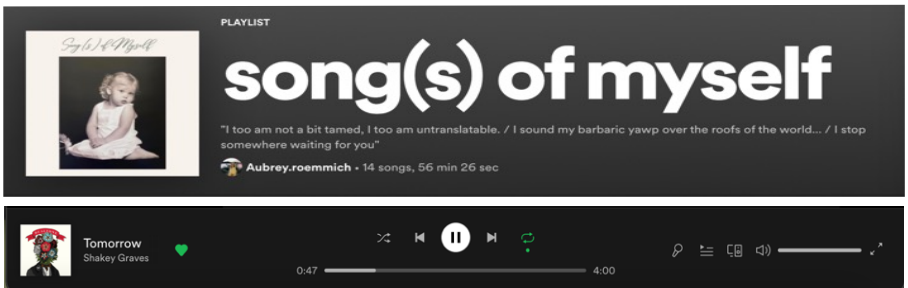


Song(s) of Myself

Aubrey Roemmich

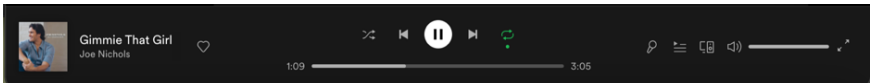


For most of my life, tomorrow felt like a guarantee. Now at the withered age of twenty, I can't bring myself to trust tomorrow. Tomorrow is such a fleeting idea. My future is filled with tomorrows, but there is no promise of them. Only hopes, wishes, and dreams. Hopes of goodness and health. Wishes of love and happiness. Dreams of success and security. No one can guarantee me a tomorrow, but yesterday—yes, yesterday is sure. Yesterday is behind me, but it's behind me with certainty. Yesterday will not change or waver. I am always one step ahead of yesterday.

I thought I was destined for grand adventures. I thought I was destined for the life-altering events that marked a change in the world and me. Something significant that people would want to write about. I used to believe people would want to write about me. I was told I would feel like an adult eventually. I was told I would have one moment that would change me forever. But when I find refuge in my yesterdays, I see those moments. Those life-altering moments worth writing about. They may be small. They may only matter to me, but they are there. They are

there and they prove that I was alive.

That's all I want—to be alive. Yesterday proves I was alive, but tomorrow is the future. Tomorrow is the promise. The world is wide and life is long, but it's also incredibly small and short. I've spent all my time looking for tomorrow. Looking for the great promises of the future. Life is supposed to be better than this. But it's not exactly bad, is it? It just is. It's just surrounded by the certainty of yesterday and the uncertainty of tomorrow... I never smile anymore, but it's hard to when tomorrow feels like it's running from you. Running from you as you run after it stretching your arms forward as yesterday calls you back...



There's a moment in everyone's life when they realize they *are*. Descartes declaring, "Cogito, ergo sum." I think, therefore I am. Being is an interesting state. We are all so caught up in our own heads that other people don't seem real. Maybe we don't seem real, either.

I was carefree in the way that all children are: wild and happy. I was the first kid, and for three glorious years, I was my parents' world. I was the sun that my parents revolved around. The star of my own show. I spent my childhood barefoot, loudly dancing around the kitchen and tracking in dirt. Always singing and asking my parents to turn up the radio. But like all kids, I was oblivious to the happenings outside my own head.

Mom and I were driving home from dance class when a popular country song came on the radio. I was singing along as I always do, looking out the window and ignoring everything that wasn't the fantasy unfolding in my own head. Then with one sentence, my mom shattered the bubble of my own interior life, the one I had been consumed in for five years.

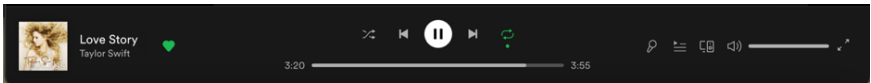
"This song reminds me of you."

Those six simple words echoed around my head as I asked, "What do you mean? How?"

“Because you’re always dancing around with messy hair. You never stop smiling and singing. Plus, you used to always fall asleep on my chest when you were a toddler.”

Such a simple explanation for such a life-altering statement. At five years old I was astonished that people noticed *me*. That I existed in this world. That I have a personality and presence that people see and remember. I’ve always been content in my own head, making up games and playing alone. But that didn’t make me invisible.

I never felt invisible to my parents, but I used to forget how much they cared. It was hard as a child to understand what my parents experienced and how they understood what was happening with me, my siblings, and our home. It’s hard to understand the depth of their love, how very vividly they see me. With those six words—*This song reminds me of you*—I felt seen. I felt that love. I realized at that moment that I am a unique person. I am.

