

Unfolding Feminism and Femininity

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## Abstract

This project considers my female lineage and my practice of Christian Science as it affects the way I practice feminism and express femininity. I analyze the relationships between media culture, body image, spirituality, family, and language as it relates to my personal experience as a woman in Western society. Writings by Flannery O'Connor, Virginia Woolf, and Mary Baker Eddy are referenced as they resonate with my own work and support my quest to define and redefine feminism and femininity for myself.

*My grandmother and her mother prattled to each other in the choppy, repetitive tones of Pig Latin. The words leapt effortlessly from their lips. They liked having a language only the two of them could understand.*

## The Same Old Story

In Flannery O'Connor's *Prayer Journal*, she writes, "[Dear God,] Please let Christian principles permeate my writing and please let there be enough of my writing (published) for Christian principles to permeate."<sup>1</sup> This deep desire was realized in all of O'Connor's work in the way themes of pain, grace, and redemption weave throughout her novels, short stories, and even personal correspondences. Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, "I am swimming in the head and write rather to stabilize myself than to make a correct statement"<sup>2</sup>. While she wrote this at a time of ill health, this desire for stability proved consistent in all of her written work. It seems that recording her experiences either in a diary or as fiction was her mode of processing the world and her place in it.

The more I write, the more I realize the possibility that every work of an author is essentially the same story. Perhaps all that we writers actually do is sculpt the same mound of clay over and over again in hopes of clarity—in hopes of seeing a fuller reality in those subjects that transfix us.

Virginia Woolf said, "It is perfectly true that [my mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*... and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother."<sup>3</sup> In the novel, the character Lily Briscoe begins painting a portrait of the character Mrs. Ramsay, which takes her ten years (the entirety of the novel) to complete. The novel ends with Lily declaring to herself, "I have had my vision."<sup>4</sup> In addition to illustrating both the end of Lily's obsession with Mrs. Ramsay and

Woolf's obsession with her mother, these words also indicate the power of art to bring clarity. When she finished writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf had had her vision. She stabilized the random images darting aimlessly through her mind about her mother through the art of writing, and thereby stabilized her sense of self at the same time.

Though the obsession with her mother may have ended after *To the Lighthouse* was written, descriptions of her mother continued to appear throughout her work. In her autobiographical essay, "A Sketch of the Past," she remembers her mother walking onto a balcony dressed in white and surrounded by passion flowers—"great starry blossoms, with purple streaks, and large green buds, part empty, part full."<sup>5</sup> She continues, "If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green."<sup>6</sup> In a beautiful echo of *To the Lighthouse*, the essay picks up the motif of art (specifically painting) as an act of realizing and preserving significant moments and memories in a world that seems to constantly change. Woolf's work reveals the multiple ways the same story can be rethought and retold to achieve an increased sense of stability and clarity.

In my own writing, I see an ongoing quest to realize my feminism and femininity, specifically as it relates to my practice of Christian Science as well as my female lineage; thus I find that the literary desires of both O'Connor and Woolf resonate with my own. For example, I could have easily written similarly to O'Connor: "[Dear God,] Please let Christian [Science] principles permeate my writing and please let there be enough of my writing (published) for Christian [Science] principles to permeate."<sup>7</sup> My focus is on spiritual discovery—cultivating a greater

understanding of spiritual identity and reality—and how this is tangible in my lived experience. How are my practice of feminism and my expression of femininity the result of spiritual understanding? I find the answer in the concept of grace.

In Hebrew, grace is a masculine noun, and according to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, means favor, acceptance, and goodwill. In Greek, it is a feminine noun meaning “that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness.”<sup>8</sup> It also indicates the merciful kindness of God, strengthening mankind and increasing their affection and virtue. That grace is linguistically masculine and feminine represents, for me, a sense of completeness. It acts as a unifier of spiritual creation. In Christian Science, I’ve learned that spiritually mankind is “the full representation of Mind [God].”<sup>9</sup> This spiritual identity is not limited to gender. In fact, it includes all the qualities of God—masculine and feminine. Therefore, for me, feminism is a mode of recognizing and correcting an error of collective consciousness that has condemned woman and celebrated man. It is a way of realizing the equality and fullness of my spiritual identity in lived reality. I find that an understanding of grace as acceptance, goodness, joy, and loveliness derived from divine love points to the presence and permanence of these qualities in my daily life and thus provides the foundation from which I consider feminism and femininity. To me, my femininity is the outcome of grace. It includes humility, strength, and freedom. I have been conditioned by Western culture to be feminine in the way that I wear clothes and in the way that I behave, but grace transforms my understanding of femininity into a set of qualities irrespective of gender and void of negative connotations.

Human consciousness seems to be the playground for chaos and clarity. In the Bible, Jesus tells his followers a parable about a man who sows wheat seed in his field, but an enemy comes and sows tares (weeds) in the same field. The man knows that in order to save all the wheat, he must wait until both the tares and wheat are fully grown. Only then does it become clear which crop should be harvested and which should be burned. As a Christian Scientist, I see this parable as applicable to human consciousness. I therefore want to divide the chaos from the clarity. Writing is a mode through which I do this. The ability to reflect upon and process a moment, a person, or an idea allows one to see oneself in relation to that moment, person, or idea and thus brings a clarity that anchors being.

Considering Christian Science principles in lived experience points me to my female lineage. I could also have written similarly to Woolf: "It is perfectly true that [my grandmother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was [ten]..."<sup>10</sup> Originally, I intended to write a novel about a young female artist working at the Walt Disney Studio in the 1930s. The main character was a quiet rebel, a woman with ideas she couldn't fully express. I named her after my grandmother, who was an artist. I wanted her to have a voice, or maybe I wanted to create my own version of her voice in order to feel close to her. Perhaps I seek simply to stabilize my memory of her. I intended the novel to act as a critique of a woman's experience in an earlier time—the ripples of which are felt in a woman's experience today. However, I found that the more important task at hand was to stop time and process my own personal history of feminism.

I want to control the past. Something about unpacking and fully realizing memories and stories passed down to me gives me a sense control. This control is not achieved through self-will or manipulation but in clear sightedness. There's a sense (or illusion) of power that comes with correctness—in processing the way the past lingers in the present. I don't want to control the past by constructing new identities but by realizing old ones to their full potential. I want to exalt what exists.

I always felt close to my grandmother even though she passed away when I was ten, and half of those years her mental health was declining. I think she must have shown me so much love in the first few years of my life that her love is all I can remember. Some things root themselves so deeply that they never disappear even when human reason and coherence do. I've been told I have her high cheekbones, her determination, and her stubbornness. I lick my fingers after a meal, and I hear "you're just like my mother" in a tone of contentment masked by disgust. Sometimes I find myself inconsolable—brow furrowed, rubbing my head in exasperation over the piece I'm writing. "Just like Kate," I hear, "never satisfied." Somehow this consoles me. I feel a deep sense of satisfaction in the fact that my being points to another—that I mark the presence of the past. I want to know more about this past—this part of myself. My desire to write a fictional story based on my grandmother mirrors Woolf's intent with *To the Lighthouse*. A longing to see the layers of a person and to shine a light on those layers (which may not have been perceived in the moment) fueled my intent to write a novel.

Interestingly, all of my creative work has been from the perspective of women trying to figure out a stable sense of identity and realizing that they find it in

each other—in other women. This pattern in my work has become increasingly clear the more I write, separating chaos from clarity. It seems I've always been driven by the way women relate to each other throughout time and how this relationship is both powerful and limited. To be clear, the relationships are not limited in and of themselves, but societal expectations and cultural influences have imposed limits on the amount of power women can achieve through each other. As a result, relationships between women have both endured stress and savored triumph. I'm interested in understanding the complexity of what female relationships and femininity have come to mean in my own history.

Now, instead of exploring this through the genre of historical fiction, I'm exploring it through observation, reflection, and memory. For me, writing fiction preserved a sense of safety from the past because of the illusion of objectivity. There's sweet protection in that separation between author and narrative. But I find that while this protection has propelled me toward clarity, at some point protection turned into prevention, so it's time to sculpt the clay over again—to write the same story differently. Non-fiction forces me to face and expose those scary vulnerabilities that constitute my identity as a woman and feminist.

To be vulnerable indicates an inherent need for protection, and in a historically patriarchal society to be vulnerable can position one as a helpless woman, reinforcing an identity imposed on me. Yet, if I take the term back into my own hands, it indicates something else: a letting down of boundaries—a freedom that requires a higher humility and grace, which, for me, comes from understanding the presence of spirituality. Vulnerability provides a space that enables truer

discoveries of being. I find that my power as a feminist comes from utilizing my vulnerability; thus I don't want to avoid the emotion, sensitivity, and intuition historically associated with irrational and frail femininity. Rather, I want to redefine emotion, sensitivity, and intuition to highlight them as modes of reason and positions of autonomy. I want to exalt what exists.

The beauty of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is that it exposes vulnerability and fear through the grotesque. It presents sensitivity to the human condition. What's more, her *Prayer Journal* offers an even more intimate level of vulnerability. In it, she admits her spiritual shortcomings and longs for God's help. It is the record of a very personal quest for grace, which, in her case, refers to redemption or salvation from mortal sin. Though this vulnerable quest found in her journal is packaged differently in her fiction, it is not lost or obstructed. Each fictional character is on a quest for grace, whether or not he or she fully realizes it. Furthermore, in every story, the characters face what they most fear.

