I told my parents at dinner. I read their faces; my mother pursed her lips to the left side of her mouth, then to the right side, while her eyebrows carefully burrowed slightly, my father simply rolled his eyes while shrugging his shoulders. The guilt of personal failure was all but suffocating; my parent’s well-meaning sympathy only gave the permission to loathe myself more. Another letdown, another disappointment, another inflection of shame—unconditional love deeply envies conditional favor.

I walked into my bedroom, and looked at myself in the mirror. The bags under my eyes appeared to be the zipper-expandable variety, and they were currently expanding at an alarming rate. The despair in my face transformed into hatred. If I were good enough, this would not have happened. My face tensed, and my stomach seemed intent to escape through my throat. Cleansing your stomach does nothing to purge grades.

Every little failure rips off a piece of perceived self-worth. Perfectionist tendencies are hardly unique; people all over the world set impossible goals and then punish themselves when they inevitably fail. It’s hardly masochistic; it’s just what they feel they deserve for failure.

All these little earthquakes / Doesn’t take much to rip us into pieces

Watching television with my mother has always been a key component of my relationship with her. Whether it is The Golden Girls, Gilmore Girls, or some other blatantly women-targeted show, I enjoy the time with her. It’s inconsequential if we are mocking Dorothy’s latest fashion disaster, or Kirk. We are together.

One night when I was twelve, I was bolting across my mother’s room in a flash of smiles and enthusiasm, showing her a new trick which involved squeezing my wrist as hard a possible to make all the blood veins in my hand swell up. As Cece chased Fran around the townhouse on television, I demanded my mother try my trick. She agreed, and I sat on her bed, squeezing her wrist while she sat and watched with mild
interest in her favorite lavender housedress. Strangely, the trick did not work on her, and I became more and more annoyed.

After squeezing the life out of her wrist with no results, I noticed a scant change in her demeanor. Her smile was gone, her face drained of color, almost waxen. She said calmly, “Go get Dad, ok?” I did as I was told, and my father soon swept into the room. Mom was now breathing rapidly; I watched her chest rise and fall like bread dough sitting on the counter for an hour compressed into a three-second loop. Dad frantically asked her what had happened. She quickly explained, and my father turned at me, a typhoon brewing under his eyes. He dragged me by the arm into the dark hallway away from Mom’s hearing range. He furiously whispered in my ear, “What the hell is wrong with you? Don’t you know how many arteries are in your wrist? Mom is dying, and you could’ve just killed her that much faster. Why don’t you ever think?”

Everything my father had said was true. Only a few years ago my mother had suffered from cardiac arrest; since then her heart had pumped at less than 40% capacity of a normal heart. I should have thought about what attempting to seal off veins might have done to her already overworked heart. I should have realized it wasn’t working for a reason, and not pushed harder.

As he left to attend to Mom, I slammed myself into the corner wall by my bed. The Johnny Town Mouse cross stitch sampler shook disapprovingly directly over my head, threatening to fall off the wall if provoked again. As I lay there, I imagined my mother’s funeral. I could see the cheap carnations in candy colors rising out of plastic Grecian vases. I could see the redwood casket, simple in purpose but inevitably too pompous to stick in the ground. I could see her body, her wispy hair falling around waxen skin heavily made up to conceal death. I slept on the floor near my mother that night, listening for her breathing. I could not help but have the same thought race again and again in my brain: I was a priesthood holder, and I had accidentally tried to kill my mother.

Every little accident rips a tear in my conscience. I cannot imagine being forgiven for mistakes, and so I punish and hate myself for not being perfect. It’s hardly masochistic; it’s just what I feel I deserve for failure.

Oh, these little earthquakes / Here we go again²
Walking into the living room of the seminary teacher’s home at 5:45 in the morning for the first time was a shock. I was home-schooled throughout elementary and high school. Because of this opportunity, I eventually became a year ahead in my studies. As a result, I was the youngest in the group by over eighteen months. The other students showed up wearing hotpants, flip-flops, arm candy, and attitude. I made my debut in a baggy hoodie and hand-me-down sweatpants—not the teen couture of the day by any means. As I surveyed the room, ignoring the looks of disinterest from the upperclassman, and hatred from the other freshman, I saw a glimmer of hope. One person I didn’t know well actually smiled at me, and gestured me to sit by him: an invitation for acceptance.

