

Detours

By

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For my parents and Allison. Thank you.

Detours

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Detours

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Thesis Title

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## Detours

I am a woman in need of a plan. Short term. Long term. Contingency. Education. Professional. Marriage. Birth. Parenting. There is always a plan. When I was nineteen, I learned that the plan is kind of a joke. Possibly a cosmic joke in which I am the punchline and God laughs. Plans are about control and, as my father likes to say, “control is an illusion.” He is in on the joke. So, in addition to the aforementioned plan, I have control issues. When plans and life collide, as they always do, and the illusion is shattered, as it always is, one can sit amid the shrapnel and pine for what could have been, or one can get up and take a detour from the plan. I have never been one for sitting amid the shrapnel. I stand up, shake off the ashes, and make a new plan. I am determined to reach my destination and to enjoy the scenic route. Here is a critical and creative map of my journey. Detours and all.

Graduate school was always one of my dreams, and I decided, post-divorce, to revisit that goal. While I had planned to focus on early Modernism, it turned out that writing is my passion. I love literature. I never considered myself a critic of literature as much I considered myself a student of literature and I certainly never considered myself an author. I sat, uncomfortable and unhappy in the first session of Modern American Poetry, trying to digest the fact that we had to write poetry. I was more than a little trepidatious because the last poem I wrote was in eleventh grade. I read poetry. When I teach poetry, I always have one or two future engineers who hate it. They want everything to have a formula and one correct answer. I love that verse does not always fit into a formula and that there is rarely one correct interpretation.

The very thing I love about reading and studying poetry is the thing that terrified me about writing it. If there is no formula and no correct answer, how can I possibly get it right? I studied a wide array of writing in the process of earning my BA in English and teaching and I

felt as if only certain people were gifted with the ability to write good poetry, but here I was, trying. However, later that week I stared at the blank screen of my computer, stomach churning, as I considered attempting to write poetry that other people would read. We were supposed to write centos, incorporating our own ideas with the words of poets we read in class. Finally, I thought, just type something and get the grade, but as I began to work, it felt like some puzzle piece inside me almost audibly clicked into place. Words just poured out of me in a brand-new way. I stumbled into poetry and found a home.

I did not, and still do not, think there is anything unique about my story, but I desperately needed a way to process and document it, to find the ways in which my experience fits into larger narratives. As Cary Nelson says in the preface of *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, “Lived time without poems is impoverished time” (xxxix). Poetry enriches our lives. It simplifies and complicates at the same time, because most poetry is image driven, which can create a visceral expression of self. I did not realize that something was missing until I began to write and discovered my voice. In some ways, the structure of the cento provided a safety net for me, as a new poet. I did not have to create new lines of verse, so much as I had to weave existing lines together to create something new, much less daunting than writing a completely original poem. It was also challenging because I had to work with the words I was given, which can feel restrictive. The challenge of the cento helped me to respect the craft of poetry and allowed me to step into poetry and address gender, the body, race, parenting, marriage, politics, divorce, and death. Through verse, I am able to explore my own conflicting ideas about all of these topics. I have the freedom, in a way that I have not found in other formats, to express my feelings and thoughts in their own rawness.

Having been raised in a fairly conservative environment, there are topics that I never felt comfortable addressing. Writing has enabled me to investigate my life and my perceptions in a way that feels oddly safe and scary at the same time, and it has become a place to process all of the detours, as I began to form a new plan, incorporating the study of, and creation of, literature, poetry, and rhetoric, which have all combined to create this work.

## Section 1 – Rhetoric of Race and Identity

## Sit Your White Ass Down:

## A Story of White Privilege, With a Discussion of Colorism and Some Poetry

## Ancestry.com

*But you must be something.* A month ago, I spat into a small clear plastic vial that promised to unlock the secrets of my heritage. My friend stares at the results on the screen then at my face. Screen. Face. Confusion echoes in her dark eyes. *I mean, I'm looking at you. Your nose. Your cheekbones.* I have my great grandmother's cheekbones and her straight thick hair, though mine isn't coal black. I do not have her deep tan, her brown eyes, or her denial. Ancestry.com says that I am bright white. Stunningly white. British, Scottish, Irish. White. Freckles and Sunburns and I should never go outside during the day, white. Ancestry.com makes mistakes and it is possible that they did so this time. My great grandmother of the high cheekbones always denied the stories of my heritage that return to slip around my brain as my friend whispers again, *But you must be something.* I am something. I am a Daughter of the Revolution and of the Union and a many great granddaughter of Charlemagne. My DNA carries colonization from its very inception. I am the descendent of systematic oppression and privilege. I am not guilty but I am complicit. A piece of the broken educational system that implicitly favors those who look like me. A cog that never learned properly how to spin. I am trying to be an ally. A woman who is white; not a white woman. I am staring at a screen trying to decide if the part of me that always understood that there was a connection to the land and a language, the secret strain of indigenous me that hides in my cheekbones, might have lied. Or maybe it was erased by the other me. The one created by Ancestry.

I was fifteen the first time I realized that I have a white ass. Up until that moment, it had just been an “ass,” or more in line with my fifteen-year-old self, a “butt.” It had never occurred to me to notice what color my ass was or that it was a color at all. In my day to day life, I never considered my race. If I had known of Peggy McIntosh’s *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, I could have ticked off most of the statements. I was never asked to represent my race. I never worried about finding appropriate hair products or people who could work with my hair. I never worried that I might be in danger if the police stopped me for a routine traffic stop. Other than wishing I had a better tan, I never looked in the mirror and thought about my skin tone (2).

That night, at a basketball game, we were cheering for the girls’ basketball team when an African American guy I had known for years started yelling profanities and other inappropriate things at the referees and the team. I, being the bossy control freak that I am, turned around and told him to be nice or be quiet. He responded with, “Sit your white ass down.” In my wisdom, I responded with, “Or, what?” His eyes widened, and he sat down. I felt big, until I turned around and realized that my older brother and the entire boys’ basketball team had been on their way to the locker room, when they saw that my mouth was about to get me in trouble, and lined up behind me, waiting to see what Jeff would do. So, I sat my white ass down. It never occurred to me that he would actually hit me. I was privileged to be in a place where I felt safe. Now I wonder about his experience in that moment. In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks explains that, “practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed” (58). It never occurred to me that it could be dangerous for him to express his frustration or anger in that moment, at least not because he was a person of color, and



I am white. He was faced with fourteen seniors, all out to protect me. I had known those boys most of my life. They were in and out of our house and as the little sister, I had attended class parties, plays, birthday parties, and various sports games, since I was in kindergarten. I like to think that they would have stepped in because he was bigger and stronger and I had made a poor choice, or because they were good friends with my brother. But I now realize that this incident was racialized. The fact that it took almost thirty years for me to recognize the racial tension present is an indication of my own privilege and a sign of how protected I was and continue to be. This incident is reminiscent of Amanda Seales' argument in her HBO special *I Be Knowin* that, "The entire world has been taught to protect white women and women who happen to be white, even at the threat of death" (00.29.20-00.32.10). Seales argues that everyone is supposed to protect white women, not just physically, but emotionally as well. Multiple systems work to protect white women for a variety of reasons I will examine later. I was shocked at this assertion, as I had never been confronted with it before, another indication of my privilege. Systemic racism and white men have enforced the idea that white women are fragile and must be protected, to the extreme that this concept is ingrained in communities of color. This protection of white women has been upheld by white patriarchy, which created the idea of the animalized black man, maintains hooks, "At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling" (60). Using this image, white patriarchy justifies violence, especially against men of color, to protect white women— not out of respect for the women, but to maintain the purity of whiteness and to protect their own power base.

One stark example of this flawed rush to rescue white women is the tragic story of Emmet Till, a fourteen-year-old who was brutally murdered, in 1955, for allegedly whistling at a

white woman. As Shawn Michelle Smith writes in *The Afterimages of Emmet Till*, “Till’s lynching marks a high note of white anxiety about the dissolution of racial boundaries, expressed as fear over the crossing of sexual boundaries” (24). The fear that men of color would somehow corrupt white women, and any children they might carry, so threatened the white patriarchy that Till’s confessed murderers were exonerated by an equally white male jury. This fear, and its contributions to systemic racism, lend to the consistent representation of men of color as violent predators hunting innocent white women. Jean McMahon writes that, “The need to protect white women from racial minority men has long been used as a pretext for violence. During Reconstruction, an estimated 10,000 African Americans were killed by white mobs. News reports and lynching apologists alike cited the need to avenge supposed attacks on white women and children” (593). The supposed purity and vulnerability of white women, simply because they are white, is one excuse that white men have used to slaughter people of color for generations. The real purpose of this protective structure is not to protect fragile white women. It is to make sure that their children are white and to continue the regime of racism while protecting their own positions of power and the structures of systemic whiteness and white supremacy. Just as with Till, the white patriarchy manufactures attacks by so-called “animalized” men of color on white women and children to guard their bloodlines and protect the ideal of the white Madonna who can be defiled by a simple public interaction with a person of color (Godfrey 210). White women become symbols of power and purity, to be controlled by the white patriarchy, not because they have any intrinsic value but because, they are the only means of maintaining the system, by having white male children. Men of color are presented as dangerous animals who stalk vulnerable white women who cannot protect themselves. Since the Victorian period, white women have been expected, not just to maintain their own purity, but to act as a purifying,

angelic, calming influence on the men in their lives, to be an “Angel in the Household” as befits the “Cult of True Womanhood.” Nancy F. Cott explains in *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, that white middle and upper middle-class women were supposed to be physically and spiritually pure, even Godly, as white men needed them to balance the sinful ugliness of the outside world these men endured or even enacted. In fact, this domestic sphere was another way to for the patriarchy to control the behaviors of white women and to protect the purity of whiteness. Requiring white women to stay home in the domestic sphere prevented them from interacting with anyone who might corrupt them.

