voices

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Between Devotion and Demonization: Yves Tumor's Praise a Lord...

by: Sunny Vo '24

Yves Tumor's 2023 album *Praise a Lord Who Chews but Which Does Not Consume; (Or Simply, Hot Between Worlds)* charts the images of heaven and hell colliding into one another, of limbos between prayer and sin, and of the blurry line between queer love and queer pain. *Praise a Lord...* is the electric continuation of Tumor's perpetual pilgrimage in breaking creative and cultural boundaries. Working with Grammy-winning producer Noah Goldstein, Tumor transcends the sultry electronic sounds of their previous albums to fuel a kaleidoscopic explosion of psychedelia, rock, pop, soul, and electronic. In doing so, they revive the legacies of queer rockstars like David Bowie and Sylvester to create an exploration of faith, love, and self both innovative and perennial.

American artist and producer Yves Tumor is known for their experimental music. For Tumor, religion has always been a double-edged sword. Tumor grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, in what they describe in a *Dazed* interview as a "conservative, racist, homophobic, [and] sexist environment." Religion was a central part of their life. Now, though they believe religion has the potential to be "super-toxic," they feel that "spirituality can be important to keeping yourself balanced." Littered with biblical allusions such as album titles like *Serpent Music* and *Heaven to a Tortured Mind*, Tumor's discography is deeply tangled with the dialectic of faith as both a kind of confinement and a devotional love.

In Praise a Lord..., Tumor explores the imposition of biblical evil onto queer bodies. Under the guise of religion, queer people are often demonized and painted as the "other." However, Tumor readily embraces and in turn reclaims this association of queerness with the heretical—with the corrupters, the monsters, and the infernal. Imagery and styling for the album photos and music videos utilize jarring satanic reds and hellish lighting. In the music video for "Heaven Surrounds Us Like a Hood," Tumor is seen taking a bite out of an apple, the forbidden fruit. Sonically , this is reflected in Tumor's use of screams and jagged breathing, defiant guitars, and distorted noise. The total effect is somewhere in between discomfort, fear, and veneration: what Yves Tumor is doing is so unknown, so unconventional. Rather than placating trite condemnations of queer people through conformity, Tumor breaks all barriers down, as if to say with unabashed pride: *watch.*

But to reduce *Praise a Lord...* to simple mockery of religion would be to discount the moments of genuine vulnerability: in odes to lovers buried under distortion, in interludial quietude, and in music-creation as an act of devotion. More than nihilistically denouncing all spirituality, *Praise a Lord...* paints a picture of the confusion and cognitive dissonance that comes with both faith and love—and their intersection. In "Meteora Blues," Tumor sings "A single glimpse of burning love / The precious sound of your last voice / I'll always pray to an empty sky / Stare straight into the morning star." The lyrics double as both a description of an impassioned yet short-lived relationship and that of theophanic ecstasy. The last line can be interpreted in three ways: as an act of ultimate devotion to God (the sky), as willing blindness (to "stare straight into the sun"), and as surrendering oneself to desire and sin ("morning star" as an epithet for Lucifer). All three could refer to the multitudinous act of loving someone.

To wrap up the odyssey of turmoil, *Praise a Lord...* ends on a more tranquil note. Tumor sings a joyous melody in the last track, "Ebony Eye," "There's no cause for shame / I'm paralyzed, a glowing life / Our beloved saint," seemingly speaking to a lover. Lyrics like "you're my dearest dove," "your burning embrace, it's as warm as rain," and the final resolution of "There's no other way / Than the pearly gates / I found my holy place" signal that Tumor has finally reached acceptance. Tumor finds a lover like a God who imparts divine bliss upon them, an all-loving God who loves wholly and unconditionally. And for Tumor, one who prays and loves God with such adoration, how can heaven not be a sure thing?

Queer Composers in History

by: Shawn Yang '24

Music, like love, knows no boundaries. Queer composers, whether publicly out or not, have made significant contributions to classical music throughout history. Their works have left powerful echoes that have resonated through the ages, and their often untold stories remind us that the universal language of music transcends all boundaries.

1. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

One of the world's best-loved composers, Tchaikovsky is known for his colorful, sweeping orchestral works and ballets like *Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, and The Nutcracker*. Experts have debated for decades whether the tender and raw nature of his works can be attributed to his homosexuality at a time when it was illegal in Russia. Indeed, countless personal letters describing his desires in great detail reveal his tendencies towards men; so does his short-lived, disastrous marriage to a younger woman, Antonina Miliukova. He had supposedly fallen in love with his own nephew, a romance that was cut short in 1893 when he died of cholera—although some theories suggest other causes, such as suicide.

Recommended listening:

- Symphony no. 6 "*Pathétique*" in B minor, Op. 74
- Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

2. Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Unlike Tchaikovsky, American composer Samuel Barber made no effort to keep his sexuality hidden throughout his life, living openly with his partner and fellow composer Gian Carlo Menotti whom he met as a student at the Curtis Institute of Music. Barber's best-known work, *Adagio for Strings*, has become a staple in orchestra repertoire, and he won the Pulitzer Prize for Music twice, for both his opera *Vanessa* and his Piano Concerto.

Recommended listening:

- *Adagio for Strings*
- Violin Concerto, Op. 14

3. Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Leonard Bernstein also studied at the Curtis Institute at the same time as Barber and Menotti. Best known for his musical *West Side Story*, he served as musical director for the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969, and received seven Emmy Awards, two Tony Awards, and 16 Grammy Awards, along with a Kennedy Center Honor in 1981. Although he did marry a woman, actress Felicia Cohn Montealegre, she wrote openly in a letter to him, "You are a homosexual and may never change – you don't admit to the possibility of a double life, but if your peace of mind, your health, your whole nervous system depend on a certain sexual pattern what can you do?"

Recommended listening:

- *West Side Story*
- *Serenade, after Plato's "Symposium"*

4. Jennifer Higdon (1962)

One of the leading contemporary composers of the 21st century, Jennifer Higdon has won a 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her Violin Concerto and a 2009 Grammy Award for her Percussion Concerto. In August 2014, she married her longtime partner Cheryl Lawson; conductor Marin Alsop officiated the wedding. The two met in band class in high school, and Higdon writes love songs to her wife every year!

Recommended listening:

- *blue cathedral* (1999)
- Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (2008)

Oversexualizing Lesbians in Media

by: Xyla Kiang '26

Popular media often depicts women in oversexualized ways. Sometimes women are made to look like nothing more than a body part or a way for a man to pleasure themselves. In these stories, a woman's sexuality is not their own, but rather used for men and owned by men. The portrayal of women transforms into a tool for the male gaze. In particular, the oversexualization of WLW (women-loving-women) and lesbian women in media can be especially damaging to cultivating an authentic and diverse media consumption experience.

Authentic lesbian relationships are not in any way intended for the male gaze or male consumption, and yet lesbians in media are often the target of the male gaze. Media depictions of lesbians have become more appealing for men, and can manifest in the fetishization of lesbian relationships. In this way, lesbian depictions in media became a way to gain male viewership and interest in various pieces of content. It gets even worse when it comes to pornographic depictions of WLW relationships. A study done in 2010 found that "men reported placing much higher erotic value ratings on female same-sex sexual behavior than on male same-sex sexual behavior, while there was no corresponding pattern with women, who reported that both lesbian and gay male sexual activity were equally--and not very--arousing."

In many instances, depictions of lesbian couples in the media are sensationalized and hypersexualized, focusing primarily on physical intimacy rather than exploring the emotional depth and nuances of their connections. That diminishes lesbian relationships, funneling queer relationships through a sexualized lens. For instance, the film *Kissing Jessica Stein* having a lesbian relationship is described as "double sexy." In *Friends*, male characters often get excited over two women kissing—in one episode, Monica and Rachel get their apartment back from Chandler and Joey by letting them watch them kiss each other. Another possibility is the oversexualized and romanticized notion of "turning lesbians straight" or "corrective" sexual and physical assault. No matter the reason, some men seem to find lesbian intercourse attractive, and therefore it is propagated through the media for misogynistic eyes.

