

My scars and bruises are some of my favorite aspects of my body, because they remind me of the stories that landed them on myself. When scanning my body, I see some of my favorite memories forever imprinted into my skin. In my painting, I wanted to convey how beautiful these marking on our bodies are, because they share our stories and history. In general, markings like scars, stretch marks, bruises, and birthmarks are looked down upon, or perceived as ugly, and my painting is rooted in ideas of body image and perceived self worth.

My painting is based around the idea of kintsugi, also known as kintsukuroi. In practice, kintsugi is the Japanese technique of repairing broken pottery with a gold adhesive to highlight the places in which it was previously broken. The philosophy of kintsugi treats breakage and scarring as a part of the object's history that contributes to its beauty. I was very inspired by this idea, and decided to apply kintsugi to the human body.

This oil painting features hands grasping their own skin, with imbedded golden cracks. The grasping hands represent the resentment most people feel about their own bodies. I couldn't make a piece of art about bodies without addressing the two sides of feeling. The hands show anger and shame towards one's body, while the kintsugi represents beauty in imperfection. The gold cracks are painted where stretch marks would be, conveying the beauty and history in these marks instead of society's idea of them. The overarching message of my painting is that no matter how you feel about your body, every mark that could be considered 'ugly' only adds to the history of your life and your body - and therefore makes you more beautiful.

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Ambush

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Ambush

Every battle I have fought in life, I started alone. Some I ended alone, too. But for most, I picked up some soldiers to fight with me along the way. For most, I eventually learned that I couldn't win or even finish the battle by myself. There was no chance of stalemate, or even survival, unless I learned to accept help. And all of these battles were clear. I knew there was war, I felt the bombs crash, I saw the civilians go down. I knew there was war. Whether it was a war against anxiety, depression, or other people, I knew it was there. But some battles can go unnoticed. Maybe there's enough war surrounding for it to blend in, or everyone is trained to think that this war is not war at all. Whatever the reason, some battles can survive and even thrive on the lack of recognition they receive. They are like sneak attacks - always there but never seen. Looming closer and closer without ever being noticed, until the pivotal moment. The moment of realization.

I was thirteen. I was beginning high school with almost no stability. Physically, I was fine. My immediate family was loving, supportive. My home was warm and comfortable. My friends were there. Mentally, I was a wreck. I was fighting the same battle against myself that I had been fighting since I was born. I was sick. I looked healthy from the outside, but wasn't. I was so busy fighting this war that I didn't even realize there was more than one. The ambush happened in an American Eagle dressing room. That was my only option for jeans, because they had long and x-long sizes that I hoped wouldn't leave my ankles showing. I hadn't been shopping in a while, but was so excited. I used to love to shop. I grabbed my usual sizes, 00 x-long and 0 x-long, just in case. But in that changing room, the bombs started to drop. I discovered my body wasn't made for 00's anymore, but my mind wasn't ready for anything bigger. I remember standing there, unsure of what to do. I grabbed a 2 and 4, hating myself for it. My identity was entrenched in my size, I was defined by the way my body looked. I left the store with nothing. I hadn't been able to feel the ground shaking before then, hadn't heard the troops' marching in, hadn't felt the feeling of dread before then. But, all the sudden, I found myself in a full-fledged battle against my own self-image. Looking back, I remember making the cannonballs. I remember setting the time and place. I remember giving the orders to charge. I remember the images I saw, the comments I heard, and the thoughts I created that led me to that point. Before that moment, I hadn't seen any of those actions realistically. I didn't think any of those actions were harmful to myself. I didn't even see what I was setting myself up for.

Hatred for one's body. It's a problem that most people, especially girls, struggle with. This disease of self-hatred is fed to us since birth, beginning with toys and children's media. It's so much a part of our culture that we don't even realize it's there. That's why I didn't feel the ground shaking before then, hadn't heard the troops marching in, hadn't felt the feeling of dread. This battle was normalized. I had grown up, as we all do, in a culture of self-hatred and body-shaming. The Barbie's I played with, the "princess movies" I saw, the comments I received all created an environment where I was blind to how much I was trained to hate myself.