It would be nice to pretend that these scenarios were left behind with Jim Crow, but on Tuesday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, it was widely reported that President Trump was asked by a reporter if he would apologize to the five men known as “The Central Park Five.” In 1989, the five men, then teenagers, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam and Korey Wise were wrongly accused of raping and beating a white woman as she jogged in Central Park. They were imprisoned as children because the New York Police Department found it easier to abuse children of color than to find the actual culprit, a white man who later confessed. Years later, after most them had served their terms, the sentences of the men were vacated and they won more than forty million dollars in a law suit against the state. A CNN article details that, at the time of the arrests, Donald Trump placed full page advertisements in four major newspapers calling for a return to the death penalty. On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, President Trump said that he would not apologize to the men because “they confessed” to the crimes (Liptek), even though they were minors deprived of their parents and lawyers for hours, while being threatened, bullied, and lied to by police officers. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander explains that, “People choose to commit crimes, and that’s why they are locked up or locked out, we are told. This feature makes

the politics of responsibility particularly tempting, as it appears the system can be avoided with good behavior” (215). But Trump’s remarks fly in the face of this idea. Because of an intrinsically corrupt and oppressive system, those children were arrested for crimes they did not commit. That same system kept them locked up for years and, after they have been proven innocent, the sitting President of the United States will not acknowledge the misuse of power and the ways that people of color are constantly endangered in this country. There was no real outcry at his statement, because oppressive Whiteness is still firmly in place and one of its foundational elements is the continued harassment and vilification of young black men. There can be no better evidence of the current state of systemic racism that is still active today, because “As long as black males [are] deemed savages unable to rise above their animal nature, they [can] be seen as a threat easily contained (hooks 65). Alexander contends that, “in major cities wracked by the drug war, as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives” (7). Young men of color are being contained in the American prison system, then if they are released, they are stuck in low income jobs without the right to vote or make any way for themselves (Alexander 46). This is the horrific weapon white men have consistently used when inciting violence against men of color. And it works, time after time, to shore up the power structures of systemic whiteness.

I was raised that only racists discuss race. Good people, people who are not racist, treat everyone well and that is enough. This was a lesson taught both implicitly and explicitly throughout my upbringing. We show God’s love. We follow The Golden Rule. This upbringing has made it very difficult for me to have the conversations required for writing this piece. Uncomfortable is an understatement. Not just because I am confronting and being confronted by difficult truths, but because I am, one thread at a time, unraveling forty-four years of

programming. I am more than willing to be uncomfortable and to keep digging because I believe that I owe it to every single student who walks into my class room. There are no words strong enough for the horror, anger, and resentment I felt and have continued to feel as I discover that there is an entire world that my privilege has protected me from seeing. Knowing that people I love were experiencing discrimination in the same place that I was having a fairly great childhood is heart wrenching. Appalling. At the same time, I am afraid to verbalize my discomfort, as it does not even compare to awful violence people of color experience due to systemic racism. And I certainly do not want to come across as a white savior, here to tell everyone the truth they have already lived. I feel like I am walking into walls and I am terrified that I will unintentionally be a part of the problem. I do not know what to do about it, other than continuing to have difficult conversations.

Circling back to 1990, in a gym in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, wrapped in my safe world of privilege, I had never heard of Emmet Till, The Central Park Five, or systemic racism. I was busy believing that if people just treated each other well, everything would be okay. My world was about to change though.

Girl, girl silly girl  
Sit down girl  
It doesn't happen to you  
So, the rumors can't be true  
Racism doesn't happen here.  
No one has to hide fear.  
We're all family until we try to date  
Suddenly we're a town filled with hate.

In high school, one of my friends, Laney, had the temerity to date a “Black guy.” Actually, she was dating Craig, who I had known since 1<sup>st</sup> grade. But for a great many other people, Craig was suddenly a Black Guy. Here is where my privilege becomes clear because I was truly stunned by the vitriol. I had grown up in this town. With these people. My parents did not care who hung out at our house or who slept over. They did not use racial slurs or talk about race much at all. I am not romanticizing this, I promise. My mother shared my shock, while my father seemed unsurprised. Small town Oklahoma, what did I expect? Better. I expected better.

Historically, white people have been comfortable watching men of color playing sports and endorsing sports related equipment. In, “More Than Just Play: Unmasking Black Child Labor in the Athletic Industrial Complex.” Theresa Runstedtler, postulates that white people use sports to categorize and control athletes of color. Typically, the people in town, including my friend’s parents, had no problem watching Craig play football. He shared a locker room with their sons and went to class with their daughters. He was celebrated along with the team, when they won the state championship twice. Few people openly treated him differently, but they certainly treated her differently. Many people said that he had “aimed too high,” but they did not seem surprised, as if he was just reaching for another trophy which, this both objectifies the woman and harkens back to the concept of the white woman as the angel in the household. It also implies that white women are more valuable than women of color. They are trophies to be attained. Laney was considered damaged. According to bell hooks, women of color are sexualized from a very young age and “we have always known that the socially constructed image of innocent white womanhood relies on the continued production of the racist/sexist sexual myth that black women are not innocent and never can be” (159). Laney was no longer “innocent” because she had chosen to “corrupt” herself with a male of color. Her punishment

was being separated from Craig. Laney's parents shipped her off to live with her sister to go to a "better school." The school was predominantly white and affluent. At the time, from the privileged perspective that my friends and I shared, it *seemed* that she received all of the consequences and Craig received none. This brings me to my first encounter with Colorism, because I overheard the school secretary say to a teacher, "But he's so dark. Couldn't she pick a lighter skinned boy?" Somehow Laney's infraction seemed greater because she chose a man with darker skin, while Craig fulfilled a need in the community as a successful athlete in a small rural town that thrived on sports. However, now I understand that Craig, far from being absolved, was punished. His girlfriend was removed from the community. He was told to play football and not to cause problems. He was told that he had tainted a girl that he cared about. He was objectified, animalized, and exploited for his athletic ability. Essentially, he was told to behave in a way white folks deemed appropriate and thus would allow him to play football.

This is not unlike LeBron James, who in 2018 was told to "Shut up and dribble" by Fox News reporter Laura Ingraham (Sullivan). James had been on a podcast with Kevin Durant and they discussed politics. Ingraham chose to denigrate James because he "bounces a ball." This speaks to the commodification of black athletes across the board. Reduced to their physical prowess, they are stripped of intellect, individuality, and identity. They can entertain, win games, and sell shoes, but the moment they try to speak to politics, or social justice, as Colin Kaepernick has, they are disparaged and silenced. In another bid to silence James voice, she declared that his statements were "barely intelligible" and "ungrammatical" (Sullivan). This white reporter, who gets paid to comment on what others do, attempted to silence James by attacking his speech patterns and grammar, a clearly racist approach. In James' situation, he has a platform that Craig did not have, so Craig was silenced more effectively. As Phoebe Godfrey explains when



discussing miscegenation in *“Sweet Little (White) Girls” Sex and Fantasy Across the Color Line and the Contestation of Patriarchal White Supremacy*, “[White men] were most concerned with the sexual relations between white women and black men, since only white women could give birth to white children and thus it was understood that although white men could and did have sexual relations with black women, white women belonged to them alone” (206). The very same masculinity that “corrupted” Laney’s white femininity provided the athletic ability that so many of the local people admired, so Laney was sent away and Craig stayed. I can only imagine that he felt powerless. He was seventeen and Black. At the time, the entire power structure in our school system was white. Every coach. Every teacher. Every administrator. Laney’s parents owned a business in town, and they belonged to a very large family of people who owned businesses in town. Many of them donated to the school as a whole and the football team specifically. Even if Craig had wanted to stand up for himself or his relationship, he had no recourse. In another commodification of his athletic abilities, he needed football scholarships if he wanted to attend college and he would not get them if he alienated the those in authority in town. If this small-town microcosm is representative of the country, my classroom is a smaller microcosm of the world today.

Every day, I enter a classroom filled with faces and hearts.  
A room filled with engineers, mechanics, and artists.  
Sometimes I feel as if the wrong word from me could rip them apart  
These faces are a kaleidoscope of colors and genders  
Many of them are seniors, making plans and working jobs  
Trying to do their AP Lit homework while taking care of parents still on all-day benders.