After the first day of seminary, I became the shadow of my new friend. He was a sophomore, tall, muscular, a ladies man, considered good looking and universally popular. I was a freshman, short, weak and chubby, unknown to girls, wore hoodies, and known as my sister’s little brother. He offered his advice, and his advice was clear: do as I say, and you too can be socially perfect. Over the school year, I seriously internalized his counsel: jeans instead of sweats, Linkin Park instead of Mozart, spiky hair instead of au natural. If I resisted, he simply asked me if I wanted to fit in, and asked why I wasn’t willing to do everything I could. Every detail was modified to fit his purposes, down to boxers vs. briefs. My friends saw an immediate problem with the situation: I had become his clone.

I hated everything I had become. I looked ridiculous with my wavy, light brown hair constricted by fifteen fluid ounces of gel in dark, slick turrets spiraling of my head. I had started talking to girls—about clothes. I hated Linkin Park. Every day I tried to think of ways to gain his approval, which seemed fleeting at best. By the end of the summer following sophomore year, despite my best efforts, my friend had given up on me. He made this abandonment clear by simply ignoring me. His reasons were obvious; his mold of perfection utterly shattered when I tried to squeeze into it.

Every little rejection impales me to my core. I could not imagine being rejected if I gave in wholly, and so I hated and hurt myself for not being someone else’s idea of perfect. It was hardly masochistic; it was just what I felt I deserved for failure.

Every day / I crucify myself / Nothing I do is good enough for you³
I had been staring at the wall of the cultural hall for nearly thirty minutes. I was thinking; planning my next move. A rift had begun to grow between nearly the entire circle of friends I had at the time, and were slowly fermenting into bloody, muddy memories that reeked of lies and manipulation. I was falling out of favor so quickly- like the current generation of models, my quick rise to perceived acceptance was only matched by the rapid loss of it. Just like those girls, I was desperate to keep them by any means possible. They starved themselves for love; surely I could keep this charade up.

After the dance, the entire group went out bowling. When we got there, I noticed more people already at the alley. I had been friends with most of them, but they were left behind when I was assimilated into the older group. When I went up to my lane, I was informed it was already full. I glanced around the group, and noticed a new boy. He was my age, wearing had-me-downs, accented by large glasses almost covered by a mop of dishwater blonde hair. I could see myself in him; he was my understudy, and socially I had fallen terminally ill. The circular nature of the group was complete; he was the new me.

Nauseated, I walked to the bathrooms, past all the other lanes. After I threw up, I stared into the mirror, and barely recognized what I saw. My eyes were dull, my skin pale and sick looking, my hair and clothes not even mine. I could not stomach this anymore; I could not keep lying to myself, suppressing my feelings and opinions for these people. I turned on the faucet, and let the cool water wash away the signs of sickness, and went to the alley I had been assigned. I haven’t lost that badly since.

Every little rejection carves out a piece of my personality. I cannot imagine being someone else, and so I deal with life’s pain, and realize I’d rather not be a slave to someone else’s mold. It’s hardly pessimistic; it’s just what I feel I have to do for survival.

Give me life / Give Me Pain / Give me myself again

I watched the Linkin Park CDs finally burn. Sitting on my bedroom floor, I watched the flame from the match lick the bottom of the disc. The flame lovingly boiled the interior, cracked the veneer, and eventually left it warped and disintegrated. It took forty matches to get the job done; one by one with rapid succession was lit, placed under the CD, exhausted and thrown away. The smoke rose from the CD, the toxic smells attacking my senses, one last little jab from the past.
I had become a supernova, rapidly casting out the extraneous reminders of outside influences. By replacing those influences with things I actually enjoyed, my personal light and life soared. My room in particular became my personal refuge. I no longer cared if I was cool, popular, or athletic- I simply wanted to be myself. I moved the soccer trophies from my past to the closet, and replaced them with African Violets. The football, resting eternally on my dresser, was replaced by a CD tower, on which I rapidly filled with the likes of Belle & Sebastian, Enya, Fiona Apple, and Jump, Little Children, trying to escape the angst-ridden nu metal as much as possible.