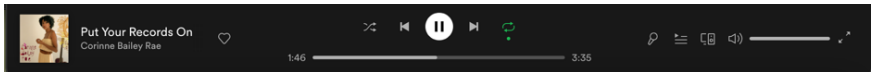


Taylor Swift was the first woman I ever looked up to. I still do, but that story isn’t important yet. She was my first example of a successful, smart, creative, young woman. My first experience on the internet was looking up her music on YouTube. I bonded with my childhood best friend over how cool Taylor Swift was (is). Her music, her style, and her videos were hallmarks of growth in my childhood. As she experienced life and translated it to music, I experienced life and saw my past, present, and future in her work. Despite the ridicule and teasing from little boys, I found companionship and empathy in her work. I saw myself and my dreams in every song.

I’ve always been a bit of a romantic, especially when I was young. I grew up on Disney princess movies (cue Belle’s vast library and Ariel’s underwater collections) and dressing up Barbies for fashion shows. I was the giggling girl, prancing around in pink and glitter, dreaming that Prince Charming would sweep me off my feet to take me on grand

adventures. Watching Taylor's music videos in my friend's basement, I clearly saw myself as Taylor's Juliet, dressed in a gorgeous ballroom gown. A handsome stranger (my Romeo) would approach me and ask for a dance. Even without the approval of my father, he wanted to be with me. He would defy all odds, throwing pebbles at my window until I came down to him. Our love story would be so simple. He would love me at first glance. and all I had to do was run to him.

My best friend and I believed in this narrative wholeheartedly. There was nothing to tell us otherwise. We were daydreaming little girls who would believe anything our idol wrote. After we got bored of watching the music video on a loop, we would blast Taylor Swift songs from the small computer speakers as we danced around with bedsheets draped around us like togas. There was nothing more exciting than the prospect of beautiful dresses and lifelong love. We never stopped listening to Taylor and she never let us down.

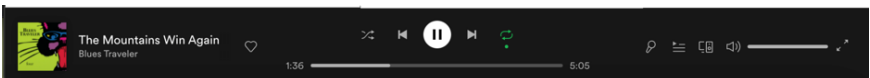


There is something exhilarating about being on stage. Terrifying, but the good kind of fear. The kind of fear that pushes you to be more. To do more. I danced competitively from fourth grade through eighth grade. I started dancing at age three but didn't get serious till much later. And when I eventually got serious, I got very serious. In fifth grade, I got to compete with my first solo dance. My coach chose a song I had never heard before, but on first hearing it, I loved it. It was a beautiful soul song that to this day makes my heart beat a little bit stronger.

Standing in the wings of a stage alone for the first time, I felt afraid. The type of nerves that start in your stomach and work their way into your mind. Numerous horrifying scenarios flashed through my mind: the music not working, my hair falling out, or forgetting the choreography. I knew that all I needed to do was to get started. Once the music started and I began moving, I knew it would all melt away. I would be alone on that stage completely the same, but radically changed. My fingers

twitched nervously over the hem of my costume. It was simple. Pastel pinks and oranges mixed in a spandex fabric that was cut high by the right hip but swooped low over my left leg. My mom found me a flower hair clip that matched perfectly and I wore it next to the tight ballerina bun that I found my hair in every weekend. I wore eyeliner and red lipstick like a grown-up. My tan dancer tights had various snags and flaws from rehearsals and my matching jazz shoes were rubbed through the bottom of the big toe.

The song ended and the other dancers exited to the sound of applause, and I slowly turned to face the stage. I had my back turned during the other girls' dance, as it was considered bad luck to watch the dancer directly before you. The emcee announced my name and song. I entered the stage and waited. Slowly the music filled the air and with it, I rose as well. I never grew up to be an extraordinary dancer. I didn't even finish with my studio, which has girls competing through high school. But with that first song, that first dance, that first solo moment on stage, I was happy. The type of exhilarating happiness that doesn't go away for hours. I was chasing a dream. A dream that didn't last a lifetime, but a dream nonetheless. A dream that lives on every time someone puts that record on.



It's my last dance.

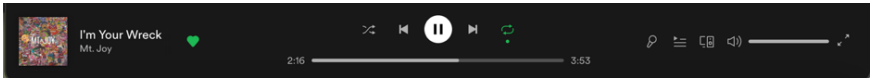
This was a decision that plagued me for months. There was nothing I loved more than dancing, but I was slowly being suffocated by the culture of my studio. Here's the thing, I don't look like a dancer. I'm not built like one and I unfortunately didn't have the natural ability that would compensate for my size. I'm by no means a large person. I never was. But dancers are small and petite. My size and lack of natural talent caused me to be consistently overlooked.. No matter how caring or honorable a coach is, the nature of dancing requires a certain type of discrimination that is especially cruel to little girls. Despite spending

over 25 hours a week at the studio, and coaching numerous competitive and noncompetitive classes, I simply wasn't good enough.

