

Gold into Gray

*This piece contains depictions of disordered eating that may be triggering for some readers.

My fingers squeezed tighter, and tighter, and *tighter* into my scalp, but I could not cool the gears that were liquifying in the heat of my skull. Head in my hands, elbows on my knees, I sat alone in the last row of the women's locker room under the harsh fluorescent glow.

Reality dripped like candles all around me, melting, melting, melting...

What time is it?

Where am I?

Though the fire still raged within my skull, cool beads of condensation dripped down the sides—memories of this morning. Alarm chiming at five forty-five in the blue dark. The trek across a campus still asleep under a reluctant dawn. Standing alone in the locker room, hands planted on the sink, staring at my shoes. Sunscreen. Conditioning circuits. Sweat dripping onto the court, steaming in the sixty-degree air. Sun struggling to burn through the mist. Glances up the street, where the hybrid citrus trees glitter with dew. Then, a certain spark of agitation within—the tickle that precedes a sneeze, the orgasmic prickle, the tingling of an itch. Adieu bid to the team, to Coach. Always goodbye. Always a firmly shut door so that all they receive is my sunshine, my smiles, the projection, the lie.

They wandered off elsewhere, and I came back here, half-unseeing, feeling my way through memory, to the last row of the locker room. It was nine AM. Empty, except for the twenty-year-old girl crying, hiding, burning silently. She'd had an eating disorder for five years. She was dying.

Sitting there, I fully understood that anyone might enter the locker room, at any time, walk by, see my blatant distress. But I simply couldn't muster the strength to care anymore. For

over half an hour, I sat there, unmoving, eyes shut, sifting through the hundreds of incoherent thoughts, trying desperately to locate anything that seemed rational—anything at all that resembled truth, or comfort, or clarity, or home.

But I wasn't in my hometown anymore. Mom and Dad were in Fallbrook, working, living without my sister and me for the time being. Romilly and I lived in our quaint, suburban, college home, working toward our undergraduate degrees at the same university. Though my eating disorder had only worsened since arriving in Riverside, Romilly knew little of the fog I was wandering through, lost within. I kept painstaking tabs on her schedule to know exactly when the house would be empty and utilized these slots for my binge episodes. Today, she had a morning class, and then work at Canyon Crest Country Club all afternoon. The house was empty.

Everything in me screamed for relief, for one singular binge to quench the flames that were melting my brain. I—*couldn't*—reason—with—it. None of my cool intellect had any effect on the inferno. I *knew* that I wasn't even remotely hungry, that the binge would consume at least two hours of my life. That I'd be left in the depths of physical, and far worse, mental torture. That I'd be in agony at tennis practice. That with this binge, I'd only further furrow down the rabbit hole I'd been digging for five years.

On that locker room bench, under the fluorescent glow, muscles stiffening, fingers gripping, heart sprinting, I was a statue of glorious misery. The flames that had melted my brain were now licking the insides of my abdominal cavity, and I couldn't quench the fire, couldn't quell the unrest, and I was growing warmer. Muscles *burning* with the coiled effort, and I had to do it. I *had* to binge. There were no other options. This was all I had, all I needed, and it would be just one more binge, just *one* more binge, just one more grand, *final*, rapturous—

Electricity arced down my spine and suddenly I was standing. I leaned against the lockers while the black spots faded from my vision. For an instant, I felt my consciousness slipping. Something was tugging me beneath the water, and stars burst brilliantly behind my eyelids...

But the decision was made, and I'd see this through to its completion; I was nothing if not dutiful. Gathering my bags, I glanced around. Already drunk off the promise of what was to come, I watched as the gray walls bled into fascinating, violent hues. The air tasted sugary, grainy, like cotton candy, and the white lights above suddenly slanted into a shade of glittering gold...

And so it begins, I thought. And so, it began.



Legs scissoring, faster than socially acceptable. Sidewalk slipping beneath me like a celluloid strip. Two tennis rackets in my backpack, pushing pregnantly against my spine. Lunch bag slung on my arm, sad, unused, unwanted. Sandwich, Lärabar, banana, cucumber slices. I'll eat it tomorrow. Past MSE. Crossing the street. Up the stairs. Past the bookstore plastered with the silk-screened faces of my professors. Under the cotton trees. Cutting across the lawn. Between Watkins and Sproul. Slow walkers—*move*—how could anyone be that leisurely in life—where is the panic, the gripping fear, the fire within—fine, *I'll* move. Sunlight streaming through the leaves, forming shapes like animal crackers and galaxies and those spots you see in old films. Crosswalk of a thousand commuters. Through the tunnel, highway above. Emerging into light. Faster, and faster, and fa—throwing bags into trunk. Extracting wallet, phone. Shutting trunk, throwing self into car. Am I fit to drive?