This was one of the first poems I wrote after starting graduate school. While my understanding of craft has evolved, the ideas here still hold true. I teach at a diverse Title I school, which means that many of our students live below the poverty line. There is a basket of snacks in my room and a case of bottled water because we have so many students who are food insufficient. I cannot expect them to learn when they are hungry. Some of my students are couch surfing because their parents kicked them out. Many of my students take care of their younger siblings, work thirty hours a week, and go to school. Most of students, regardless of phenotype, speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) which is defined as “[l]inguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represent the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of African origin (Williams qtd. in Perry 29). Many of them speak AAVE as their first language and are constantly code switching between that and what many consider Standard English, which has been imposed by a traditionally white academic system. Any system that indicates to students that the language spoken in their home is not a language, but a mistake in need of correction, is oppressive. It negates identity and independent thought. In *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*, Theresa Delpit notes that constant corrections inhibit the ability of students to communicate effectively often “produc[es] silence” (18). Many students learn to code switch instinctively as they begin to understand that they are treated differently depending on the language they speak. Amanda Seales asks the question, “How black am I going to be today?” Her point is that if she is going to be considered professional in her workplace and well-educated in her interactions with white people, she has to take on elements of an identity other than her own. She has to code switch to be accepted by her coworkers who are white. Students of color live out this question every day, as they understand

that the ways in which they speak impacts the ways in which teachers and other students evaluate them. They learn to switch between AAVE and the imposed Standard English. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Michele Foucault questions who gets to decide what language is acceptable and appropriate (88). The easy answer is that the people in power make those decisions and they, of course, make decisions that favor the status quo, the hegemonic discourse. In the case of The United States, those power brokers were European settlers and those individuals worked to impose their language as the correct language. As Foucault argues, if knowledge is power, language is the expression of that power. The ones who control language control people. When teachers, who work within a systemically racist system, force students to speak in a language not their own, the teacher is working to control the student. Students know that it is easier to code switch than it is to let their grades suffer or deal with discipline, so they adhere to language of power. They continue this system of switching between languages as they enter the job market, in an effort to fit into the hegemony. This is system of oppression in which I was complicit for too long.

I remember the first time I heard the termed “light skinneded.”  
You heard that right. Skinneded.  
My English teacher heart shriveled.  
Bits of my soul flaked off and died.  
*Skinneded is not a word*, I sighed.

I was so busy correcting their grammar  
I didn't hear what they said.  
Listening for the “correct words,”  
The meaning lay dead.

I grew older and hopefully smarter.  
I realized that the small-town girl had little needed to learn  
with these kids who had to work harder  
because they had the gall to want more than their fathers.

I was late to the game, but I was also stumbling in the dark. In meetings, I was shut down when I tried to suggest that students should be taught that AAVE (a term I did not know at the time) is a language and that they are not wrong for speaking it. I was chastised for encouraging students to write in their own voices. In *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.*, Susan Bordo writes, “we all are culture makers as well as culture consumers, and these transformations don't happen without our participation” (146). I interpret this to mean that the oppressive educational system created and maintained by systemic whiteness cannot be transformed without the active participation of white teachers. We must be willing to confront the system in which we work and we must be willing to have uncomfortable conversations. Finally, we must be willing to listen and make changes in the way we teach and run our classes.

Concerned about my complicity in a system that refuses to see students as individuals, I asked questions of the kids I knew. I felt stupid, but I started with basics—I felt like an entire world existed around me and I had no clue. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks explains that, “One mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants” (168). Over and over again, I hear white people say that we need to stop discussing race. That continuing to discuss race is divisive. They say this for a variety of reasons. Some of them are uncomfortable or afraid. They do not feel equipped to discuss race with students of color because of their subject position as white teachers. Some do not want to confront their own privilege. I also consistently witness students who are not willing to speak in class or read out loud because they do not code switch easily or they have been taught not to draw attention to themselves or to be “too black.” To make themselves invisible.

I was determined that none of my students should be made to feel invisible. The way that a person speaks is an intrinsic part of their identity. Controlling the way a person speaks is about power and oppression, not grammar. It is about imposing a European American hegemonic structure on students of color. AAVE is a language, not a dialect (Smitherman 29). As a language, it cannot be incorrect. In addition, these systemically racist institutions send the message to students is that everyone who speaks AAVE is wrong, less intelligent, or inferior to those who speak other ways. Pruitt et al. explain that, “a disproportionate rate of African Americans relative to European Americans live in poverty and low-income African American children score lower than low-income European American children on standardized test measures” (2). Because children who live in poverty often live in a language-impoverished environment, they may not code switch effectively or at all. This reinforces the idea that AAVE speakers are socially and financially inferior to other students. Every time a teacher interrupts a student to “correct” their language without the context of code switching or translating, that teacher strips the student of their identity and reinforces the hegemonic oppression inherent in language control. In my classroom, I want each student to feel wanted and to understand the power of code switching and translating. Both of these are skills that indicate intelligence, which, I believe, is the reason the traditional education system works to impose its own language on students. Further, we know that students use language as a form of social currency or as a way to navigate social positions. My students have spoken about being accused of “sounding white” or “not being black enough” based on their language patterns. In *Articulate While Black*, Samy H. Alim notes that President Barack Obama said, “Any black person in America who’s successful has to be able to speak several different forms of the same language [..]” (10). The suggestion that people of color must code switch into Standard English to be successful is prevalent and is

consistently reinforced by the education system. Again, and again students are taught that AAVE is lower class and that Normative English is the language of upper class, successful Americans. Children who effectively translate are more socially mobile than those who do not. Speakers of AAVE often feel that they must code switch to be successful at in school or at work (Seales 00.15.22 – 00.17.43).

In an effort to fight the traditional system, I designated parts of the hour to just let them be themselves, without translation. Just a few minutes here and there. I quit commenting on their grammar and I started listening. Just as Delpit noted, constant “correction” of language created silence. I had noticed this silence, realizing that I would never get to know them if I constantly negated their language.

Once I began allowing the students to speak without interference, they began to share stories. Just before prom, I learned about weaves, extensions, tracks, glue, and edges. This is when I realized that, as with everything, there is hierarchy. Dresses, shoes, hair, homes, cars. We all have hierarchies. Personal goals or standards. But this was different. The chapter, “The Beauty Queue,” in Margaret Hunter’s *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone* makes it clear that there are advantages of light skin and straight hair, explaining that, “Because ‘beauty’ is a cultural construction, it is informed by other kinds of societal status characteristics, most significantly race. This helps explain why in the United States, where white racism still operates, light skin is often associated with beauty” (69). I began to listen specifically to the way students of color speak to each other and I discovered the language of Colorism, although I did not know then that there was a name for it. I tried to approach students delicately about the way they spoke to each other about skin tone and beauty. Through their interactions, they confirmed Hunter’s assertion that “[l]ight skin was seen as a device for approval in families, as well as a



near pre-requisite for the designation ‘beautiful’” (70). I was particularly nonplussed by one student who asked me to call him a nickname that referred to his skin tone, instead of his given name. I declined. He said, “but it fits Ms. T., and I don’t mind.” This brilliantly funny student had so internalized the equivalency between his identity and his skin tone that he accepted this reference as his name. By allowing himself to be reduced to the color of his skin, this student embraced every part of the discourse of power that says that he is less than, because of his skin. Just as language is social currency, my students see skin tone as social currency. The lighter the skin tone, the more likely the individual is bound for success in every area of their lives. The power dynamic here is clear. As Robert L. Reece contends in his article, “Genesis of U.S. Colorism and Skin Tone Stratification: Slavery, Freedom, and Mulatto-Black Occupational Inequality in the Late 19th Century,” “slavery was more than an institution of interracial boundaries, creating and exacerbating racial inequality between Blacks and Whites; it also shaped intraracial boundaries among Black people” (2). From the time of slavery, European American owners prized enslaved people with lighter skin as more intelligent and more beautiful, or “people receive social favor in proportion to their position on a sliding scale of visible Blackness” (Reece 4). These people were privileged above their peers. This concept invaded the consciousness of communities of color and still reverberates today.

I was just learning these truths when I had a special group of seniors. They were a little different. Not perfect. Different.

Ugh. Millennials

We assign labels and this is the current one.

If you are 23-40 today, this is the epithet we stick you with.

Ugh. Millennials, we complain.

As if one label can turn twenty years into a monolith.

My millennials are smart and engaged.

My millennials take no shit.

They want the truth and they are enraged

With shootings, lockdowns, poor funding, and lies.

My millennials put down their phones

My millennials look you straight in the eye.

They ask hard questions and worry about student loans.

They want an education, leadership, change, and answers.

My millennials are not afraid to vote with their feet.

They will march to the Capitol

And yes, they have been known to tweet.

In 2018, Tarte Cosmetics produced a new line of foundation. Of the fifteen shades featured in their first release, twelve were very light. There was an uproar on the internet and Tarte apologized on their website and promised, “We’re doing everything in our power to bring those unfinished shades as fast as we can, at any cost. WE CAN AND WILL DO BETTER” (Baragana). A few days after discussing the makeup line, I was teaching persuasive rhetoric, and I showed students Tarte’s apology and then realized that this needed context, so I showed them the shades in Tarte’s new foundation line. The girls of color in the room already knew. They knew because they are constantly the target of cosmetic ads and skin lightening ads that encourage them to adhere as closely as possible to European American beauty standards. Hunt et al. assert in *Cultural and Social Influences on the Perception of Beauty: A Case Analysis of the Cosmetics Industry*, that this concept of white beauty goes back to The English Renaissance when, “[f]or both sexes, a pale face remained a perfect example of simplicity and beauty (3). Beauty is quantified by light skin and straight hair, because according to Baumann, “Ideals regarding physical attractiveness vary between societies as well as between groups within a society. In the United States, as elsewhere, there are dominant ideals held by the majority ethnic group, and known to virtually all members of society, regarding a great number of physical characteristics” (5). In my classroom, this led to a discussion about Colorism in daily life, the ways in which black women are exoticized, and white privilege. We talked about the ways in writing and in media, women of color are often animalized, othered, or highly sexualized and about the ways in which images are controlled and bell hooks’ assertion that “[f]rom slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination (2). Controlling images of people of color serves at least two purposes. Simply put, this control reinforces stereotypes in both the white community and

communities of color. Producing images of animalized or criminalized black men serves, in the white community, to reinforce the fear that men of color are predators and constant threats.