The way O'Connor writes about death (among other human fears) serves as a way to discover the presence of grace. For example, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother, dressed in white gloves and hat for a family road trip, exudes self-importance and superiority. She believes she is a good (wo)man though she lies and manipulates her family. To the reader, she seems undeserving of God's grace. In fact, it seems entirely absent from her being. Yet, her encounter with the Misfit—a criminal holding her hostage—results in revelation. In response to his questions about Jesus, she says, "Why you're one of my own babies. You're one of my own children!"<sup>11</sup> The response indicates her recognition of the humanity and true

compassion that unites them. The story shows how even undeserving characters receive God's grace; thus illustrating the constancy and consistency of grace. Grace is always present, though, not always perceived in the human mind or experience now. O'Connor sculpts the clay over and over again so that she herself perceives grace. This clear perception then manifests as revelation and transformation. As a result of writing the same story repeatedly, she discovers more about what she seeks and, at the same time, brings out the Christian principles she wanted to permeate existence.

I want to use my own vulnerability—the fears, weaknesses, and stresses that are inscribed within my feminist and feminine identities—to reveal the strength of a new understanding of loveliness. In my experience, I've realized that strength has always been mine. It just hasn't always been apparent to my lived reality. As I rethink what it means to be feminine and a feminist, I recognize a new sense of loveliness that was always present but unacknowledged. It is new to my human consciousness but has always been part of the truth of my being. To me, human progress is a process of uncovering a spiritual sense of identity through my practice of Christian Science. This spiritual sense of self is manifested tangibly in human experience, but it begins by the revelation that strength and grace are always experienced in the present and ever new to human perception—even gloriously so.

Within this space, boundaries of comfort and processed identity are broken, allowing deeper exploration of an ever-unfolding spiritual identity. I want to approach the perpetual unfolding of feminism and femininity as the outcome of

grace—the divine love and acceptance, which supports my joy, delight, and loveliness in human experience.

I have been writing the same story over and over again, and I will continue to write it. With each impartation, it reveals more vulnerability, depth, and clarity. To write is to approach the glowing, multifarious hues of being.

## You've Got Mail

Tweets, Facebook posts, emails, and texts permeate my existence. Today we write messages like we breathe air—we do it constantly but don't often think about it. We're constantly (dis)connected. Ellipses, emoticons, and typos fill the messages we send each other. They're sporadic bursts—half-thoughts that promise immediate gratification in the middle of errands, work, or sitting in traffic. We anticipate a response as immediate as the message we send, which will, at the same time, satisfy a craving for personal validation. This exchange simulates connection. But this connection doesn't require commitment or time. I always thought commitment and time were essential elements of connection. Has our current technological era redefined connection or have we (dis)connected to a point where we don't recognize it in its most authentic forms?

I miss writing letters—ink bleeding commitment into the page, my hand guiding the pen printing the words that express the fullness of my thoughts. My mind and body engage in an inscription of presence. My body connects to the texture of the page and the rhythm of penmanship. My mind connects to a person and the sweet anticipation of his or her reception of a message.

I say I miss writing letters, but what I really mean is that I miss letter writing as a social practice. I miss a time that precedes my birth when communicating was more literary. Emily Dickinson once wrote to her mentor, "I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid."<sup>12</sup> Such vulnerable truth emerges within the privacy of a letter, a place of safety in which a recluse allows the poetry of thought to manifest.

Letters give the opportunity for heart to reach heart. I have a desperate need for this—to reach hearts, which requires commitment and time or a singularity of mind. “Let us never underestimate the power of a well-written letter,”<sup>13</sup> wrote Jane Austen. I can’t help but feel that few people today know the lasting satisfaction of articulating exactly what they mean to a specific person without being interrupted. To think and express *fully* is to harness the soul’s power. At the same time, there’s something profound about receiving this articulation from someone else. You let yourself absorb someone else’s moment with you.

It was my senior year of college. I sat on a bluff high above the muddy Mississippi surrounded by tall grass that swayed in crisp air and sunlight. The paper felt like a butterfly wing between my fingers—delicate and smooth. His handwriting printed on the pages imprinted a moment on my heart. I absorbed the span of time in which he sat at a desk and crafted a message he wanted only me to know—that he needed me to know. My hand touched the places his hand slid over. I felt a singular connection more powerful than any email or text correspondence I’ve ever experienced. There’s an intimacy in the material nature of a letter. Texts and emails don’t entail the same process of connection; thus we’ve grown increasingly disconnected in our connectivity.

This disconnection has been gradual and almost imperceptible. The 1998 film *You’ve Got Mail* illustrates a significant point in the evolution of Western communication. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan are at their Rom-Com best as bookstore owning rivals who unknowingly correspond with one another via email. “I hear nothing. Not even a sound on the streets of New York, just the beat of my own heart.

I have mail. From you,"<sup>14</sup> she writes. "Don't you love New York in the fall? It makes me wanna buy school supplies. I would send you a bouquet of newly sharpened pencils if I knew your name and address,"<sup>15</sup> he writes back to her. They share moments of personal revelation and hardship in a way that retains the romance of focused thought—an intentional and literary mode of communication, which would be soon swallowed by the noise of Internet (dis)connectivity. It illustrates the naivety of the digital age—our ignorance of it. We thought it would increase connectivity—enhance all the aspects of former modes of communication.

The movie promised that email communication would include all the depth and vulnerability of handwritten letters in a new and improved format—one with a sense of immediacy. But this desire for immediacy has stripped communication of its commitment. The movie portrays the Internet as the one place the characters can escape from the chaos of their lives to sit in reverie and reflection. It presents the Internet as the very seat of authenticity—a place to discover genuine identity and connection. It had no idea that virtual reality would someday rival, if not overshadow, physical reality.

There's an antiquated charm about the movie. The clunky black laptops, the crude computer graphics, and the ancient sound of dial up remind me of an innocent worldwide excitement over technological advancement. But the dawning of digital connectivity rose to a noon of constant motion, productivity, and multitasking. Today, we live physically and virtually in perpetual distraction with multiple Internet browser tabs, email accounts, text messages, not to mention the many conversations, meetings, and appointments that can fill our days. Today's digital

culture makes my longing for letters embarrassing. The digital age wants efficiency and organization—not a message enjoyed for a few brief moments only to be discarded, taking up unnecessary space and wasting the earth’s precious resources.

I’m constantly at odds. Nothing about this culture justifies what I need—to be present with one activity or one person at a time. I want to sit in reverie—a state translator Daniel Russell describes as so “unproductive, impractical, and so completely unempirical as to be considered almost immoral in a society oriented toward pure and sometimes mindless action.”<sup>16</sup> I feel archaic, obsolete, and, at times, immoral, as I write letters, yet I don’t stop. As I craft holiday cards, the stiffness of the paper, the stickiness of the glue, the glide of the pen feeds my soul. This desire—this need—burns within me despite outside resistance. I can’t stop. The soul is resilient that way.

Gaston Bachelard writes, “There are still souls for whom love is the contact of two poetries, the fusion of two reveries.”<sup>17</sup> There’s a box in a drawer that protects all the letters I received from him that year. Sometimes I forget it exists. Then I stumble upon it while I’m putting something away and wonder if mine are kept somewhere, too, or if they’re floating around his apartment as bookmarks or coasters. Maybe they’re lost. Yet I would rather have these pieces of us drifting around the earth than drifting through the ether. Even if the letters aren’t accounted for, they’re somewhere. The fullness of our moments are tangible somewhere. For me, they’re irreversible evidences of connectedness.

*Hot pink was our favorite color. I had a pair of hot pink pants and a matching shirt. One time my grandmother took me for a walk, and I got it in my head that if I didn't move my legs, but kept them together, the pants looked like a dress.*

*"Look, Mama!" I said. "I'm wearing a dress." I bent over to look at my legs, erasing the line down the middle that told me I was, in fact, wearing pants.*

*"How lovely!" Mama said. She liked my ideas.*

## For the Love of Loveliness

*Lovely*. You can feel its delicacy. The *L* flips lightly from the tongue. The *V* grazes the lips. The final *LY* glides, lifting free from the mouth. We use it to describe something pleasant or sweet. *Lovely*. We use it to describe women or objects that are attractive, beautiful, pleasing to the emotions as well as the eye. It has become another brand of beauty. I want to know when love got divorced from the word. It strikes me as profoundly strange that the substance of *lovely* has become invisible. How... lovely.

The perversion of loveliness is subtle and beguiling. In the 1936 film *Swing Time*, a woman's arm floats in a soft *V* as a man whisks her into a tap dance, suit-tails and chiffon in perfect sync. "Lovely," he sings later, "never, never change/Keep that breathless charm/Won't you please arrange it? 'Cause I love you/Just the way you look tonight."<sup>18</sup> The music floats through the door of the adjacent room where she hangs her head over the sink, shampooing her hair. She stops. The anger she had held onto for a week dissolves at the sound of his voice. Starry-eyed, she forgets her foamy hair and opens the door. His back is to her. She walks toward him until close enough to rest her hand on his shoulder. He finishes the song, turning to gaze into her eyes at the last note, only to grimace at her appearance. She looks up into a mirror. Her eyes widen with horror, and she races back to the room.

Definitions of loveliness *are* subtle and beguiling. They sneak into consciousness almost undetected. The scene is lighthearted and tender. Yet, it perpetuates loveliness as dependent upon appraisal. His memory—his ideal—of her is lovely. But when presented with a form that doesn't fit that ideal, he cringes.

Media has a way of manipulating language. We *feel* images associated with words. Feeling masquerades as the soul's truth. It seems to come from the roots of our being. While feeling should not be ignored or disregarded, the source of feeling should be considered. To some degree, watching the movie scene, we feel the shame of being unlovely as she runs away from his shocked face. If we trust this feeling, we come to need loveliness, to be loveliness. But is this *our* feeling or a *conditioned* feeling?

