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Note to Self: Don't Forget to Title Your Project!

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Note to Self:
Don't Forget to
Title Your
Project!

*Reflections on an ADHD
Diagnosis*

Abby Wilson

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Diagnosis*

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Foreword

I've always been a little bit of the weird kid. While others played games during recess, more than once I was the one reading *Percy Jackson* under the tower of the playground. And as a kid, I diagnosed myself with “not like other girls” syndrome and made friends with the other “weird” kids. It wasn't until my senior year of college that I was properly diagnosed with ADHD, and some of my lifelong weirdness was actually explained by neurodivergence.

In this project, I explore aspects of my own experience with ADHD in a variety of formats. One of the first things you will notice about my project is the variety of the content. Not only have I included both poetry and prose, but I have also included visual art, recommended music to listen to while reading, a PowerPoint presentation, and even some math. The ADHD mind often thinks outside the box, making rapid connections between ideas and thoughts, so I wanted to represent this in the form of my project in

addition to its content. By making connections across multiple different disciplines, I hope to help my audience experience one of the ways that the ADHD mind works.

Some of the content may seem random, particularly the inclusion of the PowerPoint. I made the PowerPoint for fun over the summer of 2021 because I wanted to document some of the information that I have in my head about the band Twenty One Pilots. This band is one of my special interests*, a term I generally use to mean something that I frequently hyperfixate on. Despite my other issues with attention and focus, I often can focus on my special interests for hours on end without a problem. I delight in zooming in on album covers in order to overanalyze a small detail or in taking notes about the colors of lighting used at a live show. The level of obsession is evident in the PowerPoint, so Professor Bowman suggested that I include it in order to demonstrate what creation while hyperfixated looks like.

Another piece that explores hyperfixation is “Finding Where Everything Fits,” which was initially drafted in the fall of 2020, before I had been officially diagnosed with ADHD. Rather than demonstrating the result of a hyperfixation, as the PowerPoint does, it takes its readers through the physical and mental realities of hyperfixation, from the extreme joy to time blindness. This piece is largely about how fulfilling having a hyperfixation can be. Additionally, the structure of the piece jumps around from topic to topic, which is meant to emulate the way that the ADHD mind quickly makes connections. In many of the other pieces, I have closed the gaps between each jump in order to make them easier to follow, but

*“Special interest” is usually associated with autism and “hyperfixation” is usually associated with ADHD. However, special interest usually has the connotation of lasting a long time while hyperfixations usually last a short time, like a few months. Because of this, and because it is possible that I am also autistic, I use special interest to refer to things that I have been interested in for a matter of years and hyperfixation to refer to short bursts of interest. I have been interested in Twenty One Pilots for over five years with no signs of being less obsessed, hence my usage of this term.

here I have chosen not to. In his memoir about autism, Professor Bowman wrote about his own writing style that it “may feel jarring to a reader at times, just as being around an autistic person feels jarring to many neurotypicals. I ask you: Stick with it. Let us teach you how to love us” (40). I echo this sentiment for all the pieces that may be hard to follow, especially the PowerPoint and “Finding Where Everything Fits.” As I write about my ADHD, it does not just affect the content, but the form and the writing process as well, and I ask neurotypical readers to be willing to work to understand me, just as I have to work every single day to communicate with them.

I have followed “Finding Where Everything Fits” with the poem “my hyperfixation broke up with me” to show the other side of hyperfixation: the sadness that can occur once the period of intense fixation is over. This particular way of thinking about special interests and hyperfixations was influenced by Nell Brown, an autistic woman who contributed an essay called “This Love” to *Stim*, an anthology of autistic work. In this essay, she likens special interests to “a relationship with a person,” writing that they can be crushes, first loves, years-old friendships, or even more complicated relationships (Nell 60). I took this idea and decided to frame the loss of an interest as a breakup with a person and write a “breakup” poem to the hyperfixation in “Finding Where Everything Fits.”

In addition to pieces that explore the ADHD way of thinking outside of the box through hyperfixation, I have included pieces that detail other ways of abnormal thinking that intersect with my ADHD. In “Panic Button,” I explore the relationship between my anxiety disorder and ADHD, which was influenced by me learning that nearly 50% of adults with ADHD also have an anxiety disorder (“Adult

ADHD...”). “You’re Too Literal, Princess Dot” is about a trait that is usually considered autistic rather than related to ADHD. However, autism and ADHD often coexist and have overlapping symptoms (“ADHD and Autism...”). Although over-literalness is not one of the overlapping symptoms, it is an autistic symptom I have always experienced. The experience described by this piece may not be an ADHD experience, but it most certainly is a neurodivergent experience that is an example of experiencing the world through a different lens. Finally, “a series of in-betweens” is about several different aspects of my identity that make me feel like I exist in between the categories into which society expects me to fit. For example, as a third culture kid, I am often faced with American cultural knowledge that I “should” know, but do not due to my upbringing overseas. At the same time, I was bullied in German school due to exhibiting American cultural traits. I am somehow neither German nor American and also somehow both. This poem includes explorations of synesthesia (a neurodivergence that causes overlap in the senses), sexuality, spirituality, and friendship. Although not the focus of the project, I would not be myself if I did not have these traits, and like ADHD, they sometimes ostracize me from society since the way that they make me think is considered “abnormal” or “wrong” rather than just different.

While spirituality briefly appears in “a series of in-betweens,” I have included two other pieces about the interactions between ADHD and spirituality. “my prayer” is a poem about how hard it is to pray out loud when my mind moves much faster than my mouth can, and consequently how grateful I am that God is able to perfectly understand my fast ADHD mind. In “Domestic Liturgy,” I write about how even though I sometimes miss church due to the poor planning and impulse control that comes with ADHD,

God graciously finds me in other ways, such as connection with others.

I wanted to include pieces that explored both positive and negative aspects of neurodivergence in this project, and many of the pieces mentioned previously mostly focus on spinning ADHD traits as positive, even if they sometimes are frustrating. On the other hand, in pieces like “poems i meant to write and never did” and “the writer who never writes,” I focus on the frustration. I can paint hyperfixation positively, as in “Finding Where Everything Fits,” but I would not be telling the full truth if I did not recognize that ADHD is sometimes a disorder of all or nothing and that means either going above and beyond for something I am very interested in or struggling to create anything at all.

Indeed, the struggle to create is another main theme of this project. With this comes the idea of a disconnect between what I believe I can do and what I actually do. Like many other people with ADHD, I know that I am smart and that I have talent. According to Phil Boissiere, it is common for people with ADHD to feel that there are “gaps between mental and demonstrated skills” that “make [them] feel terrible” (4). He continues, however, “It’s important to point out here that there is no link between intelligence and ADHD. Having ADHD doesn’t make you ‘dumb’ or less capable; it means that the way your brain functions makes certain tasks more challenging than they are for others” (4). Many people with ADHD know that they are capable and smart but feel somehow blocked from reaching their potential. For many of the pieces in this project, even the creation of the piece reflected this reality, as I wrote them past their deadlines at odd hours of the night wondering why they had felt impossible to work on for so long.

This disconnect also leads to comparison and shame, which can especially be a problem for

women with ADHD. According to Sari Solden, women with ADHD “are continuously taking in concepts of what a woman should be able to do well and naturally. Just like the body shame that we are all familiar with, we also develop shame about the way our brains work. This is something we call brain shame” (41). When looking around at others and realizing that I am not doing “as well” as they are, it is easy for this brain shame to kick in. This concept is why I have included “Gaggle of Abbies,” as it approaches this topic specifically from a writer’s point of view. Additionally, “Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria” tackles one of the worst ways that this shame can manifest. Rejection sensitive dysphoria, or RSD, is an ADHD symptom that causes the person with ADHD to feel immense emotional pain, often to the point of it becoming physical pain, over a perceived rejection. Because our minds make connections so easily, we quickly connect from one bad emotion to all of the rest of them. For me, one of the main emotions I might feel during an RSD episode is shame. If I am rejected from a journal, for example, due to forgetting to follow a simple submission guideline, I will initially feel ashamed of being “so stupid,” which will spiral into thinking that I have no chance as a writer.

For women with ADHD, this brain shame can manifest in ways that intersect with societal expectations for women. Roles and tasks “historically assigned to women often require substantial executive functioning skills,” meaning that we often have no choice but to be gender nonconforming (Solden 61). Even in “shallow” areas like fashion or makeup, it can be more difficult for a woman with ADHD to conform to gender expectations than her neurotypical peers, regardless of whether she wants to conform or not. For example, shaving my legs consistently is unpleasant due to executive dysfunction as

well as sensory issues, so I decided in high school that I no longer wanted to shave. Because of this, I have been both stared at in public and complimented for being “brave,” which are experiences I explore in “feminine venom.” I look at an additional nonconformist view of femininity in “ode to hip dips” as well.

