

(Perfection) DEFECTION

Rebecca Kuder

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1.

If you will just hold still I'll brush your hair until every snarl is gone, oh try not to cry. I torment her until she screams and runs away and I never see her hair smoothed of snarls. Eventually I say she can be in charge, I resign; her options are she does it (or doesn't), or someone else does it—but it's not going to be me.

2.

A perfect fit, a perfect glow, if I can hold my breath while the dental hygienist takes the X-ray, it will be good, it will be perfect, I will only have to do it once. Hold the plastic bit inside your cheek, ignore the pain, *hold still don't breathe*. Okay great, now relax (back to being alive). For a moment in the chair I thought I was dead. I pretended to be perfect.

3.

“No one knows everything,” I tell my daughter. Not her teacher, not me. Eventually she says these words back to me. I ready her for a life of learning. If no one knows everything, then maybe I can still learn to play piano, or drive stick shift. (And if no one knows everything, then it's also true that nothing is perfect, and that includes me.)

4.

PER. FECT. “Free” of defects. Because: DE. FECT. A shortcoming, a flaw, a lack.

5.

That Chocolate Perfection Bar I ate was rich, dense, and bits of walnut stuck in my teeth, leaving residue, spoiling the joy. I didn't care; it was delicious, but maybe it needs a new name.

6.

Let's say a baby is born, a girl. She toddles around and does her toddler thing for a while. Then one day she sees a little friend whose ears are pierced. Your little girl begs and begs and grows and grows until she wears you down and you take her to the mall (or somewhere more interesting/less soul-killing) and pay money and sign a form giving a stranger permission to point this thing called a gun toward the head of your 8-year-old (who you still feel is your infant) and poke studs through the lobes that were eternally, until a moment ago, so sweetly unmarred. If you're diligent and lucky, these holes become a sort of clean scar that you purchased, and they heal okay. If not, they don't, and you'll remove the studs and the holes will close up, and your baby's ears will heal, unembellished.

The parent's agony of deciding: To pierce or not to pierce. (Cannot have both. One will be perfect, the other, defect. Which is which? Wasn't the child fine before the pierce, the circumcision, the tattoo? Whose standards are correct? Who gets to decide? Close your eyes and live inside this stew. Now talk to me about perfection.)

7.

I cannot trust what I see. My glasses always need to be adjusted, their slant is never *quite right*. Wondering if perception is the same. Does it matter? For instance, school photos are now routinely adjusted digitally: buck teeth, cowlicks, blemishes, begone with a click. I cannot trust what I see.

Curated personas on the social media feed breed shame for my stains and frayed edges, awaken the gnawing sense that I am not shiny enough. And off I go to a conference in Los Angeles, Trigger Town for the Self-Loathing, where I am a gnome, an invisible lump, not a tall, thin blonde. It's a conference of writers, but still, some of the prettier people scan the room to find someone more perfect... with whom to discuss the life of the mind.

LA or Ohio, why oh why-O does it always go to the body, why, despite revolutions, affirmations, awareness-raising, and song, do I spend precious energy on how I look in this meat sack. *This meat sack?* Just a bag to hold all the love and bones inside while I traverse the day.

8.

I lint-pick at perfection until its skin peeks through. And what do I find? What's wrong with perfection? It's frozen, it's dead, cannot breathe, cannot change. All it does is hold our envy, hold our lack of imagination, hold the plastic bit inside a cheek, hold our *hold still don't breathe*. Perfection's defect is stagnation. It's not real, it's paralysis.

*I propose a holiday, close the banks and schools.
Let us wear our flaws like flair, bugger all the rules!*

To hell with perfection. Instead, here we are, full of gory, messy breath.

9.

According to Brene Brown, "Perfectionism is not 'focusing on the best we can be.' Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval and connection. Most perfectionists were raised being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule-following, people-pleasing, appearance, sports, etc.). Somewhere along the way, we adopt this dangerous and debilitating belief system: I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. PLEASE. PERFORM. PERFECT. Healthy striving is self-focused, perfectionism is really 'other-focused' —'what will they think?'"

Steve Maraboli, whom Inc. Magazine called, "The Most Quoted Man Alive," wrote, "There is nothing more rare, nor more beautiful, than a woman being unapologetically herself; comfortable in her perfect imperfection. To me, that is the true essence of beauty."

And found on the Internet, attributed to Unknown (the most quoted *non*-man alive?): "The word imperfect actually spells 'I'm perfect' because everyone is perfect in their own imperfect ways."

(Perfect Imperfection. Damn! Now even my IMperfection has to be perfect!)

10.

Hide each ragged flaw so I seem ideal and shiny; chip away at what I am. If I edit and edit until I hit bone, maybe my rhythm will become algorithm and then for sure I'll be certain

of something, anything. It will be like math. If I do the absolute best possible making, leave no lint to pick, no tiny thread to clip, maybe I'll arrive somewhere, be able to pin something down. Be certain of something, anything.

11.

All this time I have been thinking a dead thing was something to strive toward, thinking a dead thing was alive; all this time I have been thinking I should pin myself to a black velvet board like the carcass of a butterfly, but here I am, breathing. I am meant to fly, all iridescent magnificence and dust.

Beware: If I touch you, my color will dust onto you, and you will know me, and, unconcerned with lint on velvet, with death pinned to a board, you and I will quiver with our living.



REBECCA KUDER'S story, "*Rabbit, Cat, Girl*," appeared in Year's Best Weird Fiction, vol. 3. Her essays have appeared in *The Manifest Station*, *Jaded Ibis Press*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *The Rumpus*. She lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio, with her husband, the writer Robert Freeman Wexler, and their daughter. Rebecca blogs at www.rebeccakuder.com.