That fact was devastating at the time. I don't think much about it anymore. But before I quit, I had one last season. One last season full of shows, competitions, and one perfect solo. After my first solo, I had many more, but they never felt as real as that first time on stage. Part of that was because the music was always wrong. My dad found my solo song that year completely unintentionally. He and Mom were going through dusty boxes from the basement full of old CDs. We brought my CD player up to the kitchen and played song after song. Eventually, Dad found a vibrant green CD and played a song that felt like home.

Mom got excited immediately and begged me to use the song. I didn't really need convincing, but I was happy she loved the song as much as I did. I loved the creative process of choreographing a routine. That's practically all I did in my free time. So with this song, I decided I was going to choreograph my own routine. Mom fully supported my decision, and it made the dance even more special. I did everything by myself. I cut the music, created the movements, and chose my costume, hair, and makeup. From start to finish, this was my song. My dance. At the time, I don't think I realized that this dance was the beginning of the end. But it was a good beginning.

That year I was sad more than ever. I found it difficult to smile and the one place that had always been my refuge felt less and less like home. But I had that dance. When it finally came time to compete, that was the only song I was excited to perform. I stood with my back to the stage in the wings once more. I was nervous again, but it was a lazy, repetitive nervousness. I rubbed my skirt hem in between my fingers, since my hands still got twitchy when I was nervous. My costume was blue and glittery, but the skirt was an unintentional homage to my first costume. The skirt was cut up high on my right hip and swooped down low over my left leg. The previous dancer finished. I turned around as the emcee announced my song and name. It all flowed quickly, smoothly together, and then I was on the stage. The music started and I danced my last dance.



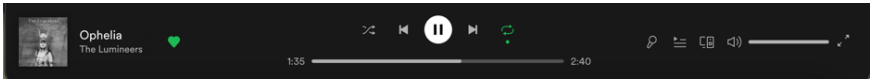
During my junior year of high school, something in me was broken. I'm not sure when or how or why, but for an entire year, living was hard. I went from being the most involved, motivated person of the entire school to barely being able to get up in the morning. I did. I got up in the morning and I hid how heavy my heart felt. I never hurt myself and I don't think I ever really wanted to, but there was something in my head that made living suffocating.

I'm introverted. I only talk to people I want to talk to. But that year I collapsed in on myself. I was nothing more than a shell with earbuds perpetually shoved in my ears. I didn't process my emotions for a long time, but I processed what I heard in the music. It was easier to hear other people's pain than live my own.

During that time, I thought a lot about a future I didn't think I'd see. I mourned all the adventures I thought I'd have by this time and the people I would never meet. I grew up on "coming-of-age" novels and movies. I truly believed that I would have a moment in high school that changed everything. A monumental one, maybe sad and a little traumatic, or perhaps a wild, exciting, and slightly illegal moment that would change me. A moment that would make me an adult. I waited for that moment. I read more books about that moment. But it didn't come. It never came. I was a wreck as I listened to the words,

Life's a bitch, I swallowed. No tears, no plans. Whatever happens, there's money in the mattress. And whatever happens, please remember all the laughter. Stitch it together kid, I know you know better. Take a real deep breath, now burn the letter.

Over and over and over again. The year passed slowly with lots of tears and long conversations. But it passed. And as it ebbed and flowed like a rising river, so did I.



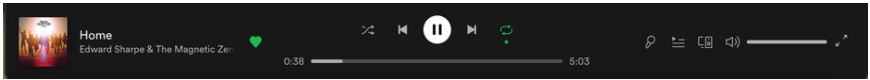
There's this scene in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* where Charlie, Sam, and Patrick are driving through a tunnel. Sam crawls into the back of the truck as Patrick drives and stands with her arms spread like wings as the wind whips around her. They all laugh together, and Charlie later recalls this moment saying, "And in that moment, I swear we were infinite." Ever since I read that moment, I wanted my own infinite feeling. I wanted to feel alive the way Charlie did that day.

I like driving, especially in the North Dakota spring. When the cold finally releases its brutal grip on the prairie and the sun warms the frozen ground, I feel the most alive. When I get in my car, roll down the windows, and drive fast down abandoned highways without a care in the world, my soul feels free. Junior year, my soul felt trapped. Constricted by an iron hand determined to suffocate me. But one unassuming day driving down a highway towards home, the feeling hit me.