Despite the hardships that come with ADHD, this project is still majorly influenced by the idea of radically accepting neurodivergence. This is put very well once again by Sari Solden, who writes:

What if the goal of treatment is to make it easier to access more of who you truly are, not to get over who you are? We ask you to consider accepting yourself and your challenges. Not to become resigned, not to be passive, but to begin a process of real and satisfying change in your life toward meaning and connection...Medication, therapy, coaching, and other ADHD-friendly interventions will make it much easier to be more of who you really are—not less. (6)

The idea is that even if there are challenges, it is not useful to berate oneself for having ADHD or to try to functionally become a person without ADHD. Instead, we must accept that ADHD is fundamentally a part of ourselves. This worldview has shaped many of the pieces within this project, especially the prose pieces. Even as I write about frustrations with ADHD, it is important to me to communicate that my goal is to find the ideal environments and treatments for me and my ADHD to thrive in. This does not mean ignoring problems, but rather finding support that allows me to be fully myself.

Finally, I likely would not have created this project at all without the #OwnVoices movement. This is a push in many publishing circles to include diverse authors writing about their own experiences. For example, a Black author writing a book about Black characters might be marketed as a #OwnVoices book.

This is a large and diverse movement not without criticism*, but I am referring specifically to the neurodivergent, mostly autistic, nonfiction authors writing about their autism who I had the pleasure to read in preparation for this project. As a neurodivergent writer writing about her experiences, it was important to me to read how other neurodivergent authors wrote about their own experiences in books like *On the Spectrum* by Daniel Bowman, *Stim* edited by Lizzie Huxley-Jones, and *Letters to My Weird Sisters* by Joanne Limburg. It was also important to me to see that unlike in the past, where much of the literature about autism has been written by allistic people, movements like #OwnVoices and #ActuallyAutistic were elevating the voices of actually autistic people on social media sites like Twitter. This made me feel that my neurodivergent voice was important too and gave me the confidence I needed to finish this project.

*Some former proponents of #OwnVoices, most noticeably We Need Diverse Books, have recently stopped using this hashtag due to criticism of the way it has been misused to pigeonhole diverse authors into only writing one kind of story, especially YA fiction authors. I recognize and agree with this criticism, but as I am only writing about autistic, nonfiction writers, I did not think it necessitated that I do not use the term here. Autism advocates often use the phrase “Nothing about us without us,” which is essentially the idea I am trying to write about (and an idea of which I have not heard any criticism).

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Panic Button

This is a map of my brain. Approximately, of course. Brain scans haven't quite reached this level of complexity and also my painting skills are a bit out of practice. All the same, I'd like to explore this map together.

My ability to focus is kept in the Golden City, located on the far right of the map. On the inside of my brain, when I'm in the City, I'm a superhero flying around the skyline helping tasks get home to their apartments. You can even add a little bit of triumphant choral music and a golden glow behind me in your imagination to complete the image if you'd like. This is my sweet spot.

Outside my brain, it probably looks like a sleep-deprived madwoman whose focus finally kicked in at midnight. She has just finished cleaning her whole apartment at 2 a.m. and is now working on six overdue assignments. She will go to sleep at 5 a.m. completely caught up. Her eyes are bloodshot but you can almost see the dopamine hitting her brain behind them.

You'll notice there are quite a few obstacles around the City of Hyperfocus. This is to keep the city and its inhabitants safe—it is dangerous for a superhero to be flying around all the time. Have you

seen how they destroy cities in the movies? So it's hidden away behind mountains and swamps and rivers and forests.

In order to get into the City, first I have to start in the Dark Forest of Forgotten and Procrastinated Tasks. It's not particularly fun to wander the Dark Forest. In fact, it's easy to get lost among the many, many tasks tucked under dead leaves and branches. I might need to find the task *pick sources for an essay*, for example. But lying nearby in the undergrowth is *wash the dishes* and *read for tomorrow's class* and *brainstorm for my senior project* and *finish that short story you started last year* and *call the doctor* and *apply for jobs* and *take a shower*. I think *why not? I need to do all of these anyway*, and suddenly my arms are too weighed down by tasks for me to be able to take any steps at all.

From there, my travels out of the Forest and towards the City have been varied. On one trip, I sat down behind the computer at the check-out desk at the library where I work, fully intending to get library tasks out of the way and to write for the rest of my shift. Instead, I logged into the computer and promptly opened Spotify to make a playlist. I could hear the other desk worker clicking away at their keyboard and the soft rustling of patrons studying throughout the library. *Just a few more minutes, and then I would join them...* Three hours later, I had a fully realized playlist based around a cartoon character I like and absolutely no words written. My mind found its way to the Castle of Distraction and its time-warping gate.

Another common detour for a trip to take starts on my living room couch. I will sit, blank-faced, wrapped in my blanket with pompoms on the edges, absolutely frozen. I don't know how long I usually sit there, but eventually, my roommate will walk through the door, realize what's happening, and start asking me questions to draw me out. "I think I will never succeed," I'll finally say, "and all my professors hate me. If I just tried harder, I would be able to do it—so it's my fault that I can't do anything. There. Are. So. Many. Things. And I can't even start to do one of them, and even if I start, I

worry that I'll never do it right.” Then we will cuddle for a little bit, and they'll make me put a compliment about myself in our Compliment Jar, and in the mindscape, I'll finally climb out of the Pit of Anxiety.

Other possible paths include taking the Train of Thought or floating away from the City on the River of Daydreams. Eventually, however, every path converges on the Swamp of Executive Dysfunction. I will almost certainly be neck-deep in mud, struggling massively for every step taken, and I may get turned around or become hopeless or get stuck in one spot for hours.

After the Swamp comes the Wall of Awful*. Each brick is etched with reminders of every time I failed before and told myself I was stupid and I suck and to give up. I think I built this wall myself, and now I must climb it to make it into the City.

It might not even be the City of Hyperfocus when I get there, by the way. Sometimes I go through all that work and I still end up in the City of Regular Ol' Focus where all the streets have a downhill slope back towards the exit.

You may have noticed that this sounds like an arduous process just to be able to focus. There are, however, two other ways into the City of Hyperfocus—one is through the City of Special Interests and the other is the panic button.

The panic button is the big red button on the upper right side of the map. I think it looks like the kind of button you probably aren't supposed to push but I've secretly always wanted to push. If I am struggling to do something, my panic button sends my brain an adrenaline rush that allows me to override mental obstacles. It's probably a way that my brain is supposed to protect me against predators or something since I would get eaten by a tiger before I had even left the Dark Forest. And, of course, it is for emergency use only.

*The Wall of Awful is originally from a video by How To ADHD called [“How to Do Something That Should Be Easy \(But...Is...Not\).”](#)

If you've ever seen that Ted Talk about the procrastination monkey, it's a lot like that.* There's an Instant Gratification Monkey in my head and often the only way to scare him off is to push the panic button. Otherwise, I'm stuck reading a bunch of my 4,318 Firefox bookmarks or organizing my Amazon wishlists. Sometimes anxiety can be an obstacle preventing me from doing a task, like in the Pit, and sometimes it can override the other obstacles.

I went through the whole of high school not understanding why it was so hard for me to start tasks while simultaneously my intense anxiety and perfectionism were telling me that the worst thing in the world would be to turn in a late assignment. I'd start projects the night before, sometimes pulling all-nighters to finish them, all with the help of the panic button after nothing else seemed to work. Telling myself "Completing this task on time will feel good" or "I will be able to watch three hours of silly skits after I finish my homework" never worked, but the anxiety of "If you don't complete this on time, you're a bad student and you'll fail and everyone will hate you" always did. I knew I had a procrastination problem, but I always got my work in on time, so what was the harm? If the procrastination was truly a little monkey in my brain, then I guess he was kinda cute. If the panic button works, why not use it?

In my junior year of high school, I wanted to die.

I mean that in the most literal sense. I was suicidal. There was no way I could live with the pressure I was putting on myself to be the perfect student, perfect daughter, perfect friend, and perfect Christian forever without something finally giving out. I used the panic button too much and now my life felt like a constant state of emergency. Why couldn't I do what I wanted? Why did I always mess up? I couldn't understand why anyone would love me, not even God. And since I never could get anything right, it seemed better to just give up. Why even try anymore?

*This Ted Talk is called "[Inside the mind of a master procrastinator](#)" and was given by Tim Urban.

You also have to understand that these were all distortions, especially being a bad student. That year, my academic achievements were the highest they had ever been—a 4.17 GPA plus six academic awards. That was essentially one for every class. From the outside, I was at an all-time high.

And I was killing myself to get there.

That's what extended, long-term use of the panic button does—when anxiety is your primary motivation, it rewires your brain to be in panic mode constantly.

That's one way the panic button works. The other is that through extended use, it starts to wear out. You can think of it like a rubber band that gets stretched further and further each time you use it.* At first, the rubber band works well enough to hold a pack of pens. But the more you use it, the more the elasticity wears out and you may have to wrap the rubber band around two, three, or four times to hold the same number of pens as tightly as it did before. Stretch it out too far and it might even snap. I used the button too much, so it took more and more anxiety to motivate myself to complete work on time until I had a completely dysfunctional level of anxiety.

