

# Portfolio

## by Kaylyn Buehler

Kaylyn Buehler  
Compilation of Essays:  
*I Love Gossip*  
*Doctor in Astronauts Clothing*  
*My Bones and Flesh*  
*I Can't Write This Essay*

### I Love Gossiping

I was 11 years old, sitting in a small dark room only lit by a dull lamp. My thick plaid skirt scratched at my legs. My small black ballet flats felt tight around my feet, and knee high socks struggled to stay up. My collared shirt and tie felt like a noose in the heat. Across from me sat a man dressed in a black robe with a priest's collar. He told me to recite my sins. I scrambled to remember "The Act of Contrition" our sixth grade teacher told us to memorize--I didn't. I told the father my sins, which probably included fighting with my sister, talking back to my parents--I was a smart-mouth 11-year-old--and gossiping. I know that other people think it's wrong, but I don't. There are not many more errors one can make in middle school than those. The priest started to give me advice on patience, but the gossiping piqued his interest. He told me a story of a priest who instructed a woman to go onto a roof and cut open a pillow, shaking all the feathers out. The woman went back to the priest afterwards, and he told her to collect all the feathers. She stammered out that it was impossible, they had all scattered. That, the priest said to me, is what happens when you gossip. This image was seared into my brain, but it didn't keep me from giggling behind people's backs at recess about who had a crush on whom. Later in college, I read that same story in a play, "Doubt: A Parable" by John Patrick Shanley. I had spent years questioning the black and white morality presented to me as a child and felt immediately repulsed by my confessional experience, also the priest in the play telling the feather story used to teach me about sin, was a child abuser. That story might've not been the best example because the fictional priest only quells gossip for the propose of protecting the secrecy of his secret meetings with school children. Slowly, different absolutes I had drilled into me as a child came up for questioning, like sex and marriage, but my built-in catholic guilt still made an appearance

when I would gossip. I began to think that maybe the villainization of gossip had more to do with control than an actual ethical misstep.

My small catholic school girl attitude towards gossip fixated on two things: (1) this is a sin and (2) I want to keep doing it. In the bible in 2 Corinthians 12:20, gossiping is ridiculed beside arrogance, jealousy, and fits of rage. It is often referenced as slander or bearing false witness to your neighbor. This led to my spunky preteen thinking of “I’m not lying about my friend being annoying, it is *my* truth.” I will mark that as the beginning of my distrust of faith, if only to make my point. I still love gossiping. The real enemy that the church was trying to suppress was the power of information. Gossip is knowledge, and knowledge is power. In a historically male dominated narrative, gossip allows women to control their own story behind the curtain. The private truths scatter like feathers over the public making an impact that cannot easily be ignored or controlled.

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Turning to official definitions: the Merriam-Webster dictionary states several definitions for gossip, like “rumor or report of an intimate nature” or “chatty talk” or “the subject matter of gossip.” Ironically, most definitions of gossip contain the word itself. In the Oxford dictionary, to gossip means “engage in gossip.” The etymology reveals a little more about this curious word: originally it referred to Godparents. The two roots were God and sibb (siblings). This eventually transformed into gossip, which was used particularly by women referring to family and friends. It later morphed into a word used to describe people that were close enough to the family to be invited to a birthing. Imagine the whisperings overheard at these events.

Gossiping is a natural tool that emerged out of expanding social circles. As populations grew, people couldn't feasibly have intimate relationships with everyone they encounter. Gossip was used to stay in the loop. It builds stronger relationships and alliances by synthesizing information from what you personally witness and what those around you know. Karen Adkins explains in her book, "Gossip, Epistemology, & Power" that "gossip becomes an informal way of figuring something out against the grain of conventional wisdom."

Gossiping is how I would know if I need to avoid getting scheduled with the creepy guy at my job, or if a certain professor favors their male students, or a boss is hard to work with and quick to anger. Besides, what is more bonding than finding out you hate the same person as someone else? Gossiping is helpful, and it certainly isn't going anywhere. Sitting at the kitchen table with my roommate discussing the intimate romantic lives of our acquaintances based on mere observations is just us harkening back to when our ancestors had to decipher whether or not to trust a group of strangers passing through the area.

