in two braids with purple rubber bands at the end. Purple was her favorite color, and when she got glasses, their frames were purple too. She loved our school because the mascot was a wolf, and she thought wolves were cool. We howled at the sky at recess, and I thought she was the prettiest person I had ever seen, so when I got glasses, I made sure my frames were also purple. I think I wanted to impress her more than I wanted to date Evan.

Shawn gave me a red, heart-shaped silly band at the beginning of fourth grade. He said it was from Brody because Brody had a crush on me. Brody punched Shawn in the arm for telling me about the crush part. I don't remember speaking to Brody before or after I got the silly band. He said I was pretty. I'm not sure there was anything else he *could* have said about me.

By fifth grade, all the boys wanted girlfriends. On the playground, I watched a boy in my class fall to his knees and beg Dani to be his girlfriend. I watched him clasp his hands before her and bow his head as he repeated how pretty she was. He didn't have

much to say about her, he didn't know her very well. He just knew she was pretty. I remember how he called her Danielle, no one called her Danielle. She went by Dani. Dani liked to sing country music, and she was a straight-A student. She liked science but not English and wore cowboy boots in winter. He didn't know any of that about her, he wouldn't have cared if he did. She was pretty.

I stopped eating altogether for days at a time when I was 10. At that point, it wasn't about my body or not being thin enough. I didn't think much about how I looked until the end of fifth grade. (Actually, I didn't think much about how *anyone* looked until I watched Jada cry on the playground because Ashton's mom said she was too "big" to come to Ashton's eleventh birthday party. Ashton's mom said the bracelets she got as party favors wouldn't fit Jada. None of us understood why that meant Jada couldn't come to the party with us. Jada understood; that's why she cried.) I had only stopped eating because I was sick, and it made eating hurt. I learned a lot from that year. By the time I was 11, I could eat without pain and still chose not to.

I had learned that not eating gave me a lot that nothing else seemed to offer. I had control, I had lost weight, I had an ache in my abdomen that reminded me I was alive.

I also couldn't feel my arms or legs the majority of the time. Constant brain fog left me confused and inattentive. I couldn't sleep because my body hurt and my bones ached when I lay down. But I was fine with all that because I was everything I was supposed to be. I was thin and small—unobtrusive. I was nothing at all. It was exactly what I was meant to be.

That went on for years. From age 11 until age 15, I continued like this. Taking care to hide what few parts of myself I couldn't destroy. Never letting anyone know just how little I ate.

"Have you had dinner?"

"Oh, I'm not hungry."

"You didn't eat last night either."

"Don't worry, I had a snack late at night." I was always lying about something those years.

*I was constantly hungry, but I always pushed that down, and I started getting so vehemently angry with my family for saying absolutely anything about how much I ate or how little I ate, or what I ate. while I'm glad that I feel*

*a lot better now, I'm still sad and upset that the younger me had to go through all that because she missed out on so many fun things, like pool parties and get-togethers and just regular hangouts because I was so terrified about food and how I looked and what was going to be there for me to eat. — Kathryn*

And then I got pneumonia. I was at my worst, though not my lowest. I was exactly 100 pounds and prepared to do anything—and everything—it took to stay that size.

It was the end of the school year, and I had tried my hardest to power through my “cold” until I collapsed before school and was forced to stay home for the day.

That day turned into a week and a half. The first six days I was home, I ate nothing and slept through almost every minute. Despite how weak I was becoming, I weighed myself twice a day: when I woke up in the morning and went to bed at night. I lost one pound every day the first five days I was sick, and then I lost six pounds all in one day on the last day. That left me at a total of 89 pounds. I was emaciated, 5'1, with no muscle and no fat. My bones jutted out.

I was taken to the doctor and put on an intense round of antibiotics to cure the pneumonia. The first thing I did when I could stand for long periods was strip to my bra and underwear and stare at myself for hours in my mirror.

It was an odd feeling. Something in the way I looked fascinated me beyond all reason. I looked . . . dead.

I was everything that I had ever wanted to be. I was the absolute least my body could shrink to. This was what I had been working for. The only thing I had cared about for years. And I hated it. I hated myself more than I ever had at that moment.

My little sister walked into my room as I stared at myself. I could barely stand, and my whole body shook with the effort it took me just to support the weight of my bones. She looked me up and down, and before even saying hi, she told me, “You’re so lucky. I wish I was that thin.”

If you’ve ever heard the silence of a heart shattering, you know what happened in the room for the next few seconds as I stared at her blankly, fighting tears, before she turned and left without another word spoken between us.

That was the moment she saved my life. That was the moment I decided I wouldn't starve myself to death, not if it meant taking her with me.

*My ED began when I was very young due to abuse I sustained from my father. By the time I was 13, I was 5'2 and only 74 pounds. I was hospitalized for about a year, and during that time, I sustained long-term trauma from malnutrition. I have been in treatment from 2014-2016 for eating issues and have been in therapy for much longer. I'm 20 now, but still feel as if my eating is greatly impacted by the way I was raised. I'm currently working on my eating habits, and my therapist specializes in eating differences. I've made progress recently and have been eating and drinking something at least twice a day now. My goals for wellness include being healthier and having a healthier mindset around eating, as well as addressing the trauma that causes a lot of my eating issues. — Anonymous*

I did my best to stop restricting my eating through the rest of high school. Unlearning something you have based so much of your worth and identity on is nearly impossible. Especially when met with nothing but resistance from the people around you.

I understand now that there was a reason that my mother bragged about having a pretty infant. It was the same reason boys were meant to be won, and hearts were meant to be broken, the reason I needed to impress Paige, the reason boys begged for girls they had never spoken to. And it was the reason Jada cried onto the asphalt.

To Ashton's mom and the boys who let me break their hearts and the girls who broke mine and the nurse who told my mom I was pretty and even to me, beauty was an expectation. And that meant ugliness had to be punished.

"Don't worry! It's probably just water weight. You'll lose it."

"I'm sure you can lose the weight again!"

"We can work out together."

"Let's start eating healthier, you've gotten big."

It wasn't until I fully left home that I started gaining weight at a consistent—and quick—rate. It's now, at the largest I have ever been, that I feel the most healthy and complete, much to the disappointment of my family—who can no longer deny that their thin child got fat.



*There's not a specific moment in time where I realized that I was bigger than a lot of kids my age. I've been trying to disassociate being fat with being gross and not feeling like I take care of my body. It's difficult because it seems like that's what society has taught me while growing up. With body positivity becoming more prevalent on social media, there's been more representation for bigger folk like me, but still not for the kind of people that look exactly like me. It's been a struggle finding peace with my body image because of the inclusivity/acceptance of different body types, not including mine. — Anonymous*

In many ways, this is the worst period of my life mentally. The war between my newfound comfort in my body and the hatred I hold for every ounce of fat and muscle I've earned is a constant presence now.

For the first time since eighth grade, I have gone through finals without starving myself in the name of studying. For the millionth time, I have cried myself to sleep and researched the fastest ways to lose weight.

I have sobbed in the shower and been proud of my progress in the same hour. Reminisced on how I used to look and felt at peace with myself in the same minute.

My arms are soft enough that I can rest on them. My stomach moves when I dance, and my thighs when I walk. I can stand or even walk for hours without collapsing. I'm soft and comfortable, and I have become my own home in ways I never thought possible.

But I still cry when I see myself in the mirror for too long. I can't stand to look at myself. I can barely stand to look my family in the eyes, knowing that they miss the body I used to be. That body is dead and gone, and the person it held is buried under layers of growth I never thought I'd live to see.

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