Producing images of women of color as impoverished servants, sex workers, or hypersexualized sirens, perpetuates the idea that these women must be controlled by the dominant culture. In my class we discussed the ways in which people of color are represented in a variety of media. These discussions led to an incredibly open dialogue where students of all phenotypes were able to voice concerns and ask questions of each other. During these conversations, several girls of color revealed that they felt pressured to have straight hair and light skin, conforming to a European American standard. One girl told me, through tears, that she had always believed that she was ugly until she saw a picture of the actress, Lupita Nyong'o.

My students have asked me to ask them questions. The kids were surprisingly open. They began to ask me questions. They wondered why teachers do not talk more about race or take the time to ask questions. I tried to explain to them that sometimes these conversations do not fit well into a curriculum, like geometry. How would one have a productive discussion about race while teaching the Pythagorean theorem? In addition, the white teachers I work with are often uncomfortable with the discussion surrounding race. An honest discussion of race requires the teacher, as the representative of the power structure, to acknowledge the oppressive nature of the American school system and their place and positionality in it. Many teachers are not ready to examine themselves or the system that closely. Some teachers worry that, in attempting to inform themselves, they will offend a student or coworker. We made a deal that our classroom would be a safe place for all parties to ask questions and give honest answers. Some of my students said that they felt seen for the first time. They said that the more we talk about this, the more we all talk about this, the better off we all are.

At the same time, I was reading poetry by Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, and Sara Teasdale in *Modern American Poetry*. Each of these poets create vignettes with a few “simple” sentences. These brief but vivid images are snapshots of seemingly unimportant moments in the lives of normal, working class people. Hughes incorporates race and class in his poetry, and his accessible narrative style and use of refrains are reflected in some of my work. Hughes highlights the objectification and exploitation of people of color. Some of his pieces, like “White Shadows” worked well for centos dealing with sexual assault. This short poem depicts a woman seeking safety in a world of racist oppression which has often included sexualization of women of color by white men. The oxymoron present in the title is important, because normally shadows are dark. However, the image of White Shadows implies that the subject of the poem cannot escape systemic whiteness and oppression, even at home. The speaker intones a need for safety, saying, “I’m looking for a house\In the world\Where white shadows\will not fall” (Hughes 607). I wanted to complicate the oppression in the poem by making the threat explicitly sexual, echoing the plea of women across the country seeking some place of safety from prying hands and not finding it. In the United States, “one in four girls is sexually assaulted before age of eighteen,” according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Those numbers climb when one focuses on communities of color, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center “Almost half (49.5%) of multiracial women and over 45% of American Indian/Alaska Native women were subjected to some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime.” It seems that there are sneaking hands everywhere.

Sneaking Hands (Inspired by *White Shadows*, by Langston Hughes)

*I'm looking for a place  
In the world  
Where hard sneaking hands  
Will not shove*

Up my new skirt  
Under the shirt  
Against the brick wall  
Outside my school

*There is no such place,  
Injured sisters,  
No such place  
At all*

Student, 2018 (Inspired by Wallace Stevens' *Mozart, 1935*)

Student, *be seated* at the desk.  
Write the essay, pencils scratch scratch scratch.  
History, science, grammar, and math.  
Learn the things we give to you.

*If they spray bullets in the hallway  
while you practice identifying adjectives,  
it is because they slipped through the cracks,  
a body in rags.*  
Be seated at the desk.

*That all you have is the past,  
is a tragic truth  
No airy dream of the future,  
no college applications.  
The unfinished concerto.  
The shrouds are falling,  
striking us with thoughts and prayers.*

*You are the voice,  
Loudly silent. You are, You are  
the voice of angry fear,  
the voice of this besieging pain.*

Be the silent scream,  
as we all try to find a sound,  
*by which sorrow is released,  
Dismissed? Absolved.*  
It is a people problem, placating.

We may never return to you.  
*You were young, and we, we feel so old.*  
The shrouds *are falling*  
*and the streets are full of cries.*  
*Be seated, student.*

*Never Enough* Influenced by *Enough* by Sara Teasdale

It is never *enough for me by day*  
to carry an unrequited love;  
Never *enough that I by night*  
stare at the stars and feel alone.

*I have no care to want someone like the wind*  
who wonders free—  
It will never be enough to imagine *his love*,  
never truly felt, *blowing like music over me*.



*This is Just to Say* Influenced by William Carlos Williams

I have not graded  
the essays  
that are on  
my desk

*And which  
you were probably  
expecting  
back today*

*Forgive me  
I am tired and  
in grad school  
writing poetry.*

*Infatuated Adolescent Portrait, Influenced by Proletarian Portrait* by William Carlos Williams

A petite brown eyed girl  
in torn jeans

Her spiral hair around  
her face

One high-heeled toe turned  
toward the other

Her heart in her eyes. Looking  
searchingly up

Into the eyes of the boy who  
glances away

He has hurt her.

*II – The Body*

“I’m moving out.” Almost fifteen years after our beautiful wedding, Doug stood in front of me and broke the most important promise he ever made to me. He wanted to try being single for a while. Divorce was absolutely a detour. No little girl lays in bed at night thinking, “I want to be divorced when I grow up.” The divorce caught me off guard and forced me to reexamine my marriage, my life, and my dreams. I was the wife of a disabled combat veteran. That informed every aspect of our lives and I let it inform my identity. Somewhere along the way, I had not just detoured. I lost the map.

In the ensuing months I chose to examine every aspect of my life, including the ways I function as a single adult, my own relationship with my body, and my relationship with my daughter. The body is a continuation of identity. I devoted a great deal of study to the ways in which women’s bodies are treated, specifically in sonnets, from Petrarch to the present. There has been quite the evolution. From Petrarch’s blazons to Wanda Coleman’s reclamation of the black female body, women have an ever-changing agency and voice in poetry (Hirsch). Often the body is the subject of these poems. According to Julia Kristeva, poetry, “shows us that the subject is a symbolic function which comes out of something else” (*Powers of Horror* 13). Kristeva, a Bulgarian scholar, author, educator, and psychoanalyst, argues that the subject is an ongoing, ever changing thing and that the semiotic model of language is more feminine, juvenile, and having to do with the mother. The symbolic model of language is more masculine and can only be achieved through the process of abjection. One cannot move back and forth between the models (14). Most recent sonnet writers, specifically women writers, recentralize the feminine as the subject and speaker of the sonnet. In these works, the subject is acting with the agency available to her in the culture in which she is written. In fact, some of these subjects push the

boundaries of behavior to which they conformed in the period of their creation. In her essay, “Thinking About Literary Thought ” Kristeva argues that poetry, “collides with the resistance of social reality, not to disprove it but instead to no longer reflect it” (16). However, the changing agency and subjectivity of women in the sonnets reflects roles of women in Western society and their varying levels of resistance to the accepted social norms. I was particularly inspired by Edna St. Vincent Millay’s *Sonnets from An Ungrafted Tree*, which depicts a woman who has exercised her agency in two conspicuous ways. She has left her unhappy marriage, but when she hears that her husband is ill, she returns to her old home to care for him. The nameless subject of this sonnet sequence demonstrates a full turn from Petrarch’s dismembered subject. In addition, Millay’s representation that men are weak and in need of maternal care harkens back to Kristeva’s argument that poetry is inherently semiotic or feminine in nature. In XII the speaker cares for her husband saying:

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed

An ailing child — with sturdy propping up

Of its small, feverish body in the bed,

And steadying of its hands about the cup — (*Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*).

indicating that she has taken on a maternal role in the relationship. This places her in a position of authority over the ailing man in the bed, as “She gave her husband of her body's strength.” The ultimate maternal power is the creation and maintenance of life. Millay’s speaker, in this moment, is holding that ultimate agency. She goes on, “Thinking of men, what helpless things they were.” The narrator is not making some joke about the weakness of men. Her internal monologue is, without fully identifying her own power, marveling at the lack of power this man

has over her, over life, really over anything. Maternal agency is often temporary and the speaker feels the pull of other places, “And she could see in her mind's vision plain\ The magic World, where cities stood on end . . .” She recognizes that the only thing preventing her from exploring that other life is the ill husband that she has chosen to care for. This life is, “Remote from where she lay — and yet — between, \Save for something asleep beside her, only the window screen.” It is important to remember that the speaker has chosen to be in this situation. She left and returned, understanding the temporary nature of her return. While it may seem that she has returned to servitude, the subject has exercised her agency by choosing to return. Identity, however is not shaped by our own views, as Nealon and Giroux note, “how others see us---plays a central role in the construction of our identities. The subject positions we occupy are never simply a function of what we choose for ourselves (261). Even as the subject has chosen to break out of her subject position of wife, her decision to return home allows others to impose their expectations onto her. In XVI the speaker is still the subject of the immediate male gaze as, “The doctor asked her what she wanted done\ With him, that could not lie there many days.” But that gaze is looking on her in a position of power. She is the decision maker here. She is the one with agency, as the doctor awaits her decision and her husband lies dead. She is not dependent on anyone. Now she is the subject of all gazes and she is expected to have all of the answers. The speaker is surprised by this attention and not a little unhappy about it:

And she was shocked to see how life goes on

Even after death, in irritating ways;

And mused how if he had not died at all

'Twould have been easier — then there need not be (*Sonnets from an Ungrafted*

*Tree*),

This observation that it might have been easier if he had not died is compelling. She does not need his death to be free of him. She has realized that her agency is centered, literally, in her own actions. But if he had not died, she would not be dealing with the fallout of their lives together such as:

The stiff disorder of a funeral  
 Everywhere, and the hideous industry,  
 And crowds of people calling her by name  
 And questioning her, she'd never seen before (*Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree*).