A song starts with a beat kept by a bass string and clapping. Its simplicity builds my anticipation. Piano chords enter, chasing the clapped beat. Add drums, and it's officially catchy. I'm all in. "I love the way she fills her clothes," he sings. "A stunner, I want her... She's so lovely..."<sup>19</sup> I'm all out. It tricked me. Here, to be lovely is for the female body to be desired, but the feeling of the song—its playfulness—gives the definition a positive connotation. Without being alert it enters consciousness as an ideal, a goal, a role, and a reality. Ascribing a woman's power to her body positions her in a losing battle. The body cannot be perfect. But scenes and songs suggest that it can be. For me, ascribing power to spirituality positions me in a winning battle. From this standpoint, my worth is secure, and I can see beyond media definitions of love and loveliness to reclaim the word *lovely*. To be lovely is to understand and radiate love—the very impetus of the word.

## Talking Serpents

*Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made... Genesis 3:1*

I thought I was safe from serpents. Growing up as a Christian Scientist I saw the Adam and Eve story as an allegory in which woman was not subordinate or the demon cause of the fall. Rather, she was the first to take responsibility for her actions, unlike Adam who cowardly blamed Eve for his downfall. Her self-knowledge gave her the power to see the “beguiling” nature of the serpent, which thereby allowed her to understand the original spiritual reality as described in the first chapter of Genesis—“*And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*”

The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, writes “Man and woman as coexistent and eternal with God forever reflect, in glorified quality, the infinite Father-Mother God.”<sup>20</sup> In one way or another my grandmother, my mother, my sisters, and I have felt the freedom this principle gives us. It unites us. A lineage of faith in God as both tender Father and strong Mother enables us to unfold ourselves. Understanding that men and women include the qualities of divine fatherhood and motherhood through distinct spiritual identities caused me to perceive the world differently growing up. The traditional Western male-female binary has always been undermined if not invisible to me. Furthermore, Mary Baker Eddy herself deconstructed this binary and demonstrated what an identity outside of Western definitions of gender might achieve. She founded a religion, a school, published multiple books, lectured, and (at age 87) established *The Christian Science Monitor*

all before women could even vote in the States. It didn't occur to me that women occupied a space of inferiority and powerlessness.

I thought I was safe from serpents.

For my female lineage and me, religion has always served as a way to access a deeper understanding of grace—consciousness of God's ever-present love. Furthermore, it has propelled a constant examination of the ways we acquire knowledge.

I remember the women asking questions, thinking critically, and revealing loveliness. They barricaded themselves in their rooms, seeking single-minded stillness. They reached across the supposed barrier between humanity and spirituality to understand the tangibility of God's grace. In my childhood, God was never a mysterious or supernatural Being, dictating human destiny. Instead, God was the law of love or spiritual perfection, keeping all in harmony and balance just like the law of gravity keeps us anchored to earth. As a Christian Scientist, I am required to reason between the material and the spiritual. Human consciousness marks the point where the spiritual and material intersect—where spiritual law can become tangible to the human senses.

My childhood was full of outspoken and opinionated women—my grandmother, aunt, mother, two sisters. "Girls are smarter than boys," I was always told. When I was seven years old I clung to the phrase as absolute truth, repeating it once to my male cousin. He whined, but I knew it was true. My cousin left the room. He came back with his family friend and teacher Mr. Brown who looked me square in the eye and told me that wasn't true. In that moment, I felt a sense of power or

maybe just rebellion. I could feel generations of women behind me. I smiled and said it *was* true. Now, I see the phrase not necessarily as truth but as a battle cry against patriarchal definitions of womanhood—definitions the women in my family have fought against without knowing it. Definitions that they have ultimately been forced to accept to some degree. Their definitions are the talking serpents we must put down.

For much of my life, I did not identify as a feminist. In my family, the term evoked images of bra-burning radicals. Feminism was not feminine, and though we defied boundaries, we were still aiming for femininity. Following the example of my grandmother and my mother, I've barricaded myself in my room, searching. Feminism has become a mode of discovery. It has enabled me to deepen self-knowledge—to recognize the "beguiling" nature of serpents—those images or definitions that suggest a limited or oppressed identity. It's a mode of prevailing against serpents. I wish I could tell my grandmother.

The serpents slithered in early. A barely dressed, shimmering Tinker Bell glides through the air and stops at a mirror lying on a table. She lands and twirls, admiring herself in a few brief moments of incandescent confidence. Then something she sees startles her. The whimsical violins narrating her emotions descend into low ominous tones as she measures her hips with her hands. The literal descent of the music reflects the descent from confidence to shame. I imitated that scene before I was even ten years old. Then, I didn't see it as a ritual of self-consciousness. I thought I was being lovely. Since then, however, I've observed myself and other women imitate this scene in one way or another.

The act of claiming and reclaiming feminism and language in general is an unending process. There's comfort in the fact that practice does not make perfect. Practice means a continual effort and continuous work. The goal is not to answer questions but to keep asking questions. All of me wants to work for a conclusion. I crave the point in which I can feel safe and secure in an answer, in accuracy, in definition. But these landmarks of safety are illusions—other versions of serpents. As soon as I reach that point, it becomes poisoned with fear—the fear of that boundary being broken, that definition being perverted. I let my own limited ideals enclose my existence. Freedom is in the process, in the active seeking, in the practice, in the journey.

*And the Lord God said unto the serpent... thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field... Genesis 3:13*

*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God. James 1:13*

## Addicted to Love

In reclaiming *lovely*, I find myself acutely aware of all the ways I see the word *love* used. “LOVE” flashes across a black TV screen in all red capital letters. I am transfixed. The shot is followed by different shots of women. One walks down the street while a man turns to check her out. Another woman looks deep into a man’s eyes while the camera zooms in on hers. The black screen and red writing returns—“Flirtation is on,” “Devotion is on,” “Romance is on,” “Sexy is on,” “Desire is on,” “Passion is on,” “Seduction is on,” “Love is on”—the words are punctuated by close-ups of a woman’s mouth, her eyes, her fingers caressing a lipstick tube, her hair, her dress strap slipping from her shoulder.

Narrating it all is a woman singing “Addicted to Love.” “You like to think that you’re immune to this stuff / It’s closer to the truth to say you can’t get enough / You know you’re going have to face it you’re addicted to love/ Might as well face it you’re addicted to love.”<sup>21</sup> The words in the context of the advertisement point to the hopelessness of a woman’s pursuit of autonomy. Women can pretend to be strong and independent, but when it comes down to it, they can’t resist their innate need for the love that only a man or the gaze of a camera can give. Deep down inside every woman is an insatiable desire for male companionship. Every woman reaches her ultimate triumph and success by her ability to secure a place in his arms.

The Revlon commercial reminds women everywhere of their natural obsession with love and their dependency on love as bestowed upon them by men. Each camera shot of “love” includes a woman with a man. However, men usually occupied the outer edges of the screen. His hand reached for hers, he wrapped her in

his arms, or he let her head rest on his chest, but the focus was always on the woman's reaction to this gift. In each image the man offered a woman something she needed, and she was happy, satisfied, and safe. The images reflect a man's ability to give something that translates to love for a woman but the images fail to illustrate a man's need for love. In fact, men are mostly absent from love. It is a woman's domain.

Western society seems bent on convincing us that women crave a type of fairytale love while men crave sex. Media in particular acts as a talking serpent, tempting us with illusionary absolutes: Men want sex; women want love. Media culture has the power to absorb us into its projected illusions. It seems to show us humanity. But when I asked a couple of men what they seek in romance it was love as "something unconditional and ever-growing" and as "embracing and working for something greater than myself."<sup>22</sup> Despite the slightness of the poll, it still illustrates a gap between media and truth. All men don't want lust.

On November 18, 2014, Revlon declared how proud they were to unveil their new campaign focused on "inspiring love and connecting with people around the world." They also stated that "From the moment you put on Revlon makeup, we want love to captivate your imagination, to take you on a journey into the world of love, where you will be enchanted by its countless dimensions."<sup>23</sup>

The commercial tells women that men will be magically drawn to them if they use Revlon cosmetics (it is a make-up ad after all), but, even worse, it reinforces a woman's obsession with a heteronormative-male-controlled love. Furthermore,

the achievement of this insatiable desire for love depends on donning a mask of perfection.

The word “devotion” flashes on the screen followed by a close-up of a woman’s lips and her hand on a lipstick tube. The one quality of love listed here that seems to plunge beneath physical affection is deliberately aimed toward a product. Rather than devotion to another person or a relationship, love requires a devotion to make-up—to a manipulation of appearance. A woman’s worthiness for love—something she cannot live without—is based upon her body.

Worse still, all of the women in the advertisement are white except for two that are African American. Not only does a woman’s worthiness of love depend on a flawless mask, but it also depends on how light skinned she can be. There are no “countless dimensions” of love or loveliness here; there is one. The only dimension of love explored here is the Western fantasy of physically perfect [manipulated] white woman and perfect man. The ad defines love as the ability for a woman to capture a man’s desire through enhancing her physique.

The only journey Revlon invites us on is one of an outmoded yet still deeply rooted Western ideal. Women are invited to see their appearance as the source of their success. They are convinced to assume a role of flawless beauty as their means to love. It sells a state of being desired as the state of being loved. It also attempts to sell satisfaction based on an illusion of control. A woman can keep a man with the makeup she uses to project an ideal of herself.

