

My Truest Form

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(Note from Professor Bebrent: Throughout the course for which this essay was written, students looked at women writers who transformed the literary canon by writing about the experience of the marginalized, oppressed and excluded. For the final project, students had the chance to write about their own experiences of oppression and examine how their lives have been impacted by larger power structures—whether the construction of gender and sexuality, or oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, etc.)

The mirror might be our strongest poison. It reflects what the world sees. No matter how pretty, it can always see the ugly. My mirror was different: it changed at some point, with me noticing.

When I was five, my mirror was spotless and clean, without cracks in the rearview. I saw myself as a little girl full of dreams and desires. I had wants that probably wouldn't be fulfilled in years time, but the dreams kept me alive. Whenever I looked in the mirror, I saw a future businesswoman, architect, chef, doctor, astronaut, engineer. There was no limit to what I could be—till there was one. Future teachers told me, “Wow that's ambitious, are you sure you want to do that?” or, “No honey, those are all man jobs. Why don't you do something more simple?” When they told me these things, it felt like they were stealing a part of me, like my heart had been sliced in half. I didn't want to be a princess who ends up being saved by a prince; I didn't want to be something pretty. I wanted to be strong and powerful.

At the age of seven, I learned what gender roles were. I learned that girls should be pretty, wear dresses and skirts, love the color pink and cotton candy, and believe that unicorns exist. Boys, on the other hand, should be really athletic and strong. They should never cry, and they should be good at math. At the time, I didn't think there was anything wrong with these roles. I believed that's how the world worked. I guess that was the innocence in me. However, there were times when I hated these roles. I didn't understand why I couldn't play with the boys during recess, or why I wasn't allowed to play with race cars. I wanted to play with the boys, but the boys were too rough and I was a girl. I must be a little lady. I must be delicate. I must be soft. I am a girl. I am not rough. I am not strong. I am not a boy. So I must sit with the girls and do what girls do, whatever that meant. In the playground, we girls play house under the playset, we fake cook, we fake clean, this is what fun was, and as we got older the playground got smaller. The games turned into hula hoop and hop scotch, to nothing at all.

At the age of eleven, I learned what it meant to be the lady of the house. My mama told me that I must know how to clean. I must know how to keep and run a tidy household even if the Clorox killed me, even if the soap from washing the dishes dried my hands. She told me, “These are the sacrifices a woman must make.” It didn't feel like a sacrifice; it felt like a homicide. Why must I suffer in order to

keep a house pretty? It began to bother me when I realized there was a cycle. My mom told me that since she was young, she had known how to run a household; she was able to lift the burden from her mother and receive it, and a generation later she passed the burden to me. My mom would explain to me how her mother did not have to clean or cook anymore, because she had taught her everything a woman should know. She took the role and did her best, even if it meant that her teenage years were cut short and she had to enter womanhood earlier than expected. The cycle started young, and consisted of a woman washing dishes, women cleaning, women doing laundry, women doing everything they needed to do in a household by a certain age. Where were the men? Why weren't they a part of this cycle? These things weren't a man's job, they were a women's job. Realizing this, I began to see the problem. The problem wasn't me being a girl; it was much bigger than a "sex" or a gender. It involved much more than I had ever imagined at the age of eleven.

At the age of thirteen, I began puberty. It was a drastic change. It was the point of my life that science officially declared me as a woman. My body started doing things it had never done before. The summer before entering the seventh grade, I got my period. My mom was ecstatic for me. I had no idea what was going on. Why was I bleeding from this part of my body? A part that I hadn't even explored? Moreover, my mom called everyone; the news traveled from New York City to the motherland. I didn't understand why this was so exciting or why it was such a milestone, or that being a woman meant bleeding once a month. Puberty wasn't easy; it was the comparing of breast sizes and the growth of hair in public places. I had no luck in this department. It was the age that hormones grew thick like honey. My mind began to flutter with boys, drama, and what sex would be like when I grew older. There was a conflict between me and science and wanting to be a lady. Being a lady meant boys were out of the picture. According to society, a girl of my age was not supposed to be intrigued by boys or thinking about sex. Science, on the other hand, disagreed. It was normal to think about sex and to have your eye on a certain boy, but with all of this, why did the feeling of shame follow me?