Stoplight. Come on, greengreengreengreen—right lane. Blinker. Watch the—*BUMP*—speed bump that's freaking Everest. Pulling into the first space I see. That rush of grocery store

air. Glancing at my picture on the video monitor. “Welcome to Ralphs,” from an aproned NPC. Speeding to the vegan section, far left. Pleasebeherepleasebeherepleasebe—sighhhhhh of relief. Vegan parmesan cheese, vegan dumplings. In other aisles: bow tie pasta, tomato sauce, pierogies. Blazing to the front, on to self-checkout—

“Hi, honey, you ready?” So violently ripped from my world, it took more than just a moment for me to orient to the store. Slowly, the regular colors settled into place, and suddenly, I heard the beeping of cash registers, the pleasing intercom music, the white noise chatter. A cashier stood at an open register, smiling, eyebrows raised for my response.

“Oh. Yes,” I responded. In all the months I’d been using Ralphs as my drug dealer, I’d never utilized an actual cashier. With humans, there was far too much unpredictability. What if they slowed me down with something as horrifying as light conversation? What if they scrutinized my purchases? What if they began memorizing my foods, realizing that it was the same five items every time?

“Where’s the fire, hm?” she said jokingly.

“Oh. Yes,” I repeated, trying to pull something like a smile onto my face. “I’m just...quite busy...”

“I hear ya,” she said, scanning my items quickly through. I wondered what she thought of my purchase. Far too small for a proper grocery haul, but far too big for a single meal.

“Have a great day,” she said, handing over my receipt. Somehow, I couldn’t summon a single word in response, but I held her warm smile as long as I could handle it. Just before exiting the store, I crumpled the receipt and threw it into a small black trash can before it could burn my hand.

Unlocking car, throwing food into trunk, throwing self into car. Halfway home. Climbing the hill, rounding the curve, rising, like an airplane attempting to reach cruising altitude. So many GODDAMN stop signs. Opening garage. Romilly's car absent, as expected. Unlocking door, deactivating alarm, transporting bags and food into house. Closing garage. Filling two well-worn pots with water, placing pots on stove. *Click, click, click, foom*. Closing all shades. Turning on TV. Innocuous sounds of commercials expanding outward, creeping along the floor like krypton, distracting me from the devastation. Ordering each elixir, according to size, no, according to order in which it will be eaten, upon the counter. Will it all fit in my stoma—?

Irrelevant. Caustic impatience sizzling through my veins. Everything, in every direction, hazy, glittering, blurred at the edges. Pacing. Pacing. Pacingokayit'sboiling. Dumplings in. Pasta in. Bowl and fork ready on counter. Sitting on couch. Nails digging into skull. Foot jiggling up and down. Grasping my arms, squeezing the marrow out of the bones— (Later, a teammate asked where those bruises came from, and I truly couldn't remember.) Sounds of the TV receding. Studying my palms, each glowing with an aura. *Done? Done?* Don't care if they're done, dumplings out. Steaming bowl in hand, body on couch.

Pink and purple powder is pluming around me, in me, and above, I see clouds gilded with gold. Almost at thirty thousand feet, now. Harps echo into the emptiness, heavenly and infinite and just for me. Lilac petals drift lazily through the air and scents of cinnamon and clove sink into my skin. Somewhere in front of me, a million miles away, colorful blobs dance around on what appears to be a television screen. I don't hear anything but the harps—not the dancing blobs, or my breath—not even my heart. In this moment, with my fork poised and my stomach empty, with the powder undulating and the scents soaking into my skin and the sky opening

upward and onward, I see the beyond at last. In this moment, I'm free, and floating, and flying. And in this golden moment, everything, everything, *everything* has been worth it.



When the powder settled, and the celestial clouds cleared, and the harps plucked their final melodies, I was left, nearly lifeless, in my empty, absurdly cavernous house. Reality solidified like bricks around me, building my penitentiary. The sounds of the television reached me at last. Some silly Hallmark movie displayed a woman ambling through an apple grove. I turned it off immediately, plunging the house into pure, humming silence.