The good news is that I started getting treated for my anxiety in high school. The pressure I placed on myself lessened as I learned to give myself grace and not place my worth in how well I did academically. And as I stopped hating myself, I figured that was the end of it and that I had the tools I needed to succeed, so you can imagine my surprise when my schoolwork became harder, not easier.

Suddenly, I was back to square one. Without the panic button, I had to travel the whole brain terrain every time I needed to work on a project. However, I didn't yet have the framework of the map to help me explain why I was struggling. Instead, I felt like a captive as I watched my "productivity" drop, followed by my grades. I was doing what I was supposed to! And I even wanted to work this time, unlike when I was too depressed to even care! So how did I go from a student who had never turned in

*Yep, stole this analogy too. It's originally from thebibliosphere on Tumblr, who stole it from her therapist. (Link to Tumblr post: <https://thebibliosphere.tumblr.com/post/660166587669757952/adhd-rubber-band-analogy>).

a late assignment to one who consistently missed deadlines no matter how hard I tried? I could no longer justify pulling all-nighters for the sake of my health, but I was still starting big projects just days before the deadline. It soon became clear that anxiety wasn't my only problem. Something else was up with the landscaping in my brain.

In October 2021, after nearly eighteen months of research and questioning of what exactly the something else in my brain was, a psychologist sat across from me at a folding table in a sparsely decorated room. I couldn't help but be distracted by the baby doll in an unopened box in the corner, especially when there was barely anything else to look at. Then the psychologist said the words I'd been hoping to hear.

“You meet the diagnostic requirements for ADHD. I was considering combined type for you but ultimately landed on the inattentive type. Before we go over your test results, do you have any questions for me?”

Finally, I had an official answer, a legend to the map. The inattentive type of ADHD is characterized primarily by difficulties in focus, organization, and memory, which are otherwise known as executive functioning skills. For example, I have a horrible time estimating how long it will take me to do something. I thought it would take me until eight p.m. today to revise this piece you're reading right now for its first round of workshops, and it's now 1:36 a.m. That's a skill that consistently keeps me from doing tasks on time.

The whole time, anxiety had been masking another significant problem in my brain, one that, left untreated, continued to frustrate me and make me feel incompetent. The psychologist described the relationship between the anxiety and the ADHD as “feeding into each other.” Without me being treated for both, they would work together to wreak havoc, keeping me from enjoying the things I want to do. Now that I know I have both, I am reaching out for resources that help me hone executive

functioning skills and reduce negative self-talk. I'm still learning, but I believe in my ability to make progress, even if it's not always the way I expect to make progress.

dear little me:

i am sorry if i have disappointed you
and your color-coded planner.
it's not for lack of trying,

it's only that
the constant hacking down of weeds
with only a pair of safety scissors
when everyone else seemed to have shears —
it got so tiring, little one.
haven't you ever thought,
“why must i wrestle with brambles
every time i'm asked to mow the lawn?”
and yes, they call you gifted,
they see your perfect rose garden
and give you scholarships but
don't you want to rest, child?
how long can you keep this up
before your arms are bleeding
themselves dry from forcing
your way through thorns?

and i'm sorry, dear one,
that no one thought to help us
until it was so late

the writer who never writes

i am the writer who never writes
except in a frantic panic
at 3 a.m. the night of the deadline
when it is already overdue
and my eyes are too far back in my head.



wish i feel

i am the writer who never writes
except when the words of the lecture
turn into the buzzing of bees
and nothing else cures the racing thoughts
(exactly when i wrote this) and

i am the writer who never writes
for months and months and months
because my tasks have piled up
in my brain like dirty dishes in the sink.
all i do is scrub crusted tomato paste
off porcelain even though my fingers
keep wandering off to dance
and so most of the work is straining to make
muscles determined to disobey scrub, goddammit,
but in the end, all i have is no art and
more dishes somehow



sometimes i

i am the writer who never writes
except in a state of hyperfocus
which is a careening car crashing its way
into my life whenever it desires
and people tell me i have control of the wheel



in the world today

but if i try to steer it towards the
Highway of Things I am Supposed To Do
the wheel shudders and instead
i spend a weekend writing ten thousand words
that to this day no one has ever read



Intermission

Welcome to the intermission! What follows is a PowerPoint that I made for fun over the summer of 2021 about my favorite band, Twenty One Pilots. I was hyperfixated on the band at that time due to the release of their new album, *Scaled and Icy*. This PowerPoint explores the background and philosophy behind the album and analyzes the album lyrically. I have included captions for some of the slides that are approximately what I would say about the slide if I was presenting it.

If you don't know anything about Twenty One Pilots, here is a quick overview! Twenty One Pilots is a two-piece band from Columbus, Ohio. In the general public, they're known for hits like "Stressed Out" and "Heathens," which appeared in the movie *Suicide Squad*. They first started reaching a worldwide level of fame around 2015 with the release of their album *Blurryface*. This album is also named after a character that front man Tyler Joseph introduced during this era. "Blurryface," often represented by Joseph with a deep voice and paint-covered hands, represents Joseph's deepest insecurities. Their newest album, *Scaled and Icy*, is an album controlled by Blurryface.

Here are some other things you may want to refer to while looking at the presentation:

People:

Tyler Joseph: the front man

Josh Dun: the drummer

Tyler Shappard ("Shap"): the lighting guy

Characters:

Blurryface/Nico: Tyler's insecurities; leader of the bishops and the city of Dema

The Bishops: Blurryface's eight friends; includes Keons, Sacarver, and Liden

Clancy: a citizen of Dema whose escape narrative was released via a secret website prior to the release of *Trench*

Albums:

"Self-Titled" (*Twenty One Pilots*) - 2009

Regional at Best - 2011

Vessel - 2013

Blurryface - 2015

Trench - 2018

Scaled and Icy - 2021

SCALED AND ICY: A STUDY IN DENIAL

content warning: discussion of death (entire), mention of suicide (slide 6-8, 33), slight gore (slide 22-23)

Meet Blurryface

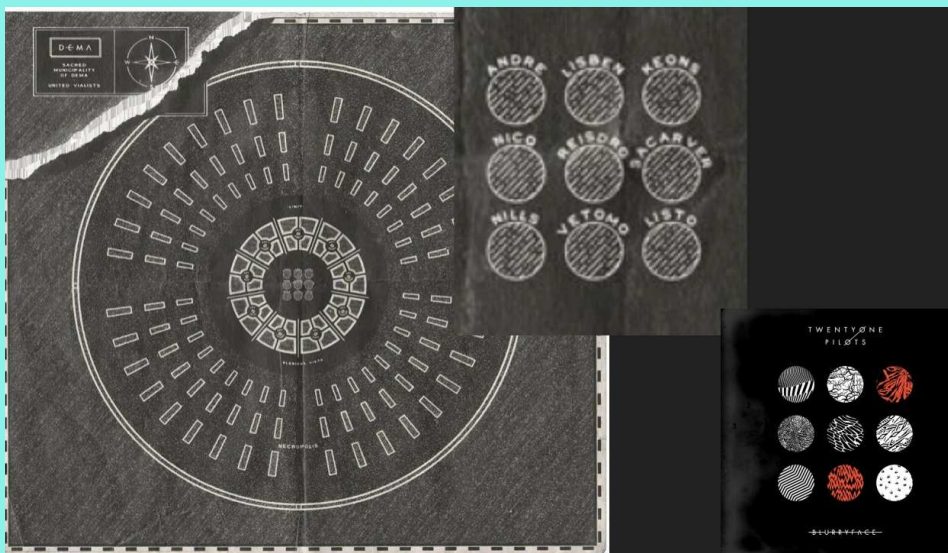
- "It's a guy that kind of represents all the things that I am insecure about. When I think about insecurities and my insecurities are getting the best of me, the things that I think of are kind of a feeling of suffocation and then also the things that I create with my hands." -Tyler
- Pictures on the right are all ways he has been represented
- Can also be represented by distorted lower voice in songs as well



What is Dema?

- Dema is a dystopian society run by Blurryface and his eight friends, a.k.a. the nine bishops
- Nico, a.k.a. Blurryface, is the leader
- Each bishop has a name created from lyrics from the album *Blurryface*:
 - Nico = Stressed Out ("my name's Blurryface")
 - Keons = Heavydirty soul ("I hope they choKE ON Smoke")
 - Lidsen = Polarize ("all I feel IS DENial")

As put by Clancy, a citizen of Dema: "As a child, I looked upon Dema with wonder. Today, I am wrought with frustration, as I spend each day squinting for a glimpse of the top of the looming wall that has kept us here. It was upon my ninth year that I learned that Dema wasn't my home. This village, after all of this time, was my trap. Before I became realized, I had deep affection for Dema. There was a wonderful structure to the city that put my cares to rest."



