

# Intertext

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## Calliope

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Percy: Calliope

# Calliope

Katie Percy

*Content warning: Internalized fatphobia, mentions of suicidal thoughts.*

I'm eighteen, and I'm at a Halloween party. It's nearly half past midnight, and I'm in a frat house's basement—it smells like sweat and cheap alcohol. I came with my friend and her five friends, and each of those friends brought ten of their friends. Out of everyone, I'm still the only person wearing a jacket. It was covering up the little black dress my friend had picked out for me, the one that apparently made my boobs look great.

On the contrary, I felt the opposite of great—my bangs were sticking to my face, my cheeks were flushed red, and my thighs were starting to chafe. I told anyone who asked that I was dressed like “one of the girls from *The Craft*.”

My friend dragged me to the drinks table—she was already on her eighth shot and had no sense of money as she threw a few wadded bills on the table and handed me a shot. A girl slid up behind us as I downed a Dixie cup of vodka. She was dressed like a Greek goddess, with long, flowing curls, slender curves, and mascara running down her cheeks. She was beautiful—her laugh tinkled like bells, and she smelled cloyingly sweet despite the muck around us.

The burn of the drink jolted my nerves, almost convincing me to tap her shoulder and ask for her number to see if maybe a goddess would look my way, if only for a moment.

Then all the lights went off and frat members started screaming, “The cops are

here—get out!”

I got stuck on a door frame twice as droves of people surged past until eventually I was spat out into the backyard. I landed in the mud, the bottom of my dress soaked with grime. My friend was nowhere in sight, and neither were the people she'd brought with her.

I was already feeling a little light-headed as I fished my phone out of my pocket to call her:

“Hey, Melanie—Melanie!”

“W-Woah. Katie! Katieeee—” she slurred.

“Melanie, did you get out okay?”

“Yeah! Yeah, yeah yeah yeah—*hic!*—I *toooooo*tally did.”

Oh my God, she was *beyond* wasted.

“Are you with Nate?” I continued.

“Yeah! We're—*hic!*—we're gonna go to the frat across the street. Do you wanna come?”

“I—I think I'm going to head back.”

The hang-up tone beeps, and I shove my phone into my pocket. As I walk back alone, I see the goddess running across the street. She's laughing again, and her fingers are tangled with a boy's. He's dressed as Zeus—they make a stunning pair.

I turn on my heel, pull my coat tighter around my midriff, and stalk off into the night.

• • •

I was twelve and huddled under the Christmas tree. My body, soft and strong, was still small enough to fit beneath the pine needles.



## Calliope, Calliope, *Calliope*

Calliope, the Greek muse of eloquence and the written word—I remember trailing a small finger over the border of her page, gazing upon fair skin and rosy fingertips and wondering if somehow I could lift her off the page. I had been given an illustrated anthology of Greek and Roman myth for my winter birthday, and despite the fact that I had pages upon pages of gods, goddesses, and mystical creatures to read about, the two-page spread on the muses fascinated me.

Calliope, “beautiful-voiced.” I wondered which force of the universe had blessed Calliope with such gifts—grace, intelligence, talent, and joy—before rubbing a hand on the underside of my jaw, trying desperately to scrub away the double chin. It had already become an unconscious habit. Calliope, slender and perfect. Kate, Katie, Katherine, fat-cheeked and fallible.

Calliope, Calliope, *Calliope*. My dreams were filled with millions of versions of myself, each more worthy of love than the last.

•••

I was thirteen, and I was dying. Shaking, huddled over the school nurse’s toilet, I was convinced that this had to be a signal of my demise—I had never felt like this in my life.

I had been in math class and getting answer after answer wrong—the teacher had long stopped calling on me despite mine being the only hand raised. I had thought I heard an audible groan—didn’t they know I was just desperate to redeem myself? And with every wrong answer and pitiful glance, the pain in my chest and the heat in my cheeks grew.

When the bell rang, I ran straight to the

nurse’s office. My emotions bubbled over like boiling water and my fear expanded into an uncontainable abyss. I don’t remember much after that, only that I had to be wheeled out of the school and taken for blood work.

Two months later, the results came back inconclusive. I stopped eating, believing that if I had control over something, perhaps the world would stop spinning so quickly.

•••

I was fourteen. I held a razor to my wrist, contemplating.

Instead, the remnants of the girl I once had been placed it down with scarred, calloused fingers. Instead, she turned around and turned on her overheated HP laptop, the corners of the keys stained with tears. She opened a Word document and began to write. At first it was an angry, self-hating letter. It detailed all the ways *I* could have ended it, right then and there, but said that *she* was too cowardly to do it.