The Beginning Me

I have always known my body was for others' consumption. As soon as I could interact with people, I was told my feet were "too large," my hair was "too short," my body was "too skinny." Skinny. That was what I heard most. I was told to 'eat a burger' so many times I lost count. Wherever I went, the first thing people said to me was, "Wow, you're so skinny". And I was. The curves of my body had chosen to be direct at that time - straight to the point. My legs,

arms, stomach, and chest chose to be lines rather than bends. But my legs planted me firmly on the ground, my brain fueled any and everything I could think of, and my feet took me where I wanted to go.

By the time I was five or six, I was used to the constant commentary. I don't know if it was because I was a girl, or I was just around nosy people, or if my body, in itself, was just that shocking. It wasn't. And it didn't matter. I was a kid - not that I'm not still. But I was a true child then, relying on my mom for all meals of the day, and taking the yellow school bus to second grade every morning. I was young, I was small, I didn't understand why my body was the first thing to be commented on. I soon developed the nickname "string bean." It was a cute nickname, except for the fact that it was based on the body type of a six year-old. An elementary school child's body should not be discussed.

When I was about five years old, my family joined a farm share. Every week, a new box came filled with colorful shapes, beautiful forms, and delicate tastes. I loved the sweet carrots that came in each box. Biting into one yielded a crisp crunch and river of flavor. My favorites, though, were the green beans. They were so aggressively green - looking like thin snakes with stems. To help with dinner, I would sit on the porch with my sister, father, mother and snap the stems off the green beans, so we could cook them and eat them. I spent hours there, with the warm cement tiles heating my feet gently, and my fingers grazing the green beans. They were beautiful vegetables. Sometimes I felt like those green beans - and not just because I was called by their name. I just wanted to exist, but kept being picked up by people, looked at, then edited. My stem kept being snapped off. How was I supposed to grow into myself if I had nothing to grow from? How was I supposed to learn to love myself if nobody taught me?

Her

6 days. 6 more days. The countdown to her birthday started 359 days ago for her, but now it's begun for her family and friends too. Turning six is not a specifically special age, but for her, every birthday is specifically special. At her age, it should be. There is so much to be excited about. Balloons, cards, a song from her family, bringing in cupcakes to her second grade class. But especially, gifts. All she can think about is what presents she is going to get. Will it be LEGO's, a paint by numbers set, a new jump rope? To be truthful, all she wants is a Barbie. All she really wants is that rectangular cardboard and plastic box, with the thick pink letters on it. Bee. Aa. Are. Bee. Aye. Ee. She even asked her teacher how to spell it. She sat there and sounded out each letter until she had it memorized. Bee. Aa. Are. Bee. Aye. Ee. Barbie.

Her obsession started last year, when she went over to her best friend's house. As soon as she walked in the door, her arm was grasped and yanked to the family room. Her friend puffed up her chest and let go, moving to stand proudly next to a long line of dolls strategically dressed and posed. At first, she didn't get it. They're okay, but where are the trucks and LEGO's? She much prefers those. Her friend then began to brag about her collection in a raised voice. She has almost ten dolls! On top of that, she has 16 different outfits for them! And, 12 pairs of shoes. Isn't that so cool? She guessed so. They're a little flimsy for her taste though. They can't even walk or stand up on their own, much less do anything other than pose. But she went along with it. Of course they are cool. For the next hours the two girls sat on the carpet, dressing and undressing the dolls. With each outfit comes a new persona. The red dress transformed one doll into an actor. The jeans and tank top turned another doll into a model. The gray jumpsuit created an artist. Each outfit change entails stripping the Barbie - exposing both girls to the smooth plastic skin on the doll. Between

the dress and jeans, she noticed how smooth Barbie's skin is. During the next outfit change, she focused on the way Barbie's legs look.

She gets home late that night, and changes into pajamas immediately. As she pulls off her pants, she catches a glimpse of her legs in the mirror - they don't look like Barbie's. Her legs are a different color, a different size, different proportions. In fact, nothing about them are similar. Immediately, a feeling of doubt seeps into her stomach. Were her parents lying when they told her she was a cute kid? Was she ever going to be beautiful? That didn't seem likely.