The infinite feeling I'd been longing for. My windows were down, and my music was as loud as it could possibly be. I'd been stuck unable to feel, but all at once I couldn't feel anything small. For the first time in a while, I felt alive. Charlie's words came to me and brought tears to my eyes. There was no one to judge me as my eyes welled with tears or as they rolled down my face, but Charlie was in the passenger seat. He understood how I felt, and I didn't need to justify it to him. He was a good companion. Silent most of the time, but kind. I needed a little more kindness in my life. A little more understanding.

I wouldn't be brave enough to stand in the back of a moving pickup. I wasn't brave enough to do a lot of things in my life. I had concluded that my lack of courage was the reason I would never have an infinite moment. I had convinced myself that those moments were not meant for me. I was not special enough to have a moment worthy of a story. But Charlie didn't think he was, either. Infiniteness is not limited. By definition, it cannot be contained or made small. Driving down

that highway with windows rolled down on one of the first real days of spring, I was infinite. It was the first of many infinite moments.



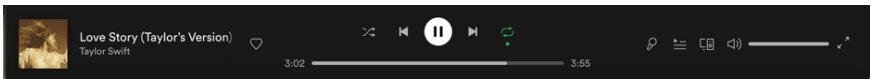
It wasn't until I met Solveigh, Catherine, and Marissa that I knew what having true friends felt like. Friends that always understood you. Friends who saw you as you were and felt like family. I had always switched friend groups, hopping from people I liked best to others I liked more. I never really had a group that was mine. Rather, I always found myself changing pieces of myself to fit the group of the moment. I didn't do this because I wanted to, but out of necessity. You need friends to survive school. I needed to change to have friends to survive school.

But with these girls, I didn't need to change. There was an understanding between us that no one else could ever quite grasp. We all had our own "official" groups, spending most of our junior and senior years with each other. Then we graduated, ending the grand adventure of high school. But our time together wasn't finished. Over the summer we spent most of our time getting burritos, driving in Catherine's car, and switching the AUX between *Hamilton* the musical and the band Queen. We were all going to different schools in the fall, and we wanted to go on one last trip together before we parted ways.

We graduated in May of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent quarantine. It's safe to say our options for travel were very limited, but we eventually decided on a weekend camping trip to Medora, North Dakota. We found a weekend that worked for everyone, borrowed a tent from Solveigh's parents (which she has informed me is now in a dumpster in Montana) and a cooler. We bought hot dogs and sparkling water, packed everything into Marissa's mom's truck, then set off down the interstate. We had no other plans than to go hiking and be the loud, obnoxious, almost-college students these tourist towns are used to in the summertime.

Before we could do that, we were driving down the interstate,

never going below ninety (Marissa had a habit of driving a minimum of ten miles over the speed limit), and I was playing various song requests from the shotgun seat. We were on the verge of adulthood, excited about the future, and already sweating from the North Dakotan summer heat. Every coming-of-age movie I've watched has this scene: the friends are driving down a highway, the windows are rolled down, the wind is whipping their hair all around their faces, and the perfect song is playing as they laugh in the face of an ambiguous nothingness labeled "The Future." Charlie called that feeling infinite. I spent my entire life waiting for it. With these girls, I found it and it was as perfect as all my books led me to believe.



In February of 2021, Taylor Swift started hinting about an upcoming project with her old music. Previously, in 2018, her contract with Big Machine Records expired and her feud with Scooter Braun started. She complained of being bullied, mistreated; she complained about the inability to present and record her music the way she wanted too, specifically being able to own and profit off her music. After this ordeal, she switched to Republic Records, where she secured rights to all future masters. In 2020, because of COVID-19, she put her touring dates on hold and found herself in the perfect position to rerecord her music and even create two new albums.

On April 9, 2021, Taylor Swift released *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*. But not just the original *Fearless* songs. This album was filled with vaulted songs Big Machine Records wouldn't record and many new guest singers who brought their own sound and expertise to her music. This decision to rerecord music (she has also released her rerecorded *Red* album at this point) was highly symbolic for her and just as meaningful for her audience.

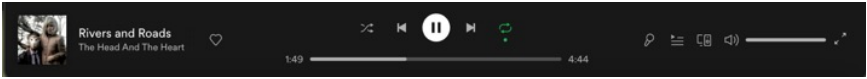
Taylor and I grew up together. As she faced the media, petty adults, and disappointing relationships, I was there ,along with millions

of other people watching. I remember her winning her first Grammy. I remember Kanye West belittling her as she won the VMA's award for best music video by a female artist. I remember the social media taunts about her dating too many guys. I remember it all, but most importantly I remember her grace, wit, and resilience during every step of her career.