Sitting very still on the rose-printed couch, I twisted ever so slightly to peek behind a window shade. The morning's sun had been chased away by a blanket of solid gray. What time was it? Was I supposed to be somewhere? Class? Practice? Across the room, the time glowed green on the stove. Rising slowly, I allowed my fingers to trace the outline of my enlarged abdomen gingerly. Standing there, I began to fixate on the fibers of my stomach wall that were surely tearing, the locations that were becoming tenuous. Speaking in terms of probabilities, I knew I would likely emerge from this binge unscathed. The distension would subside, the pain would dissipate, and tomorrow, my youthful body would feel just fine. But the scared Lindsey, the real me who was handcuffed, who was shoved into the corner of my brain, screeched that maybe this would be the binge. Maybe this time, my stomach would tear. It wasn't an irrational fear; it had happened to others. I rubbed the back of my hands, which had begun to prickle. Cautiously, I shuffled toward the stove.

11:14. Just over two hours until practice.

Leftover food, that I simply had not been able to stuff into my stomach, sat on the counter, in the pots. Pure poison that needed to be discarded—at once.

As I poured the remaining bow ties and pierogies into the trash, I paused for a moment, the insanity of it all gripping me tightly, that nauseating feeling of falling settling deep within my gut. Thirty thousand feet could never be sustained, and here I came, hurtling back to earth. When would I make my descent one of these days and end up as nothing more than a spot on the ground?

Taking the trash bag outside, I found that the gray day had turned strangely tepid. Lying in the shadow of the trash barrel was a small, silver dime, gleaming fresh and new and pretty. I wasn't particularly surprised; after moving into this old home, my sister and I discovered strange things in strange places nearly daily. Eggshells on the grass, chihuahua hairs in the tracks of sliding closet doors, and apparently, ten cents out with the trash barrels.

I picked up the dime, only to drop it moments later when I found that the backside was filthy.



Cursor. Blinking. Patronizingly.

Still alone (*always alone*), I sat at my desk in the house that was now positively flooded with the gray of the day. Out the window lay a dreary cul-de-sac. Beyond was Box Springs Mountain, low, rumbling, and beige.

I had a full two hours to study, to get some homework done, to make a dent in the avalanche of obligations that only grew with each passing day. Now was the time; perhaps now, I could start fresh.

But the minutes melted like snow, and I couldn't remember a single thing that hadn't been sickened by my sadness, and somewhere along the way, the cursor finally vanished as I wished it would, blurred and blotted away by tears that surprised me, greatly, because I hardly

ever cried after a binge, because I was so *good* at gluing the broken pieces back onto my porcelain body, belief in a better tomorrow tucked in my back pocket, but how was I supposed to believe that anything would change when all previous attempts at wellness ended up as ashes in my hands? How was I supposed to fix *my brain* by using *my brain* if *my brain* was where the problem festered and thrived? So the tears gave way to murmured confessions, professions of truly trying harder tomorrow, which slipped into moans, rasping, gasping for a bit more air now, and I was saying things no person should ever say, should ever think, to themselves, things that still crease my brow even years on, and somewhere inside, my heart, a perfect petrification of ice, was growing fragile and diseased, thinning under the waves, under the crashing grief that punched another sob out of me, and another, and another, desperate and piercing, like fabric ripping—

“Fuck!” I whispered suddenly, ducking down out of sight. Somewhere in my incoherence, just moments before, I’d opened my eyes to see that Emiliano, the boyfriend of my tennis teammate who lived down the street, was right outside the house, and at that very moment, had directed a rather concerned, confused look in my general direction. I could tell that he hadn’t quite spotted me through the window, and yet...it was the look I will never forget because it was that of someone completely unaware of the source of my pain, and yet, sincere in their interpretation that it was pain, nevertheless—a look I’d never seen before, and that I have never quite seen since.

Without any conscious predetermination, I crawled away, like a child, on the dusty hardwood, keeping well out of sight until I’d closed the bedroom door behind me. I waited, but there was no knock on the front door. No ring of the doorbell. Seconds skipped by quickly until I found myself, inexplicably, sprawled on the bathroom linoleum, propped up against the cabinets.

Time stood still, lurched forward, skipping on this scratched track that had become my life. And somewhere within the silence, I realized that I was not crying, but convulsing, that an unspeakable, unprecedented pain radiated from my chest, that my glass heart had finally, mercifully, broken.

There, on the bathroom floor, I, for once, pictured my future not as I wished it would be, but as it probably would be. I saw January bleeding into February bleeding into March bleeding into April. I saw myself stuck in Riverside until summer, with nothing to remove me from my hellscape. I saw the binge intensifying to two, three, four times a day. I saw myself withdrawing from my sister completely, avoiding phone calls from my mother and father, declining trips back home on the weekends. I saw my schoolwork slipping, my grades dragging below A's for the first time in my life. I saw myself sleeping until noon, telling Coach I was injured and couldn't make it to practices, matches, weights, conditioning; saw the Sports Med team inquiring about my mystery injury; saw their creased faces watching me, expectantly, while I sat dejectedly on one of the rehabilitation tables; saw myself unable to speak, unable to even cry, withholding a secret I could tell no one because I wanted to binge until the day I died.