Moreover, the portrayal of lesbians often adheres to stereotypes. From the portrayal of hyper-sexualized femme lesbians conforming to societal beauty standards to the depiction of butch lesbians as aggressive or hypermasculine, media representations frequently fail to capture the diverse spectrum of identities within the lesbian community.

While it is important to recognize content that has shown all healthy and constructive relationships, it is equally important to recognize where relationships, specifically lesbian, have been oversexualized. On a positive note, there are pieces of media that portray healthy queer relationships. Examples include but are not limited to *The Owl House* (2020-2023), *Heartstopper* (2022-) and *Adventure Time* (2010 - 2018). In the Choate community, we should all work to discourage misconceptions about any queer identities that are oversexualized, and stay away from media that can misinform viewers

Rainbow Capitalism

by: Delaney Ellsworth '24

Rainbow capitalism is far too prevalent in society today. It is the act of corporations monetizing queer communities and allies by using pride month and rainbow symbols to sell more of their products and profit off the LGBTQ+ movement. While representing the queer community through merchandise can be really empowering, when rainbow capitalism comes into play it can be more harmful than anything.

One brand that infamously profits off of Pride Month is Target. It's common for big-name brands to make merchandise for Pride, and Target is no exception. Their collection upsets queer community and allies because they recognize that Target is not truly interested in the aims of the queer community; they only have cheap merchandise that the company can profit off of. This is extremely harmful because while Target is cashing in, the queer community is still suffering through issues that pride clothing cannot fix.

Target is not going to be a year-round ally that strives to make change within the community and that is when their profiting becomes harmful.

Not all Pride Month marketing is necessarily harmful, however. A lot of smaller LGBTQ+-run businesses have shops that align closely with the values of Pride. They are allies all year round and their money goes to the right places. Some places to find these businesses are through

LGBTQ+-made media such as the website Everywhere is Queer, which can direct you to local businesses who do not work solely to profit off of Pride. You can still celebrate with pride merchandise without feeling like you are falling victim to rainbow capitalism.

Overall, celebrating Pride Month with merchandise isn't unreasonable, or inherently problematic. Still, it is important to keep in mind who you are buying from and what support they give the queer community. Brands like Target participate in performative activism by profiting off pride month, while other smaller businesses are more queer friendly year round.

Kpop and Gender's Convoluted Relationship

by: Gigi Chen '24

K-Pop, also known as Korean Pop, is a genre of music that has exploded in international popularity over the last few decades. K-Pop embodies not only a genre of sound, but also an emphasis on visual aesthetics and dance performance: think flashy outfits, a heavily artistic concept, and catchy music. However, K-pop tends to adhere to and bolster stereotypical East Asian beauty standards—pale skin, specific facial proportions, and low weight; these standards disproportionately affect women, highlighting patriarchal structures within Korean society. Yet simultaneously, the globalized nature of the K-Pop industry enables it to divest itself of certain gender norms and binary conceptions—when expressed through music or visual appearance, it is more socially acceptable for K-Pop idols to deviate from traditional gender structures. The genre of K-Pop thus creates oxymoronic representations of conforming and non-conforming gender roles, which is further reflected in its fanbases.

K-Pop traditionally relies on binary structures to represent its bands: groups are either girl groups or boy groups, and very few cross the line to form co-ed groups. Both male and female idols are subject to harsh beauty regiments and are valued for their bodies without the agency to decide what to do with them. Contrary to their male counterparts, however, female K-Pop idols are often the target of unwarranted backlash and misogyny online. They receive much more backlash over appearing in public without makeup, and are targeted for expressing feminist views. For example, Joy, member of girl group Red Velvet, was harshly criticized in August of 2020 when a group of her fans realized she was wearing a "We Should All be Feminists" shirt. They filmed and posted themselves burning Red Velvet merchandise and pictures of the idol in response.

Many girl group songs also center on their position in relationship to a man. This largely reflects the lack of autonomy female idols have in the music production process—of the top 100 idol producers listed in Korea's 2020 official copyright association, only 12 are women.

