

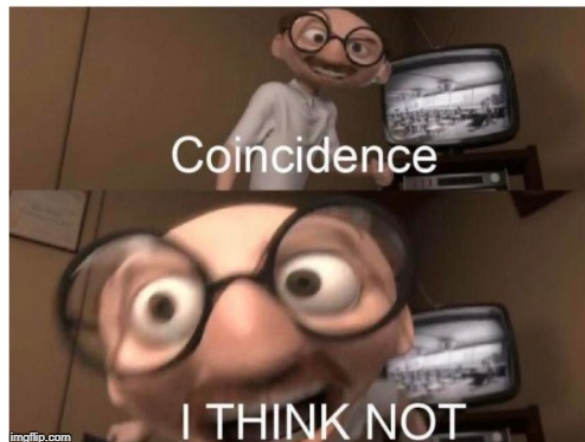


Women and Gender Studies
Poem/Short Story Collection

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Poem: *literally
says anything*
English teachers:



Introduction

I was never supposed to be a Women and Gender Studies student. It was true that I had the heart for social justice especially when it came to women, but my mind was too rooted in my Catholic conservative past to imagine an alternate future for myself. I became a WGS minor (one form short of a major) by pure accident. The year was 2016, I was huddled in my Michigan home in the early hours waiting for the course registration to begin. I had anxiously already added several pre-med classes to my cart and waited for 8am to register. As 8' o clock hit, I enrolled in all the classes. I waited as I saw all the E's next to the classes and waited for the computer to do something. I tried again and again, even changing them to other options besides enroll. It only took me a little scroll to see a large "Submit" button. I was in a panic. I had wasted 10 minutes without realizing I had never even submitted my request. I hurriedly attempted to enroll in the classes, but all I received was a seemingly infinite amount of red errors. Having to regroup, I spent the next hour handpicking classes. There were only two First Year Writing Seminars left. I can't remember the other, but I knew it was of little interest to me. The other was "Women in Law and Literature". I thought why not? Might be a good break from Neuroscience, General Chemistry, and Psychology. Little did I know the tremendous impact that class would have on me. It quelled in me a thirst for knowledge and truth. It informed me of the silent injustices and the individuals whose stories are neglected. As a senior, I do not know where I am going but I know my journey will always be aided by what I have learned from this department. I know that wherever I go this perspective and work will find me and I shall welcome it with open arms. The following is a sequential journey told through poems and short stories through my time at Vanderbilt coupled with the various WGS course I took.

This is how I will begin,

Interpretation is a sin.

My thoughts come from I alone

Only certain emotions will I condone

There is always great debate,

On who can really translate.

I write knowing my meaning will be construed

With some elaborate details far from subdued

But bless the person wiser than I,

Who looks at my words with a deeper eye

So dear reader enjoy discerning,

These thoughts that keep my soul burning.

-Christina Byrd

Chapter 1: Fall 2016



The Laborer of Love

Etch a story in the sand

A fleeting collection of struggles and triumphs

For here is the story of the laborer of love.

With sweeping motion,

Her cursive creates the essay to set her free

Inside these words is the work she has performed all her life.

The multicolored alarm clock blares at 5:45am

Her body, still warm from the woolen covers, moves into action.

She makes the lunches to sustain her siblings,

She feeds her niece who is always up much too early and always hungry.

Then the trek must be undertaken.

45 minutes of heavy traffic and blasting music and she's arrived

Inside the hallowed halls she reads, writes, and dreams.

The end of the day brings about a heavy backpack and the goodbyes from endearing friends.

The technology in her hand awakes and he has sent multiple messages,

"I can't live like this anymore, please let me end it."

The too familiar rush of fear surges at her heart.

She drives and talks him down from his plan.

She wonders if this is what love is and sobs when he ends the call.

But shape up you can't drive if you can't see.

And you can't die because who will do the millions of things you still have to do?

Before the engine has cooled she has the baby on her hip and dinner in the pot.

As everyone scarfs down the measly portions

She carries a solitary tray

With every step she is careful to walk with authority and grace.

Her mother lies in bed.

To depressed to move.

She brings her the tray and encourages her to eat.

When all have been fed and are sleeping she begins.
She learns about poetry, history, mathematics, chemistry, and psychology.

The work transports her from this way of life to the possibilities ahead.
Weary, he calls her again and she must convince him he is worthy to live.

Each call drains the fire in her soul.

For she is a laborer of love.