After a year's worth of playdates, she became attached to the idea of Barbie as well. She noticed that her mom was more willing to buy her toys if they were dolls, and her dad let her play longer if it wasn't with trucks. Her classmates joined her more often if she brought a Barbie to school, and her teacher acted more gentle around her when she stopped spending so much time with the blocks. He changed. She spent hours staring at tiny rubbery feet meant only to be wearing heels. She spent countless afternoons feeling how Barbie's stomach felt, then placing her hand on her own stomach. They didn't feel the same. She can't wait to grow up so she can look like Barbie. Isn't that what all women look like? So now - now that she only has six days left, she is excited. For her birthday, but mostly for Barbie. She wants to find a two-piece swimsuit like Barbie's for this summer.

Middle Me

I'm old enough now to know that I don't like being talked about. I already feel like an awkward baby deer with these long, skinny limbs. I don't know anybody who looks like me. Now, I see that as a compliment, but in middle school, it was a worst case scenario. If someone looked at me, it was because of my body. If someone talked around me, it was about my body. Or, at least that's what I thought. I was told that my body was "the ideal body" - long, skinny, lean. People told me that's what models looked like. You should model. That's what I was told. I know it was meant as a compliment, but I didn't want that kind of compliment. I didn't want to be looked at. I just wanted people to stop talking.

By middle school, I had thoroughly transitioned into puberty. My body grew like a weed, I had hair in more than one new place, and by many people's standards, I had become a woman. I grew and I bled and I felt everything. And while my chest grew, I wasn't comparable to Barbie, or a Bratz doll. All around me, my friends needed new bras - they kept outgrowing them. I liked my bras, but never needed new ones. I never had a problem with my chest - specifically the size of it - until others told me how they felt. At school, my friends made fun of me - any shirt I wore was either an excuse to comment on how small I was, or clearly a conscious effort by me to make my boobs look bigger to them. I never meant to do either. I never asked for any of the comments, but I accepted them. Of course I deserved being teased for my chest size. I never stopped to think that my friends shouldn't talk to me that way. My body didn't fit the mold, so of course I deserved criticism. This was how I was trained to think.

When I was in 6th grade, I remember getting a new pair of skinny jeans. I didn't have a big mirror in my room, so plodded down the carpeted hallway to my parent's room. When I stood in front of the mirror, the jeans were the last thing I looked at. For the first time, I saw myself and thought, "ow, I am really skinny." And I liked it. For just a moment, I saw what everyone always told me, and it made my day. It made my day that I saw something tiny in the mirror, it made my day that my body was small. At that point in time I bought jeans that were 00 x-long - and that size

made me proud. I was still unhappy with my body, but that size gave me comfort. I wore those two numbers like a badge on my chest, needing to make sure it was shiny and visible. I used this badge like most people do, to justify and prove myself. Instead of whipping out a police badge, or wearing an army badge, I kept this badge inside my soul. I never whipped it out or wore it on my chest, but I needed to feel the weight of it in my pocket, in my soul. All the years of receiving unwanted comments had finally solidified in my mind that these remarks were compliments. In the world we all live in, being called “too skinny” is seen a compliment, something to strive for. Suddenly, I understood. Suddenly, I gave myself into the twisted system and culture of self-hatred. Instead of hating these comments, I began to feed off them. They fueled my confidence, they reassured me that my body was ok.

Her

She is 11 now - in Middle School. While her Barbie obsession has faded, the memories last. She thinks it's time to start wearing makeup. Some of the girls at school have started showing up with glitter on their eyelids and clumpy mascara on their lashes. Maybe she will look prettier, like a Bratz doll, with makeup on; she thinks it's time for herself to join. Her mom says she's too young for makeup. She tells her that she can wear makeup when she's older - in high school. She doesn't know how she is supposed to look pretty without makeup though. How is she supposed to make the boys like her? Isn't that what teenage girls do? She wonders why she was given fake play makeup as a kid if she wasn't going to be able to wear real makeup. After school she goes to her friend's house - not as a playdate though - she gets mad when her mom calls it that. They walk together out of the school gates and sync their footsteps. Left, right, left, right.