Despite existing within systems of patriarchy and binary gender, K-Pop also challenges the gender binary through visuals, especially in regard to traditional masculinizing and feminizing standards. K-Pop can challenge stereotypes of emasculated Asian men and other existing hegemonic gender norms by accepting feminine masculinity and androgyny.

Many K-Pop boy groups challenge traditionally masculine fashion and beauty through the inclusion of components like skirts, corsets, makeup, and pastel colors in their concepts. For instance, BTS member Park Jimin, who is known to have a higher pitched vocal range than traditionally masculine voices, often incorporates jewelry and makeup into daily wear. In an interview, he has said

that when he was younger, he felt the need to be “a strong man”, but now “does not have to pretend anymore” to do so.

Androgyny is likewise more accepted for K-Pop idols as well. Idols such as Amber Liu, member of F(x), and Miya of GWSN, are well-known for having more androgynous, tomboyish looks. In an Instagram post, Amber once wrote “I’ve been a tomboy pretty much all my life. I personally believe girls and boys are not limited to one specific look.” Female idols are also often able to wear suits and lean into masculine concepts while performing onstage.

K-Pop is a complex and evolving genre of music, and both supports and challenges traditional gender roles. The genre also provides an outlet for an ever-growing LGBTQ+ audience that diversifies a predominantly heterosexual fanbase. The artists themselves are as ever-changing as the gender they explore in their art form. As the genre continues to grow and diversify, it remains to be seen how K-Pop will continue to break or embody mainstream cisnormativity.

New Queer Studies Course

by: Sarina Fernandez-Grishpun ‘25

Last year, Choate’s course catalog received a long-awaited update: the Queer Studies course. Open to 5th and 6th formers, a Queer Studies course is available this year in Spring 2024 for the second time, taught by Ms. Kyra Jenney and Ms. Amy Howland. As described in the 2023-2024 course catalog, the course is an opportunity for students to learn about “an ever-growing and exciting discipline that explores the intersections of sex, sexuality, and gender.” Students can look forward to dissecting works by primarily queer authors and philosophers including Sara Ahmed, Kath Weston, and Jose Esteban Muños, to see how they are shaping the field of queer studies, and will also learn about the history of sexuality and queerness. Students learn about LGBTQ+ issues from intersectional perspectives, investigating relationships between race, socioeconomic class,gender identity, and sexuality, in order to break down the ins and outs of queer theory.

Queer Studies is an exciting opportunity for passionate students to explore ideas of queerness and sexuality from a multidisciplinary and diverse perspective in open class discussions. Ms. Howland describes this openness, saying “A lot of our discussions are facilitated by the students in the class... No matter how a student identifies, we want them to really see themselves in this course.” Students who have taken this course in the past have

loved it. Faer Son ’24 shared, “In the classroom, opinions were very freely shared and there was always space for everyone to talk.” Outside of discussions, students explore topics in-depth through papers, podcasts, etc. and finish the term with an activism project and presentation where they zoom into an activist or group and analyze their actions and impact using the theory they have learned in class.

Choate has taken many steps in making itself a more inclusive and welcoming community, and a lot of that work starts within the curriculum. Having a Queer Studies course at Choate is a crucial step towards allowing students to have a greater understanding of social change and frequent discussion on the theory behind human sexuality; this class is a great step towards making Choate a more educated and inclusive population.

Current Anti-LGBTQ Legislation

by: Blake Steremberg '26

In the past year, 49 states have proposed or passed a record number of bills targeting the LGBTQ+ community, especially transgender kids. The bills primarily target access to Healthcare and limit what schools and the education system can do. These bills contradict the medical communities' guidance and negatively harm LGBTQ+ people, especially minors.