The slide above depicts an overhead map portraying Dema. Each of the nine circles represents one of the bishops. The zoom shows their names written above their districts. This map was found on Clancy’s website during the build up to Trench’s release. You’ll notice a similarity between the center of the city and the *Blurryface* album cover—this is intentional. Each of the patterns on the circles on the *Blurryface* cover is always associated with one song in song visualizers and live show visuals. If you rotate the Dema map 90 degrees counterclockwise (an action that has to do with the “East is up” messaging from Clancy’s site), the circles for the songs match up perfectly with the bishop whose name comes from the lyrics of their song. Hold onto the idea of subverting meanings (“East is up”), as we’ll get back to that.

The images to the right show the bishops practicing their religion. Note the literal neon lights (likely what's referred to as a "heatless fire").

What is Vialism?

- Vialism is the religion of the bishops
- Described as a "heatless fire"
- Glorification of death ("neon gravestones")
- Coping mechanisms that seem good but ultimately push you towards hopelessness until you become a martyr of the religion

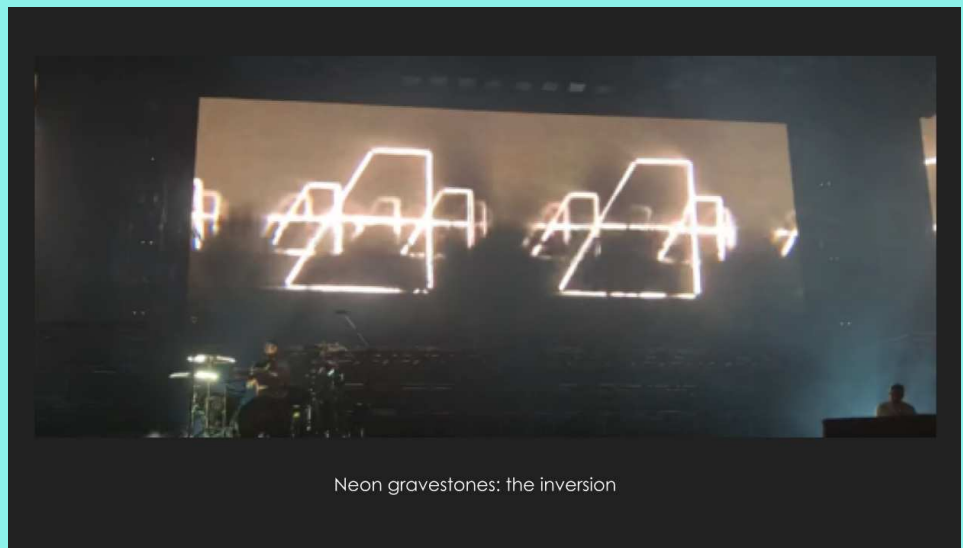


To the left, you can see neon lights arranged in the normal twenty one pilots symbol of | - / but upside down. This is also the same shape as the neon gravestones.

Quote About Vialism and How it Glorifies Death

"The theology of vialism talks about, at the very end, your goal in your life is to eventually take your own life and try to impact as many people as you can with that act. And *there's a reason why the outside of Dema is all graves*. They would say it's a party, they would say it's a celebration of this person's funeral because of that act and the way that it's presented to people who live in Dema is that this is a good thing, like this is what your goal is: to try to impact and affect as many people as you can. ... *The religion itself is the antagonist* of this story and there's a lot about how it disguises itself as a good thing" -Tyler

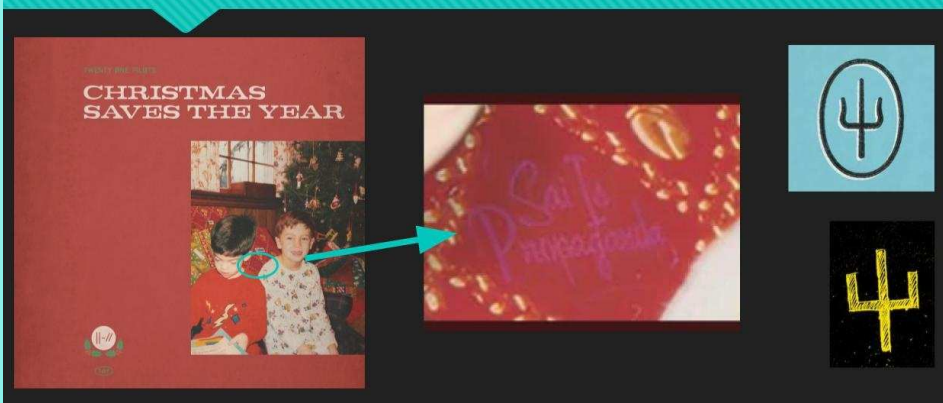
This is a picture of a screen behind the band as they played "Leave the City" on the Bandito Tour. It shows the inverted symbol once again, as well as what the outskirts of the city looks like.



Neon gravestones: the inversion

What does this have to do with their new album, **Scaled and Icy**?

Scaled and Icy is Dema Propaganda (Plus More Inverted Symbols)

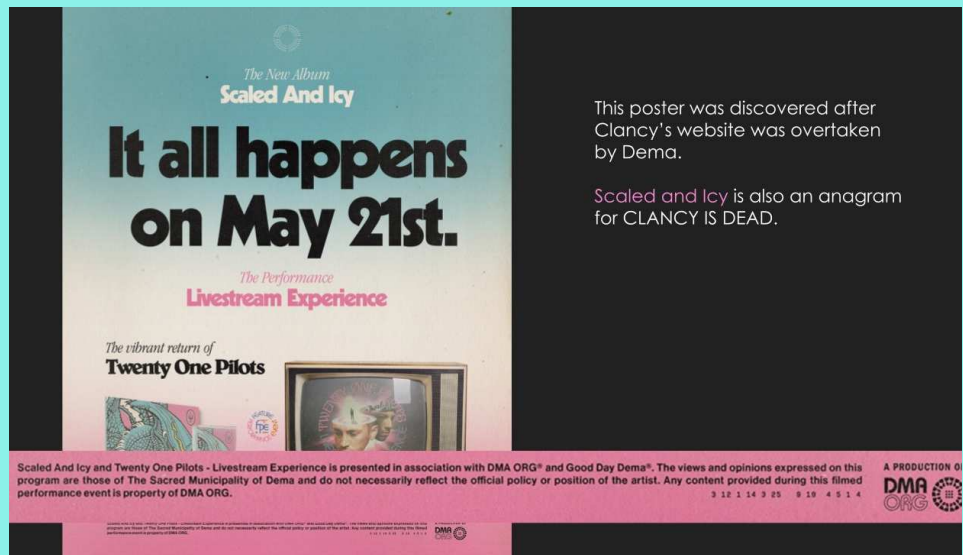


Our first hint about the new album came in December 2020 with “SAI is Propaganda” being hidden on the Christmas album cover. SAI is “Scaled and Icy.” It’s also a homophone to the name of the psi symbol that has been used this whole era. The psi (pictured in blue) is a distorted version of the compass E pitchfork (pictured in yellow) we learned the meaning of in the Bandito Immersive experience, which “symbolizes overturning the false compass of Dema.” The Banditos inverted or subverted the Dema symbols first during the Trench era, just like the gravestones we just looked at. Even their map is inverted, since “East is up” is a Bandito catchphrase, referencing how you need to look at the map in order to escape the city, as well as a “message of unity, truth and rebellion.” This is supposed to represent how you need to change your mindset in order to leave the city of Dema. Now Dema returns the favor. They steal back the pitchfork symbol and subvert it, as well as return several other symbols to their original states. Even the way the band positions themselves in pictures reflects this: usually Josh is *always* on the left, but during *Scaled and Icy* photo shoots, he’s often on the right.

Blurryface announces the title of the album because this album is under his control.

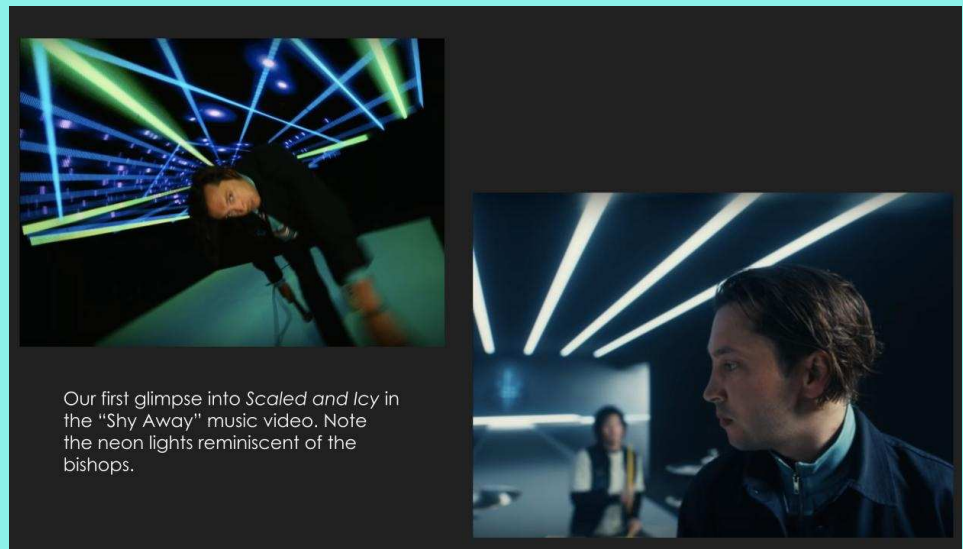


The smaller text on the poster reads: "The views and opinions expressed on this program are those of The Sacred Municipality of Dema and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the artist."



