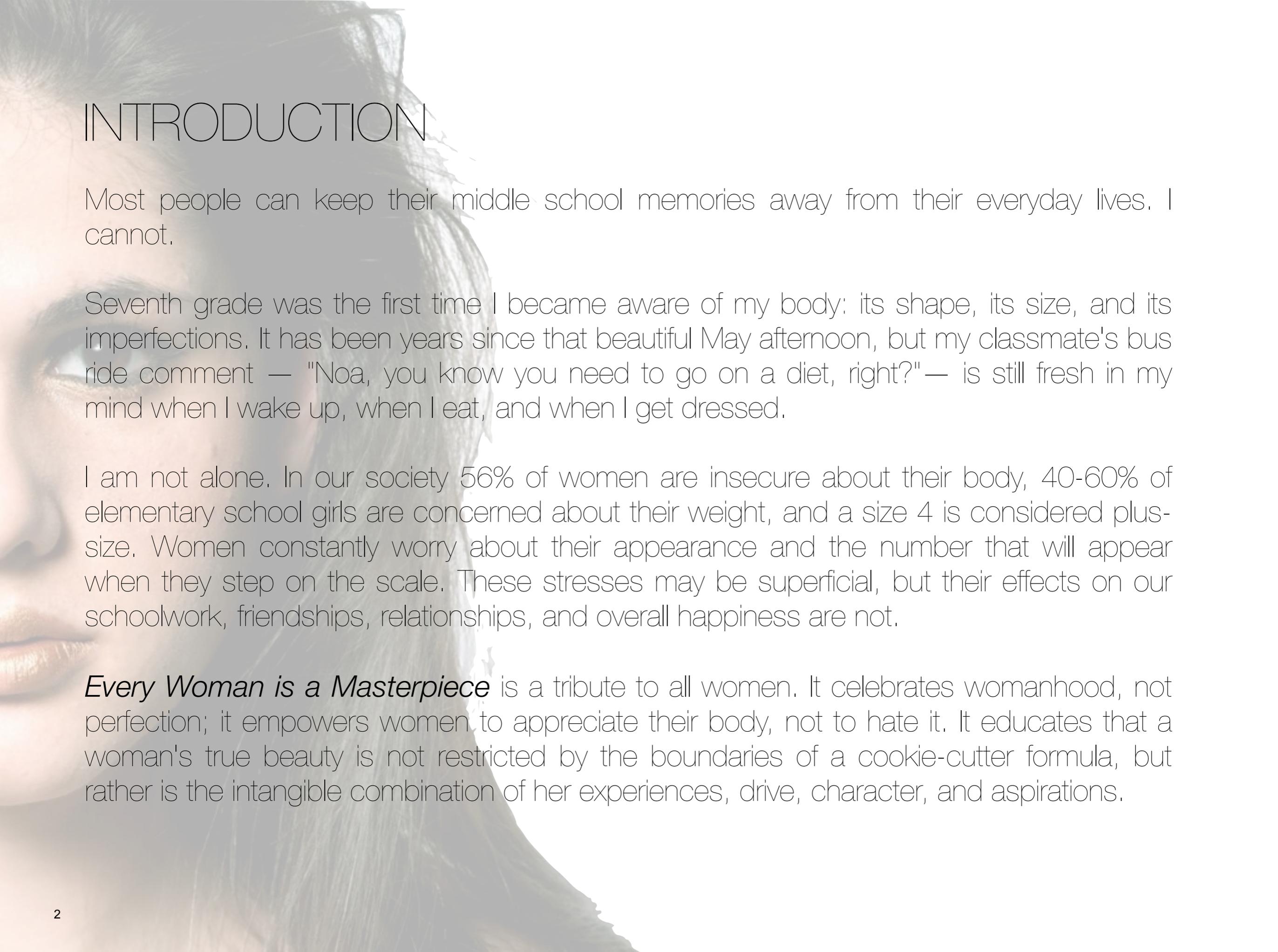




every woman is a  
MASTERPIECE

NOA GHERSIN



# INTRODUCTION

Most people can keep their middle school memories away from their everyday lives. I cannot.

Seventh grade was the first time I became aware of my body: its shape, its size, and its imperfections. It has been years since that beautiful May afternoon, but my classmate's bus ride comment — "Noa, you know you need to go on a diet, right?" — is still fresh in my mind when I wake up, when I eat, and when I get dressed.