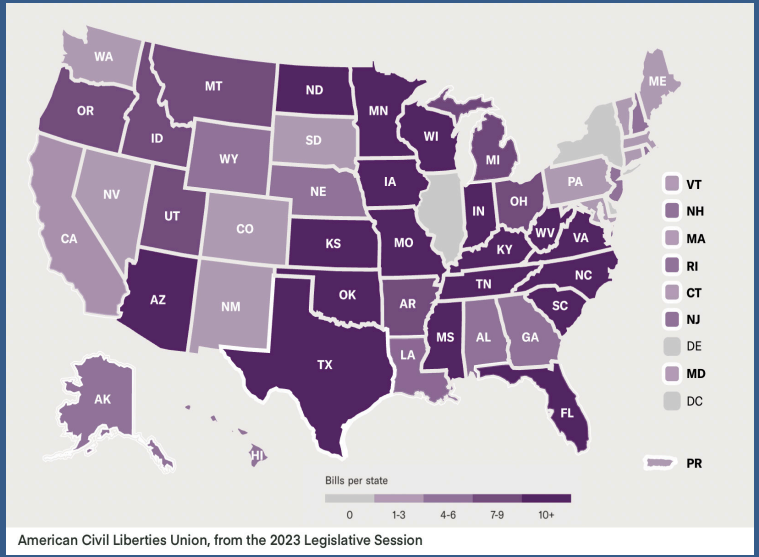
States have been limiting access to gender-affirming healthcare, which is critically important for queer youth seeking structural support, validation, and medical transition. Gender-affirming care includes a wide range of social, psychological, and medical interventions, and can range from changing pronouns to partial surgical removal of the breast tissue. Currently, gender-affirming care is done in accordance with the Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People, Version 8. According to this, for minors under the age of sixteen the only legal medical intervention is reversible hormone blockers; minors sixteen and older can receive hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and mastectomies. Gender-affirming care is important inherently, as it benefits mental health and reduces the suicide rate of minors. These procedures are endorsed by over forty medical groups including the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Physicians, American Psychiatric Association, and the World Medical Association have endorsed gender-affirming care for minors.

Across the United States, state legislatures have proposed and passed bills banning gender-affirming care for minors.They make it a crime for doctors to provide care, and instigate child abuse investigations into the parents. This directly undermines medical guidance and the scientific consensus on the benefits of gender-affirming care. One example is Florida CS/SB 254. This law prohibits gender-affirming care to minors and lets the state take custody of minors who receive gender-affirming care. It also makes it a felony for healthcare providers to provide care. Many laws are being modeled off of Florida's law and going into effect around the country. More are working their way through the legislative process. Similar laws have been passed in Iowa, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia. This stops minors from receiving life-saving treatments and stops health professionals from providing necessary and standard care for LGBTQ+ youth.

Recommended listening:

States have also been implementing limitations on LGBTQ+ material in school curriculums. These are targeting LGBTQ+ students and negatively affects their mental health. For many LGBTQ+ students, school is the only place they can be themselves, especially if they do not have a supportive home environment.

The most infamous education-related bill is Florida's HB1557, colloquially referred to as the "Don't Say Gay Bill". This bill limits mentions of sexual orientation and gender identity from kindergarten through 12th grade. As a result, teachers can't discuss and support the identities of their students. This hurts students because they cannot be their authentic selves at school, negatively affecting their mental health. Copycat laws have been passed in South Carolina and Iowa. Montana, Tennessee, and Iowa have also passed laws that forcibly out and misgender



American Civil Liberties Union, from the 2023 Legislative Session

Density of anti-LGBTQ bills per state

students. These laws hurt students, especially those who do not have a supportive home. Students are unable to lean on their teachers as a supportive resource, which negatively impacts their mental health.

These bills and laws are targeted at the LGBTQ+ community, particularly minors and students. These bills contradict an established medical and scientific consensus and negatively impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. For updates on specific bills and mapping of how many anti-LGBTQ+ bills are in each state the American Civil Liberties Union offers comprehensive information at this QR code.

The Pressure to Label in the Queer Community

by: Suleika Sandi '26

From birth, there are labels placed upon us: labels to act a certain way, be a certain person, love a certain way, and be called a certain name. In a way, labels are the human way of understanding who we are, making it easier to divide ourselves into communities and categorize ourselves. As society gradually embraces diversity and inclusivity, individuals navigating their sexual orientation or gender identity encounter a complex landscape where labels can offer affirmation, solidarity, and a sense of belonging. Who am I? Who do I love? These are questions that plague our existence. Sometimes though, LGBTQ+ individuals might face a pressure to label themselves, either from their own community or the world at large.