This poster was discovered after Clancy's website was overtaken by Dema.

Scaled and Icy is also an anagram for CLANCY IS DEAD.



Color Symbolism and Live Shows

The designers that work with Twenty One Pilots have openly admitted that they choose colors with symbolism in mind. In the words of Tyler Shapard, their lighting guy, "Color means a lot to our brand; **red** means **Blurryface**, while **yellow** equals **Trench**. More specifically, **red** and white is **bad** and **yellow** and **green** is **good**. In the very first song, ["Jumpsuit"], our color palette goes back and forth from **red** and white to **green** and **yellow**, because there is a battle going on between the **antagonists** and the **banditos**, our heroes."

To recap:

- Yellow = Trench / Banditos
- Red = Nico / Blurryface / Insecurity

Also:

- Neon / Violet = Vialism / Dema
- Orange = Prison / Entrapment



Examples from "Jumpsuit"
played live



Colors in the Dema Era

ORANGE: TYLER IS TRAPPED

He doesn't even speak during the opening of the livestream experience—the two hosts just talk over him until he sings.



Notice the giant psi in the middle of the stage as well. It was there at all times. Also, you can see the bishops in the first screenshot of “No Chances.” Going back to what Shap said about colors, this clearly indicates the control of Nico as well as the presence of vialism in these songs.

Colors in the Dema Era



“I’m Not Okay (I Promise)”—red and white



“No Chances”—red and violet

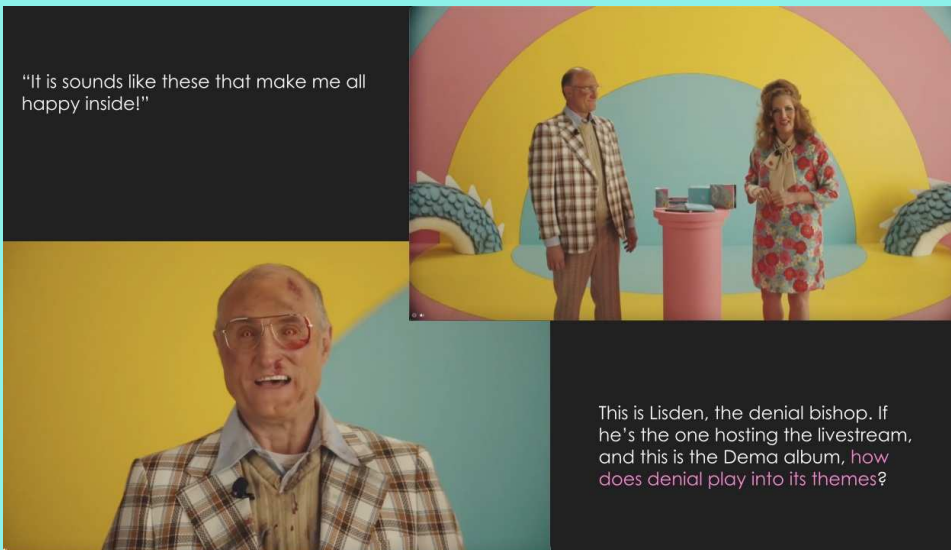
Other concerning symbolism during the liveshow :)

During the show, Tyler covers his hands in black paint, then raises them ritualistically over the crowd. This represents the return of Blurryface, since he has been represented by black paint on Tyler’s throat and hands in the past.





Those in the backup band all wear these black jumpsuits with a Dema map on them. Normally Tyler and Josh are the only ones performing when Twenty One Pilots performs—the addition of more band members explicitly wearing Dema jumpsuits indicates they are not free to perform as normal.



Let's analyze this album lyrically!

Looking at themes of denial, repression, or suppression of something

The screenshots are from the "Choker" music video and read, "STOP! BUY EVERYTHING" and "BUY OUR STUFF PLEASE!"

Consumerism

- Merch collections from this era: Shy away collection (April 12), Hot Topic release, more merch (4/20, heh), collab with Chipotle, Saturday merch collection, Christmas merch, exclusive vinyls, etc
- Constant adverts for merch during the livestream
- "He collected many things but never quite enough" -Redecorate
- The lure: burying your feelings in Stuff
- The catch: only a temporary distraction; you always need MORE



Self-Reliance

- "I don't bother anyone, never make demands" -Choker
- "Nobody's coming for me" -Choker
- "Self-sabotage is a sweet romance" -Choker
- The lure: you think it makes you strong and independent
- The catch: humans are made to be interdependent, and you end up self-sabotaging

Glorification of Pain

- "Keep your bliss, there's nothing wrong with this" –*Mulberry Street*
- "Keep your sunny days, leave us in the rain" –*Mulberry Street*
- "Like a little splinter buried in your skin...you can even push it further in" –*Choker*
- "Seems like all I'm worth is what I'm able to withstand" –*Choker*
- The lure: you feel like you're getting what you deserve, you feel strong
- The catch: you are literally refusing to treat pain

Each of these lyrics essentially says, "Sometimes, I prefer to feel pain or cause pain to myself on purpose."

Conformity

- "We used to close our eyes and picture a better life, now this city is full of dry eyes caught in a trance of obedience, devoid of any trace of an identity." –*Clancy*
- "Cogs I'm stepping on" –*The Outside*
- "Everybody stand in line, take a hit, join the club" –*The Outside*
 - Connection to *March to the Sea* (people marching straight to their deaths)
 - "Am I on the outside?" –*The Outside*
- The lure: you're not in danger of loneliness
- The catch: denying your true identity, and no one knows the real you, so ultimately you're still lonely

Referring to people as "cogs" demonstrates that they are not individuals, but rather part of a machine.

Synthetic Highs

- "My sunshine is a buzz and a light" –*Good Day*
- "Lost my job, my wife and child, homie just sued me...I know it's hard to believe me, it's a good day" –*Good Day*
- "Feeling great! Life moves slow on the ocean floor / I can't feel the waves anymore" –*Saturday*
- "Ain't no sunny skies 'til you finally realize everybody relies on synthetic highs they find someone to prescribe" –*The Outside*
- In general, all the songs SOUND happy despite lyrical content
- The lure: you don't have to deal with negativity
- The catch: repression only worsens your feelings



If the sunshine is "a buzz and a light," it's fake. All of these lyrics are about pretending to feel positively when you actually don't. The images show citizens of Dema having a party on a submarine while a monster swims around outside in the "Saturday" music video. The bishops are repeatedly shown to be the ones steering. They ignore the monster until it literally sinks their submarine.

BUT...

THERE'S STILL HOPE



The band's jumpsuits also match Tyler's tattoos. I think this could be taken one of two ways. One is that the tattoo represents running out of time as it is an hourglass, so they are there reminding Tyler that he is running out of time and pressuring him. The second is that the back up band can represent both the control of Dema and comradery with Tyler, depending on what the story needs.

The Campfire Medley as the Opposite of Synthetic Highs

- Songs about his wife ("Tear in my Heart"), Josh ("My Girl" / possibly "Formidable"), his mom ("House of Gold")—a.k.a. the people who support him
- Also dedicated to his dad
- Jumpsuit guys are friends?
- Songs with lyrics about real sunshine around a real fire
- Lights on the psi are out!



This is an example of when the backup band might represent comradery with Tyler: during the campfire medley which took place halfway through the live show.

Redecorate: the final song on the album

- "I had a friend of mine whose son passed away and they would keep his room the same way that he had left it. ... It makes me wonder, like, 'What will people do with my stuff?' It can actually bring you back down to earth, make sure that you don't make any horrible decisions."
- During the show, this song is performed by only Tyler on the B stage (no outside influences)
- Lyrics: "I don't wanna go like this, at least let me clean my room"
- Story of three characters contemplating their deaths
- Realization that dying "like this" (due to vialism / their bad coping mechanisms) leaves them with regrets
- **Hesitations about vialism** and (at the very least a temporary) rejection of the neon grave
- Supposed to be a set up for the next album
- As an allegory for mental health, it's nice to end on a note that rejects the toxic thinking that only pushes you towards suicide—to end on a hesitation about vialism, rather than an endorsement of it



The finale of the show—green and yellow!