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When I was learning about the sin of gossip, no one ever explained *why* it was considered bad to talk behind people's backs, only that rumors and lies were harmful. It was rare if the gossip I was spreading was actually a lie. Gossip was equated to lying, and to question that would have been out of line. It was made clear that these offenses were ones that women committed more. The truth is that there is no significant difference between men and women gossiping, but women are simultaneously encouraged and criticized for doing so. Gossip, just as with anything, exists in a power structure. Those with power have access to knowledge, or if you have knowledge, you can get access to power. This is the basis for every historical drama I've watched. Take the 2013 show "Reign" starring Adelaide Kane as Queen Mary of Scotland for

example. The French queen (Megan Follows) wields her power through manipulation and controlling the reputations of those around her. The secrets, lies, and gossip elevate the stakes of the conflict and intrigue for the audience. Just like real life gossip sessions, these shows are often looked down upon by critics, labeled as being for women, making them vapid and shallow.

Modern-set shows with similar premises like “Pretty Little Liars” and “Gossip Girl” both utilize gossip as a plot device to control the characters. They both have an anonymous internet source that lords information over people to gain power and influence. “Gossip Girl,” based on the novel series of the same name by Cecily von Ziegesar, inspired by her upbringing in New York City’s elite, made a comeback through an HBO reboot, revamped and modernized from its original 2007 release. It hasn’t quite nailed the energy as well as the Blake Lively version, but the show explores the way new social media influences gossip. The teenagers need to constantly be “on” as they are watched everywhere by everyone-- at least everyone with access to a smartphone and Instagram.

In both iterations of the show, the characters are subject to the whims of the anonymous “gossip girl,” who holds powerful secrets that influences their reputations, and seems particularly interested in those of the women. The female characters’ love lives anchor the show, and they are highly scrutinized and public. This takes on another depth once the original gossip girl is revealed to be a man using gossip to elevate his status so he can date the rich, popular Serena van der Woodsen (Blake Lively). The story flips the traditional script of gossip being used as a tool by women to turn the tide of public opinion in their favor. All the characters often assume the anonymous gossipier is a girl, taking the name “gossip girl” literally.

In the recent reboot, social media allows the subject of the gossip to control what is being seen to a certain extent. Selectively choosing what to post about their private lives becomes a

part of the game. In the original show, the characters had to be much more creative in getting gossip girl's attention by staging drama and fights in public where they knew prying eyes were watching, but now the teens are able to communicate their own narrative through personal posts. The anonymous overlord of gossip is a less threatening enemy in the wake of Instagram and Twitter. Just like these fictional characters having new access to their admirers and enemies, the general public now has a peek behind the curtain into the private lives of the real rich and famous.

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Gossiping can be destructive and harmful, but it also fuels the public conversation around the entertainment industry. Public relations for celebrities is an entire industry created to use gossip as a means to maintain relevancy with the general public. With the advent of the internet, there is access to intimate information about celebrities that never existed before outside of magazines and curated press tours. Recently, a scandal with comedian John Mulaney divorcing his wife and having a baby with actor Olivia Munn dominated headlines. The meta-conversation surrounding the Mulaney scandal questions the validity of celebrity gossip, and if it's worth partaking in. Many people on the internet are frustrated with how much people care about the personal lives of strangers, saying it is unhealthy. Truthfully, I know just about as much as the boy sitting next to me in class as I do famous comedian John Mulaney. (I might actually know more about John Mulaney), but if I found out Joe from class broke up with his girlfriend and impregnated another girl 6 months later, I would certainly talk about it. So, it's only fair I treat Mr. Mulaney with the same respect. Women are criticized for caring about the personal lives of famous strangers, but curiosity of the person behind the art is natural and nothing new.

This new accessibility to these rich and famous strangers makes gossiping more complicated. Some react by protecting them by saying, “Well we don’t know the full story!” or “It is just a rumor.” Yes, but have these critics considered that it is an interesting rumor. Public figures live public lives. Signing up to be in the spotlight comes with the rest of it. The concept of millions of strangers knowing my business makes my skin crawl, but then again I didn’t go on a late night talk show to discuss it. Unfortunately, that means their private lives are up for discussion around my kitchen table.

Ultimately, the gossiping and tabloids only helped the career of the male comedian, while that isn’t true for many female counterparts. Celebrities consent to a level of public prying, but there comes a point when it’s too much. Often, this pushing too far results in actions like the famous 2008 Britney Spears moment or Taylor Swift not making a public appearance for over a year. Personally, I think we should all have to stay in for recess because of the loud voices calling Taylor Swift a slut for dating in her twenties.