An hour later, the girls decide it's time for a photoshoot. That's one item on the narrowing list of activities acceptable for girls her age to be doing. She jumps at the opportunity to wear makeup. She looks up a picture of Barbie, and tries to copy her makeup. Pink eyeshadow, pink lips, and long eyelashes. But she doesn't have blue eyes, or blonde hair, or pale skin. Does that mean she will never be able to look as good as Barbie? 30 minutes later, her face is done. She took a long time so she could make sure she did everything right. She has to make up for the way she naturally looks. Next, it's time for hair. A straightening iron is the only way to make her hair flat and smooth - which is the only way it can be pretty. A slow five count for each small fistful of hair. The smoke slowly rises from the pink iron as the smell of perfumed makeup tinged with burnt hair spreads through the room. The smell of beauty.

Next up is clothes. The selection has to be perfect. Her friend laid an outfit out for her. A short pink skirt is smoothed onto the bed next to a black tank top. Big gold hoop earrings are next to her soon-to-be outfit. She asks if the outfit will be too much. She likes being dramatic sometimes, but this seems like a lot combined with her already done up face and newly straightened hair. Her friend is sure. As she changes into the skirt, she looks in the mirror. Her legs still don't look like Barbie's. Before her mind can even change topics, her friend plods over. In a helpful tone of voice, she says that she can't wear that skirt unless her legs are shaved. But don't worry! Her friend can teach her how to do it. It's not hard at all - she has been doing it for months.

With every swipe of the shaving cream coated razor, she feels a little older. Each swipe causes the excitement and worry grow in her chest. She is going to look beautiful! So why does she feel uneasy? Why does she feel like everything she is doing today is premature? No. It can't be. She thinks of Barbie to calm herself. Barbie wears makeup, Barbie shaves her legs. So she should too. A new wave of confidence washes over her. This is what she is supposed to do. This

is what she is supposed to look like. And beauty is pain, right? At least that's what she's been told. The cut on her ankle is worth it. Beauty is pain.

The End **Me**

The following years proved difficult for me. The battles I was fighting surged to an all-time high, leaving the war around my body image to fade into the background. I had so much going on in my life that I didn't even have the energy to obsess over how I looked. Time passed, and eventually my battle lessened, leading me back to my own conceptions about my body. Over the years I had gained weight; partly due to birth control, and partly due to just growing into my body. The lines of my figure had changed from stick straight, and began to see the value in curves. My silhouette softened, my proportions changed, my size went up. I became more normally proportioned - as 'normal' as a body shape can be. But that meant my badge, the idea that I clung to when I was younger, became rusty. Instead of being a source of pride and comfort - although an unhealthy one - this badge became a weight. People stopped calling me 'too skinny', I wasn't offered cheeseburgers by people I had just met, and nobody called me a string bean anymore. All of the things I had always wanted to go away had. But instead of feeling free and happier, I felt uncomfortable. My identity had become so strongly associated with how my body looked that having that identity stripped was confusing and devastating. I was taught that my appearance was my worth - the way my body looked defined me. Not by anyone specifically, but by the media, my toys, and all the people who had been force-fed that idea as well. I hated that people would talk about me, but was uncomfortable if they didn't. My whole life my body had been talked about. My brain had absorbed these comments, and believed my place in the world was to be too skinny. My body was the most important part of me. When that changed, I felt that my body was wrong because it wasn't 'too skinny'. Once again, I was sick. Society tried to tell me that this state of mind was normal for me. It shouldn't be.

One night, I had a sleepover with some friends. We did what we were supposed to do - makeup, pillow fights, ice cream, movies. Afterward, we started to talk. We started to uncover the parts of our lives we were trained not to speak of. We all shared our sickness, we shared our pain, we shared our battles. Out of the six of us, only one wasn't infected with this disease. I learned that many of my best friends hurt themselves to attain an unreachable goal, an unreachable silhouette. And I did too. I counted calories, I took weight loss pills, I starved myself, I tried to make myself throw up. We all shared this burden, but none of us spoke of it. This incredible pain had been silenced in all of us somehow. All of our tears, our shame, and our hatred had been compressed into silence. Why?