Something psychologically devastating happens when women realize they cannot fit that ideal even with the help of Revlon. Suddenly they are in a hopeless

state of failure. In fact, failure is inscribed on their identity in that their body—the physical manifestation of identity—will never meet the standard necessary for success—for happiness. As the commercial defines love, it also defines an unattainable femininity. If a woman doesn't like makeup or can't wear it correctly, then she fails as a woman. She is not feminine. Conversely, it defines that a manly man is to be drawn to this brand of femininity. A man's aspiration is to possess a woman with perfect hair, perfect skin, and perfect lips. Love becomes a performance as dictated by our most prevalent and omnipresent mediated images.

The takeaway hash tag #loveison tells women that they can literally put on or wear love, including flirtation, devotion, romance, sexiness, desire, passion, and seduction. All of these qualities are attributed to literal objects. Love doesn't require thought but, instead, simply requires a *thing*. It doesn't require one to think but offers the illusion that following a prescription will result in feminine success. It requires one to believe there is a problem and that the problem can be fixed with an item. The problem projected in the commercial is that women cannot fight their obsession with love—and this is a problem that *depends* on a solution. A woman can wear objects to become an object herself. By donning certain objects that become her she becomes little more than those commodities she wears.

At the same time, while love can now simply be worn, the commercial also ascribes specific qualities to love. It acts as a new dictionary, stating that flirtation, devotion, romance, sexiness, desire, passion, and seduction constitute love. How many long-time married couples confess the trick to a long marriage is flirtation? While the qualities listed may be parts of love, they seem to be the most surface

characteristics. They refer to the Western world's dance of love, which is really a game of attraction not connection. The game or dance of attraction between the macho and the feminine does not necessarily result in love, but in a temporary self-validation, satisfaction, and pleasure.

It's in disguising attraction as love that love is made into addiction. Love therefore becomes a substance—an object for consumption. What's more, it makes it a harmful trigger of abuse. This substance is something women, in particular, can't fight and actually crave. But this is exactly the point of the ad. Love is made into a cosmetic—something to wear and to need; a quick ticket to a fantasy of power and satisfaction.

It's commonly accepted in the world of advertising that sex sells. The same principle is demonstrated in the Revlon commercial, though, in this instance, sex is disguised as love. Western society is one that is in love with the dream of love. We're constantly told what love should look like and that it is the pinnacle of happiness. The concept of sex selling may be true, but it seems that this mantra has come to hold a very negative connotation in society. "Sex sells" usually translates as "objectifying women sells." It makes sense then that a marketing campaign would disguise sex as love. Furthermore, since the product is aimed to create an illusion on a woman's face, it also makes sense that Revlon would play with society's propensity to dream—dream of being perfect, dream of perfect love, dream of sex as equivalent to love.

This ad isn't the only place we've learned to consider love as an addiction. The same message weaves throughout all media. "Maybe I need some rehab... I've

got a sick obsession... your love is my drug"<sup>24</sup> goes the catchy Ke\$ha song. Similar to the Revlon commercial, love is an item a man possesses and either gives or withholds from a woman.

These media messages shape society's definitions and expectations of love. We walk around every day inundated with words and, in turn, these words form associations and new meanings. The song has a fast beat. It's playful and carefree. It makes going crazy over this withheld item seem like a positive thing. The women in the Revlon commercial are glamorous, and the final shot shows a woman lying on a man's chest with a smile that makes the viewer feel her satisfaction. Being at the beck and call of a man or possessing a craving for only something he can give is portrayed as a pleasant state—and one to aspire to achieve. She is happy, and female viewers are assumed to want this same happiness. And we do, in a sense. That point of gratification and contentedness is something humanity wants.

Issues of loveliness stem from issues surrounding our cultural definitions of love. These definitions trickle in sometimes without our consent and sometimes despite our understanding of the issues.

*The coat hung in the window—a crisp, beige trench coat with plaid interior lining.*

*“Mom, that looks amazing,” my mother said.*

*She bought it with the insurance money and wore it everywhere—to church, out to dinner, to the park. It gave her some kind of reassurance that she was still worthwhile enough to have a nice coat. But after a couple of years, it disappeared.*

*My mother always wished she had had more time to spend with her mother during this time, but she had three toddlers, a job, and a rocky marriage. She found out later that her two older brothers had returned her coat for the money.*

## Guilty Pleasures

I have a problem. I am addicted to love. I watch *The Bachelor*, have a secret obsession with One Direction, and feel Taylor Swift sings to my soul. My feminist mind is horrified. Yet, there's something in each of these guilty pleasures that overrides that horror. There's a difference between being aware of the messages projected by the media and indulging them anyway than being ignorant of them. However, which is worse—knowingly doing wrong or ignorance? My reflex response is ignorance. Yet, knowingly doing wrong sounds so much worse when you see it in print.

There are many problems with *The Bachelor* (which started in 2002 and is in its 20<sup>th</sup> season). It's a "reality" show that allows one man or woman to date often over twenty-five of the opposite sex at once while they live together, competing for one man. It's meant to get ratings and thus authenticity is at best questionable. It contributes to the dominance of heteronormative love. What's more, the majority of relationships resulting from the show have failed. I guess watching your significant other make-out with a bunch of other women or men, including you, at the same time can strain a relationship.

There is always a token black girl or black guy in the group—and they never "win." The winners have always been white, though some are unnaturally tan. It reinforces one standard of love. It is formulaic. The planned dates at the beginning of each season are often constructed to push the couple out of their comfort zone. More specifically, it usually is directed to make the contestant face a fear in order to

bring the couple closer together. If the contestant fails to face the fear and to immediately trust the Bachelor/Bachelorette, they are usually eliminated.

The process of dating on *The Bachelor* is anything but realistic. Everything is rushed—contestants are forced to make themselves stand out and to somehow create chemistry and depth at once with a stranger. A person is forced to trust, be vulnerable, and cultivate affection for a person who may or may not do the same for them in the end. If you fail to be immediately all of these things you will likely not make it to the next round. It's a psychological hell. Those competing for the "prize" trick themselves into believing they are in love. There is no gradual progression. What's more, there is no equality of investment. Thus many of the relationships fail. It's more often built on chemistry rather than commitment, on passion instead of connection, on sex rather than love.

There were several years during which I refused to watch *The Bachelor* because of these reasons. I no longer believed the illusion of genuineness. Then, in 2013, everything changed. *Bachelor* producers decided Texas born Christian, Sean Lowe, would become the bachelor. He exuded wholesomeness with his clean-cut blonde hair, blue eyes, and white smile. The media highlighted him as a gentleman with high morals. He had been a contestant on a previous season in which he competed to win the heart of bachelorette Emily Maynard. My youngest sister had watched that season and convinced me that Sean would be different. Her confidence coupled with his media persona was enough to rebuild and fuel my hope of witnessing true love. I started watching again. And his success at finding and

keeping love contributes to the show's ability to taunt me as it plays between illusion and reality.

I can't resist the dream of love. I realize I'm being played. The cameras paint a fantastical reality. Yet that potential—that what if—that hopefulness wins every time. To see genuine human connection, understanding, and commitment is a magical part of this life that I can't help but want to witness in every way possible. To see it happen against a backdrop of the Grand Canyon, Antigua, Italy, etc. is irresistible.

Similarly, painting an unreal picture of love are bands like One Direction. Their lyrics direct thought to the body as a source of beauty and attraction. While the body isn't absent from beauty, attraction, or love, it isn't the source. Unfortunately, songs like these seldom highlight anything other than the idea that affection is directly dependent upon appearance. This then perpetuates an imbalanced perception of the importance of appearance as it relates to worth. Furthermore, cluttered with grammatical errors, One Direction doesn't help listeners justify their enjoyment of their music. "Everyone else in the room can see it/Everyone else but you/Baby you light up my world like nobody else/ The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed..."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the songs insist on loveliness. Somehow the lyrics and the predictable melodies whisk me into a world where my innocent (or perhaps movie conditioned) expectations of love come back, and I'm hooked on a song that contributes to the recycling of the same (in some instances) detrimental message about love and loveliness.

The events of everyday life often convince us of the banality of existence. We

get sucked into thinking nothing special really happens and that reality is full of pain and suffering. What's more, we attempt to train ourselves *not* to want the things we have been convinced are impossible for us to achieve. Yet this is not reality either. Silly songs like One Direction rip me from a downcast view and remind me of the sweetness of love. "But there's nothing to be afraid of/Even when the night changes/It will never change me and you."<sup>26</sup> Whether or not the lyrics are genuine, they speak to my propensity to want love as a situation in which to marvel at life—to expect that goodness is present and that the moments of love (to whatever degree) we experience are extraordinary.

Taylor Swift has become a phenomenon because of this. She gives women permission to love love. She paints dreams and heartbreak unapologetically. "You'll be the prince and I'll be the princess,/It's a love story, baby, just say, "Yes""<sup>27</sup> she sang in one of her breakout hits. "It rains when you're here and it rains when you're gone/'Cause I was there when you said forever and always"<sup>28</sup> came from the same album. Later her lyrics became even bolder "No apologies. He'll never see you cry,/Pretends he doesn't know that he's the reason why./You're drowning."<sup>29</sup> It's no secret that Taylor Swift's personal life has always directly influenced her songwriting. To me, her lyrics illustrate an embrace of vulnerability. To feel is not shameful. Women do not need to hide their emotions. To feel is freedom. It is to explore and experience a spectacular part of the human condition. No matter what the result, to feel is to fly. It is not to be condemned as weakness but celebrated as strength.