"Sexuality is fluid" is a sentiment echoed throughout the LGBTQ+ community. However, when someone first realizes they may be part of the queer community, friends (or even the person themself) may expect them to immediately know what label to use. Someone may also not understand their own queerness, and may feel trapped by labels that did not need to be there in the first place. Still, someone may feel the pressure to label oneself from the internal struggle of self-discovery. Often, in today's society there is a pressure to fully understand yourself, which can translate into pressure to understand who you love. This mindset can stem from many different places, for instance heteronormative ignorance. Many people may only understand the LGBTQ+ community under labels like "gay" or "lesbian," but those are far from the many valid labels out there.

Within the LGBTQ+ community itself, the pressure to label oneself can come from well-intentioned places. Advocates and support groups, in their efforts to create safe spaces, sometimes inadvertently foster an environment where labels for specific subgroups of the LGBTQ+ are seen as a prerequisite for acceptance. This unintentional pressure can lead to feelings of confusion for those who might not need any particular label or are still exploring their identities.

As we navigate throughout our life, we may find ourselves seeking a label to better understand who we are. It is important to strike a balance between finding ourselves whilst allowing ourselves to be comfortable with the parts of ourselves that cannot be confined to any certain label. While labels can be empowering and validating, they are not necessary. The LGBTQ+ journey is vastly diverse, and should emphasize self-acceptance and respect for individual experiences, with or without labels.

Dissapointment(s): a recollection

by: Yoyo Zhang '24

1. her

We stood on the moonlit balcony. *Listen*
to *the wind blow*, you whispered

into my ear, soft shoulders
uncovered by the beige

cardigan. I tell no one,
how my heart raced in

the silence, air saturated
with suspended

desires. I closed my eyes to
listen, but the wind ceased

to sing. Your embrace
eluded into the night,

without even a star—suspended
desires shattered in the dark.

2. pancakes

Wheaty clouds flow in my
dream, syrup symphonies dripping

in adagio. Into my mouth, sweet
disposition. Hunger. I crawl out

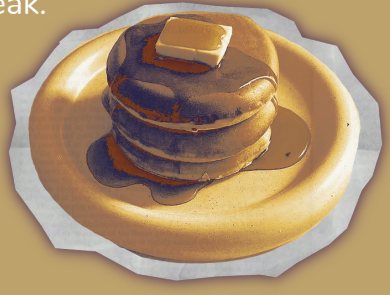
out of the bed's warmth, vision
blurry, frostbitten legs launching

a monumental quest. Kitchen walls
grow still, widen, brittlely bright in

twilight, and then, it was time
to pull, not the wooden drawer,

but the steel oven that gates
all hopes and jovialities and

"oh ma gah"s and "yumyum!"s...
Empty tray. Heartbreak.



3. birthday

Such specialty, once a year, frozen
clock and countless wishes. Candlelight

fragile, precious. How to express,
my content, my aspirations, heightened

by the crowd's song? Two words
for a heart. Love, I live for the boxes

I must wait to open. Shiny wrappers,
creases twinkle in excitement,

soul reshined. My fingers trace
the smooth surface, tearing open

the magic, oh how fascinating
the enclosed treasure.

Only I find it shattered in
pieces, along with my soul.

4. the glance

Cerulean sky, gentle heartbeat. Your
hand in mine as we lay on

the frosted lawn, infinitesimal
eternity under American

bittersweet. A night I held tight
to my chest. A hole where

your love used to be, cut
cold by the "why?"s, "don't"s,

and the one "leave me alone" the day
you hung up seven times. Your shadow

still passes by sometimes, and
I pretend to forget, but

how can I, your glance,
the glance.

Lorca

by: Yoyo Zhang '24

I open my tome, hundreds of pages filled to the brim with my open bleeding heart. This feels like opening an old chess set from the bottom shelf, dust floating everywhere when you pull out the pieces. The words are overwhelming. They lift right off the page into my face.