"In this story, 'Trees' is green and yellow, because that is the last song and the resolve." -Shap

"Trees" is the closing song of the show. The background behind the tree is also the map of Trench, or the place to which citizens of Dema escape. Thus, there is hope for escape at the end of the show. If you want to learn more about the hopeful side of this story, listen to Trench.

poems i meant to write and never did

You're Too Literal, Princess Dot

Flik: *Here, pretend—pretend that that's a seed.*

Dot: *It's a rock.*

Flik: *Oh, I know it's a rock, I know. But let's just pretend for a minute that it's a seed, alright? We'll just use our imaginations. Now, now do you see our tree? Everything that made that giant tree is already contained inside this tiny little seed. All it needs is some time, a little bit of sunshine and rain, and voilà!*

Dot: *This rock will be a tree?*

Flik: *Seed to tree. You've gotta work with me, here. Alright? Okay. Now, you might not feel like you can do much now, but that's just because, well, you're not a tree yet. You just have to give yourself some time. You're still a seed.*

Dot: *But it's a rock.*

Flik: *[shouting] I know it's a rock! Don't you think I know a rock when I see a rock? I've spent a lot of time around rocks!*

Dot: *You're weird, but I like you.*



My family calls me Dot after the ant in the Pixar film *A Bug's Life*. It's because of the one scene when Flik tells Princess Dot to use her imagination to pretend that the rock he gave to her is a seed, so he can use it as a metaphor for how small bugs like her can do big things. But no matter how many times he tells her to pretend that it's a seed, she can't seem to move past the fact that she's holding a rock in her hands.

I am Dot because I “take things too literally.” As a child, I would tell my brother that his fantasy

stories were improbable. Didn't he know that good stories need to follow the rules? He usually ignored me and proceeded to tell the tale of the superhero with seventeen different powers anyway. Or maybe it would be my dad calling me Dot because he told a silly joke and I told him it didn't make any sense. Over the years, the phrase "It's a rock" became a cue for me to understand that I was missing the point by getting caught up in details.

Until recently, I considered myself to have grown out of this problem. After all, I'm a writer. I understand metaphors now. Surely it was just a childhood quirk that I've left behind, just like checking that the text reading IKEA on the bottom of my cup was perfectly straight when I set the drink down after every sip.

Except I think I never actually grew out of it—I just know to hide it better. If I'm not paying attention, I'll let it slip to my friend that his joke doesn't make any sense because that's not how exponential growth works (and he'll throw a pillow at my head in response). Or I'll learn that the latest slang is calling people "bestie" online and I'll cringe because *they're not my bestie, they don't even know me!* But at least now I keep my discomfort to myself.

In class the other day, our professor showed us a video. It was an interview with some famous writer guy, but I've already forgotten which one. I can still hear his voice drifting across the room though, claiming, "In the best stories, one plus one equals three." And I wanted to scream, "That's not true!"

Meanwhile, the part of my brain that has learned social conventions and metaphors knew that I was missing the point again. She tried desperately to get through to the rest of me, but didn't she know that math doesn't work that way, not even in metaphors? Despite knowing that I was being Dot, I still couldn't push myself past it. Why didn't it bother anyone else? Why could everyone else blithely discuss the writing advice in the video while I got stuck thinking about how the math equation

metaphor was bad math?

It's not like I'm against metaphors as a whole. Maybe I just think that there needs to be some truth to them and there is no truth in one plus one equals three. I imagine the writer was trying to say, "A story where everything happens as expected is boring, but a story where somehow, unexpectedly, the sum is more than its parts is worth your time." But if you wanted to express that truth through math, why not use an example that is also true? Perhaps he thought real math is never beautiful or mysterious or seemingly contradictory enough for that but I disagree.

In the best stories, $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$.

What I've just shown you is called Euler's identity. It's also known as the most beautiful mathematical equation, and honestly, it makes no damn sense. You're telling me that you take Euler's number, which is an irrational, unending number ($e = 2.71828\dots$), and raise it to the power of the imaginary unit, which is a number that cannot exist ($i = \sqrt{-1}$), multiplied by a different irrational, unending number ($\pi = 3.14159\dots$), just add one, and somehow get nothing? Are you going to look me in the eyes and tell me that's not crazy and weird and completely unexpected?

Yet it is true. Every part of it is fundamentally true even if we don't understand it. And one plus one equals three is not true. Saying stories are like one and one is three almost implies a sort of falseness to the best stories as if nothing that is true could be so seemingly contradictory and mysterious. Euler's identity tells us that beauty is irrational and outside understanding. The reason mystery is where the best stories are is because that's also where the truth is and the truth is wilder than anything you could invent.

And listen, I know that I just made a complicated metaphor out of a nice, punchy one, and I know I missed the point again and I'm reading way too much into everything and yes, I know it's a seed, but maybe that's okay if while we were here, we learned something about the truth.

Gaggle of Abbies

Abbey Chandler, Abigail Franklin, Abby Latoundji,
Abby Stoesz, Abby Swartzentruber, Abby Pepin and me:
there are 39 English students at Taylor University for the 2020-2021 school year
and seven of them are named Abby
(that's 18%).

i don't know all of the Abbies but
Abbey Chandler's enthusiasm bleeds into her work
Abigail Franklin immerses me in all her stories
Abby Swartzentruber was clearly meant to talk about literature
Abby Pepin writes the most beautiful phrases i've ever read

and i, Abby Wilson,
write stupid bad poems
about people who share my name

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

the thunder claps and i cup my hands to catch the storm and cradle it in my arms like a kitten but it scratches my face and squirms away and i am sprinting after a bullet train my bare bleeding feet slapping against the tracks and i'm sorry i'm sorry but it is too late because the storm train has escaped into the atmosphere and its torrent pelts my clothes and soaks my shirt like ants scurrying down my back each carrying a tiny ice cube and they are swarming and i cannot bat them away because the boa constrictor is tightening and tightening around my body

all because you did not want to sit next to me at dinner tonight

Finding Where Everything Fits

recommended listening: [Jester's Tear by Celestial Aeon Project](#)

The time: one p.m. The setting: stomach flat on the carpet, wrapped up in a burrito blanket, the glow of the computer screen competing with the dim sunlight from the window. The task: find a song that I only knew the AudioJungle title of, which sounds like it should be easy, but is more complicated than you might expect. The artist chose to upload the song to his other social media under a different name, meaning that knowing the title is functionally useless. He also seems to have several different accounts on each music platform (YouTube, Spotify, Jamendo, and Bandcamp). I push the pompoms on the end of my blanket past my toes as I scroll through his Bandcamp page. I am vaguely aware of them—my toes—being cold. I don't care.

I imagine the time is 2:20 p.m. I have scrolled through his Bandcamp and determined that it wasn't there. He has three Jamendo pages for some reason, and I systematically click each song to discover if it's the one. The plucking of a violin. Skip. The harmonies of a quartet of strings and a harp. Skip. Scratchy, droning music whose tension builds and builds. Skip.

The time: three p.m.? I am now scrolling through his Spotify page, or at least, the songs that I have determined are the most likely to be the one based on the fact that the song was in an AudioJungle pack called "Halloween." Additionally, I have accumulated at least 30 new open tabs of

other sites to scour later. I switch between the tabs whenever I get bored with scrolling through Spotify, my attention skipping around on one leg in a game of digital hopscotch.

The time: ?? I have lost interest in scrolling through Spotify songs, so I search for Halloween on his YouTube channel and find several “Halloween Music Compilations.” I add them to my growing army of open tabs. Instead of listening to them, I return to the Jamendo pages that I had gotten bored of earlier. I am vaguely aware of my stomach gurgling from hunger.



recommended listening: [Jazz Cafe by MusicTrove](#)

I have always had a thing for themed playlists. My first one was “Forgiven” themed, made at 13 years old, on YouTube. I later moved to iTunes and finally Spotify, churning out a plethora of playlists for themes like “yellow” and “days of the week” and “Hufflepuff.”*

To give you more of a framework of what I mean by a “themed” playlist, let’s look at the Hufflepuff one as an example. I start with the songs that inspired the playlist idea—in this case, a parody of Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” about Hufflepuffs called “Sorted This Way.” Then, I sort through my music library to find thematic matches: are they about loyalty or kindness? Do they have to do with the color yellow? I add those. Then comes the fun part: finding new music. I start with easy searches—things like “Hufflepuff” in the Spotify search bar and “Hufflepuff songs” on Google. I end up translating several German rap songs because they evidently had “Hufflepuff” in the lyrics and I needed to know if it belonged on the playlist. (For the record, all five of the German songs got dropped for calling Hufflepuffs losers.**) I steal from other people’s Hufflepuff playlists. I search for songs mentioning yellow or badgers. Once I’m done adding songs, I organize all of them into a document

*If, for some reason, you are interested in listening to these playlists, you can find them on my Spotify profile, Abby Wilson: <https://open.spotify.com/user/21nxdhbgukxykqp2jlubl2q?si=363c82c940cb4422>.