There is a pervasive problem in media and at a community level, where women and young girls are subject to more heinous rumors and consequences. Looking at gossip with a critical eye, the information we focus on points to deeper societal problems like sexism and racism. There is far less sympathy and grace given to women and people of color in the gossip circuit. Gossiping is deemed acceptable when the reputation of men isn’t harmed. When Taylor Swift, Kanye West, and Kim Kardashian went rounds about a recorded phone call where Swift allegedly gave permission for West to use her name in a lyric, Swift claimed the recording was edited and she didn’t give him permission to name drop her. West pushed back saying Swift lied. The media and public took the side of West and essentially cyber bullied Swift into hiding. Years later it was discovered that Taylor Swift was actually telling the truth. Kanye West and Kim

Kardashian lied, and the media did not punish West the same way they went after Swift for her alleged lie.

As a society, we are very selective about believing women. If believing women means that we have to turn our backs on a man, that woman is lying for attention. She is merely spreading rumors. The idea of truth is reduced down to the term “gossiping.” It becomes synonymous with lies and rumors, despite its neutral definition. It is far easier to list examples where gossiping only ended in loss for women. The consequences for women are often life and death. In the Salem Witch trials women were put to death based solely on rumors. Whereas for men (particularly white and rich ones), there is little evidence in history and modern life that their reputations were brought down by falsehoods or rumors. The gossip that causes ruin to men often exposes even deeper, more sinister truths like in the case of Jeffery Epstein.

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I can’t collect all the feathers I have spread around with my gossip nor do I want to find them. When I was 11 in my thick plaid jumper, no one explained that harmful gossip is different than talking out my experiences to understand the world around me. The reason I love gossiping is simple: connection. In sharing gossip with friends, we show what is important to us. Our values come through in the stories we share and what we consider news about the lives of those around us. The way we speak about the choices of others reveals more about ourselves than it does about the subjects of conversation. The removal of the personal investment in the information being discussed allows for more vulnerability. The error of this comes when people use the natural inclination of gossiping as a tool for tearing others down. No matter what people believe and say about gossip, it doesn’t go away. There will always be parties, dinners, after-church donuts where information flies around from person to person. In our relationships, we



search to understand different sides of ourselves by hashing out events with trusted friends.

While dissecting the lives of the strangers and acquaintances around us, we feel safe to reveal ourselves, bringing us closer to those in our inner circle. Gossiping with someone essentially says to them that there is enough trust there to reveal our opinions and values, allowing ourselves a vulnerability not afforded to just anyone.

### Doctor in Astronaut's Clothing

There is a soft knock on my door, and a small voice says, “Hey Kay, I left your dinner outside your door!” I wait a moment for my roommate to walk down the stairs. I open the door and grab my meal. I yell down a thank you, climb back onto my pink comforter and press play on my computer. The show rattles on about an unsolved murder, as they carefully dissect a crime scene. I have my own crime scene: I obsess over my aching head, how much my throat burns, how wet or dry my cough is. I keep a tally of how often my nose runs, and every once in a while I take a deep breath to ensure I am still breathing.

I’m awake at 3am in a living nightmare. Images of looking up at a nurse in an ICU bed as she intubates me score themselves on the back of my eyes. I flashback to moments last summer when coffee and hot sauce tasted the same, when my dad facetimed us from a hospital bed with oxygen hanging in his nostrils, when a doctor more closely resembled an astronaut. The beeps of the pulse oximeter warning the low levels of oxygen in my dad’s blood rattle between my ears. The astronaut with a doctorate explained the lack of treatment they had to offer, “we haven’t had enough time to study the virus. We are doing the best we can with what we know. I am sorry.” I think he meant it. I sat in the car playing songs about devastating heartache while my mom walked up to the hospital hiding her face. She carried a bag full of books, cards, games, and underwear for a nurse to bring to my dad’s room. It’s as close as we could get to visiting. The only time I left the house for two weeks were spent in the hospital parking lot, pretending I wasn’t actually living the life I found myself in. I drifted away into the melodies and stories Taylor Swift sang on “folklore” instead of facing the reality that my dad almost died.

I tell myself: It is most likely just a cold, and I have a lowered immune system from two years of staying inside and wearing a mask. Maybe a football game and a night of dancing was a lot for my body to handle.

