

OMNIVISUM

literary magazine



who we are

Angeles

Written by Grace Shelton

I know I should eat lunch. The skinny girls walking around campus probably still eat lunch. I haven't eaten since four o'clock yesterday, nothing more than some tofu and rice; it makes sense to have another meal now and then dinner again at four o'clock today. Or maybe I should save that meal to eat later. I'm prone to binging at night when I can go to the a la carte cafeteria, buy a couple bags of generic chips, and hide away in an unused classroom to eat. If I don't eat now, then tonight's unavoidable buffet will hurt a little bit less. For the fifth time today, I convince myself to turn my course from the cafeteria and to the Writer's Institute.

My university's creative writing program is really good—so good, in fact, they can afford a whole separate building, albeit tiny. Something about being surrounded by writing in a place meant just for writers is calming. The smell of books in the air substitutes for that of dessert. My creative writing classes take place in this building, so I can belong here, so I can hide here should I please. And I love to read. Reading is the only thing that distracts me enough to ignore my stomach rumbling. I press the Spotify app on my phone and play "Angeles" by Elliott Smith on my headphones as I walk inside.

~~~

Elliott Smith was long dead when I heard his voice for the first time. School years came and passed for me; Elliott did not last beyond October of 2003. In the time between his passing and our meeting, my life went through metamorphosis: I was the

[wordpress.susqu.edu/omnivisum/](http://wordpress.susqu.edu/omnivisum/)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Grace Shelton

is a freshman creative writing and Spanish double-major from Dover, Pennsylvania. She would like to thank the boys who lived above her in Reed Hall, without whom she never would have had a sleepless night to write this piece.

odd one out in middle school, on the bottom of every boy's list.

I told myself I'd get skinny and everyone would love me. They did. It wasn't enough. Rules, calories, and counting took over my life for years and years, and as awful as they were, I had to pretend like I didn't miss them when my doctor said they had to stop. Elliott sang to me from 1998, lyrics embodying some melancholy emotion I did not yet know how to process. To top it off, his birthday was the day before my own. He and I, I decided, were just alike.

My dad pulled up the True Crime Garage podcast about Elliott Smith while we drove back to Susquehanna University after winter break. I think he and I relate best to each other during car rides, because we have similar music-and-podcast tastes.

Elliott's girlfriend claimed he stabbed himself twice in the chest while she was showering. Analysis of the depth of the stab wounds, handwriting on the suicide note, and Elliott's rehab efforts called that story into question. When True Crime Garage picked up the story, Elliott's massive following had pretty much decided that it wasn't a suicide at all: his girlfriend had murdered him in cold blood at the height of his career for no apparent reason.

I will admit, I found the facts suspicious. The conspiracy theory could be plausible, if one overanalyzed certain little details. However, the podcast struck me in a different way. Maybe it was a little too close to home.

"Imagine you're feeling really bad," I said to my dad, "and you feel like the only way to stop feeling so bad is to kill yourself. You've gone to therapy and it hasn't helped, and fame hasn't helped, so you're just completely done with living and you stab yourself twice in the chest to get away from it all."

My dad shifted in his seat. "Okay?"

"Now imagine that you look down from heaven and everyone is saying that it wasn't suicide, it was murder. All this time where the evil in your head has been eating you alive, and now they're denying it existed."

"I think you're overanalyzing."

I accepted the term; it was better than the right word: projecting. The Susquehanna river flew by to our right, snippets of sunset flashing between rows of trees. I plugged my tablet into the AUX port to play "Angeles" for the forty-millionth time.

"Probably."

We spent an uncomfortable minute with our gazes locked on the windshield.

"I just think," I said, more to fill the silence, "that's the last thing he would have wanted."

~~~

Elliott Smith wrote some of the music for the film *Good Will Hunting*, and his original song, “Miss Misery,” won an Oscar nomination that year. It was 1998, far from his end in 2003. Sources alleged that he did not want to perform live at the awards show. His agents and producers coerced him into the performance by threatening to have someone else play his song if he would not.

The recording can be found on YouTube, only a click away. Elliott looked so small under the lights. Blank expanse of stage stretched around him in every direction, the picture of isolation. I imagine he felt the same, like it was just him and an acoustic guitar against all of Hollywood (and maybe the rest of the world). He kept his eyes closed through most of his song. I watched the video a million times and could not find any emotion other than sadness in his gaze.

If you were to freeze a frame, it could sit juxtaposed to a snapshot of me in a doctor’s office. Tenth grade. The blue lights of the Oscars stage could fade into fluorescent bulbs buzzing overhead, and Elliott’s crisp white suit could morph into my blue paper gown. I shivered while the nurse took my weight, then blood pressure. She had me sit down and took them both again. At my mother’s insistence, I had gained back all the weight I lost when I starved myself. There was nothing wrong with me.