She is the embodiment of smiling pain.

The tears and bruises are jewels to her crown of thorns.

She will wake again to repeat the cycle,
But gain new strength to set herself free.

WGS-1111-01 First-Year Writing Seminar: FYS: Women in Law and Literature

A new start
With fresh eyes
Eager to soak up the newness and freedom
Little knowledge I had
Of the coming perspective
I would gain
Stories of slain black bodies
Letters from assault victims
Historical anecdotes of slavery and lust
This was my first-year course work
But these were peoples' lives
Grim was the lesson
But its honest truth was required
To light the passion within
And be compelled to start.

Shrinking

I see your pain.

Tracing the tear-drops with your finger.

I reach out, but stop.

I'm scared you'll recoil.

By my touch you'll shrink farther.

I can barely see you even now.

Running to the stairwell I scream

And beat the wall.

Each moment that passes, you get smaller.

The pain in your mind eats you.

I'm watching you fade and can't make the mist whole again.

Tell me what to do, I'll do anything!

Any action is better than this watching.

This unhelpful excruciating watching.

Please grow!

I'll cook you the finest desserts this side of Paris.

Cakes, cookies, croissants, pastries,

Bread, gumdrops, vanilla swirls...

What's that?

You're not hungry?

Haven't felt hungry for three day?

I see.

Under your oversized blanket you slip further.

Does love make a person grow?

I love you! I love you! I love you!

Come back to me! You're disappearing.

Damnit, I need you!

I look up and can't tell if you're there.

Day by day you waste away.

Passion, the first thing to go.

Then wants and will do's

Then needs and must do's

They all evaporate from your pillow case

And oppressively hang in the air

I can't see you anymore.

I pull back the covers and

Find you're the size of my palm.

I gently take you into my hands.

I'll protect you and never let you go.

I'll make you strong again,

I promise.

Chapter 2: Spring 2017



The Last Light

In the frosted window on Hart Street a lone lamp shines.
Evidence of life inside, working away at the ever-high paper stack
The smeary black ink on the hot handled paper screams:
“Raped in residence hall.” “Perpetrator was a friend.” “Victim.”
One paper would cause queasiness alone,
But upon her desk is an ocean.
With her pen, she navigates the tumultuous waters.
Sinking, and trying to keep herself afloat.
When at last it is about to consume her,
She clicks off the light
And the nightmare disappears.

WGS 1150 Sex and Gender Everyday Life

Jaime was a bubble of light
With her gentle guidance
Focault, Crenshaw, Lourde, and Donnavan
Entered my mind
Theory, society, and practice
Melded in my thoughts
Culture and harm were debated
FGC caused an uproar, while Bachelor was giggled at.
And western mindset was addressed.
So broad and complex are issues
That are equipped
Without much guidance
Here I learned of medical injustices
Here I fumed at a child bride narrative
Here I contemplated how I can be helpful to other cultures.
So intriguing were the lessons
And unanswerable the questions,
That I had to push further.

WGS-2252-01 Sex and Scandals in Literature

A second class with Faith

And all the more intriguing.

Just to say you were in this class,

Was erotic.

Here we learned of and overworked Venus

And one covered in furs.

Only could we read about Lolita,

But not protect her.

As I was at the apex of queer desire,

So too were the story's inter-racial lesbians.

Sex was no longer discussed the Catholic way

(Not at all.)

But it was now a discussion

Power came from discussing the taboo

Oscar Wilde's trial showed deviance.

But love and consent could conquer all.

Chapter 3: Fall 2017



Fall 2017

Absent were the WGS courses
But full was my heart from the suicide.
I drifted through the days
Making myself incredibly busy
To robot my way through the pain.
The shock waves held me
Rocking my core with each new vibration.
I had spent the summer drifting.
Whether I be in Beijing or Casco, Michigan
I was emote.
No class did I fail but actually aced.
I attribute it all to a robot named, “Me”.
Faith and God embraced me,
But I felt stifled.
How grateful am I though for the people.
For that beautiful group of faith filled women.
These women gave me life
So I could continue on.



Chapter 4: Spring 2018



WGS-3201-01 Women and Gender Transnationally

How moving are the words of Stacy Simplican.

Never before had I seen so much passion.

Every issue discussed hit my core.

But no issue was mine to hold.

For I am not an Asian sex worker.

I am not a Filipina Domestic Servant.

I am not an undocumented woman seeking work.

I am not disabled or a caregiver.

