

I found an art project from the fourth grade tucked away deep inside my closet. Buried like a bad memory, trapped inside a time capsule long forgotten. Inside a small pink and purple box, a design meant to mimic a castle where the royalty was the memory of a young child. Dust held a tight seal in the edges of the Ziploc bag, the last wall of defense to an old, prized possession. A tangle of yarn woven under and over and under and over some straws, a weaving of yarn in tubular fashion made to resemble a belt.

I tried to slip it around my hips, around my waist, begging to see if I could still fit the shape of the girl who made it. Tried to yank and pull and tug. Tried to mush my ribs together, suck myself in, make myself shrink down to her size. The only way it would fit was around my neck.

This aching, choking feeling. I do not have the body of a ten-year-old girl. I do not have the body of a twelve-year-old. I do not have the body of a fourteen sixteen eighteen-year-old version of myself.

I am brought back to high school lunch. I skipped the line, pulled a handful of mints from pockets, crunched them between my teeth, devouring them like they were the only meal I would allow myself to have, let the sound ring in my ears like a shaky symphony, each note just out of tune. I told myself it was enough. Sometimes I would split a pack of Pop Tarts with my boyfriend. We would share a can of diet Dr. Pepper.

I would go home. Eat dinner.

I grew envious of people who had bodies smaller than mine. If I was a size zero, what were they? What comes before zero? How would it feel to become smaller than the smallest number? I dreamed of making myself that small, of disappearing into myself. If I disappeared maybe someone would finally notice.

I could never mold my body the way I wanted to.

For senior prom I pulled myself into my quinceñera dress. Let the dress fit me like it did when I turned fifteen. Shifted my body into the shape of her. Our bodies felt the same, felt like they needed to feel the same. The dress fit like a prison. Designed to keep me in, hold me tight to the body of a girl I was no longer sure I wanted to be. Fitting into that dress was not going to undo the chaos of my life, but maybe I told myself it would.

It was getting a dress that led to my unraveling. The beginning of my destruction. An end for my body I was not ready for. Fourteen is so young to start a version of forever.

Maybe it wasn't fourteen.

In grade school someone once claimed they could suck in their stomach all the way to their back. I practiced for hours and never got that far.

When I made the belt, that prized fourth grade art piece, I remember wanting to give up. Remember thinking that it was going to take so long to make it fit. It would be easier if I was smaller. Rotted

seeds planted in the mind of a child, sinking in, burrowing into my being so deep as if they were becoming a part of me. A silent piece of me, sitting dormant for years, waiting for the right words to escape someone's mouth like water and the seeds would blossom.

The words only had to be said once.

I took the belt off my neck, tossed it back in the bag, back in the castle. I tucked the box back into the closet, nestled between old shoes and old yearbooks. I tried to ignore the choking feeling around my neck, the lingering telling me that something else needed to be done. But I couldn't. I wanted nothing more than for it to stop, I wanted to tell myself that I could ignore it and it would just get better. But I can't get better if I don't try.

So, I let the memories slide into my closet.

Let the ten-year-old girl who made the belt have a home. I gave the fourteen-year-old girl a hug, held her close, tried to tell her words do not matter. I told the seventeen-year-old girl to not fade away, told her to keep her chin up. I promised the past that food will not hurt us the way we are scared it will. I promised the past that it's okay to grow and change. I promised the past that I am trying to get better, for me, for them.

I let the girls live in my past, placed them as memories in the castle time capsule. I left the box open.