**These five songs are “Diggy Diggy” by the 257ers, “Stone is My Pillow,” by the 257ers, “Daddy,” by Gary Washington, “John Schnee” by Pillath, and (most insultingly) “Hufflepuff” by SamLi.

divided into sections that explain why they're on the playlist.

My current favorite playlist project is tracking down the soundtrack to a specific web series called *Sanders Sides*. The series has some original music, but a lot of the more “soundtrack-y” songs—the ones that serve as themes for certain characters, or accompany important character beats—come from royalty-free music websites like AudioJungle or Epidemic Sound. But the creators never really say what the songs are, so I end up in the situation that I described earlier: scrolling through endless websites that host music in search of a single song.

This process is a little different than my normal playlist process since I'm looking for specific songs rather than throwing my net out and seeing if I happen to like anything that I catch. I often start by using a reverse audio search application called Shazam, which identifies about ten to twenty percent of the songs I feed it. The web series primarily uses AudioJungle and Epidemic Sound for royalty-free music, so that helpfully narrows the scope down from the whole Internet to about a million songs. Unfortunately, the only method that gives results so far is brute forcing my way through the websites and listening to hundreds of songs until I find it. Epidemic Sound tracks are often on Spotify, so those then go onto my playlist.

But if it happens to be an AudioJungle track, then the process isn't over, because AudioJungle tracks have an audio watermark. You'll be jamming to the upbeat piano of “Jazz Cafe” when suddenly some vaguely British woman's voice will whisper “AudioJungle” right into your ear. These tracks are sometimes on other streaming services and sometimes not, so I've hunted down the artist's other social media or even emailed the creators of certain tracks just to find out where I can stream them and not have to pay \$30 to remove a watermark. I recognize that this is a ridiculous amount of work to put into something that maybe only three other people in the world actually care about, but it's worth it. It's always worth it for the moment I find the song and some kind of dam breaks inside my brain,

overwhelming my senses with excitement and energy and telling me that if I don't physically shake it all out somehow, my heart will beat itself into exploding.



Sometimes, like most people, I need to take a shower. So I sit on my bed, scrolling through Tumblr, thinking about how I need to take a shower. I scroll past fandom discourse. I need to take a shower, I think. Oh look, a cute cat. I need to take a shower.

Blind to the passage of time but aware that it has probably been too long, I flop out of bed, undress, and on a good day, clamber into the shower. But it also is not an infrequent occurrence for me to then plop on the carpeted floor, and as we all know, an object at rest stays at rest. Scrolling through Tumblr. Thinking about how I need to take a shower. *Why don't I just get in the shower?* I think, the carpet starting to irritate my skin. Come on, get in the shower. I reblog She-Ra fanart. Please get in the shower? Please, for the love of God, just move your butt and stop looking at your phone. Don't let this turn into one of the days where you sit here for nearly an hour and don't have time to take a shower anymore. I like a cat video. What is wrong with me? Getting into the shower is so easy and I'm already halfway there and it's been five days since I last showered and I feel gross and *what* is stopping me? My laziness? Why can't I go? Why can't I do simple things?

Later in the day, I will try to read a sonnet. I will look at every word and I will recognize them as words I know. I will not be able to process them. I will continue to stare at them, yet their meaning will hide itself from me and I will wonder why I am even an English major if I can't read hard texts.

But right now? Right now, I've stood up (Tumblr has finally worn out my interest), my legs buzzing angrily with TV static, and walked to the shower. It's been forty minutes since I sat down.



recommended listening: [*Incomplete \(The Puzzle Song\) by Thomas Sanders*](#)

Something that I've discovered a lot of people don't know enough about is neurodiversity, which is the overarching concept describing variation in the human brain. Things like autism, ADHD, synesthesia, and dyslexia all fall under the neurodiverse umbrella because these terms describe brains that work differently than "typical" brains in one way or another, especially in how they process sensory information.

People with ADHD, for example, are said to have an "interest-based nervous system."* So although "attention deficit" is in the name, it's not exactly true. People with ADHD have plenty of attention; it's just prioritized on what is most interesting to them at the time rather than what may be most important. They don't choose to focus on something because they should be focusing on it—instead, focus comes to them when it pleases, usually because they've managed to stumble across something that stimulates their nervous system in that moment. We call this a state of hyperfocus, in which a person with ADHD may forgo everything around them and intently focus on one thing for hours and hours on end. They may even be completely unable to tell how much time has passed at all. So it may be incredibly difficult to focus on something that they aren't particularly interested in, such as reading a sonnet or taking a shower, but something like fixing their deerstalker hat at three a.m. instead of doing homework could have their rapt attention, to use a completely random and not at all personal example. Or like, you know, spending an entire day trying to find one song on AudioJungle because it serves as a musical motif in a web series that you like.

Yeah, turns out, I might have ADHD.

It's weird to even say that. I wrote an ever-expanding twelve-page document for my counselor about why I think it would be good to look into me getting officially evaluated. It's like if I don't write

*Dodson, William. "ADHD and the Interest-Based Nervous System." ADDitude, 27 February 2018, <https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-brain-chemistry-video>.

down every single detail about me related to ADHD, then they don't exist and I'm making it all up. But then I'll be sitting with my friend at lunch and I'll glance down at the ingredients list on the Arizona Iced Tea in my hand and within a few seconds a song called "Drugs" is stuck in my head through a series of rapid fire connections (the chemical ingredients made me think of talking about the "Poison Squad," a group of men I learned about in my forensics class who ate unsafe foods in order to provoke the government into regulating the chemicals put in food and then that made me think about how we were talking about various drugs and their effects on the body in the same class and then that made me think about the song called "Drugs" that I saw on TikTok and mind you it took me four lines to briefly explain all of that to you but it happened in my brain in about four seconds) and I'll remember how having a mind that moves incredibly fast and jumps around from topic to topic is a hallmark sign of ADHD and then I'll wonder how I ever lived before I knew a word for that.

The psychiatrist can't see me until the end of the year anyway, so I suppose I just have to be okay with the uncertainty for now.



I've listened to so many of these Jamendo songs. No luck there. I decide to finally turn to the Halloween Compilations. I realize that I don't actually have to listen to the whole three hours of content, like I initially thought; I can just keep hitting the "skip forward fifteen seconds" button until I hear a clip that sounds right. I do that with an entire video and hear plenty of appropriately scary music, dissonant and screaming, but none of the right chimes. So I close the tab and choose another one; and another. I'm about halfway through this one when my breath catches, almost involuntarily. It's the high pitches of the glockenspiel that I instantly recognize. I let out a sort of scream, raising my voice so high that I almost sound like the glockenspiel. I've found it! I can barely think.

A ding from my phone lets me know that my mom has texted me that dinner is ready. I glance at

the clock on my screen—it’s already five p.m.? How? I stand up from the floor, my legs tingling from sitting so long.



recommended listening: [Mysterious Paths by Marco Belloni](#)

Let’s back up. Have you ever heard of Thomas Sanders? He was well known on Vine before his tragic death (8.3 million followers and 7.4 billion loops kind of well known, to be exact). In the present, he makes hour-long YouTube videos exploring the different aspects of his personality by personifying them. These personifications have their own names: Patton is his morality and empathy (like *pathos*); Logan is his logic; Roman is his creativity and self-esteem; you get the picture. It’s kind of like *Inside Out*, if *Inside Out* was about a 30-year-old man with intense anxiety and constant back-to-back dilemmas. These videos are called (you guessed it) Sanders Sides. In recent episodes, it has explored what it’s like to grow up, question your morality, deal with intrusive thoughts, and make hard decisions. Fundamentally, it’s a series about getting to know yourself, discovering parts of yourself that may surprise you, and learning to accept every part of yourself, even the ones that you feel are weird. Although the early episodes were closer to vlogs in quality, recent ones have an impressive production value considering the fact that it is still filmed in the middle of Thomas’ living room. This production value, of course, includes the soundtrack that I have spent so much time hunting down.

The first musical motif I noticed was the “soft Patton music.” As the embodiment of emotions and empathy, he has quite a few soft and touching moments. And during each, a simple piano motif echoes in the background.

The one I remember the most though is from the episode titled “Can Lying Be Good?” From the very beginning, something was off. When Patton appeared on screen, his usual upbeat jazz piano motif didn’t even play. His interactions with the other characters were somehow both too sugary and

strangely sinister. If you have a good eye, you'll even catch that his outfit is missing the cat cardigan he was given in the last episode. The tension between the characters, as well as in the music, builds, until they finally "unmask" Patton, revealing someone we only know as Deceit in a moment filled with the unsettling plucking of strings and clipped chimes. I used to rewatch the episode just to hear the song play at the moment of the reveal over and over again. The song became Deceit's theme as the series continued, accompanying him any time he made an entrance.



recommended listening: [The Mercy of the Wind by Million Eyes](#)

My family likes to share music with one another. Even if we don't know anything about each other's music, we still use Apple's homesharing feature and try it out. I think it's our way of showing that we care about each other's interests.