And then I deleted the whole thing, equal parts scared of having my suicidal intentions discovered and exhausted from the anger. I instead began to write something simple—an adventure story with a girl at the center, surrounded by a group of adoring friends who would do anything for her. It was a poorly written piece of garbage despite this not being my first time writing creatively. But writing it was relaxing and a much-needed distraction.

I continued with it and would do so for the next four years.

•••

I was fifteen and stuck in English class. I had constant cricks in my neck—I’m not

sure whether this was due to spending hours poring over my new computer or simply due to anxiety. It had a name now—*anxiety*. A whispered little thing in the recesses of my mind, telling me I'd never be good enough, never be worthy, pretty, or smart enough. It was easy enough to shove the thoughts away to focus on the dos and don'ts of the MLA format, but when 2:34 a.m. rolled around and I sweated under too-thick blankets, the feelings of inadequacy crept back in. *Did you actually do a good job on that essay, or are you just lying to yourself? Who are you kidding? Of course it wasn't good enough. And while we're on the topic, let's think about your body.* The little girl who had tried to shove a double chin back in on itself was now the biggest girl in her classes, the girl who got asked out as a joke. I was the girl people would go to for homework answers, but never with homecoming proposals. I hadn't quite accepted the nature of reality—the one in which love wasn't an option—and so I booted up a Word document.

I wrote about Eloise and Thomas, Elizabeth and Darwin, and finally Ophelia and Kit. All figments of my imagination, of my *desire*—it wasn't a coincidence that Kit had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a perfect figure. She was me if I had been born a Calliope.

I started therapy in the summer, then began antidepressants shortly afterward. *Calliope didn't need medication, now, did she?*

• • •

I was sixteen, and I loved a girl with amber eyes and hair that shone in the sun. *She* was a Calliope—she could speak three languages, could write a manifesto in a day, and looked as if she had walked off the cover of *Vogue*. She never failed to make me laugh and let me count her freckles one by one, none the wiser to the way I traced constellations across her collarbone.

She kissed boys behind the bleachers and wrapped her arms around my waist without knowing what it did to my heart. After all, when she bent down like that, with her head resting over my shoulder and her breath brushing the shell of my ear, I could see where her boyfriend had sucked a hickey into her neck. Unknowingly,

he had punched a pit into my stomach.

On a cold November night, I decided to tell her—not that I loved her, but simply that I was gay. I did it over text because I was a coward.

I don't really know what I had expected—that she would come out and declare undying love for me? Please. Of course, I was ecstatic that she had even accepted me—my small hometown held an alarming number of homophobes. But still, a fragment of hope I hadn't even known was there withered at that moment.

Muses don't fall in love with mortals—it's really just that simple.

• • •

I was seventeen and receiving praise. I



had one earbud shoved into my ear, ABBA on full blast, as a classmate told me how my previously submitted creative writing piece had inspired her current one—she said my word choice was “well done” and that I should consider a career in writing. We were running a group critique, as the class size was small enough to accommodate it. I thanked her profusely, my voice choked up. My classmate beamed before directing us to her own work. I opened the document, and as I scanned the page, my eyesight blurred as I realized that when she had said “inspired,” she had really meant “dictated”—it was my piece from her lips. Only now, instead of two women falling in love in the English countryside, it was stand-ins for my classmate and her boyfriend. It was the same format, the same plot, the same *everything*. And hers was chosen as the representative work for that assignment, with my teacher promising to show it off in years to come.

I remember driving home that day in silence, with no music in my ears and thoughts swirling through my mind. It wasn't as if my pieces hadn't been highlighted as good examples before—they had. But I couldn't let it go—was it the fact that the piece had been plagiarized? Or was it that the plagiarism didn't matter, and was the issue just that she had taken my garbage and made it gold? But would that mean I didn't have the talent or ability to write? Writing was my crutch—if I wasn't good at writing, what *was* I good at?

• • •

I'm eighteen, and I still struggle to create “perfection.” I'm still in therapy, I still take my medications. I bite my nails, I write flowery romances, and I've still never been kissed. I'm more confident in myself than I've ever been, and yet I still find myself contemplating whether the fat peeking over the top of my jeans makes me unworthy of being where I am today. Perfectionism percolates in every pore, and every second there is another worry that I force down (because if I listened to them all, I wouldn't even be able to finish a sentence). But now I talk and write about it. I examine it and question it—it holds on, but its grip is loosening. My fingers are bloody, my body is beautiful and broken, and I am here. And here I will stay.

And here is where I have reached an impasse. I can't create more of my life from thin air, can't pretend I'm a Delphi. So, in lieu of that, I've created a culminating piece, something that predates this one—a visual encapsulation of six years of loathing, loving, and writing.

She is *Calliope*. She is *perfect*.