I am not alone. In our society 56% of women are insecure about their body, 40-60% of elementary school girls are concerned about their weight, and a size 4 is considered plus-size. Women constantly worry about their appearance and the number that will appear when they step on the scale. These stresses may be superficial, but their effects on our schoolwork, friendships, relationships, and overall happiness are not.

***Every Woman is a Masterpiece*** is a tribute to all women. It celebrates womanhood, not perfection; it empowers women to appreciate their body, not to hate it. It educates that a woman's true beauty is not restricted by the boundaries of a cookie-cutter formula, but rather is the intangible combination of her experiences, drive, character, and aspirations.

Quality art is art that evokes emotion, not necessarily that which is the most 'beautiful'. I want to provide society with a lens through which it can view women the same way it views quality art: a lens with which it may see women not for their aesthetics, but for their qualities.

To execute this project, I spoke with women to learn more about their lives, insecurities, aspirations, and goals. I specifically chose to focus on women at MIT, not only because I am an MIT woman myself, but also because I wanted to study the implications of MIT women's traditionally 'masculine' academic interests. I then took the information they gave me and used it to create an abstract piece of art that, to me, captured their essence. Finally, I took the art and added dimension by translating it on to a body part of their choice and photographing it. By choosing to zoom in on a particular area of the woman's body and overlaying a portrait of her personality, I lost the physical whole, but gained an interwoven image of body and personality.

These are eleven of the 2,041 undergraduate women at MIT. They are driven, inspirational, strong, and real. They are each a *masterpiece*.

What is your favorite body part?

When did you feel the most **beautiful**?

When did you feel **vulnerable** about your body?

What is your greatest accomplishment?

When did you feel the most POWERFUL?

What *motivates* you?

What is your aspiration in life?

What is your perception of women at MIT?

# KRISTEN

Is 5'4.5" tall and weighs 180 lbs. She has brown hair and brown eyes. She is African American, and she is okay with that.

...but you still don't know the first thing about her.



NO<sub>6</sub>APOLOGY

I don't think I have a least favorite body part. Where I grew up there was a lot of racism. I got a lot of shit for my skin tone... [for] something I can't change. That's the only thing I have ever been insecure about— growing in the South being African American. Now [when] I go home I don't care about it anymore. Beautiful is feeling good about yourself, no matter what other people think. I think I'm beautiful and fuck what other people think. You cannot impress everyone, and being happy with myself is more important than someone saying to me 'wow, you're pretty'. The average weight for someone my height is 140 lbs. **I think I'd look scary if I were that skinny.** I like the way that my body looks now. Getting into MIT is the biggest accomplishment that I've made. Another friend [and I] were the only two people [out of a class of five hundred] to go to schools outside of the South. **People used to tell me I got in because I am African American.** I haven't really felt super powerful recently. I am in control of my actions but that's not something that makes me feel powerful. The idea that I have a degree from MIT—that's so powerful. If I can do this, I can do anything. Women at MIT are badassess. MIT is a very open place, but at the same time there is still sexism. When you see a woman in science it's frightening and different, so guys treat you differently. [During a fraternity party], a guy came up to [me] and [said] 'that's so weird, **you are too pretty to go to MIT**'. I think that's the most offensive thing [I've heard]. For being such an open place, why would you think only ugly girls go to MIT? That logic really upsets me. There is being pretty or smart. There is no in between and no overlap. That is the only logic, and it is not even logical. There is always going to be that thought— she is pretty, so she is stupid'. I don't think guys say it to be malicious. I think it's something that maybe they don't realize they are doing. Taking care of my parents is something that I would like to do whenever I am able to. They have given me so much and I'd like to give back to them. In the longer term the thing that motivates me is wanting to help people. Pharmacy is a great way to help people and that's what I want to go into.

# LAURA

Is 5'6" tall. She has long straight black hair and brown eyes. Her ring size is 7.5 and her shoe size is 8.

...but you still don't know the first thing about her.