So, I sat on the linoleum as the reel played on repeat, each passing minute an eon in itself, every heartbeat somehow softer than the last. I sat there, listening to the cars and trucks rumble up the quiet street outside. I sat there, the gray and all the horror it contains bleeding into my skin, certain that even death had to feel gentler than this.



In a deep, dreamlike haze, I shuffled about the room, pulling on my skirt, my shoes, my visor. Keys in hand, bag slung over shoulder, I wondered for the second time today whether I

was capable of transporting myself safely to my destination. The truth is that I never actually paused to answer that question before turning the key and driving away.

“Tired, LG?” Lamai asked brightly, her electric brown eyes attempting to meet mine. *Huh?* I glanced about to find that I was sitting on the bleachers, the blue courts stretched before us. Coach was consulting his clipboard, and most of the team was present, milling about, chittering and chattering in that low, white-noise rumble. Somehow, not a single memory of the drive, of the park, of the walk to the courts was cataloged.

“Yeah,” I murmured, flicking my eyes up to Lamai’s before smiling demurely, crazily, at the ground. If Lamai raised an eyebrow, I didn’t see it. Even I was surprised by the deflated, husky quality of my voice. Somewhere in my chest, water was streaming steadily out of that now-cracked organ of ice.

“I hate to ask because I know you always like to go off on your own, but do you think you could drive me home from practice?” Lamai asked. “I think one of my tires is low on air or something. I might need to borrow your pump once we get back home.”

“Sure, sure,” I murmured, rising from the bleachers to join Lamai and the rest for our calisthenics on the court.

Five minutes in, I was already completely zoned into the firecrackers of exquisite pain that were bursting in my belly, and, under typical circumstances, I likely wouldn’t have detected a bolt of lightning splitting the cement before my feet. But the smallest, gentlest pricks of rain had begun to fall from the reluctant sky at last, evaporating almost immediately once united with the court. Chronically overworked, as all Division 1 athletes are, my team began jumping with glee, swirling around, hoping that enough rain would fall for the courts to become too slick to play on.

“Don’t take offense, Coach, I promise we love tennis!” Lamai called as the drops steadily began to fall faster, stinging the court, sparking steam that rose in delicate curls, and the entire team was jumping, swirling, wildly, spilling over the edge into madness, still jogging across the court in mock commitment to the warm-up, faces turned toward the sky, and somewhere along the line, I joined in, too, jumping, *smiling*, inconceivable champagne bubbles of laughter rising from the depths of my soul, and I could *see* the bubbles bouncing in the air, effervescent, so delicate I wanted to grasp them, but they were ungraspable, like everything else that lived inside me, and the rain was coming in sheets, droves, gales, and Coach was scrambling to get the baskets of balls inside, and we were laughing, and I was crying, but no one saw the pain stream down my face, my silver tears lost in the rain, and the next moment we’d tumbled inside, now drying under the fluorescent lights, and the euphoria was lost forever.



A few hours later, after I’d driven Lamai home, she came over to the house with Emiliano to use my air pump on her tire. Romilly and I met them in the garage, where Lamai pulled in her car.

“Hi, Romilly!” Lamai chirped. “Long time no see.”

“Yeah, I’ve been working, you know...oh, down at the country club, I’m like the front desk girl for the pro shop...” Romilly said, dissolving into a catch-up with Lamai. Completely uninterested in what they had to say, I studied Romilly without hearing her, as if we’d suddenly been plunged into a silent film. She was my golden, only sister, two years my senior, and we’d grown up completely intertwined like the two snakes on the medicine staff. The way we spoke, and laughed, was almost exactly the same, and yet we were utterly opposites in all other areas. Where she was bright, blonde, and sociable, I was darker, a definite brunette, and prone to

introspection. She craved simple delights, wide open spaces, easy enlightenment. I wanted all that was cryptic, breathtaking, bursting with profundity. Despite our differences, we cared for each other, deeply, and she knew everything about me except the one thing that mattered the most.

“Hey, Lindsey, how are you?” Emiliano said, punctuating my reverie. Typically, the manufactured smile would have already risen to my face, and I’d have been engaged in senseless babble to keep the conversation superficial, topical. But panic was prickling over my scalp. *He’d heard, I reminded myself. Did he know it was me who’d cried? Did he tell Lamai about the wails emanating from my house?*

“I’m good, how are you?” I said automatically, punching out the lie I’d repeated hundreds of times.

“Not too bad,” he said, giving me a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“How do you put this thing on?” Lamai demanded, crouched over the tire.