I've wondered why we have the term *guilty pleasure*. I've only heard women use it. Guilt implies shame or that one has committed an offense. It's the antipode of innocence. Pleasure indicates temporary satisfaction, happiness, or enjoying yourself. Should it be offensive to enjoy oneself? When these joys are superficial and contribute to the negative aspects of society, then where is the pleasure? Are we allowed to have guilty pleasures or must they be eliminated? Are they immoral? Everyone has a guilty pleasure whether it's a TV show, type of music, chocolate, or hot baths. The thing to examine is where we get our joy and how it affects the world.

I'm not ashamed to love love. I am ashamed to love a limited definition of love. How do we communicate an expanded definition of love to the world? Perhaps we need to turn off the TV—that box of dreams that inserts itself or substitutes itself for reality—and go out and actually love the world. We are addicted to the fastest way to pleasure. *The Bachelor* is the fastest way to a temporarily satisfying illusion of love. It doesn't require me to think or to be vulnerable. Rather, I am in a position to judge others for their vulnerability and worthiness of love. The TV makes me feel in control when I'm not in control. For a two-hour show or for a two-minute song, I can feel without putting myself out there. The familiar feels comfortable. Humanity craves comfort—that's why we often resist change, though it is the best and most rewarding part of this experience. I think that's also why we fear the unknown. Watching a TV show involves no pain. But are we alive without pain and progress?

*Her arms were the softest I had ever felt—melt-in-your mouth sweet, like cotton candy. I was four when I named my grandmother's arms, and I wanted to fall asleep with my cheek on them. The grown-ups laughed when I said that. What I called "candy arms" were old and saggy to them. My mom has them now. I want them.*

## A Different Kind of Legacy

My eyes fell on a magazine cover—"The Kennedy Legacy" it said. Two men were pictured on it. It made me realize that the family legacy I want to name cannot be named. It's the Wilcox-Longan-Park-McGinnis-(to be continued) Legacy. A woman's legacy will never find stability in a name because a female history is inseparable from a tradition that has deliberately fragmented and scattered it. Women have always been set up for disunity.

*Name.* The *N* starts at the front of the mouth, throwing sound through the *A* to the *M*, humming alive on the lips. *Name.* It's such a smooth and simple word—that indicator of identity. Our name distinguishes us from others. It defines who we are and who we will be.

There are rules to names. You can't name your son Fiona but you can name your daughter Wesley. My future husband won't take my last name. I will take his because it's easy, expected, and accepted. Can I break the status quo? My last name represents an identity that has been passed down from my *forefathers*—from my paternal grandfather, a chain smoking sex-addict whom I never knew, to my father, a friendly and disappointing acquaintance, to a husband I have yet to meet. I have been tossed down a line of people I do not know.

Gloria Steinem once said, "Any woman who chooses to behave like a full human being should be warned that the armies of the status quo will treat her as something of a dirty joke. That's their natural and first weapon. She will need her sisterhood."<sup>30</sup> What she didn't say was that the armies of the status quo are often comprised of the sisters a woman needs.

I have never known a man who has taken a woman's last name. However, I did know a couple that chose a completely new last name, and, I'll admit, this breaking of the status quo seemed to rattle the stability I found in the consistency of a name. The couple, specifically the woman, could not escape the shadow of outsider to my scrutinizing eye. The rejection of this patriarchal naming tradition startled my sense of self. Changing my name to that of my future husband was subtly established early on as a right of passage—an accomplishment, a small symbol of my fulfillment as a woman, a step toward my human fullness (or what I had believed to be my human fullness). However, I had never stopped to consider the origin of this tradition or whether it accurately represented my sense of self—a sense of self that felt more connected to a line of women than a line of men. There is no name that represents my lineage of sisterhood.

According to legend, three sisters called the Moon-Spinners spend nights spinning moonlight into wool. When they have spun all the light out of the sky, the world is safe for the hunted. According to Disney, the Moon-Spinners are three sisters who spin the borrowed light of the sun into silver moon glow; thus enabling the moon to illuminate the sea and its treasures.

The night air was sticky even with the fan roaring from the top of our block of a TV. My two younger sisters and I lay on mats and sleeping bags sprawled across the living room floor, listening to an eerie melody.

*Moon-spinners  
spin me a moon tonight*

*Moon-spinners  
spin it with a silver light*

*Spinning on the sea  
Let the waters glow*

*Shine it on the treasures  
Lying far below.<sup>31</sup>*

Disney was afraid of the dark. We weren't—at least not when we were together. All the lights had to be off as we stayed up, watching Disney thriller *The Moon-Spinners* starring Hayley Mills. We spent two summers laughing uncontrollably as we imitated lines and gestures, jumping every time that hand lunged across the screen, and usually falling asleep before it ended. The lightness of laughter would fade into the darkness of quietude. We felt safe in our tradition of sisterhood. Attempting to describe why we chose to relive these seemingly inconsequential moments night after night proves the inadequacy of words and a craving for something beyond a name to embody my legacy. Why do the Moon-Spinners spend each night spinning away the moonlight? There's a power in the secrets sisters share. They know who the hunted are.

Other nights we sat with our knees up under our chins on a bench. My aunt still has that bench, and I desperately hope to inherit it someday—a sale item from Fred Meyer. The back has a ruffled detail that reminds me of a baby's bonnet. It's a symbol of my legacy of sisterhood. My backside would fall asleep against its hardness, quietly listening to stories. I didn't know it at the time, but I was piecing together my lineage—my feminist history and my feminine identity. And so were the storytellers in their own way. My aunt, mom, cousins iterated and reiterated the past to confirm their own identities and to remember they weren't alone.

As my relatives spoke, I could see images of the past—tubes of paint, polaroids, magazine cutouts, and paintbrushes littering the countertop and the summer sun flowing through the kitchen windows, bathing my grandmother’s canvas with light. I could smell the turpentine filling the house with a stagnant scent of pine and licorice. She’d mix together yellow and blue, watching them swirl into a deep green. With sporadic flicks of her wrist, blades of grass sprung out of emptiness. A dirt road followed, then a tunnel, then trees with golden leaves, and a hint of a blue-white sky. That was her last attempt at “the bridge.”

My mother had watched her paint it a million times. The colors always got darker the longer she worked on it until she had to start over.

“Stop!” my mother said one day. “You’re done. I want this one.” She snatched it up and hid it.

So Mama finished “The Bridge.”

It hangs in our dining room now—the tunnel is a dark chocolate brown, it’s mouth surrounded by deep forest-green blades of grass and a white fence. The painting feels like its in motion with its curving road. There is a glow at the end of the tunnel. Two bright diagonal streaks of light make it look like glass. A tunnel to an impenetrable window.

## The Body

*We deck ourselves from head to toe with garments and decorations which serve like badges and buttons to announce our sexes.<sup>32</sup> –Marilyn Frye*

I looked down past the tiers of pink ruffles to my white shiny buckle shoes. I was six years old and about to go to a birthday party, knowing I was lovely. My mother made sure of that. Half of my hair was slicked back—not one bump—while the rest of my hair fell softly around my shoulders. A photo of that day is propped on our entryway hutch. I sit in the middle of my two sisters with my ankles crossed. One sister sits to my right. Her halo of curls are tangle-free, yet still wildly framing her face. Her bare feet dangle in the air—she was always breaking the status quo. My youngest sister sits to my left in a pink dress that echoes mine. Her blonde hair is styled like mine, and her shoes are on.

There was never any mistake that we were girls. My mother coordinated all of our dresses—for church, birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter. Early moments of self-satisfaction came from onlookers who thought we looked like a set of porcelain dolls. Wonder and pleasure reflected in their eyes as if we were the representatives of another more beautiful world. My mother preserved us as such. I recognized early on that sense of power, which comes from perfecting a female identity. The more feminine I looked and acted, the more attention I got—the more loved I felt.

I always thought I was born feminine, but I was made feminine. As I grew up, I realized the sense of satisfaction and power that came from perfecting the outward expression of feminine identity was impossible as long as I continued to pattern

myself after an idealized image of femininity presented particularly in film. I watched images of effortlessly pore-less and slender women—Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, and Olivia Newton-John—telling me what I should be. I fought hard, but always lost. I ran into walls—the limits of my body—and, as a result, I felt stripped of that satisfaction and power.

*Body.* It's a hard word. The *D* thuds in my mouth. And that's all I feel—this heavy thud in my mouth.

Like a name, the body distinguishes us from other people. But more than a name, it's the physical manifestation of us. The eye sees *I*. But I find that both a name and the body are inadequate representations of my human fullness. If the body were adequate, then it would not dictate my social position or my health. Instead, it would conform to all I can imagine for myself. All that I am is so much more than a decaying physical shell.

Psychoanalyst, Susie Orbach, points out that today “bodies are and have become a form of work. The body is turning from being a means of production to the production itself.”<sup>33</sup> This intense focus on the body as a product of work seems to indicate an attempt to control it. If one works hard enough, one can achieve high social standing or good health. However, there are times when work does not result in either of these outcomes; thus looking to the body as the evidence of hard work becomes problematic.

My body has been a production—a performance of the feminine. At the same time, it has endured my loathing and disgust when I have not worked on it enough

or the work did not bring the results I thought I wanted—the perfect performance dictated by what I have been conditioned to see as feminine.

The body as work instead of that which works seems sown into my mental makeup. I can't seem to escape the cultural desire to manipulate an imperfect form into a perfect one. The body has always represented the smallest portion of who I am. This is the thud in my mouth—that hopeful *O* springing from the light *B* falling in failure.