At the age of sixteen, my mirror began to crack in places that were unexpected. My reflection became less clear because people often came by and left with pieces of me. Being sixteen and in high school wasn't easy. High school was filled with comments of what you should look like, what you should have done, and just plain sexism. My high school included an unnecessary and unfair dress code. Our dress code consisted of no booty shorts, no crop tops, no short skirts, no cleavage showing: this list could go on. Many would think that our school systems impose these rules for our own safety. In reality, these rules were imposed to not distract the boys, because apparently if they saw anything higher than knees, they might just cum.

High school at sixteen was unnecessary comments like the following: "You should smile more." This particular comment came from faculty and staff, who believed if I wasn't smiling, there was something extremely wrong with me. In reality, it wasn't that I was upset or unhappy; it was just that I didn't feel the need to always smile all the damn time. Or when my fellow guy peers would ask, "Are you on your period?" because every girl should be walking around shooting unicorns and glitter out her ass. Or when my girl classmates would point out how flat my chest was, as if I didn't wake up every morning in this body. It was the constant arguing with my mother as to why my curfew time-shifted depending on who I was

with. If I was with my girl friends, my curfew was very strict. My mother's reasoning behind this was that there was a lot of danger in the streets and us girls were defenseless. If I was out with a boy or a boyfriend, my curfew became more flexible. She would say that if I was out with a boy no harm would come my way, because he would be able to defend me.

Walking down the halls of school, I heard the round-the-clock mumbling of lockers whispering everyone's secrets. Want to know mine? I was still a virgin at sixteen. Most of the girls in my class had lost their virginity already or were close to losing it. I was nowhere close. It's not that I viewed it as being sacred or wanting to be swept off my feet by Prince Charming. I just didn't feel the need to have all my dirty laundry aired out between the class bells. All my life, virginity has been explained to me as a "golden ticket": you only had one, so be sure to use it wisely. This golden ticket meant too much, it depowered women; if you used it too quickly with the wrong person, you were instantly classified as a hoe. But if you waited for someone who was worth it and saved your golden ticket, it was like being a lady. You were called a tease and a snob for the rest of your years in high school.

So now I'm eighteen, picking up the pieces of the broken mirror. Putting piece by piece together, finally being able to see my reflection once again. The world around me has drastically changed, from not being able to play with the boys in the schoolyard to not being paid equally to the average man. I learned that not only do they degrade and belittle me for being a woman, but they also do so for the color of my skin, along with the texture of my hair. When looking back on my memories of playing with a white-skinned, blue-eyed baby doll, I realized that there and then I was playing with an object of oppression, because to me, the doll wasn't just a doll anymore. That doll meant that I should be good at motherhood, that I should want a baby, that I should want to marry a white man, that I should want to refine my race. If I could pick my poison, would I pick to be a woman? Being a woman means having to fight for everything that we have. It's the fight my ancestors have died fighting for: having to throw themselves out in the streets to get the right to vote; buying alcohol and cigarettes in bulk because they were belittled for drinking or smoking cigars; being repressed by men, and deciding to liberate their knees, start dancing, and call themselves flappers; eventually becoming sick of all the roles they had to endure.

Same fight...different century.

My fight is having a pepper spray in my hand when the street lights turn on, refusing to be a victim in a world where, even if we aren't the ones who they point their fingers at, we are still the ones they blame, saying "You could have prevented this," blaming us for wearing the short skirt or walking alone at night or taking a jog in Central Park in the early morning while the sun is rising. My fight is when my friends and I talk about marriage and I tell them I won't take my future husband's last name, and every once in a while a smartass asks me, "Oh but you've already taken a man's last name, your dad's?" Thanks for noticing that somehow we can never escape the patriarchy! Even though it is true that I have a man's last name, it's what I've made of it that makes it my own, that ties it to my individual struggles. My fight is no longer ignoring the "God bless you" from perverted old men on street corners, but now responding and saying "amen." My fight is protesting to make sure that they won't take away my rights as a woman, that I'll be able to access birth control or seek an abortion if the moment presents itself ten years from now. It's

explaining to the world that there is not just one type of beauty, that my caramel skin, my scars, my skinny, my curls are all beautiful. The fight hasn't changed. We will eventually break the glass ceiling that keeps us from shining.

I took one last look in the mirror and I finally realized that I've always known what my oppression was. It was what I saw in the mirror, and that thing was me. It was being a woman, being able to birth children. It was all of that wrapped up within me.