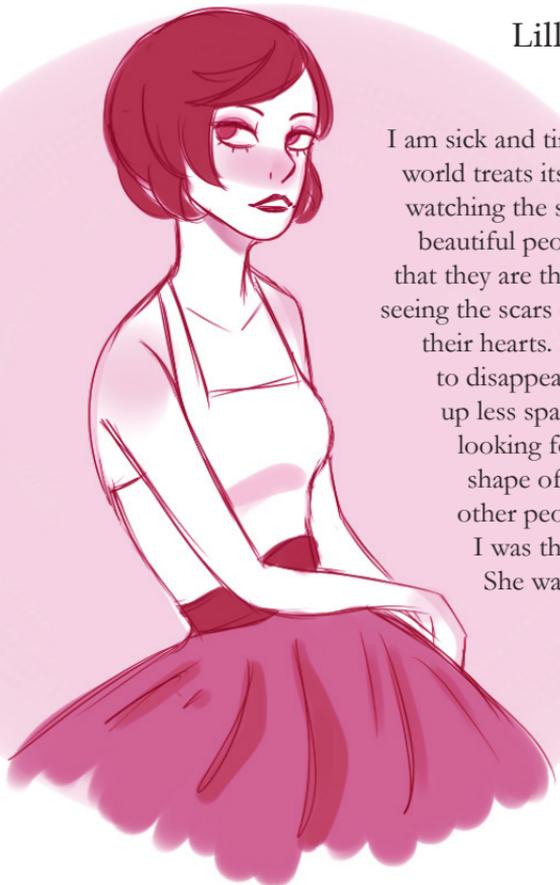


# This is Yours

Lillian Pettigrew



I am sick and tired of the way this world treats its girls. I am sick of watching the strongest and most beautiful people I know believe that they are the opposite, sick of seeing the scars on their wrists and their hearts. I am sick of trying to disappear, of trying to take up less space in the world, of looking for my worth in the shape of my stomach or in other people's words. When I was thirteen, I met a girl. She was lovely in a dusky, unassuming way. I liked the way her soft dark hair fell about her cheeks

**"20th Century"**

Melissa Nie

and the way she covered her mouth when she laughed (sudden and shameless and barely stifled). I liked her doe eyes and her lopsided nose, and she liked me. She was tall and thin, and I admired this too until I learned why.

We emailed each other constantly. I don't remember it, but there they are, dozens of messages in my inbox from years ago, rapid-fire and not cohesive and words tumbling over each other and scrambling to be heard, just like we were, in our emptiness and loneliness and confusion. It makes me cringe to read them now, these reminders of how half-formed and desperate we were. How much we were reaching out, reaching blindly for some anchor to tell us that we belonged, we deserved, we loved and we were loved. We reached out blindly in the darkness and caught each other's hands, and only stumbled further down.

I told her that I loved her and I still don't know if it was a lie or not. I let her take me by the hand at a dance, feeling small and cinematic under the disco balls and purple-blue lights, and we sat with our knees toughing on a ferris wheel. I wrote her a letter asking her to be my girlfriend, and I folded it up and threw it away before anyone could see, lay awake in bed that night wondering if I was gay, feeling that thought weigh heavy on my chest and sting tears into my eyes. She came out to me in a note passed in history class, a word in cramped looping script I'd never seen before. She taught me what bisexuality was, but she also taught me what fear was, what depression was, and these words tangled themselves up in my chest, became foggy and indistinguishable and I thought I saw beauty in them that way. She asked me once if I had a thigh gap, and I didn't even know what that was so I told her I did and learned to hate my lack thereof later.

We drifted apart. She told me that she liked me one more time, scribbled it in code in my yearbook on the last day of school with her purple pen, and we faded into different futures. I Google her name sometimes, wanting to find her, not wanting to think about what it might mean if I do. But then she shows up in Facebook photos, a friend of a friend's, and I am grateful. Sometimes she looks like a ghost, distant and blurred and lonely, and sometimes she looks like sunshine, wide grin and eyes full of life. She's with a girl, their arms touching, in colorful eyeshadow in someone else's prom photo. She's in the honor society, a gold sash over her shoulders, and my pride for her is fireworks. I told you I was sick of how the world treats its girls, and how it makes the girls treat themselves, and I am. This feeling,



this anger overwhelms me sometimes, and I let it, because anger is a thousand times better than emptiness. I let myself be full of anger now, instead of pushing it down and hiding it away, and I let myself be full of love and warmth and inspiration and sadness too. I don't exactly know how I did it, because the process was slow and painstaking and sometimes accidental. But I can tell you it's possible, possible to fill those aching spaces inside you with other things, and I'm begging you, to all the empty girls, and to anyone else who's felt that pain, start today.

Take a moment for yourself.

Just a second, to breathe the air and remember that it's your lungs moving in and out. Feel the ground beneath your feet and remember that it is yours as much as it is anyone else's, that you have fought and lost and won and learned and that this earth is yours. Fill your room and your chest with flowers, with stories and music and laughter. Find the things that you love about yourself, or even the things that you don't mind so much, and remind yourself of them. Find the rosy color of the stretch marks on your hip that tell the world how much you've grown. Find the freckles on your knees and your eyelids that come from stolen moments in the sun. Find the braveness and the hope and the wonder inside of you, and hold on to them. Let them get bigger and bigger. Let yourself grow.

I am a rebel, because I am a girl in this world who loves herself, truly and fully and finally. I am no longer the frightened frizzy-haired girl who didn't even have the words to realize that she was hurting, and who hurt someone else because of it. I have strengthened her, and I have hurt someone else because of it. I have strengthened her, and I have softened her. I have let vines grow up from the ruins of her, and I have watched and prayed as the grow up from the ruins of her, and I have watched and prayed as the girls I love grow too. I want nothing more than for every one of you to find the solace in yourselves that I have found. So take this moment. Take this breath. This is yours.

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