

## **Hed: Apologies**

**By Ada Fiala**

### **High School Essay Winner**

“Don’t dance like you’re apologizing to the audience”—a direction I’ve heard countless times from my ballet teacher. She follows it up with: “We want to see you dance, so just dance. Have fun. What are you apologizing for?” I want to tell her it’s for so many things. For being terrible. For believing I belong onstage. For forcing people to sit through the atrocity that is my dancing. I can’t say that when I perform, so instead I withdraw into myself and stare at the floor and make my movements smaller. By taking up as little space as possible, I can tell the audience that I know how bad they must think I am.

We apologize in small ways like that so often. We make self-deprecating jokes as if to say, “Sorry, I know I suck.” We follow up giving someone a present with, “You can exchange it if you want.” And I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard kids at school say, “This is probably a stupid question, but...” We apologize again and again. But when we say “I’m sorry” for every little thing we do and every little thing we are, what it really starts to sound like is, “I’m sorry for existing.”

To cope with this existence we build shells around ourselves with our own self-hatred. We say bad things about ourselves to beat others to the punch; you can’t hurt me if I’ve already hurt myself. But what I’ve come to realize is that hearing bad things from yourself hurts just as much, and that shell that blocks people’s criticism also blocks their affection. So this year I decided to stop apologizing for my dancing.

I got a solo in *The Nutcracker* and I was mortified. People would have to watch me dance. What could be worse than that? My dancing showcased my embarrassment. During rehearsals, I was told to dance bigger and more confidently, but I couldn’t. The more I “apologized,” the more I felt the need to apologize. I was miserable, so one rehearsal I thought, *What if, just for today, I stop worrying about what other people think? I’ll take up as much space as I want and I’ll dance like someone who has all the confidence I lack.* I let the tension out of my shoulders, I pried my gaze off of the floor, and I went for it.

And it felt good.

It felt fun. I realized fun was something that’d been missing.

So I took that mindset with me all the way to the performances. I proudly danced without restraint. And maybe the audiences hated my dancing. Maybe they laughed about me afterward. But I don’t care, because for the first time I allowed myself to let my guard down and find joy in what I was doing. I let myself accomplish something I felt good about, never mind

what other people thought. And in doing this, I apologized to the one person who needed it most: myself.