Three days ago, I was content. My roommates gone for the night, I blasted my music and sipped carelessly on a glass of cheap wine that stung the back of my throat a little less with each taste. I looked around my living room and felt like I had made it somewhere, or out of somewhere. Unintentionally, I tricked myself into thinking I had somehow gotten out of a pattern that I have been existing in since March of 2020. This push and pull I flowed through of health and worry had been eating at me for over a year and a half.

I came home to be with my family as the news flashed images of hospitals overflowing, deserted the big cities, and silenced roads. I drove past a sign that read “The real pandemic is sin, Jesus Saves!” I snapped a mental picture and laughed to myself. The laugh came out more hollow and darker than I expected. We were here living in the unimaginable. The news anchors sat in their own living rooms trying to make us laugh at cute Tik Toks as the screen ticked off a death count. I laid in bed, anxiety pressed down on my chest so heavily it felt like shortness of breath.

Tonight instead of the cheap wine, I took two Tylenol PMs to help me sleep, and I set my alarm for 7am. I have a COVID-19 test at 8:30am tomorrow morning 30 minutes away.

Before when I was looking at my life, I didn’t sit and map out the tragedies, taking note of all the plans I will have to cancel. My summer acting in Los Angeles, my sophomore year cut off, my friends from school floated so far I couldn’t reach out if I tried. I didn’t predict how my friendships would end as they were beginning. Lately, I have started taking stock of all the

warning signs of danger. I get anxious standing close to strangers. I am stuck in a pattern of grieving before I can hope.

Through my door, I hear my roommates faintly discussing a homework assignment and their days. My other roommate yells up laughing at a joke I texted her. Bringing me a bowl of ice cream and a smile about how ridiculous life is. She stands in my doorway, “If you have COVID, I am kind of fucked already. So I don’t really care.”

I tested negative. I called my dad, letting him know I can in fact come home for the weekend. I heard his smile through the phone, “You’re vaccinated, cold’s still exist kiddo.” I made my coffee in the morning. I take Advil. No more plans canceled in the wake of my cold. A cold isn’t just a cold anymore. It spirals into a mountain of guilt and grief. All of it weighs on a test, a positive or negative result, instructing me how to move forward.

My Bones and Flesh

Everything I need exists in my bones, in my flesh, in between my joints, and running through my blood. I am afraid to take inventory of all the things inside of me. I focus on the outside. There are rules for the outside. I make sure everything was in shape to be looked at, but not known. I ignored my body when she begged me to rest and love her quietly. In vain, I waited for someone to do it for me.

My backyard in Michigan was at its most striking in the fall. The three weeping willows that represented each of the children in my family began to lose their leaves, and the air smelled richly of grapes. Welch's owned seemingly endless acres of land behind our house, growing grapes for their jellies. My sister and I would climb over the fence to steal grapes off the vines. We ran down the aisles of fruit playing tag. Letting our young bodies fly around with bursts of joy and energy.

We often played catch in the backyard during the summer months when the grass was green and the air was wet. I shouted at my sister, "You can throw it harder! I can take it!!" So, she chucked the bright, round, neon green softball right towards me. It had a downward arc. Thinking it would hit the grass before it got to me, I didn't attempt to catch the ball. It pounded me with enough force to imprint the stitching of the ball onto my ankle. The doctor said I had bruised the bone, nothing more. My sister scoffed, "You said you could handle it."

We moved to Colorado for the first time when I was five. Our backyard looked brown in comparison to Georgia. A rock wall separated the piney forest behind our house from our

manicured lawn. I decided I could scale the rock wall like a great adventurer. The beehive snuggled in the rocks was not pleased about that decision. They retaliated by stinging my shoulder, eyelid, and hand. I went to my first day of kindergarten with a swollen eye. My mom, worried how it looked, explained the story at length to my teachers. I kept running into counters and foosball tables after my eye healed from the bee sting. The teachers gave concerned looks that faded when they saw how clumsy I was.

My knee used to hurt when I was a kid. I came home from soccer practice, and my dad set me on the kitchen counter and rubbed on this blue pudding that made my knee tingle and then go numb. I sat patiently on the counter as the pain dulled. My mind traveled in circles trying to diagnose myself with rare diseases explaining why my knee ached. My dad lifted me off the counter, “What’re we gonna do with you kid- take you out back and shoot you like a horse?” I wondered if horses knew that once they were injured they were no longer needed. Why didn’t anyone want them around if they were hurt?