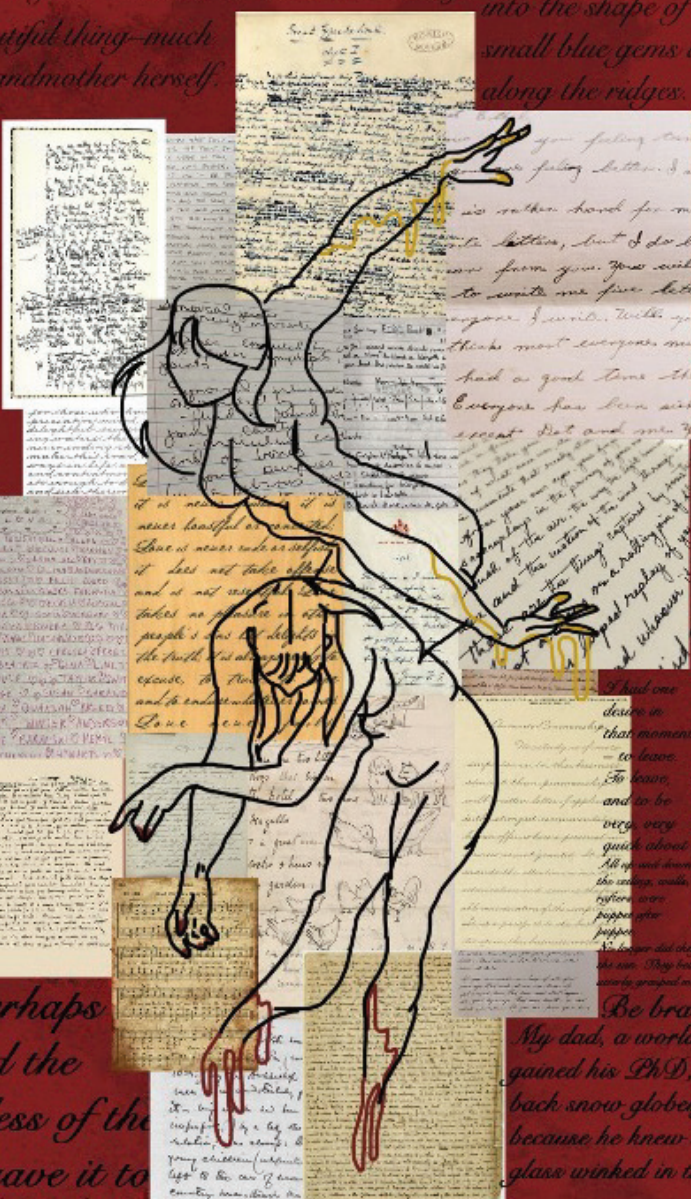
Kate, Katie, Katherine

Art by Katie Pearcy



I didn't even respond.  
 I didn't have an answer  
 it was a hot Canada summer.  
 The flowers got to eat it anyways— the rain made it fall out!  
 It wasn't really happiness, and it wasn't really sadness— even though the  
 nine-year-old me couldn't categorize it at the time, I would call it "serenity."  
 It was a fragile, beautiful thing— much  
 like my great grandmother herself.  
 It certainly wasn't a  
 symbol of aggression,  
 not from the woman  
 who took every  
 opportunity to send  
 me handmade cards  
 with five-dollar bills  
 wedged in the crease.  
 Perhaps it's a  
 reminder  
 from one  
 woman to  
 another— a  
 reminder  
 of resilience.  
 Perhaps it's  
 her way of  
 letting go of  
 the past. Or perhaps  
 she simply liked the  
 design, regardless of the  
 monster that gave it to

For all the little things mattered, whether it was long  
 wildflowers or simply spending time with your brother.  
 He was her husband, and he was an abuser.  
 I remember lifting the necklace  
 to the light— the gold was woo  
 into the shape of a starfish with  
 small blue gems dancing  
 along the ridges. When I wear it and  
 golden starfish judd  
 over my heart, I su  
 can feel the twin hair  
 and intertwined with  
 Adele had hobble  
 and a crooked grin  
 time (they've since  
 straightened out by  
 types of braces)—  
 hair was a wavy, c  
 brown that I requ  
 threading through  
 fingers like spun g  
 tying them into ne  
 plaids on either sid  
 head.  
 His favor  
 pastime wa  
 hicking the  
 seat in fron  
 of him beca  
 his legs we  
 long enough  
 to reach.



Be brave for your fu  
 My dad, a world traveler after h  
 gained his PhD, who would bri  
 back snow globes for me simply  
 because he knew I liked the way  
 glass winked in the sun.

I can barely remember what happened next,  
 only failing to follow my mother's one  
 request and dripping tears all over the  
 My hero, who had lifted me high into the sky,  
 almost high enough to brush the clouds and pull  
 the stars. Because for me, I'm fairly certain he