“Babe, you gotta take the cap off the valve before you put the pump on,” Emiliano said, moving to help her.

The tire was filled. The cap was screwed back on. More light conversation. Inquiries for Lamai about tennis, about school, about the Pit Bull puppy she bought a month prior. Inquires for Emiliano about soccer, about school, about living with Lamai in a house full of Emiliano’s teammates. Expressions of exhaustion. The rain sure made for a cold night, didn’t it? Let us know if there’s any other trouble with the tire. Car doors slammed. Emiliano’s hand raised. Headlights turning, car disappearing into the night, and in the end, silence. That’s what it always was. A slight crease between the eyebrows, a hand raised in farewell, a gesture of goodwill, but never an offer of help. Never a pull-aside for a, “But are you really *alright?*” Never a truly deep

look in the eyes. In the end, it was always polite smiles and self-assurances that she's probably fine and silence. Always the impenetrable silence.



Sitting on the edge of my bed, I waited for a sign, for something like salvation to come upon me. I waited for the little golden glimmers of the little golden things that, deep in my broken heart, I knew wouldn't come for me now.

At some point, I rose unceremoniously. Snapped on the bathroom light. And had not even the strength to flinch at what I saw.

Deep swaths of lavender ringed my eyes, and my lips were cracked and dry. My bloated cheeks gave me the distinct appearance of someone on a round of harsh steroids. And before my eyes, my body undulated ceaselessly, one moment appearing delightfully slim, the next, positively ballooning out of my very clothes. I ran my fingers along my ribs, counting each one, ending at my hip bones, circling my thumbs over each protuberance. Amidst the intense, daily tennis, the physical effects of consuming thousands of excess calories had always been greatly mitigated, a curse in itself, for it alerted no one to the fact that my body was failing, rotting from the inside, its exterior twenty years too youthful to give away any signs of distress. I dropped my gaze at last, utterly exhausted. It was nearly midnight, and tomorrow, as always, was another five-forty-five start.

Standing under the water, it took a while for me to realize that steam was filling the shower fast, that my skin was becoming scalded. I turned the handle all the way to the right until cold leached its way into me. Delicate pearls collected at the edges of my eyes. I waited, patiently, for a solution to arrive, for another facet of this diamond life to reveal itself to me, for a fresh gale of inspiration to burst upon me. But the truth is that it was just a Tuesday night in the

midst of a windy, gray winter that had no end, no beginning, and there was nothing but the snow, no help on the way, no relief in sight, no successful way out of this cell.

Hope was a small, bright, blue flame within me, still burning faithfully, though I'd watched it flicker madly for months now. *Tomorrow will be better*, I promised myself one last time, eyelids drooping in a haze of delicious denial.

But a violent thought struck swiftly, crackled through me, and suddenly I was wide-awake, sizzling with steam and the coiled, burning effort of coiled, burning muscles, gulping more and more and more of the cold, wet air, and the rain, the shower? The water pounded, *drilled*, into my skin, and I fumbled for the handle but could not find it, so I crouched down in the tub, grasped my knees, still gulping, gasping, but I knew it at last, that I was sinking under the curling waves, and even without air, I was still sobbing silently, shaking with the effort of keeping it all in because Romilly was in the other room, sleeping, unaffected, the way I wished I could be, never would be, God forgive me, and the sobs were screaming for release, but I clenched my teeth fiercely, squeezed my eyelids shut so that I didn't have to see the tears dropping from my face, melting into the water, just tears in rain, forgotten *completely*, because no one will ever know this night, this Tuesday in 2020, this January ninth, and it was that thought, that thought that struck me like pure lightning, that kept me on the floor of my shower until dawn, lips colorless, heart broken, strength spent, that thought of utter certainty, the understanding that tomorrow would be just like today, and today *was* tomorrow, and I would keep repeating this pattern, abusing the gold, wallowing in gray, never ceasing the fight in this epic war, but never winning, either, and this would be my life, ad infinitum, gold into gray, into gold into gray, until the gold finally burns itself out, like a lightbulb that bursts in one moment

and never alights again, until that blue flame of hope is whipped by the wind into a whisper of smoke, until I'm left to walk into the sea of gray, finished, finished, done.

Author Bio

Lindsey Gelinis is a Californian writer and Adjunct Professor. After receiving her undergraduate degree in Creative Writing from the University of California, Riverside, she went on to receive a graduate degree in Education. She was the 2021 recipient of the Maurya Simon Poetry Award. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Your Impossible Voice*, and her fiction has appeared in the *RCLS Literacy Services Anthology*. She is forever chasing the freedom of the written word.