Your body is a temple. My body is a temple. For who? At eight years old, I was instructed to sit through weekly classes, where pious adults with too much free time taught me how to prepare my mind and body for Christ. Why did I have to prepare if my body was already a temple? Pure of heart and pure of mind meant confession, prayers, and picking out a white dress that mimicked a wedding dress. That was my favorite part- looking like a child bride. I got presents too, but most importantly, I felt pretty with my hair curled and my veil full of tiny sparkles. I was in charge of carrying the bowl of wafers down the center of the church to be consecrated into the

body of Christ. The glass bowl was the size of my torso, and my mom was convinced I would drop it. I didn't.

I first became aware of my body aesthetically when I was around eight years old. I stood in front of the mirror noticing that my stomach was larger than the girls in the magazine. Shame rolled across my body. It would stay for a very long time. It dug itself into my skin. It settled into my scars and seeped into my pores. It weaved itself into the hair growing on my legs.

It was always, "She is such a beautiful little girl! And smart too, better watch out for those boys." The order wasn't given a second thought, but it's important. She's beautiful and then smart.

Sometimes I like being sick, because then you get to feel healthy at some point. It's like a hot shower after a cold and muddy hike. You forget to cherish neutral until it is no longer available to you.

My sister drove me home from school every day, and as we turned the corner into our neighborhood, I yelled at her to stop the car. I ran out hopping the fence into our backyard hunched over because if I straightened out the pain got worse. I ran up to my bathroom and hung over the toilet. I told my mom that it felt like period cramps. I missed a week of school because they took out my appendix. I have three faded scars on my stomach. They don't bother me like I thought they would.

All the girls in my choir were dressed in unflattering, floor length, itchy black gowns. We sang a depressing Latin song in the mostly empty cafeteria as potential new students and their parents wandered through the school. With all the bodies and air, a heatwave set over the room. Right at the end of the song, my arms flew out as if I was being crucified, and I fainted. All I remember is a sharp pain traveling from my head down my spine as I hit the unforgiving linoleum floor. The doctor said I didn't have a concussion, and I shouldn't lock my knees while singing.

The lockers were painted light blue because it provides a calming effect for students. Benches with blue fabric lined the other side of the hallway. As I ran toward the bathroom, I flung myself onto one of the benches. My vision was hazy from the flashes of pain. I made it to the bathroom, but someone heard me vomiting and told the nurse. I had to beg her to let me stay for rehearsal. I cried that it was just period cramps. She let me stay. I wish she hadn't. Maybe I would've learned sooner that my body is more important than what I provided for other people.

In the small concert venue, the smoke from vapes and joints floated to the ceiling creating a haze for the blue stage lights to pierce. My beat-up yellowing converse stuck to the floor. As the band played, the sound rattled my ribcage. My body became a vessel for feeling.

I stretch my neck by lacing my fingers together on the back of my skull and pulling my head down. Staring at the floor, I wish my neck could stretch into liquid. I would go swimming through my bones holding no tension anywhere. I imagine melting into myself, releasing my skeleton and muscles from control.



The hematologist told me that with my blood condition, I should not take any form of hormonal birth control. My gynecologist handed me a tissue as tears flowed down my face. She explained that the only feasible treatment for my endometriosis was hormonal birth control. I must live with the pain. My body will be in pain.

When humans hug, they release hormones that lessen pain and increase empathy. My sister surprised me by coming home from college for the weekend. I have never felt so loved by an embrace before.

My first kiss was in the parking lot of my high school. The parking lot was nearly empty except for our two cars. The bright street lights made the pavement sparkle. I was 17. My second kiss was right after. He grabbed my butt. I didn't mind it at the time.

I got a tattoo of a pine tree when I was 19. My ex never wanted me to get a tattoo. When he broke up with me, my mom and I went to the tattoo shop. As I laid down on the table, tension filled my body, anticipating the pain of the needle. Someone had told me it felt like a million little shots over and over again. I stared at the brown tile floor. The needle pierced my skin, and my body relaxed. They were wrong, the needle felt nothing like a shot. It's always worse in my head. Now my body has a mark that I chose.