International campaigns like Dove's "Real Beauty" try to solve the larger Western body image issue by expanding views of a beautiful human body. For example, in their video, "Real Beauty Sketches," various women describe themselves while an FBI-trained forensic sketch artist sketches what he hears. Then another individual describes the same person and the artist, again, sketches what he hears. The two portraits are placed next to each other and are revealed to the participants. One woman said the sketch based on her own description looked sad and closed-off while the sketch based on someone else's description of her looks happy and open. The message: "You are more beautiful than you think."<sup>34</sup> What I find problematic is that female self-perception hasn't changed if the gaze is still directed to the body. In the video, women are supposed to realize that their bodies are uniquely beautiful. But this doesn't address the issue of the body as a production or the body as the representation of human fullness.

A recent *Weight Watchers* campaign takes a different and very interesting approach to weight loss. A woman's voice sounds flat and almost monotone. She narrates a story about a very intimate relationship—with ups and downs, struggles,

hard work, desperation, and, finally, revelation. It's a story of a woman and her "butt." At the end of the story she says, "I finally realized my relationship with my butt had nothing to do with my butt and everything to do with my brain."<sup>35</sup> The new approach illustrates a very important shift. Rather than trying to change the body, the key to health is a change of mind. It points to the significance of a mental cause and the way it produces a physical effect.

In addition, *Positive Changes* also illustrates an acknowledgement of mental causation in that the program utilizes hypnosis to achieve weight loss and healthy eating habits. A manipulation of mind takes place in this system, causing the relationship between self and food to improve and manifest physically. Each of the beauty and weight loss campaigns, though flawed, seem to acknowledge the need to change perception in order to solve issues of the body.

I read an article once called "Becoming Dragon: A Transversal Technology Study," which analyzes the phenomena of *Second Life*, an online virtual world. In it, *Second Life* program user, Alynna Vixen, says she feels more herself as her avatar—a small glowing fox with wings—than in her human form. The physical realm doesn't express who she is—her deeper sense of identity. She further talks about the way that she knew she was a fox since childhood, feeling pain in her phantom tail whenever she sat on it. She feels like a fox in what one might call "real life." The body does its best to mold to our perceptions of self, but it never fully succeeds. To Vixen, the body constrains her—she doesn't have a visible tail or wings, so she manipulates the constraints of the human body with technology to express a more accurate version of herself. Alynna Vixen and I are on a quest, searching for ways

around or above the human body to fully represent our selves.

My experience as Christian Scientist has always pointed me toward spirituality as a means to get outside the body and to access the deeper aspects of my being. Focusing on transforming the body from ugly to beautiful is another talking serpent, presenting body image issues as *body* image issues and not *mind* image issues. To me, changing my mental perception of body and its relationship to femininity and beauty is the only path to freedom. The body I seek is a spiritual embodiment of love, joy, peace, and grace.

While introducing a variety of beautiful bodies into mainstream media has expanded interpretations of beauty and promoted self-acceptance, it will still run into walls. Looking at the body as my source of beauty also means that my beauty will decay and deteriorate no matter what I do. As a Christian Scientist, I've learned that to embody spiritual qualities—to be conscious of divine Love—results in a physical beauty I can depend on because it is not based on something transient. One might say that considering beauty from a spiritual standpoint elevates beauty to *loveliness*—a permanent and constant form of beauty.

## Self-Consciousness

I was fourteen the first time I understood the word *self-consciousness*. My friend wanted me to go with her to throw away her brown paper lunch bag. “I feel self-conscious going alone,” she said. Walking up to the trash bin, I watched her toss her knotted blonde curls with her hand as her eyes darted around the cafeteria. *Who was looking at her? What did they see?* I didn’t like what I saw—a lovely friend searching for her worth in the wrong places. But I started to wonder if I was supposed to be self-conscious, too—if the places she was searching for her worth were actually correct. When our friendship ended a few years later, the self-consciousness remained.

*Self.* There’s no freedom in it. The *E* requires only the slightest part of the lips, resisting openness. The frontal *L* pushes against the roof of the mouth in an attempt to escape. But the final *F* foils the attempt. Sound is cut off as soon as it starts. It seems strange that such an intimate word should be so brief and isolated. I want a word that indicates openness, delight, individuality, and connection.

*Self* is the root of words like selfish or selfless. To be selfish is negative. It is to be focused inward to the point of forgetting one’s connection to and awareness of others. To be selfless is positive. It is to consider others before oneself. It means to think about oneself last or not at all. I find selflessness a problem. To be without a self seems more negative than selfishness. It plagues femininity. “Sugar and spice and everything nice. That’s what little girls are made of,” goes the nursery rhyme. It circulated throughout my third grade classroom. “Snips and snails and puppy dog tails. That’s what little boys are made of.” I felt the satisfaction of superiority—

because I was a girl, I was innately (and superhumanly) sweet and good. I realized later the plague of being placed on a pedestal.

Femininity is complicated. What I know about it I know from my mom, movies, and the Bible. “How do young ladies sit?” Hands folded, ankles crossed, silent. Silent but never silenced. I learned women should have opinions and should be self-sufficient, but they must be feminine. In other words, be passionate but know when to back down; be independent but maintain warmth; be a strong woman but not a feminist.

To be selfless is the ultimate of femininity. But I find a need to rethink this term. There’s something that happens before true selflessness. In order to be genuinely humble one has to have a stable sense of being. It seems illogical to think you can consider others if you’re distracted by inner confusion or questions of self. You have to be so rooted to yourself that you no longer need to think about it. But that doesn’t mean that one is without *self*. Rather it means that one has explored oneself so fully that one can then think about oneself in relation to people, places, cultural norms, etc.

My Sunday school teacher opened her leather bound Bible to the book of Ruth, and I brightened with excitement. Ruth was my favorite Bible story. I felt connected to her. Perhaps it was because it was one of the only stories I remembered being taught as a child that focused on a woman. What’ more, she was an independent woman who chose, against custom, to remain with her mother-in-law, Naomi, though her husband had died and society no longer demanded that she stay with someone (much less a woman) outside her own blood. This act of

sisterhood resonated with my own experience of female relationships. Women uniting and thriving together represented the strongest relationship of love I had experienced in my life. Ruth was someone I understood and could pattern my own identity after.

I learned that aspects of femininity included determination, humility, and grace. Ruth demonstrates these qualities through her loyalty to Naomi, who had no one else (no husband and no sons) and when she gathered the wheat the reapers dropped in Boaz's field in order to be the provider. To me, she presents a fullness of self in her selflessness. Not only is she nurturing and kind, but also she is resourceful and wise. The less obvious lesson from the story is the value of her self-knowledge and its role in her ability to be selfless.

In the end, she earns the protection and validation of a husband. When I was a child, I loved that she found love in the end. In some ways, I liked the story because it was the closest to a happily-ever-after romance. Later on, this troubled me. Why did a story of feminine independence, unity, and strength have to end with a man? What I realize now is what male companionship represented. Instead of becoming an outcast or downtrodden widow, marriage is a mechanism of preservation. It acts as a way to protect and celebrate her selflessness as a strength rather than that which makes her either submissive or radical. It shows the natural harmony that results in lived reality from knowledge of spiritual completeness.

As a Christian Scientist, I was taught never to take texts at face value. The literal Word is not the inspired Word. If you don't understand something search and study. If you understand it, look up words or historical contexts anyway because you

will learn something new. I have spent my relatively short lifetime studying words, not satisfied with accepting confusion or misunderstanding and always wanting to know myself through this investigation. Yet, at the same time, I have been immersed in a culture of instant gratification. I don't have to think of things—I can Google them. I find myself in constant battle between depth and shallowness. Sometimes I think this shallowness has distracted me from my own journey of self-exploration.

To me, *consciousness* is one of the most beautiful and meaningful words. It means to *be*; it indicates a mode of existence that is both inside and outside our human experience. Without consciousness, there would be nothing. It indicates a mode through which I connect to God and perceive the nearness of her grace.

I never had a feeling of self-consciousness before hearing my friend use the word. It strikes me as tragic that to be self-conscious indicates embarrassment or insecurity. To me, it should indicate the most loving and confident relationship with oneself. It should point to an understanding of higher selfhood—a knowledge of self as peaceful and safe. It should provide a platform to reach out to help others, like Ruth.

Since middle school, a war has waged within me. I started to feel that same kind of self-consciousness my friend felt. *Who was looking at me? What did they see?* The chaos of my human mind suggested I should doubt my beauty, the clarity of my human mind told me my beauty was permanent because not dependent upon the impermanent mortal body. To be aware of oneself should be the grandest most helpful thing. This I learned in Sunday school and did my best to carry with me through the week. But the serpents slipped into human perception, causing chaos.

The cycle of middle school cliques and classes manipulated meanings, and my mind entertained a confusing multiplicity of meanings.

Today, I want to reconsider my definition of *self-consciousness*. To me, a word that refers to my being, core, or individuality should point attention outward and inward—toward selflessness and self-knowledge. It should indicate the presence of grace and should be delicious to say.