I miss my devotion. I miss myself. I miss unapologetically expressing myself. I bury my head in my blanket to inhale the dust, the dust that came off of my memories. If I was wondering whether people deteriorate over time before, now I'm sure of the answer. The roundness in my letters has now been sharpened by life. Life is a knife that cuts. The golden filter over the old days isn't real gold, it's an illusion created by the juxtaposition between gray and less gray. The old pages didn't even need perfume to smell sweet. It's just there, it's overflowing from the paper. I realized that I can't hate myself because I don't even know myself. I have turned into a stranger, no more cheerful chatters in hallways or Sunday trips to the flower & bird market.

I am a paper-thin slice of a nameless figure, whose past has been tucked away in a wooden box, a cargo dragging behind me. The harder you squint at it, the more it fades. It's there — but is it really? I wish you could peel me off and see the gem that I am made from, gem crystallized with pain, which makes it shine all the brighter. I am dull on the outside, the clay protecting it all. I pain myself when I look into the mirror because I'm painfully beautiful. I'm so beautiful that I want to worship myself, but when I zoom out I realize that I'm just a loner on a fake throne in a mud palace with no other eyewitnesses.

I'm a pearl necklace tied together by a stretchy plastic string. This string is love. All forms of love, family, friends, guys, girls, romantic, uplifting, toxic, ephemeral. I wish love was as sweet as people make it seem. But when you really think about it, it's just a painful, inescapable destiny. What would I be without love? Still pearls, but pearls scattering in 46 directions. No matter how much they wish to believe that they were enough on their own, pearls would not be pearls without the plastic string.

I'm reduced into a single moment. But I wish I was so much more.

by: Vik Wei '24

Notebooks tower precariously near jars of highlighters and stationery. The pens are well-loved, the markers running out of ink. This is the workspace of a student who loves studying.

The far corner of the desk, however, is littered with mismatched, colorful jewelry and an organized chaos of eyeliners and shadows. This is also a place to feel pretty–a portal to the world of femininity.

My cluttered dorm desk reveals these two essential sides of me, so close in proximity and the divide between the two obvious, but somehow natural. The desk is mine, a place I visit every day that I use to make myself more me. I study chemistry and read philosophy sitting before the same surface on which I embellish my eyes with glitter.

Where did I learn to collect knowledge like I compile a set of earrings? Who taught me to braid my hair like narratives of a story? I learned these skills before a dinner table-turned-desk and in front of a water-stained mirror in a lilac-scented bathroom. I am the sum of the women who raised me.

My mother: the hardest worker. When I think of diligence, of sacrifice, I think of my mom. I recall 2-hour trips as a 6-year-old to watch her mop floors at work and I think of interminable business calls she took from our now-defunct home phone. I think of that capable businesswoman when I face stage fright and emulate her assertiveness while coordinating quizbowl tournament logistics and leading teams in competition.

She tells us stories of late nights hunched over textbooks–how she wants my brothers and me to work hard, but not at the cost of our well-being. From childhood, she's emphasized the value of hard work in every aspect. It's she who motivates me while I take integrals, compose essays, and check off tasks in my planner.

This is the femininity my mother taught me: strength, the confidence of seeing another woman in charge, and the knowledge that I can be even more capable than my male peers.

But that's not all what being a woman is. There's more to learn.

My grandmother: the most resilient caretaker. She was warm hands around mine and smiles when you ate her food. The soft bed I sought when I feared a bug in my own. She taught me to love so much it oozes into every flat-looking dumpling I fold for New Year's.

My hands imitate hers as I pull my hair into braids. I'd always been reluctant to care about my appearance because what kind of scientist wears mascara to class? But I remember smiling at myself when I saw the pigtails my grandmother painfully pulled into my hair. A geologist can have winged eyeliner. I can love the feminine parts of myself without taking away from the others.

That's the other half of femininity I've learned: a softer strength and learning to love, not hate, womanhood and "girly" things. To love the face in the selfie no matter the amount of makeup I have on.

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