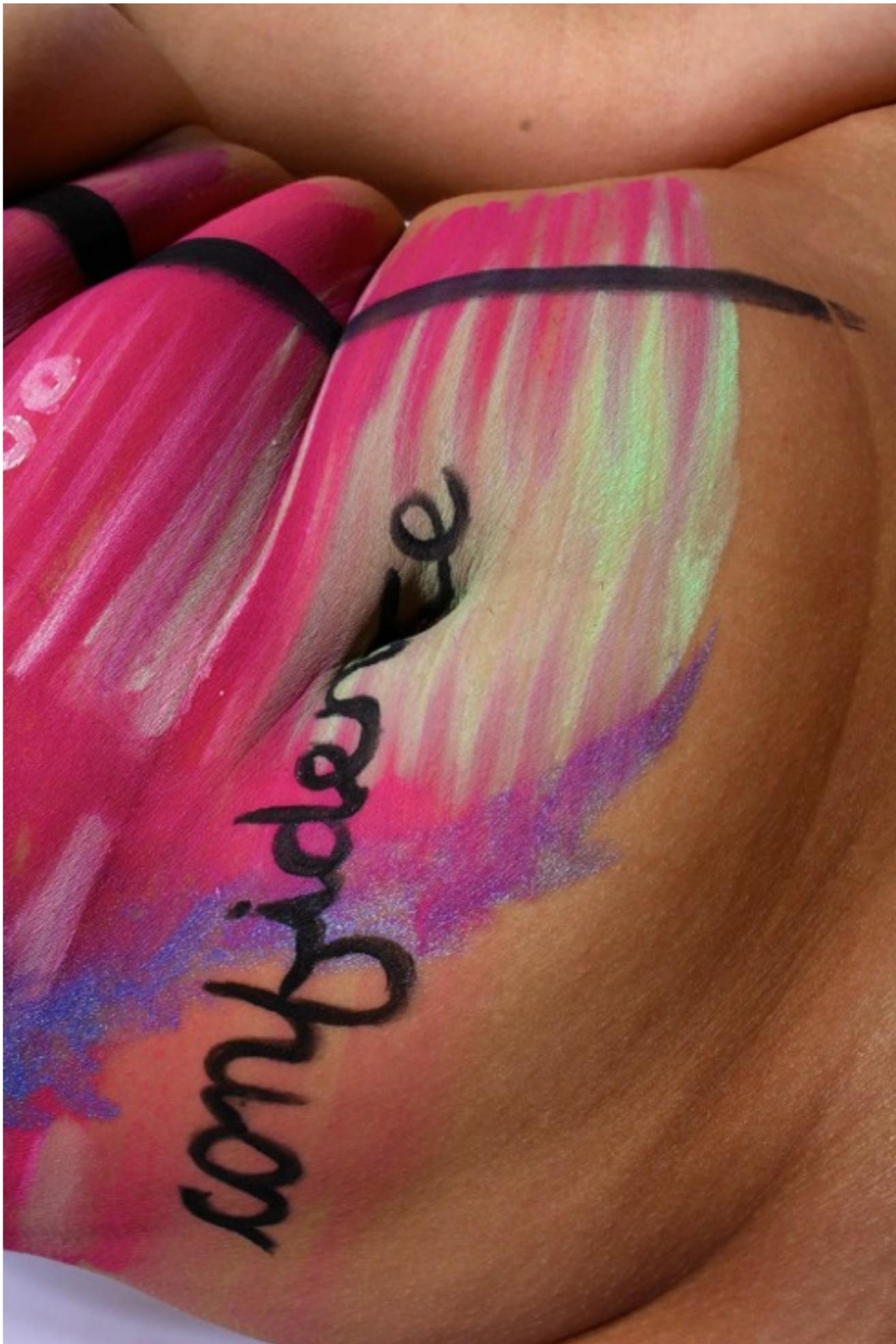


[My favorite body part is my] legs. It's the way you move around, they can be strong but also look hot when you're wearing heels. [My least favorite body part is] the stomach. There is a little more something-something there than I would like. I can usually tell my mood from my eyes. [I felt most beautiful] at the last navy ball. It was my comeback [after] all the crazy med-course stuff that was going on. [What motivates me] is knowing what I want and finding out how to get [it]. Obviously there were times when I said 'fuck it, I'll be a pilot', but **I had the foresight to realize that was a moment of struggle.** You can only get so much about yourself from other people. I read to see different perspectives; there is always some sort of emotional connection that you feel, and realize you find some of it in you. My greatest accomplishment is getting through this fucking place. Finding the balance, taking advantage of the experience. **Finding the personal connection with people who are similar but also very different from you.** I felt personally powerful when I was Commander of ROTC, not just because of the title, but because of the responsibility and the trust. [I want to] be a doctor and do research—being able to do the two sides of the same coin. Doctors really need to step up and find ways to make better policy; right now that is really lacking. Within MIT, women are more reserved, but **in the context of the world they are a lot more confident than other women.** Within MIT, it's tough. [Males at MIT] view females as equals. There is always the joke "BU girls to bed, Wellesley girls to wed, MIT girls to talk to". I think there is that underlying assumption that MIT girls are less attractive. **Maybe it's because we are supposed to be the nerdier kids.**

# CHYLEIGH

Is 5'10" tall. She has blue eyes, fair skin, and hair that is blonde in the front and dark brown in the back. Her shoe size is 12 and her dress size is 10.