*My mother taught my grandmother how to swim after sixty years of avoiding water. She also got my grandmother her first real job. My mother says she never saw her look so satisfied and impressed with herself before these two events.*

## I'm Enough

My eyes glaze over with tears. I'm at Starbucks, so I don't let them fall. They just rest on my lower eyelid until I blink them away. A video with the hash tag #imEnough plays on my laptop.<sup>36</sup> It follows the individual experiences of several women as they look at themselves in the mirror. This particular mirror, however, is interactive. In swirly white handwriting, it asks, "How do you feel when you look in the mirror?" A woman can then drag her finger to the left or right to indicate how she feels on a scale from "woof" to "I'm enough." One woman selects "Alright" to which the mirror responds in a shocked voice "Only alright? Why'd you say that?" It then declares that the individual is "an inspiration." It speaks about how much she cares about others and how graceful she is. Photos and videos of her friends and family appear with personal facts to support the mirror's declaration. One woman had held her friend close when she received news that her dad was dying, and then she took care of her children. Another finished college as a young mother and took every opportunity to tell her daughter how proud she was of her. Another was present when her friend woke up from a coma. And so on. After being reminded of the significant impact she has had on others, the mirror asks, "Now, how do you feel?" Each woman selects, "I'm enough" and is told to repeat it out loud. When she turns around, her loved ones are there to embrace her.

The goal of this social experiment is to change inner voices—the ones that tell women they are *not* enough. The video's music score is well crafted. The piano sets the scene for sentimentality while the fast-paced new single "I'm Enough" (by The Mrs.) puts the perfect period of empowerment at the end. The music controls

how the viewer is supposed to feel. Admittedly, some of my tears are a result of this strategy. However, they are mostly due to the fact that this remains a significant issue for women, particularly in the Western world. This isn't the first social experiment video aimed to address how women see themselves. Another popular video is Dove's Real Beauty Sketches in which an FBI-trained forensic sketch artist draws a woman based on her own description of herself and then again based on another person's description of her.

Another video recorded experiment is BuzzFeed's "What do Strangers Think of You?"<sup>37</sup> in which people stand in front of a mirror and talk about their bodies. One person is self-conscious of his round face, another of his skin, another person is self-conscious of her dimples, and another of her legs. Meanwhile, there is a person on the other side of the mirror who describes what they see. While a guy points out his flawed cheeks, the person on the other side describes his nice cheekbones. The video illustrates the skewed perception people have of themselves. Interestingly, when people described others, they also included personality traits—one looked like "the life of the party" while another looked like a "cool guy." Another looked like a "fun person" and yet another looked like one of few but meaningful words. The takeaway from this video is that "you're enough just the way you are, so be kinder to yourself." Also, "the mirror lies." It seems to me that we focus too much on the body as the full representation of our identity. Can it truly represent the way we love? The way we make others feel? Sometimes even a hug seems to cheapen the depth of our love for someone.

One of the comments on the #imEnough video says, “Call a girl pretty a million times and she’ll forget. Call a girl ugly once and she’ll remember it for the rest of her life.” The comment points to the unfortunate truth that this is how many (though not all) women process comments about their body. The video illustrates an attempt to help women see beyond the body as the determinate factor of her worth.

What saddens me is that after the social experiments are over, we’re still left with mirrors and a growing media culture that places a great deal of importance on the body’s appearance. Despite the fact that we may feel loved and valued, we look to the mirror to mark our success for the rest of the world to see. At the same time, media culture also trains us to be self-deprecating. Most of the comments on the BuzzFeed video are confessions of insecurity. However, another comment claims the opposite. One person says, “I can actually stare in the mirror for 30 minutes sometimes just looking at my face and body.” People replying to the comment call her self-centered or arrogant. The purpose of the video is to bolster confidence yet that confidence has a limit. Interestingly, both extremes focus most on physical appearance. Perhaps, the confidence we’re craving is one that comes from a source outside the body. To be confident in a sense of worth based on qualities rather than physique results in a confidence that inspires. While I actually support the commenter who can stare at herself for a half hour, truly appreciating herself, I recognize that this kind of confidence is labeled arrogance. Interestingly it makes others feel that the person is in a position of judgment. I also recognize that this

confidence is limited. It lasts as long as the body remains the same or as representative of an ideal image of health and youth.

Furthermore, we live in a culture that requires permission to have confidence. In the #imEnough video, the mirror gives the women permission to accept that they're enough. But what happens when the social experiment is over, when there isn't a mirror to give permission to be confident, etc.?

The mantra "I'm enough" seems to resound in the past, present, and future, trying to accomplish similar ends for different boundaries of femininity. At the 2015 Academy Awards, Disney star Zendaya, who is biracial, wore her hair in dreadlocks on the red carpet. Host of E! Fashion Police, Giuliana Rancic commented that she probably smelled of "patchouli oil" or "weed."<sup>38</sup> The comments opened the floodgates of outrage over the racial stereotypes still deeply entrenched in our culture. The actress responded that her very point was to "showcase [dreadlocks] in a positive light, to remind people of color that our hair is good enough."<sup>39</sup>

The concept of being enough indicates a new kind of self-image. Rather than an ideal to work toward—an image of mortal perfection that's always just out of reach—it implies *presence*. It points to a sense of understanding oneself and being satisfied with oneself *now*. There's a sense of control implicit in the phrase.

It seems to me that what the social experiment attempts to introduce is an accurate meaning of loveliness—one that includes the love that we feel for others and ourselves. It's marked by vulnerability, self-knowledge, self-acceptance, openness, and giving as opposed to physical appearance.

*I wish I could remember my grandmother's lap and the tickle of her breath on my cheek as she whispered, "I love you." I wish I could remember the cookies she would bake while I was at school—her special oatmeal crispy recipe. The house would burst with cinnamon-sugar warmth. I wish I could remember her smell, her smile, the color of her eyes, late night talks about love, her arm in mine as we window shopped downtown. Instead, all I remember are her candy arms, her fork in my mashed potatoes, and the sob buried in her throat.*

## Memory

In my journey to unfolding my feminism and femininity, I have thought much about the past as it relates to the present. The memories I have of the past are fragmented yet through writing I somehow see them more clearly. The blending of memory and imagination create a present reality. I ask myself: what constitutes reality and identity?

In 1972, Peter Handke published *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, prompted by his mother's suicide and arguably an attempt to piece together her reality through memory and fiction. He writes, "the more fiction we put into narrative, the more likely it is to interest others, because people identify more readily with formulations than with recorded facts."<sup>40</sup> Handke's text presents a believable rationale for his mother's "VOLUNTARY DEATH." It furthermore illustrates Handke's as well as a fundamental human desire to find and maintain one's own identity and reality. The emotional reaction provoked by the text suggests a recognizable struggle. Only in locating significance does Handke feel honest as a writer. He describes a danger between retelling what happened and drowning the individual in poetic language. Both must be kept in delicate balance. In fact, throughout the text, Handke explains his process of formulating his mother's life.

...I first took the facts as my starting point and looked for ways of formulating them. But I soon noticed that in looking for formulations I was moving away from the facts. I then adopted a new approach—starting not with the facts but with the already available formulations, the linguistic deposit of man's social experience... for only with the help of a ready-made public language was it possible to single out from all the irrelevant facts of this life the few that cried out to be made public.<sup>41</sup>

Handke is concerned with authenticity and honesty of the individual thus he looks at his subject in her social context in order to truly grasp the significance of the facts of her existence. Moreover, this process allows the significance to be understandably communicated to a public audience.

In addition to opening up his own process of writing the novel, Handke also opens his mother's interior mind. For example, he describes that during World War II,

She had always wanted to be proud of something, and now, because what she was doing was somehow important, she actually was proud, not of anything in particular, but in general—a state of mind, a newly attained awareness of being alive—and she was determined never to give up that vague pride."<sup>42</sup>

He formulates her consciousness to illustrate that this disruption of the everyday by war brings about possibilities of a full reality for his mother. He inserts elements of consciousness to gain a deeper sense of her, which had been forgettable amidst the banality of her daily existence. He focuses on an element that forces his mother out of routine and social norms in order to convey an exploration of self. What's more, the sense of self he seeks for his mother lies in awareness and keen mental perceptivity.

Furthermore, he describes a clear contrast between wartime and post-war mentality. The war infuses daily life with a sense of excitement and spontaneity while, after the war's end, daily life becomes (once again) mundane and deliberately *not* spontaneous. Handke seems to discover reality only through the new and atypical.

In addition, he explains the way "[his mother] could laugh anyone to silence" and "...also interrupted the children with laughter."<sup>43</sup> At this point, her life was

“...confined entirely to housekeeping and making ends meet...”<sup>44</sup> As she nears her ultimate suicide, Handke says, “[s]he was no longer able to play housewife” and “[i]t hurt her to laugh.”<sup>45</sup> Handke sees that his mother’s reality was completely pretext—a construction of social norms, leaving no room for unique self. The abnormal behavior she begins to exhibit points to an interior rebellion against what is expected of her—even if subconscious—and a possible attempt to see herself in a new way. Handke even admits that before she “...turned herself inside out”<sup>46</sup> he kept forgetting her. However, her extremity forced his full awareness of her. The uncertainty she created in his consciousness required him to acknowledge something more about her—something beyond “the idiocy of her life.”<sup>47</sup>

There is power and clarity in uncertainty. It points one inward and outward at the same time, contributing to a deeper and more genuine definition of self. Instead of being engrossed in daily duties that seem to constitute one’s life, uncertainty points one to consider a higher and broader picture while simultaneously redefining one’s role within that broader picture. Thought shoots in different directions that invite a keener perception of what’s happening around them, resulting in true self-discovery. Handke is anxious to enter this frame of mind and points out the dangers of submerging oneself in pretext—a façade of certainty. He explains that for his mother and others of her generation,

...typology became a guide to life; it gave you a pleasantly objective feeling about yourself; you stopped worrying about your origins, your possibly dandruff-ridden, sweaty-footed individuality, or the daily renewed problem of how to go on living; being a type relieved the human molecule of his humiliating loneliness and isolation; he lost himself, yet now and then he was somebody, if only briefly.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, the ability to insert oneself in some sort of group or community—a form of pretext—gave the illusion of identity. The need to be safe and accepted—perhaps even admired—by society propels the attachment to a collective identity that ensures this outcome. However, becoming a type doesn't allow freedom, self-exploration, or authenticity. Again, it constitutes pretext—that which Handke sees as deadening individuality and uniqueness.