The nurse joked and said, “What are we doing this for?”

I had tried not to get better. There were months when I would eat what my mother asked and frantically shove my finger down my throat in the bathroom. It never worked; the small, healthy part of my brain refused to let me vomit. I wondered if anyone knew, or what they would say if I told them.

When the nurse left, it was just me, the empty room, the lights, and the crushing feeling that I wasn’t enough. No—the feeling that there was too much of me, and too much stage surrounding.

~~~

I sit down on a green couch next to a shelf full of chapbooks from past and current seniors. With the number of students at this university at any given time, I’m surprised that there are so few. Some are bound like notebooks, others with mere staples to hold them in place. Some have elaborate cover art completed by credited art students, whereas others feature words across a solid-color background. I pick up a blue one with a nice cover.

The first poem is about a girl tracing the lines of her ribs in front of a mirror until she disappears completely. The word choice implies that this girl is not making good decisions with her body. There are consequences, it preaches. Now that I’m no longer skinny, the therapist voice in the back of my head tells me I should not be drawn to sinister descriptions of dinner splattering into a toilet bowl. I hate those intrusive thoughts.

Still, it’s a theme I recognize. One memory in particular surfaces as I run my fingers over a photograph on the page. My parents prepared dinner, and I slipped in the casual anorexic’s question:

Can I wash the cheese sauce off of the macaroni before I eat it? My family knew about my eating disorder to some extent, in that they noticed I skipped dessert at dinner. I missed the occasional lunch. They knew something had to be wrong, because I'd lost over forty pounds in around a month and a half. I could fit into size zero jeans, which I hung on the hanger right next to my size elevens. The cheese sauce was the final thread.

"You can't keep starving yourself like this!" my mother yelled.

My sister spoke over her. "You're doing this so you can lose more weight!"

"How long has it been since you've had your period?"

Even my dad, who never seemed to have an opinion, wanted to add his two cents. "Your bones are going to disintegrate if you don't eat the sauce."

All of this felt foreign to me. I was thin and beautiful, and the sacrifice of cheese meant almost nothing when it meant keeping my wrists as delicate as butterfly wings.

My mother couldn't handle it. While I love her dearly, one of her fatal flaws is her need to distance herself from things that make her sad. I had to chase her car down the driveway waving my hands, promising the same thing over and over.

"I'll eat the macaroni, Mom, I'll eat it."

She didn't stop crying. I swore I'd never make her cry like that again.

I yank myself from the memory as fast as lightning, before I can become nostalgic. I hate upsetting my mother, I hate being so worried about every little molecule of food on my fork, but I love the way my body used to feel. For all the parts I do not miss, I miss being skinny enough to be a cause for concern.

Go on, lose the gamble, croons Elliott's voice through my earbuds. That's the history of the trade. I know I want my family to think that I am fully recovered. Once more, my fingers dance over the photograph. I think I might want to be the vanishing girl again.

~~~

Some arguments surrounding Elliott Smith's suicide center on his hopes for the future. At the time of his death, his girlfriend told police that he'd been doing better than ever. Elliott had a bit of a drug problem in the late nineties and early two-thousands that I never knew much about. Before 2003, he attended rehab to get his life on the straight and narrow. He wrote another album's worth of songs, some happy enough to make you smile, and recorded them for posterity. Though he only performed "Miss Misery" at the Oscars because his agent forced him, he suddenly seemed open to the idea of going there again. I can imagine how he would have felt underneath those stage lights for the second time, a completely different man than he'd been in 1998.

Instead, he died en route to a hospital.

Why would a man with so much to live for kill himself? questioned a Youtube commenter. He had been suicidal before, but he was not suicidal when he died, stated another. It was the girlfriend.

Millions more poured in their own ideas on the subject: She killed him. That bitch. I read that she pulled out the knife and her medical training would've told her not to do that so I know that she was trying to kill him. Some arrived with even less grammar and less regard for Elliott. "What if things got bad again?" I asked my dad as our car passed Liverpool, Pennsylvania to the left. We were less than a half-hour from school.

He shrugged. "It's possible."

"Things could have gotten bad again, and he was arguing with his girlfriend, and it just... happened."

Elliott and I, I thought again, were one in the same. Recovery did not exist as a straight upward line for either of us. Drugs are like that; you can spend decades without a hit and be fine, then one painkiller too many can send you right back to the depths of hell you left. It can be the same with eating disorders. Weeks without a binge disintegrated without meaning when I ate a bite of a friend's cookie as a snack. I ended the night gorging on whatever I could find, promising that I'd starve off the difference the next day.