And yet,

The idea of care and the manifesto's we create say:

We care about you and the care work that

Befalls upon you

No matter where you are,

Or who you are.

We can improve work, rights, and life

While still acknowledging the need for care.

Across the globe there is a need for justice.

Will we be willing to uplift the silenced?

WGS-2267-01 Seminar on Gender/Violence

Shock and sadness were my seat mates
Cara's humor and honesty was our only glimmer of hope.
I read what happens on the dark end of the street.
And immersed myself in the hateful tweets.
I was given startling facts
That showed violence is political
But also
Economic
Social
Religious
Forever
And
Ever
Continuing and connected.
Simple tea etiquette was consent's learning tool.
Race being in all things.
Found its unfortunate home here.
Forced sterilization, rape, beatings, and killings.
Safety is rarely found for a black woman.
What drew me to this class was my experience.
What stayed with me was their experiences.
I still hope those women are doing well
And that healing has found them.
As I prayed for theirs
I found mine.
Forever grateful for the Project and women who got me by.

WGS-2259-01 Reading and Writing Lives (Final Project)

Inside the Outsider

As formerly poor women now working as students, the gifts we bring-not only to the people in our lives but also the institutions that currently shelter us-are an angle of vision and the will for change.
-Joy Castro

When I first came to college, I was amazed at all the food. Four different kinds of lettuce, when I only thought one existed. All the fruit imaginable, all in one place, and all for me to have. Never before had I had to know that there was any cheese beside Kraft singles. But above the “common knowledge” the extravagance quickly emerged as I entered into a world far different from my own. I finally understood what a Crepe Dieppoise Au Gratin was, but that it clearly told me I didn’t belong. On several occasions I remember crying at ordering an entrée that was above \$20 realizing my family would never experience this type of lifestyle and realizing how far I had strayed from them.

But the thing that troubled me the most besides indigestion, was that many people expected this. Their normal was my luxury. The endless stream of rich foods with catering waiters all in white, was another alienating layer of academia that I did not think could occur. I had known \$5 pizzas, bologna sandwiches, nights of hunger, and bills unpaid. I was the first to escape the cycle because I could take tests well. My slight advantage brought me here and now I feel like Alice gawking at the mystifying but utterly backward world she fell into.

At 18 years old with only one suitcase and a duffle bag, I arrived at the glittering gates draped in ivy. I couldn’t even delude myself to thinking I was their typical student. Even my family asked if they should leave so people don’t immediately associate me with the hillbilly gang. Their shame only increased my own. When applying to this school I had never heard of it before. No one in my county ever went out of state for school, especially not an “ivy league”. The acceptance was a shock, but then the unsettling feeling of tokenism came in. I begged my older sister to take me shopping because I feared my clothes would give me away. I got three new dress shirts, I realized too late that they were not enough. I was an explorer on a dangerous adventure, as all back home anxiously awaited my return. I did return to them, but not unscathed or unchanged.

The breathless cold of Michigan was exchanged for the sweet sticky days in Tennessee. My previously monochromatic friend group, was now replaced by an array of color and diversity. I was fortunate however, to have my roommate. A girl very different from me, but in many ways just alike. She too had known hunger and poverty, and I met so many more with this story. Yet, these troubled pasts never broke farther than the late nights of whispering them into the darkness. Together we ventured into the world of classical concerts, and trust funds. We had a secret understanding as the rest of our friends debated which car to ask for for their birthdays, or how many of them judged someone based on the clothes they wear. I do not deny the beauty in the better things in life, but I question at what cost they come.

I remember that most of my shoes had holes in them. When it would rain, they would fill up like capsized boats, drowning me in their weight. That miserable feeling when your feet ache because you can't afford waterproof shoes and you see a brand-new bike thrown in the trash. I did a work study job at Plant Operations and was able to witness an entire culture through garbage. I saw the expected plethora of beer bottles, and pizza boxes, but then I saw the boxes of 10 new Mac laptops, a 62-inch LED flat screen, entire mattresses, and a stack of novels that nearly touched the roof of my golf cart. I brought those novels back to the work room, and my fellow employees, many of whom were making minimum wage as adults, took them back to their children. I saw their hard work which kept the university afloat, yet no one recognized them. Even driving around in my work truck, my friends were oblivious to my existence till they truly saw me. Another job at the daycare made me forget there was a class difference until closing time. The care workers would line up on the back wall exhausted from the day, and all the parents fresh from their white-collar jobs at the university would form a line at the front. As if ceremoniously, the children would walk to the other side leaving the women behind and nestling into their mother's Louis Vuitton. I was a tight rope walker teetering on a clear line, a clear divide. The two sides pulling at my heart strings vying for me to fall.

