

THE OXFORD HANGOVER

By Jessica Thomson

"Why aren't you working?" said the voice in the back of my head.

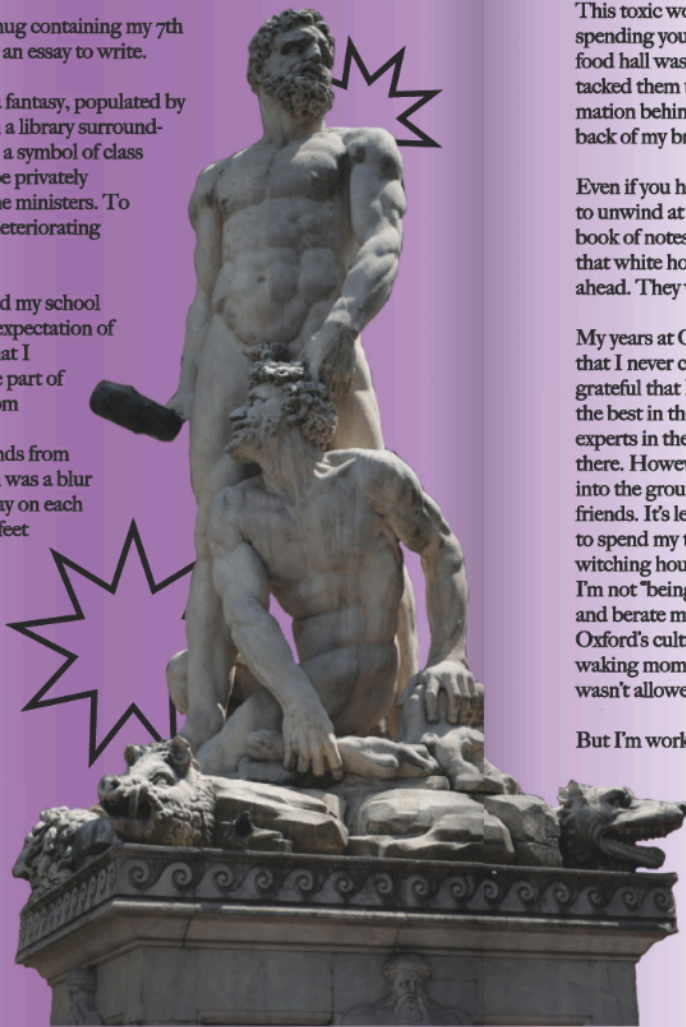
I slammed my forehead against the desk, nearly knocking over the mug containing my 7th cup of tea of the day so far. It was 11pm on a Tuesday, and I still had an essay to write.

Oxford University is idolised by many as an aesthetic dark academia fantasy, populated by intellectuals with perfect hair and expensive trench coats working in a library surrounded by thousands of books from the annals of history. Others see it as a symbol of class disparity—of the conservative elite whose parents paid for them to be privately educated and jettisoned into the ranks of royalty, celebrity, and prime ministers. To me, however, it mostly represents a period of burn-out and rapidly deteriorating mental health.

I went to a small state school in Cornwall. I was lucky enough to find my school work easy, and I started to inch my way to the top of the class. The expectation of high grades from myself and others made me obsess over the idea that I couldn't let myself be anything less than the absolute best. It became part of my identity. On a rainy day in January, I got my acceptance letter from Oxford in the post, and I cried for an hour.

University couldn't have been more different from school. I had friends from every corner of the country, every corner of the world. Our first term was a blur of poorly mixed vodka cocktails and hangovers spent eating takeaway on each other's bedroom floors. After a few months of struggling to find my feet like a baby deer—and figuring out how to write a 2000 word essay every week—I started to realise that everyone there was just a bit too much like me: used to people telling us we were the best, and suddenly realising that we weren't anymore.

At Oxford, there was a thick atmosphere of competition that pervaded every conversation about our degree work. It wasn't necessarily about competing for the best grades; most of us weren't anywhere near the levels of the demigods and -goddesses leading the year. We had all gone from finding our work easy to struggling to keep our heads above water. So instead, the competition focussed around the one thing we could control and use as a proxy for how "well" we were doing: how hard and fast we could grind ourselves into dust.



"I didn't leave the library until 2am last night," someone would say at lunch.

"Oh yeah? I haven't even been to sleep yet," would come the reply from the girl sitting opposite, bags under her eyes like ripe plums.

"I did an all-nighter finishing my essay for this afternoon."

Someone else might roll their eyes and proffer, "Well, I went out to Bridge last night, got back at 3am, finished my problem sheet for my tute, went straight to the river for rowing practise at 6am, then sprinted to my lectures. I have a lab this afternoon and another problem sheet to do, so I probably won't get any sleep until Saturday at this rate."

The others would look impressed, flashing a strained smile, smothering the boiling emotion rising in their throats. Was it envy? Guilt?

In an environment where students are put under more pressure than ever before, one where they're unsure how to access the mental health services they need, students haggardly stumble along in a race to treat themselves the most like shit. This toxic work culture rears its ugly head every minute of the day that you're not spending your time productively. Students writing notes over their dinner in the food hall was a common sight, and my neighbour laminated her physics notes and tacked them up in the shower so as to not waste a single second not stuffing information behind her eyes. I would cry myself to sleep, bone tired, but a voice in the back of my brain would still scream that I was a waste of space if I didn't carry on.

Even if you had spent 12 hours working that day and attempted to have some time to unwind at 10pm, you might see an Instagram story from a coursemate of an open book of notes and a cup of coffee captioned "endless grind" or something and feel that white hot flash of guilt that you weren't doing the same. They were getting ahead. They were working harder than you. They were better.

My years at Oxford are a treasured memory of great friends and unique experiences that I never could have dreamed of sitting in my Science class in Cornwall. I'm truly grateful that I had the opportunity to go to a university that many deem to be one of the best in the world. I gained a great many skills and learnt from people who were experts in their fields, and I know that I'm so privileged to have gotten my degree there. However, I have to admit that the culture of overworking and beating oneself into the ground was incredibly unhealthy, at least for me and an awful lot of my friends. It's left its grubby fingerprints all over my brain, changing the way I am able to spend my time. Even now, years after graduating and getting a 9 to 5 job, in the witching hours of a Sunday evening, I'll spiral—pacing, restless and stressed that I'm not "being productive enough." I'll see other's accomplishments on social media and berate myself instantly for not working as hard as them. My hangover from Oxford's culture of work is that I just can't relax. I can't shake the feeling that every waking moment has to be spent working, learning, pushing. I was taught that I wasn't allowed to switch off.

But I'm working on it.



Based in London, Jess is a big fan of carb-based foods, cosy jumpers and small dogs. She has words in *Era Magazine*, *The Demented Goddess*, *Aurelia Magazine*, *Potluck*, and various other publications. You can find her on Twitter at [@thomsonjessie](#) and on Instagram at [@jessicathomson](#).