

5-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Dowling, Lauren (2020) "Everything You Don't See," *Intertext*. Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol28/iss1/9>

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Everything You Don't See

Layout by Aaqilah Wright. Photograph by Nina Bridges.

LAUREN DOWLING

As I stick my fingers down my throat, I press gently against my stomach, enticing the calories to crawl back up. I have done this so many times that my strategies are perfected. It feels almost like a dance. Especially when I play my favorite song on my phone, “Good Vibrations” by Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch. I didn’t always listen

to music, but after the time Kristen walked in out of concern of the dry gagging noise—the embarrassment was so incredible—I knew I needed to avoid it at all cost, and music was the solution. I haven’t always been like this, a sad, weak statistic. One of the 9 in 10 girls that have an eating disorder. I used to love my body actually, “the fun, enthusiastic, chubby younger

sister Lauren!” I was comfortable in my own skin. I would own my long-sleeve swim shirts as my sisters wore bikinis. I rocked yoga pants when all my friends wore jeans. I wish I could tell you when it all started. Pinpoint the exact moment where my life changed; a dress that didn’t zip, a boy that said no to a date, or an under-the-breath comment from a mean girl.

If only it were that simple. If only I could look back, point my finger, and say, “That was when I started to hate myself.”

Maybe you’re wondering why I would confess my most coveted secret. It’s because I would be thinking about this in some way, regardless of what I was writing about. Wondering when my next snack break is going to be. Wondering

whether to have five crackers or half of a banana. Because if I have half of a banana, I can have the other half for dinner, because a whole banana within three hours might make me feel too full. It consumes all of my thoughts from the minute I wake to the second my head hits the pillow. I think about when we made a class pyramid in 5th grade and the boy that was my base looked at his friends as they all laughed at the fake expression of pain on his face. Or when I overheard a boy in the middle school hallway saying, “Lauren Dowling’s so fa-” at the exact moment I walked out of the bathroom. In high school it was never-ending. Far too many instances to fit into a single essay. What I feel the most isn’t sadness, it’s shame. The shame I felt while throwing out all the handmade lunches my mom made each morning. The shame I feel knowing that there are children starving, while I waste food. I’m ashamed that my fam-

can I look like that?” I grew up believing I was a pioneer for a new generation of women. All laws have been amended, stereotypes demolished, and my path was free and clear with possibility. Being a very tom-boyish child, I didn’t mind getting dirty, playing soccer with the boys at recess, and tossing aside the pink clothing my mother would lay out for me. In 6th grade I was invited to my first dance at the all boys private middle school across town. I danced to my favorite Usher song and felt unstoppable. Until suddenly a slow song came on, and I realized I was alone in a sea of pairs. I began to come to a misguided realization: You were either wanted or alone. As girls, we are taught to be desired in one way or another. We have to be the prettiest, the smartest, or the most talented; we can never just be us. When these expectations are not met, we begin to become critical of ourselves. Suddenly, negativity and self-depreciation be-

plotted in every aspect of life and degraded in various ways based upon sex appeal. In Amber Heard’s article in the *New York Times*, “Are We All Celebrities Now?” she describes the suffering she endured when she was targeted in an online hacking tragedy that leaked intimate photos of her body. She describes her pain. The pain of a woman who has been victimized and lacks resources to fight back. After being virtually violated, Heard describes her fellow victim’s suffering: “The photos were at the top of results that came up in online searches for her name; everything else about her—her work, her accomplishments, her identity—disappeared beneath a string of pornographic links.” An entire woman was chopped down to merely a salacious leaked photo of her on the Internet. *How can our society explain women in the twenty-first century being belittled for leaked private images of their body? How can society expect women to break out of this degrading shell of a world when even a successful woman can be torn down to the submissive, weak, insecure stereotype she has fought to defy?* Really the only question I want answered is *why*: “Why does society keep lying to generations of girls like me?” Making us think we can be whoever we want, as long as we get there by wearing a size double zero, a face full of makeup, and a wardrobe as expensive as a home mortgage.

As I interview a 21-year-old woman who is currently a senior at Providence College, I ask her about the first time she remembered caring about the way she looked. Along with this I asked when, or if, she had ever changed her eating habits in order to change what she looks like. Her answer for both was the same; 7th grade. The correlation between our self-perception and eating habits go hand in hand. I asked if she continues to change her eating

habits in order to achieve an ideal body. Her answer was this: “As long as there’s comparisons out there on social media, or any platform for that matter, girls will continue to strive for a change in their appearance, doing so by any means necessary.” Attempting to resemble the standard of beauty, girls see change in their appearance as success. More likely than not, girls will be rewarded by this change: “You look so thin and beautiful!” People will say, fueling the skewed measurements of self-worth.

Being able to live with your body is a universal struggle for all people. Society has created such a narrow view of what beauty is—almost no one is given a chance to love themselves. In Ta-Nehisi Coates’ letter to his son, *Between the World and Me*, he tells him “that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.” Coates encourages us to explore the world, find beauty in the imperfect, and accept that who we are is found within. As great a struggle as it will be, we must find strength inside rather than looking outward for acceptance.

In a society of anger and sadness, I fear that the embodiment of self-love will be difficult. As I continue to lift others up around me, I find reconciliation in sharing my own experience honestly. I can only hope for more voices to bring awareness to one of the less talked about issues of our day: a woman’s right to love herself, and more important, to love being a woman.

Works Cited

- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Random House, 2015.
- Heard, Amber. “Amber Heard: Are We All Celebrities Now?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 4 Nov. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/amber-heard-revenge-porn.html>.

“Like going to a zoo and staring at the animals, we gaze up at the billboards of the long-legged, smooth-skinned creatures.”

ily loves me so much, and that my friends tell me I light up a room, when I can’t even look in a mirror without holding back tears. I don’t want 69% of girls saying pictures in magazines influence their concept of the ideal body shape and another 47% saying the pictures make them want to lose weight. I refuse to accept that anyone should ever find warmth with their face in a cold porcelain toilet seat like I do.

Like going to a zoo and staring at the animals, we gaze up at the billboards of the long-legged, smooth-skinned creatures. “Where did they come from?” we ask ourselves among other questions, always seeming to land on the only one that we really want answered; “How

gin to creep in. This is where the real damage is done. These questions and circumstances ignite the fuel that has been poured all over our self-confidence from the first time we flip through a magazine, accidentally see a *Playboy* at a Stop and Shop, or stare at the posters in Victoria’s Secret. Suddenly we’re burning our entire world around us, altering ourselves to fit into the “perfect” girl ideal. Justifying it all, convincing ourselves that looking perfect will take away all of our problems; until it turns into a disease. A plague that grows stronger with time.

The high percentage of women who suffer from eating disorders compared to men is no coincidence. Women and their bodies are ex-