When I say the word, "gentrification" at school it is an accepted form of communication, but when I go home the term evokes a chorus of laughter, "Look who went off an' got an edjamacation". I stiffen and remind myself where I am. I can't sling the terms "toxic masculinity" and "the patriarchal system of oppression" around here. In the world of education, I am a bisexual liberal feminist. At home, I am quiet. I speak out against my family's unjust ideology without revealing my own beliefs. I did not believe I would grow comfortable in this place not designed for me, but I did, and like a growth spurt, all the clothes you used to wear just don't fit anymore. My family's antics were irksome and no longer enjoyable. Their jokes about African Americans, Asians, and Muslims were met with my condescending eye. I would often get a "Lighten up, Christina, it's just a joke" when I got upset with their insensitivity. I was now the girl who knew too much, and not enough.

The first summer after college I ran away to China for a month. I did not actually run away, rather I was graciously invited by my well to do best friend, but it did feel like I was avoiding the inevitable. For the rest of the summer in Michigan I was plastered into my home by the heat. I couldn't escape the monotony of arguments, little food, and crying infants. Thus, the days slowly passed without distinction. I awoke from my haze at the end of August and was practically running to Tennessee, but once there I wanted to turn around. Suffocating in the lace and drapery I longed for the colorful dollar store plastic tablecloths. Upper classmen housing allowed me to live closer to Greek Row and within a few days, I quickly understood my place.

My dual identity made me question the idea of duality entirely. Why couldn't I exist in a bubble within a bubble and carve out my own place. A place of people like me who wanted to take the system and remake it. People who wanted justice in every form. Having my safe haven to retreat to when the overheard conversations of second homes in the Alps became too much, was helpful. I could find my foothold and my identity. One extreme example of the class power struggle came in my assault by a rich young man. I was not broken by this experience, if anything made

stronger and wiser. This vicious attack on my being made me understand who I was and what I had to become. I would not let the rage of class, gender, and race consume me. It would be a small flame that keeps me going. The only thing he took from me was the hope that these structures didn't really exist. That I had made it all seem worse than it was. That food stamps and disability checks were not something to be ashamed of. But alas, it was now clear. At 19 I had learned the way of the world. Now the rest of my life would be dedicated to fixing it.

Much of my feminist course work discussed socioeconomic status, however this was a strange concept to my peers. They recognized the injustice but could not comprehend the emotions involved in scrounging for quarters under vending machines. In one of my classes we read Joy Castro who proclaimed, "Jumping class comes at a price, and the price is not belonging". I finally found solidarity in a work of fiction. My advantage to helping the people around me was that I could understand, that I could use empathy and not sympathy or pity.

I once remarked, while peeling an orange, that I had never done the task before. I was met with, "Wow. The princess never had to peel an orange." Only when I clarified that all the fruit I had ever eaten had come from a can from the food bank did they begin to understand. Was I starting to be assumed as a person who shared in the wealth? Did this occur because I hide, out of shame, any stories that could tell my truth?

I never thought I would dread the question, "What are you doing this summer?". It now comes attached with expectations and demands. Going home is not an option. One must embark on marvelous vacations circumnavigating the globe or land the perfect internship at a prestigious company. Each of these ventures costing more than selling my limbs on the black market would give me. There is a heightened expectation, even as I work in my laboratory, I am just expected to have taken every AP test, and know what an ANOVA is and how to calculate it.

Well, as I look at my protégé who reminds me so much of myself, I realize I don't have to live up to these expectations. I can exist with my army of world changers and try to navigate this place of higher learning. We have found our voices and are ready to remind others we are here too. I am no longer taken aback at the sight of multiple kinds of melons, or fluffy white purse dogs with pink bows, but I can recognize their reality. I can go home and know I'll always have a place even if it is a little small on me. I won't belong in either but I can fly on my own hovercraft observing the crazy tiny world below. I have been given the gift to walk the line and not be torn in two. I will be the empowered woman who can empower others. As author, Toni Morrison, (a great inspiration to me) put it, "If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it." And thus, is the inside story of yours truly, the outsider.

Chapter 5: 2018 Fall in Northern Ireland



A Couple of (Mis)Adventures in Some Green Hills

I could write a book about all that happened in Belfast.