"Don't you think he would have said something, though?"

I stared out the window. Would Elliott tell someone that his depression was taking over for a second time, even after his family needed to deal with it once? A better question: had I told my family when school schedules rekindled my eating disorder?

"It's almost impossible," my dad continued, "that no one would know."

~~~

I move onward to the next poem. So many of the chapbook authors have chosen to write about love in their poetry, as if each of them has experienced it in its purest form.

I'm all over it, Angeles, sings Elliott as I read the title: the one i call love. I almost laugh at the irony.

I asked my on-again, off-again boyfriend over the phone last night, "Will you still love me if I'm fat?"

He said, "Of course. I'm not shallow. I think that you're beautiful."

"Are you sure?"

I weigh one hundred and forty pounds. I always feel like shit. My mother was thrilled when I started to put on weight again, but to me, it was the equivalent to failure. I didn't get thin enough. The only way I could be fully satisfied was to dissolve as completely as the girl in the poem and materialize on next year's death statistics. Part of mental illness's charm is framing self-hatred as constructive criticism.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes, I’m positive.” He drew in a breath that crackled in my ears. “Every time I have you here with me, lying next to me, I can’t imagine how I get to be with someone so authentically attractive.” He didn’t know that I reinstated the rule to starve myself for twenty-four hours before I saw him, just so he’d never have to look at my bloated stomach and catalogue my name under that image.

“Are you sure you’re positive?”

He didn’t know that I wanted to be thin so I could guarantee our back and forth would always end in the sentence it did then.

“Yes, Grace,” he said. “I love you.”

I read the chapbook poem, think of the phone call, read the poem again. I think of the time he refused to describe my body like an object when I asked. I just wanted to know I was worthy of being objectified.

~~~

We were no more than fifteen minutes away from Susquehanna. I recognized the landmarks along the way—the billboards, the adult video stores, the tiny cafés nestled against the rocky hills. A raggedy ice cream shop seemed to salute the car as we sped past.

“I don’t think I could live here,” I said. “I’d be too scared of falling rocks.”

I think my dad had been enjoying the silence. “That doesn’t happen often.”

“But it can happen, and when it does...”

He let me trail off.

“Oh!” I sat up in my seat. “I just looked it up, and I thought it was really cool.”

“Looked up what?” my dad asked.

“Angeles. The meaning behind this song.” He didn’t answer, so I carried on. “It’s about how Hollywood sucked him dry, basically. Like, people came and recruited him for the music business, and then they forced him to do all of this stuff that he didn’t want to do, like performing at the Oscars. They said they’d get this other dude to come and play the song. Unless he wanted his song butchered, Elliott had to go and do it.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. I guess it was like... he didn’t have anything else he trusted besides Los Angeles, which brought him down.”

“Huh.”

Another moment in thought, and my analysis began hitting a nerve. “Angeles refers to the thing hurting him,” I said. “He’s singing the song to comfort it, though, as if he still wants it to love him. He doesn’t know who he is outside of it.” GeniusLyrics.com had said nothing of the sort.

The picture in my head was no longer of Elliott Smith on the stage, but myself in the doctor’s office. I didn’t know who I would be if I didn’t have my Angeles, my starvation, my control. I didn’t know who I would be without that little voice in the back of my head telling me what I wasn’t worth. My dad had to see it too. “It’s the only thing left that still expects anything out of him.”

He clenched one hand on the steering wheel and used the other to change the song on his iPhone.

~~~

My creative nonfiction professor steps out of his office, probably because I’m tapping my foot on the carpet. He says nothing when he sees me, or at least, nothing that registers in my head, but I justify my presence anyway. I would hate for him to know I come here to avoid binging before class.

“I’m just here to see the chapbooks,” I say. Now that there are people in the building, I don’t want to stick around. I slide the thin blue volume back onto the shelf and rise to leave. He disappears behind a door.

On the walk back to Reed Hall, I stop to glance into the Counseling Center. It looks busy. I call my parents that night for our weekly phone conversation, to tell them that I’ve been in church every Sunday and go to therapy on Tuesday mornings. I’m still doing everything that I did to preserve my mental health in high school. Then, instead of talking myself through the steps of recovery, I head to the cafeteria and buy a bag of gummy bears.

I eat them on the bottom floor of an academic building, empty room G18, where no one can see me. I think, maybe Elliott Smith didn’t tell anyone things were getting bad again because he didn’t want to keep being a burden to the people he loved. I understand. I don’t want to be, either.

I think, if they find my dead body all alone one night, I hope they think it was murder. So glad to meet you, Angeles.