I threw myself into music; I began practicing piano one to two hours a day. I had grown to love Chopin and Fauré, with their liquid emotion, and Shostakovich, with his militaristic chromaticism. After playing catch-up for several years, I was finally on-par with other piano students, and I was able to compete at that level. Previously, I had volunteered at a senior center, teaching the seniors how to play hand bells, but had stopped after my parents complained it took too much of my time.

“We want to pull you out of piano,” my father said. My parents had called the family council a few minutes before. I had learned to hate these councils; I was the only child left who actually was required to attend, and they only occurred when my parents had bad news. “We want to pull you out of piano,” my father said again, as though to soften the blow. My fingers dug into the plush foam of the piano bench; its dark viridian paisleys wrinkling in protest. I could feel my lips purse, and my eyes squint as I replied, “I’m sorry.” “Sorry for what?” my mother asked, her voice suddenly straining to maintain it’s cool. “I’m sorry you want to- it’s not going to happen. That’s all.” I got up and walked out of the living room, down the hall to my bedroom; I shut the door, and ripped Johnny Town Mouse off my wall and threw it in the closet.

Every little compromise destroys my self-esteem, and weakens my resolve. I cannot imagine losing to someone else, and so I do everything I can to beat them: compromise is defeat. It’s hardly despotic; it’s just what I feel I have to do for victory.

And here I stand / With this sword in my hand / You can say it one more time

What you don't like / Let me hear it one more time then ✅
I had been sitting in the kitchen, listening to my parents and the bishopric counselor for nearly twenty minutes. “I’m not him, but I think he’d make such a good lawyer!” my mother said, beaming her pride across the universe. “He’ll need to find something that makes good money, especially if he wants to buy all those expensive clothes,” my father said. My shoulders react to the reference to fashion, stiffening, preparing for the next blow. “Clothes?” our visitor inquired, his head tilted to the side, eyebrows raised. I wondered what it would be like to dive into the cranberry sauce to escape them. “Oh, he’s into fashion. It’s neat, right hun?” My head jerked up; I was not expecting anyone to actually address me. “Yeah, it’s neat,” I said half-heartedly.

I would be entering Brigham Young University in the fall, a sophomore. I had no direction, no major, and no aspirations. My parents had created a short list of non-approved majors: English and music. My parents never openly push anything; they suggest vocally, and often. They were suggesting business and law. Their reasoning was good enough; I dress well and can argue anyone into the ground— and they think I can write.

A week before the dinner party, I had lost the year long war with them. Piano would be ending in June; and it was clear it would not be continuing at home or any where else. After I gave in, I sat at the piano. I moved my fingers across my heavily marked music. The trails of ink and graphite in some places so thick I could feel little ridges, I could feel the passion with which they were erected. My parents were right, and their reasoning had won. I was going to Brigham Young University; I would never make it into the music program anyway, and I may as well stop playing around and get serious with my life. I simply wasn’t good enough, and I knew. So, I gave in.

Every little experience carves out a piece of my personality. I cannot imagine being someone else, and so I deal with life’s pain, and try not be a slave to someone else’s mold. It’s hardly optimistic; it’s just what I feel I have to do for perfection.

I sit on the floor of the bathroom, waiting for the water to fill the tub. I slip in, and feel the water wash over me. I shut my eyes tight, and push myself under the surface, holding my breath as long as possible. I wash off the accumulated dirt, and try to drown out expectations.
These precious things / Let them bleed

Let them wash away

These precious things / Let them break

Let them wash away

Notes

1 Amos, Tori. "Little Earthquakes." By Tori Amos. *Little Earthquakes*.


4 Amos, Tori. "Little Earthquakes." By Tori Amos. *Little Earthquakes*.

5 Amos, Tori. "Take to the Sky (Russia)." By Tori Amos. *Little Earthquakes*.

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