As Handke reflects on his mother's suicide while traveling to the funeral he says, "I was beside myself with pride that she had committed suicide."<sup>49</sup> She had broken from society in the most decisive and final way conceivable. What's more, she had claimed her uniqueness in the only way she saw possible. This last definitive and abnormal act would be forever attached to her name thereafter.

In 1975, Handke published *A Moment of True Feeling*, which explores identity and reality through the same themes, but from a strikingly different standpoint. Instead of formulating someone else's life, he narrates a character's almost futile struggle for authentic identity. Instead of piecing together a life, he depicts one that is unfolding moment by moment. It deconstructs a life rather than constructs one. Though written in the third person, this work feels as though the reader is inside the consciousness of the main character, Gregor Keuschnig, rather than bouncing between mother and Handke. There is less distance between the main character and reader because Handke is not the intermediary between the reader and the life depicted in the narrative. Though Handke likely appears in Keuschnig, it is not overtly Handke as it is in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*.

The novel starts with Keuschnig dreaming of murder and consequently questioning everything normal.

From today on, he thought, I shall be leading a double life, and my new life will consist solely in pretending to live as usual. I no longer feel in place here, but I can't conceive of being in place anywhere else;<sup>50</sup>

He suddenly sees the pretext within which he had been defined. A repressed and estranged dimension of the self comes to the surface—the cause of his ultimate nervous breakdown.

In order to break from this pretext he begins a mental process of relearning feelings and, at the same time, he develops a keen perceptiveness of the common events of his day as something much more profound and/or horrifying. For example, crossing a playground at night with the wind increasing in force, he feels panicked. A moment later, "he remembered he had just been afraid." He thinks to himself, "A feeling—remember it...I'll have to rediscover all these feelings!"<sup>51</sup> Similarly, he tries to hold onto particulars about people, including his wife, in order to recognize them. Everything that once was normal has been completely turned inside out by the jolt to human consciousness caused by a dream. He finds a brief moment of solace when he has a sexual encounter with a stranger.

His glance had no further need of something to hold on to, some detail, some particular by which to recognize her—he saw her all in one, noticing nothing in particular. If in that moment he had told her he loved her, he would, at least for the time it takes to draw a breath, have known what he meant by it. For a moment it was REAL, that's all there was to it.<sup>52</sup>

This, again, points to the notion that spontaneity and uncertainty point to reality. Furthermore, he's able to connect to another human in a way that transcends the everyday and thus truly sees her on another level. With the sense of perception that

had been awakened by a change of conscious, identity can comprehend this stranger because she, too, is new and thus kindred.

Unlike *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, this work assumes a quasi-mystical tone as Keuschnig begins to find a new way to define himself. This is especially clear when he sees the chestnut leaf, piece of a pocket mirror, and child's barrette in the sand at his feet. Keuschnig says that "...suddenly they came together and became miraculous objects."<sup>53</sup> This almost seems like a religious epiphany though likely more of a secular revelation in human consciousness. Interestingly, it seems as though Keuschnig reads these items among others as if it were a kind of text itself—the items being the authors. His secular revelation or epiphany contributes to his journey to discovering language that leads him away from alienation and toward connection. But even despite this experience, he feels anxious and dislocated. This reveals the existential quality of his epiphany. After all, transcendence cannot be fixed and conclusive. The salvation art and imagination provides is temporal and must be continually renewed. This pattern becomes a type of salvation for him from the uncertainty that permeates his experience.

As in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, this concern to find accurate language pops up yet again in Handke's work. Though in *A Moment of True Feeling*, he needs to find a language that is not "ready-made" for the public. He needs a communication mechanism beyond social norms. Interestingly, in an interview by American scholar June Schlueter, Handke says,

There is almost no language anymore. It is only when I live and have a feeling that there is a future, that language appears, not only for me as a writer. Language is the most valuable thing there is. Most people have no language at all. There is a sigh of relief through the masses when there is someone who

has a language. What is this language? I believe this language is only poetic language. That is what language means. All other languages are a set of rules, routines...<sup>54</sup>

We see this desire to find new language within Keuschnig (the character he created). Imagination and artistry serve as tools to other possible realities and lifts one's alienated self to these realities. Poetic language embodies this imagination and artistry. As Keuschnig does this by reading the mundane events and items of life as a text, Handke does this through his office as author. He reveals art as the liberator of estranged consciousness. He includes an intriguing paradox in his work in that fiction and formulations serve as the means to experience reality.

Keuschnig also seems to recognize the power of imagination and fiction to create reality in degrees throughout the novel. In the beginning of the story, he thinks, "I have to busy myself with something... already exhausted by the short time spent without imagination..."<sup>55</sup> He already understands the need for imagination to create true reality. By the end of the novel, he decides to search for a new career, and it could be concluded that perhaps the new career would be becoming an author himself.

*A Moment of True Feeling* leads readers in gyres of consciousness. It illustrates the horror and uncertainty involved in actively rebelling against what is usual and expected from one in society. Though horrific and unsettling, this process is essential to realizing reality. It highlights the current of spontaneity running through art and imagination, keeping it new and accurate as a language.

Contrastingly, in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* the reader follows Handke as he forms his mother's story. There is a separation between the reader and the individual, or main

character so to speak. Furthermore, *Moment* follows the way Keuschnig takes apart and analyzes the “normality” of his life to make a sensible future for himself. It follows him as he redefines himself. Though reality and identity seem to be ever illusive, there is significance in the act of searching for them in new ways. They arguably lie within this act of continual renewal. *Sorrow* analyzes the events that led to the “VOLUNTARY DEATH” of Handke’s mother. A journey like Keuschnig’s was impossible for his mother, so she was left to one way of claiming her unique individuality. Her only hope for renewal or a new way to think of herself was through suicide.

Interestingly, though strikingly different, *A Moment of True Feeling* and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* both embody Handke’s poetics. Through both texts he brings mundane and everyday events into a new form to illustrate the intersection of particular day-to-day events. As a result, his characters (as well as his readers) see the ways reality is constantly in need of redefinition and evolution.

## My Femininity and Feminism

*Femininity*. The staccato syllables pop at the front of my mouth. They don't move, they just stay right there, popping. *Femininity*. Images of lace, pink roses, and pearls come to my mind. I feel the lightness of chiffon around my thighs, flirting with a summer breeze. *Femininity*. I find pleasure in its sensation.

But it stays in one place.

Its connotations are learned and limiting. It indicates a set of characteristics typical of women. It is insulting to men and can be used against women.

A scene from the 1961 movie *The Parent Trap* remains fixed in my memory. A father scolds his daughter. "You've been plain impossible. You've been monstrous... And not speaking to someone because you're mad at them is just plain...it's..." he stammers.

"Feminine," finishes the female housekeeper.

"Yes, feminine, and she's absolutely right," he continues "And it's the worst part of being feminine, too."<sup>56</sup>

I asked my dad what *feminine* meant when I watched this scene as a child. He said something along the lines of *girly* or *womanly*. This definition confused me even more than not knowing what the word meant. How was monstrosity or not speaking to someone womanly? Of course, as I grew up, I learned why this was considered feminine. I learned that women were considered emotional and unreasonable. But every woman I've ever known has always had a reason for her actions.

The sun was setting, shooting brilliant beams of orange and pink through the sky. My grandmother stood over the stove, her hairline moist. The smoky smell of

steak filled the house. The front door opened, and she could hear the voices of two men. My grandfather had brought home another unexpected guest. When my grandmother saw them, she said nothing. She left the kitchen and walked back to the bedroom, slamming the door. She hadn't been consulted. My grandfather had stripped her of control, so she took it back the only way she knew how. She could feel the mattress springs compress as she sat down on the bed. She gazed out the window, lips tight. She watched the last traces of daylight sink into the horizon, leaving her in the safety of dark stillness.

It's in this stillness that the women in my family have discovered their own understanding of femininity separate from the definitions perpetuated by film and media. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, writes "Masculine, feminine, and neuter genders are human concepts... The ideal man corresponds to creation, to intelligence, and to Truth. The ideal woman corresponds to Life and to Love."<sup>57</sup> I understand this to mean that a spiritual sense of identity is not gendered.

Therefore, my spiritual identity includes the qualities of both the ideal man and woman. In Christian Science, Life and Love are references to God and represent what humanity might call the "feminine" aspects of a divine creator. Truth is also a reference to God and indicates what humanity might call the "masculine" aspects of Deity.

Femininity in my lived experience thus becomes a set of spiritual qualities, including loveliness, joy, and health, innate within myself and others irrespective of gender. It's no longer an insult. It's no longer limiting, but contributes to the fullness of my spiritual identity.

My practice of feminism thus becomes a mode through which to discern between a human concept of femininity and a spiritual understanding of femininity that points to God's grace—Her love for creation, revealing a truer and fuller sense of self. Feminism is a way to realize the equality and fullness of spiritual identity in lived reality.

My female ancestors have taken up this process of discernment—of seeking clarity—in different ways. My grandmother would not have considered herself a feminist, but I would. I think I've come from a long line of feminists—women who have stood for a higher sense of self that includes the masculine and feminine attributes of a spiritual source.

## End Notes

\*All Bible passages are from the King James Version

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