The subject would actually be freer of her husband if he had not died. Ironically, these people staring at her and questioning her would never have tried to shove her back into the role of wife, if her husband had lived.

Millay's choice to convey this story completely from the point of view of the woman signifies the complete break from the Petrarchan sonnet tradition. This speaker is not pursuing the love of another. She is not dismembering and objectifying another. She is pursuing freedom and individuality. Millay's subject is still pushed and pulled by the whims of death, creditors, and the doctor. She also seems to examine herself and her world through the lens of her marriage. As I approached my own marriage and divorce, Millay's approach to the body and marriage influenced the way I approached the traditional sonnet, using most of the structure, but breaking from the theme of unrequited love.

In writing the American Sonnet, I was influenced by Wanda Coleman, the creator of the form. She maintained that her formula for the American Sonnet included issues, rhythms, tones, and musical taste. She also understood the poem's ability to create social change, she said, "I presume that social change comes about when unpopular ideas, ideals, and ways-of-life are

validated in a given text. . . Poems can and do function—they may record a time, a community, a sense of having been” (Ryan 419). Coleman was fully cognizant of her context and of her subject position as a black woman in the United States. Here is another poet in conversation with Kristeva’s claim that poetry, “collides with the resistance of social reality, not to disprove it but instead to no longer reflect it” (16). Coleman consistently resists social reality. In *after Lowell*, Coleman writes of marginalized and abused women exercising agency to carve a life out of a land they were never meant to live in:

our mothers wrung hell and hardtack from row  
and boll. fenced others'  
gardens with bones of lovers. embarking  
from Africa in chains

The context, both for Coleman and for the speaker of the poem is clear. According to Nealon and Giroux, this context is necessary for agency (263). Coleman’s subject has undergone a kind of abjection, having literally been separated from their country of origin and everything familiar. Kristeva suggests that the use of rhythm and musical sounds is a way of interacting with the maternal semiotic while remaining separate (*Powers of Horror* 42).

reluctant pilgrims stolen by Jehovah's light  
planted here the bitter  
seed of blight and here eternal torches mark  
the shame of Moloch's mansions  
built in slavery's name. our hungered eyes  
do see/refuse the dark  
Illuminate the blood-soaked steps of each

historic gain. a yearning  
 yearning to avenge the raping of the womb  
 from which we spring

Coleman situates the slaves as “reluctant pilgrims”, but they were stolen and now their descendants, the “blight” planted by those pilgrims, are angry and “yearning” for vengeance.

While Petrarch dismembered women as an exercise in objectification, Coleman works to bring the parts of the body back together. She lists bones, blood, eyes, and womb, as an exercise of anger and eventually, hopefully healing. Coleman completes the circuit from Petrarch. As Petrarch’s Italian Sonnets employ the blazon tradition of breaking women into their voiceless parts, Coleman’s American Sonnets are an exercise in the agency of women in every way. She does not adhere to traditional form, including length, rhyme, or meter. She does not conform to the trope of unrequited love or to the blazon tradition. Certainly, her subject is actively building a life and thinking for herself. Particularly, “our hungered eyes do see\refuse the dark illuminate the blood-soaked steps of each\ historic gain.” Coleman’s subject’s eyes are hungered. They insist on seeing the horror around them and are working to do something about that horror. I have composed a group of poems which explore the ways in which the female body is sometimes objectified, as well as examine dating and parenting a daughter in the age of Trump, Twitter, and Matched. The weight of teaching our daughter to have a healthy body image and to exercise her agency is a never-ending loop for me. This led to a series of poems in which the speakers are distinctly female in subject position.



## The Unexpected Mother

For parents whose hopes  
 are shaped by need for legacy?  
 For friends waiting to  
 celebrate and buy  
 toys and clothes? Not for these  
 the twenty-nine-year-old woman  
 pees on yet another stick.

*Giving her a perishable  
 souvenir of hope, a plus  
 sign after so many minus signs  
 shocks her heart, as the watchful  
 husband hovers beside the bathroom door  
 day and night; she can scarcely*

*eat* until the ultrasound shows  
 within her rebelling body  
 a small speck of a  
 fragile human who could be

her daughter, if she can  
 just stay connected through  
 the continuous

heaving and weight loss.  
 The white coats threaten to  
 hospitalize them if she can't

find a way to protect her  
 unexpected child better within  
 a body that does not  
 seem to want the it  
 as desperately  
 as she does, so she

pleads with God  
 and wraps arms around  
 herself, as the frightened father who  
 never expected this  
 battle that he cannot  
 fight. He understands battles

that he can fight.  
 This is not one. Wraps  
 his arms around

them both and tries to hold  
them here to a world  
broken, but it is the only

world he has. He too  
    pleads with God and winds himself  
around his love as she is  
    a fortress that must  
be strong enough to hold.

Full Length Mirror

Harlequin cover model with glistening abs,  
Hallmark movie hero, smile shiny and wide,  
your flawless skin and perfect hair stab  
the hope balloon where I desperately hide,  
applying antiaging face cream in frantic dabs,  
praying quietly that my chance hasn't died.  
Hero, why are you always twenty-eight?  
Forty-three-year-olds still hope for a date.

My forty-three-year-old body has born a kid,  
survived a c-section, breastfeeding,  
Ephedra, phen-phen, and fasting, which never undid  
38 Gs that always seem to be leading  
me into rooms of beautiful people twenty years younger or rid  
me of any opportunity to stem the bleeding  
of my self-esteem, So for you hero,  
I wrestle Spanx like a deadly foe.

Spanx produce a flawless line  
and cover a multitude of sins.  
Not sun damage or time  
etched across my face, the losses and the wins.  
But Hallmark heroes aren't looking for bodies like mine.  
It's really no wonder our mothers turned to Virginia Slims.  
So, into Spanx I go.  
In profile pics, quick wit and intelligence don't show.

## Spiritual Sex

Spiritual sex is the only kind I'm havin now.  
Spiritual sex is the only kind I'm havin now.  
Make Love?? Netflix and Chill? Not since you left with that cow.

No one's touched me in years.  
No one's touched me in years.  
Caressed my cheek, dried these tears.

I do it all on my own – and I do mean all.  
Nothing interesting happening here, ya'll.  
Nope, no pregnancy scares or STD fears, at all.

Think I'm tired of doin it all alone.  
waiting for the ringing of the phone.  
Only hearing the girl on the TV drone.

Spiritual sex just isn't working anymore.  
Gonna take a lesson from Cosmo and Dior.  
Gonna go out and find something more.

Labor and Delivery

My body formed a child. Literally grew a person.

You played a part.

But it was relatively brief.

My body housed a daughter.

Floating. Oblivious.

Fingernails, toes, cerebellum, smile.

Cut in half, on the table.

She moved out. Perfect. Whole.

With fuss and complications.

The emptiness overwhelmed me.

There would be another.

Tiny cloths, tissue wrapped. Waiting.

You moved out.

With a minimum of fuss and complication.

Tiny clothes, a donation box. Waiting.

#Metoo Mothers

I am the mother of a daughter,  
I am a mother in fear;  
Sadness and gladness flow through me like water  
Measure for measure they never falter  
As I watch and hope for my daughter  
Wiping away a tear.

I am the mother of a daughter,  
She sings the songs of the world;  
Dashing and whirling, swishing and swirling,  
Delicate, strong, purple glitter hurling  
She sings the songs of her world,  
Hopeful, naïve songs of the world:

She sings with laughter and mirth  
And She laughs in delight and glee  
As she discovers the joys of the earth  
Calling, "Trip through the light with me."  
Young and beautiful, pleasures are simple  
Like an Imagine Dragons song to sing,  
Twirling in stage light  
Glowing in stage light

And again  
I am inundated with slow lingering fear.  
Of the dark world, where monsters creep,  
I pray that she will never shed a tear  
And find herself listed as one of three girls  
Choked by an agonized pain.

And then  
I pray and hope that she not have cause  
To cringe and fear the power of men.  
As she chases her dreams  
As I hold her world by the seams  
Frantically fighting, praying and writing,  
That she will not fall victim to snarling and biting:  
Of power-hungry men  
Of the sick perversions of some men

We are the mothers of daughters  
We are #metoo mothers in fear  
Measure for measure we fight, rage hotter  
To create a world safe for our daughters  
Never should they live in fear.