It was mid-evening one Wednesday night. I felt disgusting, I felt full, I felt ashamed. I wanted out. I traveled thoughtfully and carefully out of my bed and into the bathroom. My footsteps were more timid than usual, seemingly scared of my immediate future. Soon my feet transferred onto the cool tile, and the walls began to feel claustrophobic. A couple seconds later I found a comfortable seat in front of the toilet, enjoying the feeling of the soft carpet brushing my thighs. How can I allow myself to enjoy small moments in a situation like this? I might as well just get it over with. I tell myself that I'll feel better soon. Deep breath. Another deep breath. I know I'm procrastinating what is going to happen, but maybe that's what's best. The reality is, I won't look any different unless I change my behavior, and that's what I'm doing. It's going to be okay, I can do this. As I close my eyes, I begin to see and hear every moment that has led me to

this position, hunched over a porcelain bowl. I hear my grandmother telling me to suck my stomach in, I hear comments about how I've 'filled out', I feel the shame of not being able to borrow clothes from my friends. I see myself sucking my stomach in as I run to the pool, wanting to submerge myself and disappear. I see myself as a child again, picking the stems off green beans. I see myself being looked at, I hear people telling me that I've gained weight. I feel the compression on my legs as I try to fit into old clothes. I relive the comments from when I was in elementary school that trained me to think that my body was for others' approval. My body isn't mine. I close my eyes. I promise myself I will feel better after.

Her

As soon as she walks into the store, she regrets going bathing suit shopping with her friends. She doesn't want herself to see her body, and most definitely not others. Just the sight of the skimpy bikinis makes her nauseous. The strings and minimal fabric accelerates her heart rate, but the glaring amount of space between the top and bottoms is what really triggers her anxiety. She thinks that if she tries on one bikini, she might be able to get away with only wearing one piece after that without comments from her friends. She methodically sorts through all the bathing suits, automatically calculating how they would look on her. Instinctually she moves toward the one piece, but forces herself to grab at least one bikini - everyone else will be wearing bikinis.

Ten minutes later, she stands in a dressing room fighting urges to run. Slowly, she removes her shorts and shirt. It takes more concentration to take off her bra, but after a few deep breaths she finds it in herself to slide into a fairly modest dark green bikini. On the hanger, she loved everything about it. It's such a pretty color, the straps are thick and comfortable, and it is sturdy enough to cover everything. Once it is on her body though, she hates it. The waist isn't too tight but just snug enough to cause her hips to bulge a little at the sides. The straps dig in lightly and reveal the small amount of fat on her sides and shoulders. The bottoms don't quite cover the stretch marks on the inside of her thighs, leaving her feeling exposed. Before she can take it off though, her friends call for a reveal. It's time for her to slip on her persona of confidence, so she sucks in her stomach, arches her back, and walks out. All the cheers and compliments thrown at her seem to quiet and her breath seems to louden. She hears nothing but positive things. Suddenly, a friend blurts out that she wishes her body looked like that. The other girls chime in to create a melody of envy - each one saying how they wish their stomach or legs or arms or shoulders or boobs looked like hers. These comments went in one ear and out the next, a river of meaningless compliments. As soon as felt socially acceptable, she dashed back into the dressing room, allowing herself to breathe again. What her friends didn't understand was that even though they thought she had the ideal body, she hated it. She wished her stomach was flatter, her legs were thinner, her butt was bigger, and her calves more defined.

Out of nowhere a memory floats into her mind. She remembers turning six again. She remembers the Barbie she was given, and that matching bikini that came with it. Her excitement was overwhelming at the time. She had never felt so happy to get a piece of clothing. That whole summer she wore that bikini and brought her matching doll around with her. She had become Barbie through this outfit. She also remembers how her pride and excitement lessened throughout that summer. She stopped wanting to bring her Barbie with her - she didn't like having it near her because it always looked better than her. She remembered liking that bathing suit less and less the more she saw Barbie in it. When she put it on, she noticed how her legs looked different than her doll's. She didn't have the chest Barbie had - of course she didn't she was six. But somehow she

still felt bad about it. She remembered the dread that set in. She still feels that dread, but she doesn't need Barbie to feel it anymore. That plastic figurine is burned into her mind; ever curve, bend, and line forever memorized. She knows her body will never look like that. She also knows that she will forever be conscious of that.

These are not stories of a few. These are stories of many. These fears, thoughts, and behaviors are shared by millions of girls across the world. And we are causing it. We need to change what we teach our girls, literally and subliminally, because nobody deserves this.