...but you still don't know the first thing about her.



I really like my hair because I have gone through a lot of phases and finally settled on my natural color and style. It says a lot about who I am and my background; you can see I'm of African American heritage. **And it's big, like me.** I'm very comfortable with my body, so I don't know if I have a least favorite body part. In high school I was probably the fattest person in my graduating class, and I had a lot of insecurities because of that. I became more comfortable with my body when I came to college. I stopped caring about what other people thought. I particularly [feel beautiful] when people compliment me when I haven't done anything special. [When I look in the mirror, the first thing I see is] these weird lines in my stomach. At first I [thought] it's because I'm fat but even when I lost weight they were still there, so I realized I'm never getting rid of them. Now I just notice them [and think] **"oh, they're there, cool"**. [My motivation comes from] my family, my friends, and my desire to do something I've wanted to do since I was little. I want to be a doctor but I also want to be a mom; I have no idea how it's going to work out, but so many people do it and make it work. Graduating from MIT is a very big thing for me. When I was in high school I didn't know what MIT was until the beginning of my senior year. I didn't realize until after I got in how big of a deal it was. I feel most powerful when I've done something well. [It makes me think that] I can do anything. Finishing a task, knowing that I did the best that I could, and having it completed makes me feel powerful. I used to ski race, and with MIT I did not do very well. But **even [when] I would come in 30<sup>th</sup> I would still feel powerful.** That's the best that I could have done. I'm not the best skier here. [Women at MIT] are not underrepresented, but people propagate ideas that women are not as capable; [for example], girls don't get trusted to use machines. I think it's common and unfortunate. People who have these ideas are older. As times are changing, I think these mentalities will change as well. No women here are unattractive. I'm very appreciative of human bodies and people in general, and I want other people to experience that as well. I don't think you can define ['beauty'] as being this size or that hair color. The biggest thing about being beautiful is being self-confident, **being comfortable in your own skin.**

# SARAH

Is 5'6" tall. She has brown eyes, brown hair, white skin, and her ring finger is 5.5. According to her, she has the features of an 'average person'.

...but you still don't know the first thing about her.



[My least favorite body part is] my nose because I feel like [it] has **a giant ball at the end**. I don't like looking at mirrors unless I have to; It makes me feel uncomfortable. I love putting makeup on, even though I don't really know how to do it. [I feel vulnerable about my body] a lot of the time. Even just walking around, I feel self-conscious; I don't like the attention. [When people compliment my looks] I laugh and then say thank you. **I think it's comical**. My mom is the first person in her family to go to college, [and] my dad was the only one of his siblings to finish college. They raised me to have pride in myself and what I'm doing and not settle on anything less. It's really weird for me to be here; **My grandparents don't know what MIT is**. On paper, [my greatest accomplishment] would probably be being here. [But] my goal in life is to be a good person; be the best friend I can be to people. I'm clearly smart, even though I feel stupid a lot of the time. I have to work very hard to be average sometimes. But I'm okay with that. Fifty percent of [women] who go into engineering end up leaving it, because the field is male-dominated. I am one of four girls in [my electrical engineering] classes sometimes. If I mess up [my research advisor] gets really upset with me, [whereas] if the male student fucks up, [my advisor] is just a little nicer to me. It's interesting to see how he treats us differently. [I never thought of saying something] because I don't think it would change anything. When I came here, I thought I have to speak nicely and very quietly, and now I just don't give a fuck. **I have thrown out all gender stigmas of how a girl should act**. I talked [the way I am speaking now] at a conference last week; people responded. I hold women at MIT to a different standard, since they are so academically driven. Some people leave here and become stay-at-home moms. I think that's really weird, but I don't know why I feel that way, and there is nothing wrong with wanting that. Some guys go after the Wellesley and the Northeastern, and 'the other girls'. Maybe they don't voice their opinions that much? I think MIT girls I really fucking cool, I don't get it. **If I were a dude, I would date an MIT girl**, I don't know why you would go to another university and date someone else. I want to be near my family, but I'm also really concerned about going back home. How do real people make friends?

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