My first boyfriend said he loved me, but I think he just liked chasing me. He kept me like a discarded tissue in his back pocket, forgotten and waiting to be used. I held onto his words like they were scripture. Each time I started to leave his church, he reminded me why I converted.

Pulling me back in to prove to himself that he was capable of love. I didn't notice he only wanted me when I was ready to leave.

At work, my new coworker walked behind me by touching his hand to my lower back. None of my female coworkers touch me to move around the store. I didn't say anything.

When I go to bars with just other girls, men notice. One man thought a hug was an appropriate response to running into me. Slipping his drink, he didn't notice that I didn't hug back.

I wish I could rig out my spine. Pull it out, twist the muscles, watch the blood drip off like water from a dishrag. Then I could place it gently inside my body to reform my shape as human.

I like crafting outfits, trying on different personalities. Each morning, I wake up and decide what kind of woman I will become. Am I one that wears dresses and has her hair in braids? Or do I pull on leather pants and combat boots so people don't approach me?

In becoming a woman, I strip away the signs of humanness and adulthood. Shave my legs, under my arms, above my lip, shape my eyebrows, curl my eyelashes. Hold my body close to my spine. Take up as little space as possible. I become woman, leaving behind my human self.

Dance classes make my body feel strong. Spending 30 minutes slowly stretching out my limbs then floating across the marley floor. My muscles strain to look effortless. As if my bones don't

weigh a thing, I leap and land without a noise. I contort my body to control what people see of me.

I have to remind myself to release my stomach from its held position when I am alone. No one is around to care or judge except me. I am my harshest critique. I have been sucking in my gut since I realized it existed.

I started running when I moved back into my parent's house sophomore year of college because of the pandemic. I ran past all the houses in their new neighborhood. Each one identical to the last. The symmetrical yards mocked me as I pushed through the burning in my thighs. I focused on my breathing. In and out. In and out. In and out. I was running from something. I didn't know what it was just yet. I ran so I could eat. Until I stopped eating, then I didn't need to run.

Therapy feels like I am manipulating myself into loving myself. Other people manipulated me into hating myself. Now, I have to work to heal bruises that I aren't my fault.

"Talk to yourself like you are your best friend." Okay. I tried it, "The least interesting thing about you is your body." Would I believe my friend if she said that? Is she right?

I force feed myself lunch now because I know it's better if I eat. It's better for the people around me if I am not wasting all my energy hating myself and trying to be smaller.

The lights in my room are a soft yellow. The pink comforter compliments the peaceful sanctuary. I pull out my journal and write down all of the scary thoughts circling my head. I let the tears fall freely thinking about my younger self. How could I spend so much of my life trying to be smaller? I wanted to hug the girl smiling through all of the hurt, but I just went to bed.

If I can love myself looking back, can I love the girl inside of me right now? She deserves just as much of the compassion she gives away to others.

Tallying up the things inside me: blood, flesh, bones, muscles, wit, intelligence, humor, pain, selfishness, love, hate, anger, compassion, loneliness, openness, stories, songs. The myriad of things inside me contradict each other. They complement one another. Each one builds on every other to create a complex body, all confounding to create a complex me.

## I Can't Write This Essay

By Kaylyn Buehler

I can't write this essay. That would require me to have some sort of answer to the questions that I don't even know how to ask. I can't write this essay answering the questions I have about change, but maybe I can ask them.

You cannot solve a problem that your brain doesn't yet know how to describe.

I can't write this essay, but I will start by writing something, because I cannot graduate without finishing the essay. Or maybe I don't want to finish it, so I have to stay another 5 months in this safety net of higher education where I am limited by other people deciding things for me. I can stay where the leaves changing means a fresh start and new classes.

I can't write this essay. My fingers lock up on my keyboard. A lump blocks my throat. The coffee quickens the beating of my heart. What is it about this change that feels so unimaginable? What is it about the world without school that feels so big and unbearable? Most humans live without school. Most people don't go to a classroom every day. To most people, the leaves changing means only that it will be dark sooner and cold outside.