## III – Form

I thought that working with form would be more difficult than free verse. Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes explain in *An Exaltation of Forms*, “For the past few decades, many poets and critics, both traditional and experimental, have suggested that to write in certain forms is incompatible with postmodern insights about the contingency and fragmentariness of the self” (2). I agreed. I could not reconcile the concept of postmodern life wedged into sing song rhymes. What I found though, was that form allows the poet to focus on content. Being required to repeat a refrain means that the poet must be very deliberate with diction, as the meaning should evolve with each repetition. Forms like the sestina, which requires the patterned repetition of end words, require nuanced control of language and careful word choice. Lewis Turco rightly says that, “The problem with the sestina is, generally, that the repeated end words can be obtrusive” (Finch 290). This sort of challenge forced me to focus on craft in a way that free verse had not, although “free verse is still organized, like all poems, around technical constraints” (73). My high school English teacher once told me that I had to learn the rules of writing before I could be allowed to break them. At the time, of course, I thought he made no sense. As an adult, I have found that understanding form has allowed me to develop my writing in free verse, just as writing traditional sonnets has allowed me to better understand the American Sonnet. Jennifer Ryan explains in *The Transformative Poetics of Wanda Coleman’s American Sonnets*, that, “The poems’ form also engages a specific literary history even as their many digressions from the sonnet’s standard features challenge that history’s conventional narratives. Their topics diverge from the more traditional subjects of love and religious devotion associated with Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Donne” (415). Coleman explores racism, slavery, recovery, and gender while using the nontraditional form to “engage with the social issues and conditions concurrent to their

writing in order both to advance a more progressive social politics and to outline a next stage in modern American poetics” (417). Adhering to form, or determining when to break it, forces the poet to be deliberate and creative with content and diction.



## Detours

Narrative is not negative.  
 Stories are cords that bind us together.  
 Poetry doesn't have to conform,  
 tell a story of love. Of hate. Of heritage.  
 My narrative doesn't always rhyme,  
 but the story is always mine.

There once was a girl with a face like mine,  
 who made every effort to survive the negative.  
 She had a plan with reason and rhyme.  
 She and a boy would graduate and be together,  
 Their children would have her brains and his Native American heritage.  
 The girl with my face completely planned her story.

Of course, her story had no happy ending and is my story.  
 I did realize that he was pathologically incapable of fidelity, that boy of mine.  
 That inability had nothing to do with his heritage.  
 His laughing brown eyes and beautiful smile blinded me to every negative.  
 He was pretty, but not very smart. We weren't destined to be together.  
 But I tried to force my plan with reason. With rhyme.

Does my broken heart have to rhyme,  
 just to add drama to my story?  
 Could you be different? Could we create poetry together?  
 Just your body and mine?  
 (Later we pray that the sign on the little stick is negative)  
 Is this my legacy? Is this my heritage?

Passively left, cheated over and over is no heritage.  
 I won't pass this on to my daughter even in rhyme.  
 I'll teach her to create a positive from a negative.  
 The girl with my face became the woman with my face. Let's continue her story.  
 She, (I?) learned. Every relationship is a landmine.  
 There may be no such thing as forever together.

She distanced herself from the very idea of together.  
 Infidelity might be ingrained into men. A part of their heritage.  
 Ooops. That was a generalization. Stereotypes serve no one and these biases are not mine.  
 They belong to the girl with my face who gave up her plan of reason and rhyme.  
 She made a priority of rewriting her (my?) story.  
 Creating the positive from the negative.

Possibly, I reject your lyrical uniform altogether.  
 Predictably doused with a disjointed storm of rhyme

blood, sweat, and tears. The poet's heritage  
is to conform. Fragment the story.

But this story is mine  
and narrative is not negative.

Sonnet of Sixteen Years *Inspired by Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree XVI* by Edna St. Vincent Millay

The lawyer *asked her what she wanted done*  
with the life, that could not continue this way.  
*And she was shocked to see how life goes on*  
*even after death, in irritating ways;*  
and thought, if he had just stayed longer  
*it have been easier—then there need not be*  
*the stiff faces of their many friends*  
*everywhere and the pitying curiosity,*  
*and the creditors calling her by name,*  
*and questioning her,* She knew little of these debts,  
*but only moving through her picket fence life*  
and pretending she didn't know about the other.  
*She said at length, feeling the attorney's eyes*  
*"I don't know what you do exactly when a marriage dies."*

We were working to co-parent and build a new normal for our daughter when my ex-husband died suddenly of heart failure. The trauma of combat was etched into every moment of Doug's life after Operation Desert Storm. As a result, that trauma touched everyone around him. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is insidious and was accompanied by diagnoses of Traumatic Brain Injury, depression, and anxiety. PTSD is rarely diagnosed without other illnesses. Along with managing the variety of symptoms that accompany these diagnoses for many vets, fear of suicide becomes a constant companion for caretakers. According to a study by the Department of Veteran Affairs, "There were more than 6,000 Veteran suicides each year from 2008 to 2016" and "From 2005 to 2016, Veteran suicide rates increased 25.9 percent" (5). Many caretakers do not speak of the weight of these statistics or of caring for veterans because it can add to the guilt the veteran feels. It is important that we break this culture of silence so spouses and loved ones feel less alone. After Doug's death, I was able to write about this part of my journey.

The Music in My Head

As I try to compose a quatrain  
a play list swirls in my head  
An unrelenting refrain  
of the day we found you dead

It's been a long day  
for you so alone  
In a cold bed you lay  
You never really left the drop zone

You relived the horror every night  
Sweat and screams your  
lullaby. You fought with all your might  
You wanted to be so much more

Someday, I'll tell the little girl you lived for  
when life isn't so jagged  
Someday, she'll know that the final tour  
Left you ragged

Whimper

My eyes open

His, still closed, rapidly moving, he views a violent montage I can never see.

Whimper

I breathe a prayer

Lay a soft hand on his chest

Whisper his name

and fly into the wall as his scream is agony amid shattering glass

apologies and tears

mine and his

no blood

scars on the inside

mine and his.

is Survived By...

Everything paused in the moments before we knew you died.  
In those moments on the porch when only you knew that you died.

A frenetic energy swirls around us; sirens scream and paramedics stream into the house,  
only to shuffle out, eyes downcast, confirming that you died.

The waves of grief and shock scald my nerves, blurring my eyes, as a familiar blonde woman  
approaches between the cars and cops. I tell her that you died.

Don't worry, we'll see her again, because in that moment,  
I am reminded that I didn't lose you the day that you died.

I lost you long before that day on the porch where I face the  
woman you chose, but who has no place in the family, because you died.

I can never rage at you or take revenge on you. One must never  
speak ill of the dead. I silently scream into the void because you died.

Kendra. Jasmine. J Lynn. Tricia. Natasha. Esmerelda.  
Let me count the ways I lost you, long before you died.

And Kim. We must not forget Kim. Standing in the grass, perhaps remembering the day she  
and her husband and children visited our home before we died.

Now she reaches out to me, seeking comfort from your ex-wife.  
I have none to offer this woman as I care for our child alone, because you died.

Army Wife

You were a casualty of war.  
Yellow ribbons fade, but your injuries never did.  
You were unexploded ordinance.  
Remnants of the boy who went to battle and returned  
patched together with camouflage and pills.  
Bloody footprints everywhere you wandered.  
With the "Thanks of a Grateful Nation"  
and a flag drenched in blood,  
I become the unexploded ordinance.  
Walking wounded. Not a soldier,  
Just a wife.  
Just a lover.  
Exploding inwardly so the shrapnel of me  
doesn't create more of the same.



Airplane Dreams

Allison loves to fly.  
She is a fairy reaching for the clouds  
As they solidify: A grand ethereal staircase.  
They recognize her as their princess. Tendrils of air like  
wispy dreams form her celestial crown as she glides  
over airy bridges from formation to formation.  
She presides from the perfect  
cumulous throne.

I smile,  
hold her hand,  
and breathe through the turbulence.

Lost Things

Lately, I've been forgetting things:  
Words to songs, lip gloss, my phone charger, but  
It doesn't seem to matter just now.

Little things like hair ties and wedding rings,  
Slip through the sieve of my mind, like blood from a cut.  
I've been forgetting things,

Hair appointments and light bulbs swirling  
Down the miasma of survival in this rut.  
It doesn't seem to matter just now,

Because energy and care are required for remembering  
To buy toilet paper and to clean up the muck.  
I've been forgetting things

And I know that I should care about who the forgetting is affecting  
Remember chips for lunches and makeup for a galaxy costume, but  
It doesn't seem to matter just now...