One time, my mom was scrolling through my music and noticed the large number of instrumental tracks that I have downloaded on my Sanders Sides soundtrack quest. Before she could ask, I compulsively started to explain. Sometimes I feel like this part of myself is too weird to just show to people without any qualifications. "Those are from Sanders Sides. I don't know if you'll want them."

She continued to listen to them anyway, saving a few to her computer. I tried to explain again when she hit play on a song filled with dissonant piercing notes. "That song is a motif for the character who represents intrusive thoughts. So that's why his theme is...like that."

She nodded, but I'm not sure she understood. She hit play on Deceit's theme and I got to explain it to her. She scrolled through a few more, finally landing on "The Mercy of the Wind."

As the wistful piano notes drifted into our ears, she asked, "Isn't this the same melody from before?" Oh bless her, she was trying to understand.

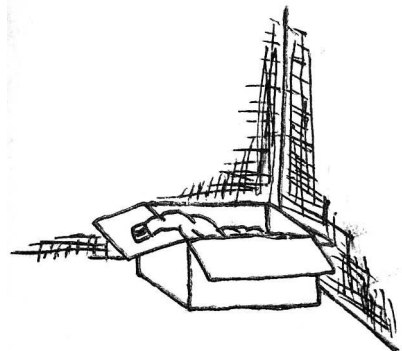
"Sort of," I said, barely containing my excitement. "It's meant to sound like that theme, because

in the moment of the series where it takes place, that character—Deceit—has just seen eye to eye with one of the other characters for the first time, and that character always has a piano theme, so by choosing a song with a similar melody to Deceit’s theme and similar tone to Patton’s theme, they represented how the two of them are starting to get along.” In my excitement, I’d forgotten that she doesn’t know who any of these characters are in the slightest.

And so I think about how to explain to my mom that these are two different songs made by different artists that were purposely chosen for their similarities to represent the coming together of two characters who had previously been at odds—the mixing of their themes. These songs hadn’t specifically been composed for this purpose but were carefully and thoughtfully woven into the story. How wonderful to repurpose them that way, even if very few people would notice, just for the sake of art, just so that even the background music of your web series sends the message that even the parts of yourself that you sometimes hate or wish were different have their purpose and can be strengths in their own right.

my hyperfixation broke up with me

you were a parasite rewiring my neurons;
you were the only thing i thought about.
when i could not visit you,
you flooded the cracks in my brain
and spilled out of my mouth.
you were a tsunami
seeping into every sulcus
and then just like that
you were gone,
a mere puddle
and as much as i tried to paddle,
my sailboat ran aground.
i packed up the notebooks half-filled
with doodles and notes and timelines
and diagrams —
was this the equivalent of your hoodies? —
and shoved them in the corner of my closet,
and sometimes i still listen
to the spotify playlist i made for you
as if it could bring you back.



feminine venom

do you think Medusa's leg hair
was snakes too?
the way you stare at mine,
i'd guess it was.
what, is there hissing beneath my skirt?
you scared of turning to stone, of being bit,
feminine venom infiltrating your veins, boy?
yes, you'd like it better
if i beheaded them all, i know.

Medusa wasn't brave and neither am i.
this is my body, simply woman:
all i did was not
cut down a field of daisies
and not
pretend they were weeds
and not
rip them out by the roots.



ode to hip dips

shapewear ads stalk me everywhere on the internet.

women with soft, squishy bellies wiggle and squirm
into a dress, sour faces and their skin pooching out
into a cushy pillow, straining fabric in a gaudy display

and then they roll on some Brandy McBrands'
Certified Shapewear and smooth out their curves
and compress their divine cushion stomachs,
and lift their butts, and, most horrifically,
eradicate you, the hip dip.

many of us are naturally shaped
like the melodic, graceful violin,
so we call you violin hips,
our waists swooping in
one delightful curve,
going out, out, out
then deftly reversing
for a final smaller scoop,
chiseling a Stradivarius,
fashioned for the most mellifluous of
dancing and running and loving and climbing trees.

but when we compress you with the sleek fabric of shapewear,
(sometimes just so we can learn to love our bodies)
we smother your melody, and thirteen-
year-old me grows up thinking
her hips are weird and ugly and fat,
and not a lovingly handcrafted instrument
just waiting for her to perform the song of self-love.

Reader, I have taken you on a journey through my ADHD brain, traveling through the landscape of the map I entrusted to you at the very beginning. You can imagine us traversing through a ravine, peeking into the nooks and crannies in the brain folds, getting lost in all the offshoots and rabbit holes. But there are even more fissures in my brain than we have been able to explore. Just as ADHD places me in some in-between place in society, these other fissures leave me liminal too. As we near the end of our journey together, see if you can get a fragmented glimpse of the other trenches as we pass by.

i.

always unpack as soon as you can,
even if this space only belongs to you
for a week,

 a month,

 a semester,

 a year.

if you don't fit in anywhere else
you might as well get comfortable
with the temporary.

this is your turf:

These cardboard boxes are your
Castle, and you are
King of the packing peanuts.

ii.

they say my brain has "wires crossed,"
but i like to think of it as a bridge over a river
that should not be there.
the lands of the senses are
proud to be independent, free states
(well, except Taste and Smell, whose
alliance is well known)
with few bridges between them, all carefully guarded.
yet here is this bridge,

an illegal bridge,
where letters sneak over
to steal kisses from their color spouses.

iii.

We hold hands
when we walk
fingers entwined
sappy and sweet.
At school they
think we're "just" friends.
At pride they
think we're partners.
At home they
know we are both
~~neither~~

iv.

i love that picture of me—
staring up at the camera
sitting next to a creek,
a flower crown on my head
and a rainbow wrapped
around my shoulders.

the rainbow stands for
my yes to the girl in pink
who could carry me bridal style
her biceps firmly pressed
against my back.

the rainbow stands for
my yes to the person
whose purple hair
serenades me like a bird
from across the airport.

the rainbow stands for
my yes to the boy
whose kisses would be
the soft glow of billions of
stars in the navy sky.

the world says, "you're just confused,
make up your mind."
do you aim to split my heart,
hide one half never to be seen again?

its beating cries from the floorboards,

but i can't let it out yet.

i tried to separate the two halves
as if they could be
truly severed as if it's not all one
but instead i guess i'll bury it whole
and whisper, someday

v.

the Rainbow once said to me,
“do not go to the Church.
They are a sugar-sweet poison,
the vanilla that smells delicious
and goes down gagging.”

the Church once said to me,
“do not go to the Rainbow.
their multicolored presentation is
a conscious-carving facade.”

but as Mother Mindy raises her hands
over the congregation,
blessing our whole selves,
i think about her email signature,
“Mindy+ (she/her/hers),”
and light streams through
the stained glass window,
casting rainbow patterns on the floor.
the Rainbow in my veins
receives the blessing too.

my prayer

she is a shapeshifter,
the essence of her a mass of swirling mist,
taking the shape of an elm tree,
 then a whisper of a word or two,
 then a streak of light like a flare,
 then finally settling in my gut
 as sentence fragments pop out like embers.

but if she tries to escape my mouth
she trips on my tongue
as it slows the whirlwind of her dance
and her light fizzles out

(so thank you for accepting
my wordless groans)

Domestic Liturgy

This morning we missed four alarms
and, subsequently, church (again).
As I bury my head under the pillow
while imagining the liturgy without us,
 your hand reached up to my bunk
 so I let mine dangle.
And as our fingers
 almost-but-not-quite touched,
I imagined we were
The Creation of Adam—
 reaching for but
 not touching God,
 reaching for but
 not touching hands.
This thought,
in all its absurdity, made me giggle:
Wouldn't that make me God,
crying in her bed over missing church?
Then our fingers curled around each other,
 and it was good.

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About the Author

Abby Wilson graduated from Taylor University with a degree in Creative Writing in 2022. She has contributed to publications such as *A Novel Mind* and *Weave*. She can be found on Twitter @doublejoywilson.



"This is a map of my brain. Approximately, of course. Brain scans haven't quite reached this level of complexity and also my painting skills are a bit out of practice. All the same, I'd like to explore this map together."

Note to Self: Don't Forget to Title Your Project! is a collection of creative nonfiction, poetry, and visual art reflecting on the author's ADHD diagnosis. With an approachable and direct tone, Abby becomes a tour guide for her readers as they explore the landscape of her neurodivergent brain. These readers will discover aspects of ADHD that can be strengths or drawbacks, such as executive dysfunction, outside-the-box thinking, emotional dysregulation, and hyperfixation. They will also learn a lot more than they probably wanted to know about the band Twenty One Pilots. Along the way, they might even encounter reflections on the intersection of ADHD and other neurodivergencies, gender, and spirituality, too.