I can't write this essay, but I will try by going back to the beginning. I was born in Arkansas. I lived there for a month. Half of that month, I spent fighting to breathe in the hospital. Then we moved to Michigan for two years. We moved to Georgia, I don't remember anything here other than a red brick house and my dad's stories of the playroom where they painted a mural. Then we moved to Colorado. I remember my pink room, the toy chests, and the large speakers. I remember how the grass itched my legs, and I remember all the trees I would climb, watching as





the deer passed below me. I remember chicken sandwiches, being kicked out of nap time for singing, my rainbow tie blanket and cloud pillow. I remember waiting for my sister to get home from second grade watching from the front room window for her bright colored backpack. I remember skiing past the instructors on the mountain. I remember accidentally killing all of our fish in our dad's tank. He was mad then, but now he laughs.

Later, we moved back to Michigan. I remember how beautiful fall smelled and looked here. I remember the creek running beside the playground. I remember wearing my first training bra. I remember being one of 5 girls in an advanced math class. I remember running through the swings trying not to get hit, but always falling to the ground. I remember the boy I had a crush on: Colin. (I also remember his last name.) I remember I liked him because he didn't treat me like I was weird, he just thought I was funny. I remember these were the days I learned what loneliness meant. I remember too much to put into one essay. So, I can't write it.

I would cry into my mother's arms as she stroked my hair. I couldn't understand why no one wanted to be my friend. Why did the other kids call me names and leave me out at recess? She whispered that I was too special for them. She tells me now that all those things that made life difficult for me as a kid, make me a person people like being around now. I am independent, opinionated, out-going, authentic. Those things are hard to be when you are in 4th grade. The hallways felt bigger when I walked them alone. I remember the tears I held back stinging my eyes because my friends went



everywhere without me. I remember how it didn't get better for 6 more years, and I remember how much had to change for it to get better. And it did.

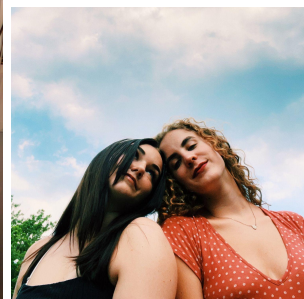
I can't write this essay. There are too many things that change- bodies, leaves, land, people, memories. Change is a constant, but it also feels like it happens all at once like being flung off a swing. It's a slow build of pumping, back and forth, back and forth, and then all of a sudden you are flying through the air connected to the ground only through metal chains. Your friend yells, "JUMP!" So, you fling your body off the rubber seat onto the pebbled ground. You land with a thud and stumble down in laughter. The swing jangles erratically through the air. Change swings me around, but this time I don't have a friend to tell me to jump. I have to learn to be my own friend.

I can't write this essay because I remember too much and not enough. Every step forward was guided, now I have no map. I am supposed to be celebrating graduation, but it doesn't feel like a celebration. I celebrate the woman I am, but what about the girl I left behind? She's sitting at her desk writing in her journal, scared about all the things she will have to learn that she doesn't even know she doesn't know. She isn't celebrating because she hasn't even begun. So, I can't write this essay.



What I have learned is that it's normal to try and define yourself by your relationships. In the 1960s psychologist Erik Erikson said that in early adulthood the crisis we go through is isolation vs intimacy. Once I graduate, where will all my friends go? Some will move with me. Some will become mere profiles on the internet of people I used to know. Some will fade from my memory. Some will live only as characters in stories I tell to strangers years from now. Some

will be at my wedding, and some will be in it. Some will call every week or every month. Some will call often until one day they don't call ever again. That feels like too much to write.



I was thinking about writing this essay as I walked back to my car at night after a long shift. I put my headphones in to zone out. I strolled through campus, careful to step on every leaf that looked delightfully crunchy on the ground. The campus glowed orange and pink as the sun set. Autumnal nostalgia took over my memory. Its sadness wormed around my gut and its love in my heart. I tried to remind myself of all the exciting things I will gain, rather than watching as all the things I have slip away:

You will move to a big city.

You will make new friends there.

You will stand outside of a bar smoking the singular allotted cigarette of the month with these strangers turned family.

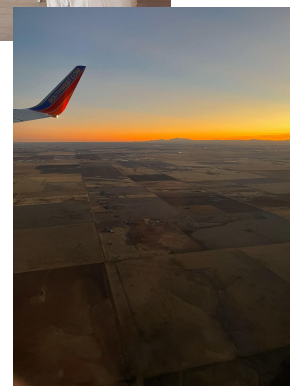
You will miss being in college, but you will laugh at the idea of going back.

The mountains that mystify you now will transform into the vision of the sun setting on avenues.