Except your smile, your laugh, your deep brown eyes, everything  
I try to hold on to like a mental tattoo, but  
I've been forgetting things...  
It doesn't seem to matter just now

Every morning we piled into an old yellow school bus. Twenty-five ELA teachers from a variety of places chatted or slept, depending on the morning. The United States Capitol building was the biggest image in front of us. We filed out in front of The Folger, greeted by our instructors, like elementary school children. We entered the quiet replica of The Globe Theater and began our day. Sometime after seven in the evening we piled back into the bus. This was the pattern for my entire visit to Washington DC. It does not sound transformative, but it was. We lived in dorms and were together all day. The only time I could be alone was at lunch, and I took full advantage of that hour. I strolled by the Library of Congress and reveled in the energy of the city so different from my home. The serenity of my walk to lunch, from The Folger Shakespeare Library to Pennsylvania Avenue, juxtaposed with the carnival atmosphere of souvenir trucks parked beside monuments and the protest marches that occurred that summer. The city is both emblem and caricature. When writing about my experience that summer and trying to capture the dichotomies of Washington DC, I was particularly drawn to the idea of the American Sonnet. The form seems designed to address everything I wanted to say about Washington DC. American Sonnets include a sense of music and of location, as well as addressing some issue (Ryan 417). Using a modern form that was created by an American to write about a place that is uniquely American seems a fitting way to embrace the movement and music of the city. In addition, Coleman designed the form to address issues, which makes it perfect for highlighting the sociopolitical climate of my time in Washington.

## American Sonnet for Our Formerly Self-Evident Truths

Marble glints.            White wash everywhere.            I slide  
 into sunglasses and the flow of traffic as drivers, politicians, and pedestrians,  
 consider laws to be gentle suggestions, while they orchestrate the  
 next movement without pausing for collateral damage.       Statues and cherry blossoms  
 witness the symphony of souls.       What shall we march for today?  
       Should we tear down walls, unite families, protect students or  
           my body, but not my uterus? Provide for veterans as long as they don't  
                   need it? All while chanting in the shadows  
                           of pristine marble malls, monuments, and men.  
 (Shhhhh...We're talking too loud)    Rest in peace at the Folger where quiet reigns and we  
 can study things long past beside the works of people long passed.  
           Go to a museum! See a memorial! It's free!  
 Visit the Kennedy center, take in a show, take pictures. Take pictures, take souvenirs, take your  
 time, but take no notice of the tents under the bridges, or the mold  
 in marble buildings where marble men take laws to be gentle suggestions.

The Folger

I wonder when the cherry blossoms bloom.  
It is supposed to be scorching here in the summer,  
but so far,  
all the air is springtime without cherry blossoms.  
Lunch on Pennsylvania Avenue  
Street tacos  
Sweet Greens  
Organic Pizza

Which street should I walk back on?  
This is my only down time.  
After the dorms  
The bus  
Coffee time  
The lectures  
Performance practice  
Rehearsal time  
Research hour  
Tea time (with little cookies)  
Lesson Plans  
Curriculum  
More curriculum  
Sword fighting on the lawn.

This moment,  
Breeze in my face,  
Sun in my hair,  
Leaves rustling.  
These few moments are mine in  
the city of museums and marches.  
March for our lives,  
for our families,  
for our veterans,  
for guns,  
for gun control,  
for building up walls,  
for tearing down walls.  
March for something.  
Or for nothing.

Back in the reading room I  
settle into my spot,  
surrounded by busts of Shakespeare  
and researchers

and the watchful paintings—guards to the graves in the wall.

One woman,  
steeped in the soft silence,  
steel gray hair and a library tan,  
she pours over the text, magnifier in hand.

What is she working on?

Could I possibly, someday be her?

Steeped in the soft silence,  
folios, book snakes, and foam wedges.

Every day she stakes her ground as  
she slowly creeps to a table.

Her spine a C from decades hunched over some great folio.

#### Section IV – Stops Along the Way

Creating poetry is, for me, creating an archive of my experiences, a way of saying the unsayable and documenting the process. For so long the culture of silence that surrounds so much of a woman's life has been impenetrable. We are told not to complain about abuse, pay inequality, or problems in our marriages. While surviving a very difficult pregnancy, I was told that pregnancy is a gift and "we mustn't ever complain". Women are told not air our dirty laundry, whether that laundry is stained with pain or fear. Most recently, I have been told that we should not speak ill of the dead, as if death deifies. All of these strictures reinforce the need for an archive of these very common experiences. As Adrienne Rich wrote, "And I feel so strongly that we need to do this more, put our lives on paper for each other" (Benjamin 628). Recording real life, raw and honest, as a woman, mother, wife, daughter, friend, and teacher, drives my work. Rich mused, "I wonder if women haven't always written poetry that has been burned, hidden away in drawers, buried with them, and so on" (623). In *Snapshots of a Feminist Poet: Adrienne Rich and the Poetics of the Archive*, Meredith Benjamin notes that Rich uses poetry as a method to capture snippets of her life experience. Life is made of snippets. Built into these poems is a willingness to speak the unspeakable against the status quo. In the same way, I have attempted to "record real life," celebrating the minutia, while examining the realities of class and gender. More and more, as I write outside of the class setting, this examination takes place with prose poetry. Prose poetry allows me to embrace the elements of narrative while incorporating the imagery and focus of poetry and subverting the expectations of both genres. If prose poetry teaches me anything, it is that my writing does not have to fit into any specific box and it does not have to be restricted to critical work or creative work. Just like the great women writers before me, I can create my own path and add to both the critical and creative conversations.

## Refinery Town

I don't smell it because I live here, but my cousins ask what that awful stench is when they visit. I tell my dad and he says, "that is the smell of money, Baby doll." And it is. It is scent of my braces. It is the scent of every prom dress I had. The scent of my college education. I don't smell it because I live here, but it is the scent of Friday night football games. It is the cologne at the curve of my boyfriend's neck and the conversation about leaving the town he never really left. I don't smell it because I live here, but it is the scent of my father missing birthdays and Christmas and basketball games and my childhood, because shift work waits on no man. (When I was eight, I asked my dad why he couldn't just call in sick. It was 5:30pm and Christmas Eve. He gently said, "then someone else's dad would have to work a double and miss all of Christmas.") I don't smell it because I live here, but it is the scent of his FRC's as I put them in the washing machine and remember not to use fabric softener. Most of dad's clothes are fire resistant, unless you use fabric softener. It is the scent of sitting by the phone. Waiting to hear how bad the fire was. Did anyone die? Was it my dad, my uncle, my cousin? My best friend's dad, uncle, or cousin? (I will never forget the day the call finally came. Mom's voice on the other end of the line, saying, "I don't have any details. Turn on the television. It's on every channel. Lightning struck a holding tank. Your dad is on site." Dad is the leader of the Emergency Response Team. He is always on site. I turned on the T.V. in time to see the fire have a "secondary combustion"—We don't call it an explosion, because scientifically it isn't an explosion, but it sure as fuck looks like an explosion-and to watch my father be thrown back fifty feet.) Dad is fine, but not everyone was. He hurt his knee and walks with a limp when the cold is too much. It's okay though, because the company had no choice but to shut down and make things safer. I ask my dad if it is better today, with new guidelines and rules. He smiles and says, "Nobody died today, Baby doll."

I don't smell it because I used to live there, but it is the acrid scent of fear. And the scent of waiting. And of acid burns. And grief.



## Rain soaked

That day was half sunshine, half rain, and all spring. You stopped your two-tone Chevy pickup beside the softball field, our song playing softly from your stereo speakers, you asked for this dance. And you kissed me in the rain. I was a wet bra, smeared mascara, and flat hair, but I think there was more. I think that it was beautiful. Magical. A moment stolen from time. With the sun filtering somehow through the rain, as it sometimes does in Oklahoma. Heart racing. Breath catching, as you bent your head to mine, our lips met. My thoughts froze, like snowflakes caught in glass. It wasn't our first kiss and it wasn't our last. That came soon enough with tears and accusations, but that kiss, in that moment, in that small town, beside the softball field, was everything a hope filled teenage girl could dream of. Soft. Lingered. Like promises and faith.

## Wynnewood

One stop light. It isn't stuck on green because the cop figured out that we would race our pickups if it wasn't there to stop us, so we use the red blinking light as a finish line. No real restaurants and one Sonic. We mostly eat at home, where our mothers cook meat-and-potatoes meals for men, mostly returning from the oil field or the refinery, even though most of our mothers work full time and our fathers almost never cook for them. The boys haul hay in the summer, or cantaloupes, or watermelons, or whatever, but mostly hay. The smell of it gets in your nose, your clothes, your hair. The girls drive out to the fields with a Sonic Coke and a smile and pray for rain so they can get laid during hay season. While the farmers, old grizzled men who have been praying for rain all year, beg God to hold off, just a few hours, until all of the hay is in.

We play sports, but only football, basketball, softball, and track. And cheerleading, if you count that. Most people don't. Golf if you're rich enough to have clubs. Practice at the course the next town over and putt on the dying green. We watch sports even if we don't play, because the rest of the town is there anyway. Small town crowds show up, and they know every player on the team. And really, when you are sixteen and this town and these people are all you know, the bright stadium lights, the marching band, and the vibrant energy of a winning team is a great way to spend your time.

Boys wear their state rings with pride, and girls wear their boy's letter jackets with more pride. Both badges of honor earned in different ways. The cop looks the other way when the boys buy beer after a good game, because he remembers playing a good game as the best time of his life, before he realized that he would never leave the tiny town filled with people, good and bad, just like every other tiny Oklahoma town. So, every Friday night in Fall he and thirty other guys who were the best player in (pick a year), talk of missed tackles and coach from the sidelines, as they recall the play that made their high school careers.

