

Exploration of Identity
Written by Anna Scheck, Medfield High School

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I don't know who I am.

That is the truth that dogs my steps, chases me through life. I think about it at night, staring at the ceiling, faint in the darkness of my bedroom. I rewind tapes of the same few words over in my head, and they only seem more trite every time. *Daughter, sister, cousin, friend.* Those feel like a gravestone, some ghostly outline of a person. Besides, who I am can't only be in relation to other people, I think. *Kind, loving, generous.* Only two of those three strike close to true. *Selfish, angry, eternally frustrated.* These reverberate somewhere deep in me, but I don't know how to tell if it's the truth, or my own insecurity. *Insecure.* That's another one. Maybe all of these words are true of me, in one way or another. Maybe none are. Besides, nobody could pull an idea of the person that I am from such isolated descriptions.

Identity is a puzzle to me, in more ways than one. Both because I can't figure out my own, and because that's how I envision it. My physical appearance is the first piece. My family, the second. Then, comes the multiple pieces that make up the person I am to others. Now the last, and probably the most important piece, who I am internally. The person who exists inside my thoughts. Who is she, really?

Appearance should be easiest. All I have to do is look in the mirror, and there I should be. Wrong. I've stood in the mirror with a stranger looking back, (it was the kind of stranger that makes you double take in vague recognition, but a stranger nonetheless) and now my brain and body feel like separate things. A migraine had been bringing my world crashing around me. I was in the hospital for three days. Until past sunset that first day, the pain was so excruciating that I couldn't remember a thing, not even my own name. I was conscious only in the sense that I was physically awake. Later, I remembered what had happened, remembered looking right in the downstairs bathroom mirror of my own home as the ambulance shrieked outside. My pupils were

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blown wide and afraid, in a face I might as well have been seeing for the first time. I was told later that my right side had sagged as in a stroke, skin like a deflated balloon. I don't know if I saw that or not. But those eyes haunt me, wide and teary and terrified. Unguarded, like a child. Not mine. I don't know how to get them out of my head. I don't know if I can.

My family is actually the easiest. The parts of them that appear in me are clear, shine out as my best qualities, my talents. My skill at baking, from my grandma and passed down through my mom. My dad's love for learning, though he leans more toward cars while I dive into history. A hatred for being cold. That deep set desire for community. My temper, quick to light and slow to burn out. Sheer stubbornness. A sense of adventure. When I look at my family, it's almost as good as that mirror I can't see into anymore. Distorted, maybe, and not actually a reflection of me, but it works well enough. I will make those little bits from my family mine, and for a moment, I will be able to see a part of the girl I am trying to find.

The person I am perceived as is harder. I'd like to think I can read people fairly well, but everyone sees me differently. To my mother, I am the daughter who feels too much all at once and pushes it down until she explodes. The child who is loyal and generous and lets those qualities take from her until she can't give the world anything more. To my father, I am the daughter who wants to run from her hometown the first chance she gets. I am the daughter who is too passionate about politics that I haven't yet researched enough, the child who argues for the sake of it, too fed up with the world to keep it hidden. To my older sister, I am a sibling who was spared some of her pain. A sister who takes "you're so weird" to mean, "I love you", who's just this side of too awkward, who's maybe fun to be around anyway. To my younger sister, I'm sorry. I hope I'm some semblance of a role model to you, even though by all means I shouldn't be. I'm unkind to you too often, and I hope I haven't hurt you very badly.

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With my friends, it gets even more complex. I am everything, to all of them. Several definitely don't consider me a friend anymore, but a person that they have to tolerate until graduation. I'd say they see me as headstrong, caring, viciously sarcastic. Hopefully a little bit funny. But to them I am also a betrayer, and a fraud. I've done things I'm not proud of, told lies to the few people that I never should have. The only solid conclusion I've ever come to about myself is that I can be kind, but I am not nice. Someone told me once that I have the eyes of a cat. I always thought they looked a bit more like a shark's. Attack when provoked, and I do. The only person who can really stop my attacks, is also the only friend that I can't tell what they think of me. We used to fight like clockwork, the spring of every school year, when we were nothing if not sick of each other. My first real memory is sitting in the corner of preschool with him, stacking a wall of blocks. He's one of my very few lifelong friends, and I can't even tell if I mean much to him. I wish I could.

So here I've come to the most difficult piece of my little puzzle. The person who exists inside my own head. She is a mess of contradiction, of pain, and of strength. When I picture her, I picture a girl who walks with her head down, whose hair is long and coated in split ends. She is me, as I used to be, screaming that I am a terrible person. She insists that I will not be loved, not because I'm not worthy of it, but because I'm unlovable. Your mistakes are all you are, she says. I know she's wrong. She has to be. But she's very convincing. The facts don't entirely leave. I know I can't be entirely a terrible person. I've done things that I know are objectively good, that are worth my unashamed pride. Then I think of a too crowded closet and lies that slid too easily off my tongue. It must have been forked that day. The memories crowd in, too much and too fast. Cookies at the kitchen counter and tears sliding down my cheeks. Cold wind and a punch thrown. A locker slamming and a feeling of dread. A too long text with not enough said. Some of

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these I prompted, others I committed. Sometimes I can push this back, can look through my pictures and grasp at better times. A warm kitchen, crowded with friends. Reflections of candles and laughing aunts. Too cold shakes and hushed giggles. City streets, messy hair, and too many pictures. My snapshots to drive back the ghosts. Sometimes, when the sun warms my window panes and the computer is closed, she smiles. And I smile too.

In the end, I look at what I've written here, and wonder. Does this paint the picture of who I am? It isn't truly possible to know a person without meeting them. Have I met myself? Are all these words enough to convey the facets of who I am, or even enough to help me fully realize them? Must I resort to poetry, vague sentences indistinguishable from metaphor? Maybe I do sometimes laugh the way that my dog used to bark. Other times, I blend into the wall better than a window shade. It takes whole books to know a character, so I guess real people are no different. For now, instinct has to be enough. But one day I will be able to sit down and state, this is who I am. I'll look up from life, into the mirror, and see myself. My eyes will be mine again.