You will travel.

You will learn without a classroom.

You will be okay.





You will be lonely.

You will be sad and scared.

You will also be fulfilled in smaller moments.

You will be open and refreshed.

You will be curious and happy.

You will be on unsteady ground, but you will have all the tools you didn't have before.



My face burns as each of these affirmations fill my blood with an emotion that feels new to my body. It is nostalgia for a future self. “Hello Kaylyn. I hope all of this is true, and I hope the woman you are stays compassionate to the woman on this side of it all who is trying to work through the fear of taking the first step into the foggy morning by writing this essay.”

I remember the first time I graduated, I made a project for high school graduation that



they call our capstone. I wrapped all my sheet music around my favorite music stand. I decorated it with birds, butterflies, and flowers. Each one with its own special meaning. The teachers told me I didn't go into enough detail. My presentation lacked

depth, but I still passed. The depth they were looking for was tied up in my heart. At 18, I didn't know how to speak about pain without completely unraveling. I almost didn't graduate high school because I was scared to let them see how afraid I was.



My fears remain similar to those I had at 18. To say the change from high school to college was jarring is an understatement. I first went to a small school in St. Charles, Missouri.



In the investigation of my journal from 2018, I found that I rarely trusted myself enough to let myself enjoy the moment. I wrote desperately at 1 am on August 17th, 2018, in messy black ink to find the answers to: “Why do I feel like I’ve already failed? Why am I so disappointed in myself?” Besides all of my fear of change, most of my research resulted in the knowledge that I should have dumped my high school boyfriend far before it happened. I muttered aloud while reading my own diary, “break up with him.” I guess I have always fought the inevitability of change, even though fall and spring are my favorite seasons.

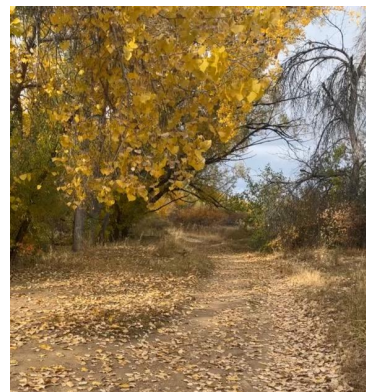
I left Missouri for Boulder, looking for something that I now realize lived inside of me. It is hard to love a place if you are only focused on why you do not belong. I tallied all the reasons I needed to get out, but I was running from myself, and she carried the entire weight of that fear inside of her. I didn’t want to live with myself, and that is hard to get away from.



At 18, I wrote about having more fondness for Missouri now that I was leaving. St. Charles gained a certain charm in the fall as the leaves changed. It softened me, but I still had to leave. Several weeks ago, I called my mom saying, “It’s easier to enjoy it now I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Why do I have the same fears pestering me, only for it to be proven that I am ok?

Every year, people graduate and move on. Just like the leaves piling up on the sidewalks, we are inevitable. While trying to not write this essay, I learned why leaves change colors.

According to SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry: “In the fall, because of changes in the length of daylight and changes in temperature, the leaves stop their food-making process. The chlorophyll breaks down, the green color disappears, and the yellow to orange colors become visible and give the leaves part of their fall splendor.” So, my crisis is “part of my fall splendor.” I dye my hair darker, change my clothes, hoping the outside aligns with the inner chaotic fears.



Bodies get used to environments. They like routine, but feel trapped by that very stillness.

Maybe it's a youthful restlessness that will fade with me into an old chair. I have jumped off the swing so many times and each time is uniquely painful. I land funny, or jump at the wrong time, or scrape my hands and knees. I wince imagining this next jump, but I remember that laughter has always shortly followed even in the midst of pain.

nothing new

(march 2, 2012)

I'm getting older and less sure of what you  
like about me anyway  
How can a person know everything at 18 and  
nothing at 22?  
And will you still want me when I'm nothing  
new?

With time, perspective is granted, and with even more time, perspective is gifted in the present. So while I couldn't laugh lovingly at my fears when I was 18, I can do it at 21 for my younger self. And I even can laugh with my friends as sadness chokes me when I say, “I can't believe you won't be living below me forever.” The scared girl inside of me is sending me tears that each carry a message: “Don't go. Don't change. Don't leave the people that love you again.” But I know better now. I know the people worth staying for want me to fly wherever I need to go. I just have to want it for myself.