Boys without state rings and girls without letter jackets or homecoming crowns, go to the games, wait for acceptance letters and for day that they can prove that the road leading into town also leads out—once they follow it, they never have to come back. Unless they choose to. Many do, return home to the town where their fathers grew up and their fathers before them, to raise their kids amid the fireflies and football games. Where everyone knows everyone and they offer to help when the hay needs to be brought in.

## Humanity

Babies come into the world screaming.  
Screaming like sirens, shocked to the core.  
Core muscles stretching, catching, like retching.

Retching up the fear, we all try to hide.  
Hide from the bad, from life, from the good.  
Good is just as scary, although not as scary as change.

Change. The unknown. The wilderness. Why?  
Why do we tremble in terror when we don't know?  
Know all the answers. Be right. Be the one.

One of the achievers. The winners. The leaders.  
Leaders show no fear, right? No terror.  
Terror never holds them hostage, screaming like babies.

Obituary

The divorce killed her.  
She was sure it had.

Her Grandmother told her, when she was seventeen and broken hearted for the first time, in a very real way, “Keep breathing. One day you won’t have to remind yourself to breathe.”

The divorce killed her  
She was sure it had.  
Sometimes, late at night,  
when there was no one else to  
be honest with,

She wondered if the marriage had killed her.  
She wondered if caring for him,  
His illnesses  
His neuroses  
His many diagnoses  
Had slowly, insidiously killed her.  
If it had, she hadn’t noticed.

She wondered if the money,  
struggling to pay the bills and getting loans.  
The foreclosure  
The bankruptcy  
The many collection notices  
Had slowly, insidiously killed her.  
If it had, she noticed a little more.

He never asked it of her.  
He would never have.  
He never asked her to give up parts of herself.  
Her goals  
Her voice  
Her many dreams  
He surely would have stopped it, if he had noticed.

No, in the light of day,  
she was certain  
the divorce killed her.  
She was sure of it.

Her Grandmother told her, when she was seventeen and heartbroken in a real way for the first time, “Keep breathing. Eventually it won’t hurt to breathe”

The divorce killed her.

She was sure of it.  
But she couldn't stay dead.

She would like to say that she  
rebounded, Rose Gold and brilliant,  
Bright  
Fiery  
Ready to take on the world.

But she didn't.  
She wanted to stay dead.  
They wouldn't let her so  
she rose, a plague survivor clawing from the grave.  
Slowly  
Painfully  
Tragically

Dazedly shaking the ashes from her hair,  
She rose, removed her sackcloth, and realized that she had to keep breathing.

Unwritten and Unnamed: What Came Next

The divorce hadn't killed her. Neither had the marriage.  
Despite her cries to God and her copious tears.  
Rumors of her death had been greatly exaggerated,  
at least in her own head.

She pulled herself from the grave.  
Slowly.  
Painfully.  
Tragically.  
and tried to hide from the world.  
The world wasn't having that.

Her grandmother's voice echoed in her head; "Keep breathing. One day you won't have to remind yourself to breathe."

Actually, many voices echoed:  
Not your fault.  
He lost the thread,  
Sick and sad.  
You deserve better.  
You'll be better.  
(This last came from her father, which was a little shocking to her newly risen sensibilities.)

The world wasn't having her death or allowing her to hide,  
so, she shook the ashes from her hair and  
reminded herself to breathe.

In.  
Out.  
In.  
Out.

Take a breath.

Left foot.  
Right foot.  
Left foot.  
Right foot.

Take a breath.

The world was happier.  
She was up and moving.  
Only she could see the remnants of the ashes,

If she turned her head too quickly  
or when she brushed her hair.

In.  
Out.  
In.  
Out.

Unwritten and unnamed. She  
remembered to breathe, but  
Oh God, it hurt.

Left foot.  
Right foot.  
Left foot.  
Right foot.

Unwritten and unnamed  
because none of the names fit anymore  
Her story had unraveled.  
Where did she go from here?

In.  
Out.  
In.  
Out.

Her grandmother hadn't given her a timeline when she was seventeen and broken hearted for the first time, in a real way. Maybe her grandmother had been wrong. This time she wasn't just heart broken. She was broken.

Left foot.  
Right foot.  
Left foot.  
Right foot.

She washed her hair.  
Watched more of the ashes go down  
the drain, wondering if they would  
ever be completely gone.

In.  
Out.  
In.  
Out.

It sounds trite to her own ears,  
but trite exists for moments like these.  
She grew tired of being broken.  
Unwritten and unnamed.

She looked in the mirror.  
Decided to call the ashes highlights.  
She took a deep breath and realized  
That her grandmother had been right so long ago,  
when she had told the broken hearted seventeen-year-old that it wouldn't hurt forever.

She started writing a new story.  
And she named herself: Elizabeth,  
Child of God.  
Mother.  
Daughter.  
Friend.  
Poet.  
(With highlights)



Drenched

I don't need a  
savior. I already have one.

I release my boundaries  
No need to push through.  
Drench me with your touch  
I'll do the same for you.

You say, "You don't need me"  
But I want you. Can't that be  
better? We two.

Neither broken.  
Neither spent.  
Wanted.  
Desired.  
Craved.  
Two completes making something more.

Intertwined  
Tongues, lips, hearts, minds, legs.  
We bathe, one in the other.  
No boundaries. No you. No me.

We Can't.  
You won't.  
Try.  
We don't.

---

Am I sacrilegious to ask?  
Faith is not enough  
I am not enough  
The glue slips  
Darkness shows through those cracks

Or is the sacrilege in admitting it?  
I am washed in the blood.  
But I drown.  
I slip and slide in the blood.  
But I drown.

Is the sacrilege that I'm over here  
working out my salvation  
that I don't have time to worry about yours?

Walking on water would have been...something.  
But I doubt. I fear.  
So I sink.  
Peter glanced away and sank.

I turn my whole back.  
How much more do I deserve?  
But God is my antidote.  
and I drown.

## Collective Memory

Elizabeth

When Allison was born and I battling the scalding red fire of post-partum anxiety (It wasn't baby blues. It wasn't depression. It was churning fear that would not recede, just came, wave after wave), I stared into Doug's eyes and sobbed, "I just don't want to break her." He solemnly leaned in and whispered, "Don't worry, they bounce." We laughed through tears, and eventually there were fewer tears, although there are never fewer fears.

No one talks about the loss of memory when someone leaves, either through death or disagreement. The loss of the shared glance and eye roll across the table at Thanksgiving. The lean in and "do you remember?" Cold toes brushing a calf under the blankets. The kiss of shoulders in the hall. Love notes tucked under a pillow. Laughter at two a.m. Assembling bikes on a sleepy Christmas morning. Slow waltz in the grocery store aisle. The quiet moments after lullabies and prayers. The first tentative glance of lips. Tangled fingers, tongues, and legs. The moment of conception. Sitting, numb with terror, beside a child's hospital bed. No one talks about the loss of confirmation. The shared joy. The debilitating pain.

My marriage did not end in fire. I looked around one day and he was gone. Busy elsewhere, his body present, but his heart missing. Then one day, he was gone, body, heart, and soul.

I search for the memories we shared. For the missing details. I look to the sky. If there was a third witness to those moments, He is silent. There are only two in the moment. If the one who leans in to whisper is no longer there. Can no longer confirm. Does a memory die if it isn't shared?

Doug

## Saturday Night Sacrament



Wednesdays and Sundays are for church and only for church. Revival is more than church for a week *true Revival is in the heart* thunders the evangelist *Raise up a child in the way she should go and when she is old she will not depart from it* Her father's *amen* booms Her mother echoes the little girl gets to play under the pew color nap take her shoes off the preteen does her homework trying to parse math amidst the hymns and homily but the teenage girl must sit up listen learn receive sanctification and purification but the only tongue she can think of is his in the bed of his black pickup river valley hay field sanctuary stars their cathedral square bales the altar and her body the sacrifice His tongue laves the base of her spine and she she praises that skin where his abs are carved just below his navel As her mother prays in the old church he is the bread and the wine sighs and salvation she shall not depart from it.

## Retha Mae

Age spots fleck the hand holding the door & smiling wide & a voice declaring, “Well come in this house” & strong hands wringing a chicken’s neck. A fryer. I can help shuck corn but I can’t pick blackberries because snakes are terrifying things & Sunday dinner & everyone’s welcome & hot cakes & fried eggs & beans & cornbread & I hate beans & cornbread, but I eat them because respect is also a terrifying thing & Okies survived on beans & cornbread & biscuits & watergravy & blown to Salinas & still fighting the wind sixty years later & strong hands make a delicate dress for the first day of school as eyes peer through cataracts & married for sixty-five years & “Honey, I worry that you don’t have a man anymore” & so do I, Grandma & for different reasons

## SPF 0

I used to tan. Every day. Thirty minutes a day. I didn't have the time or the will to lay beneath the sun and relax, so I rolled my naked self into a man-made oven that was supposed to be better for my skin. After a day of twenty minipretzels, sixty ounces of water, six ephedra, and sixteen ounces of Coca-Cola, I would lay my racing head and carefully highlighted hair on the freshly cleaned baking sheet and pray, "Dear God, let me glow. Dear God let me be beautiful and thin. blonde and thin. Smart and thin. Anything and thin. Twenty years later the dermatologist slices the answers to my heated prayers.

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