Taylor's Version is a reclaiming of the story. Not just for her, but for her audience ,as well. I was embarrassed to love her as much as I did when I was younger. People told me she was dumb and I was a prissy little girl for liking her music. But I never stopped liking it, because her music was my childhood's story. The heartbreak, happiness, and hope. All of it. *Fearless* came out when I was six years old. *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* came out when I was nineteen years old. *Taylor's Version* is growth. Her growth and mine. People spent years trying to tell me what to feel and how to act. More people screamed at her as she came of age in an industry that is terrified of vibrant, successful young women.

After the release of *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, I watched the music video for "Love Story" once again, because that was my favorite song of Swift's for the majority of my childhood. In watching it again, I realized Romeo and Juliet are overrated. They were young, irresponsible, and running from things they didn't understand. Their own rashness and their families' hatred got two vibrant, young people killed. It is not the love story of everyone's dreams. I'm sure Shakespeare is shaking his head at the way his work is portrayed in pop culture. Romeo is not a hero. Juliet only chose him out of fear of someone worse. Women don't need Romeo. They don't need Prince Charming. But now Juliet is wearing Romeo's shirt. Juliet is saving herself. Juliet loves herself in the way that Romeo never could.

Taylor's story is one of self-discovery and love. I hope mine is too.

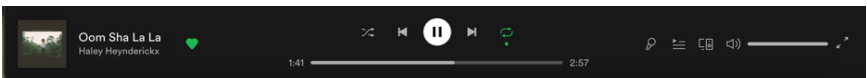


I used to think that the idea of “home” being a person was stupid. Then I moved away from home, both the place and the people.

I loved college from the moment I set foot on campus, but I also had never felt so lonely. My family lived in different states and I had never been more proud of them, but it made my chest ache to be away from them. Two months before, we had all been in Medora, but now I was alone. I have never been particularly good at making friends, and the restrictions caused by the pandemic were not helping at all. On top of all of that, I just wanted to tell my best friends about my day. But we all had busy days, and lots of homework and work to do. There was no time to talk, except to send crazy occurrences and jokes into a group chat.

But whenever the ache got too strong, whenever it felt like we were too alone, someone would always send one song into the chat. It was the same song over and over again. There were rivers and roads and hills and trees and mountains and plains and miles... miles... miles between us. But we were not alone. Despite the physical distance, the emotional distance was minuscule. I knew that my found family would spend the rest of their lives cheering me on and I would be just as endlessly proud of them.

There’s nothing more crushing than loneliness. Nothing makes my chest ache more than missing my family. But there’s a safety, unity, and comfort in sharing a song. The pinging of my phone bringing me the gift of a repeatedly shared song quickly became my favorite comfort. Though there were miles between us we were never really apart.



I've barely been to college, but I'm looking towards tomorrow.

I think I killed the plant my best friend bought me. I didn't mean to. I really loved that plant. But my room is dark in this house and there is no place for sun. This town is dark and cold all the time. I miss the sun and the gardens of my youth. But I will continue looking towards tomorrow. I will grow and I will trust. Yesterday is safe and I can always find it in the music, but tomorrow is exciting. I'm sick of letting the mold grow in my lungs and infest my mind.

I've barely been to college. I am only 20 years old. There is so much to discover and learn and fall in love with. Tomorrow, I will plant a garden. I will save the plant my best friend bought me. Life will go on. My days will be filled with infinite moments. It will be worthy of writing about even if it's only written about in my own journals. I'm coming of age in my own time. I'm not a character, an idea, or a two-dimensional being that ceases to exist at the end of the story. I am. And being is the most beautiful state to exist in.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Bruner, Raisa. "Why Is Taylor Swift Re-Rerecording Her Old Albums?" *Time*, Time, 25 Mar. 2021, <https://time.com/5949979/why-taylor-swift-is-rerecording-old-albums/>.
- Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Gallery Books, New York, NY, 1999, pp. 33–39.
- Swift, Taylor. *Taylor Swift—Love Story*. YouTube, YouTube, 16 June 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xg3vE8le_E. Accessed 25 Feb. 2022.
- Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *The Norton Anthology: American Literature Beginnings to 1865*, edited by Robert S. Levine, Ninth ed., Norton, New York, NY, 2017, p. 1132.

Aubrey Roemmich is currently an undergraduate student at the University of North Dakota. After her graduation, she hopes to get an MFA in creative writing. She spends her free time reading, writing, and listening to music.