But a poem should suffice.

I was in a badass bisexual American girl gang

I was robbed in Rome

But loved everything about Italy.

I was madly in love with a beautiful woman

Spending all my waking hours

Looking at her through a screen.

In Copenhagen I thought I understood Inception

I walked all of London alone in the rain.

I saw the pope and hung out with my favorite nuns.

I tried to see Paris in 24 hours

But all I really needed was one look at the glittering tower

To have made the frantic worth it.

My sisters stopped by!

And we saw the most spectacular green hills.

I joined a British feminist group with an Australian

And I once got tipsy on Guinness at 10am.

I lived in a deeply divided city.

That was once riddled with terrorism.

And never quite healed.

I was alone but never alone.

I never quite got used to the rain.

Because those slim bits of sunshine were breathtaking.

I will always remember how the leaves looked on Cadogan Park

I met a Scot who I will always cherish

And some feminists who will always inspire me.

Chapter 6: Spring 2019



Knelt in Prayer

Here I kneel before the wooden cross
Wrought from bloodshed and loss
I gaze before my former God
And contemplate the new
My joy is in her grin
My piety in her stare
Forgiveness in her eyes
And salvation in her hair.
As I kneel, I smile at friendly faces
They steal a beaming glance
But revert their eyes back to their fixated pearly chance
I know an utterance of my new devotion,
Will diminish me in their eyes.
Another good soul lost to them
Another Catholic, demonized
But have they ever loved so fiercely,
That she was given a reason
To set down the razor?
Have they ever been so moved by the spirit,
That they dedicate their life to her happiness?
I do not say that I am right
Or that I possess God's Wisdom and Might
But I do say this:
No evil is present when we kiss
No darkness envelops
When I promise to cherish
No blazing fire

When from afar I admire
This love is not wrought from pain
But from Patience and Acceptance
So here I will kneel and pray
That God will show me the way
To open their eyes and find
That all love is pure, true, timeless, and kind.

WGS-3246W-01 Women's Rights and Women's Wrongs

Dickerson's cheery voice details the horrors of denial.

Denial of love, education, and fair treatment.

We can talk about it now with hopeful eyes

Because we believe slavery is over,

We believe women have won the vote,

And believe they can get an education.

Oh, but how far that is from true.

An awakening of self and body can lead to death

So powerful are women that when left to our own devices,

We go mad from the reality of the world.

Or does this only happen in the 1900s?

No.

Injustice pervades throughout time

And has not rested or ceased.

A Buttrick classroom can be a torture room

Where revolutionary ideas and potential groundbreaking thoughts

Dissipate within the hour

These Cinderella notions

Have to return to the recesses of our minds before the clock strikes 2.

But in our hearts, we know what Dickerson is saying.

These are our histories.

This is our history.

We can only learn from it.

Or be doomed to repeat the vicious cycle.

So bring me a 2020 Ida B. Wells

Bring me a Emma Goldman

Bring me a feminist ready to risk it all.

For it is all worth the risk.

Chapter 7: Fall 2019



WGS-2225-01 Women in Popular Culture

It's Britney, bitch.

And Nicki

And Cardi

And Gaga.

The pop and dazzle of the stars' glitter

Wow the senses.

We are in a Euphoria of representation.

But does that sparkle blind the eye?

The male gaze leers on posing their barbies to appease the voracious audience

Always hungry

Never satisfied.

Gossip girls and pretty blondes

Make for the dumbest of good girls

While Black goddesses

Are viewed and hailed as exotic

(Read erotic).

How is this media representation,

Representative at all?

When was the last time a dragon-riding queen was killed?

(But maybe if we look closer, we'll see its often)

How can we still not escape reality

Even while entrenched in "idealistic" fantasy.

Wonder Woman is a bad ass,

But not for herself.

And,

In a galaxy far far away

Sexism still exists.

Chapter 8: Spring 2020



WGS-1160-02 Sex and Society

Why do I attempt poetry when Lorde is perfection?

Because I have a story.

And I have been waiting for someone to tell it,

But I guess only I can do that.

So, bring on the theory.

Serve me again Gilman and Jacobs.

Let me immerse myself in Fierce Femmes, and a divided America.

Speak about religion, guns, violence, and music.

Bring the world to my eyes

And dare me to interact.

For I have a unique tag

That only my hand can make.

You are society

And society is you.

So, if we don't like it

We should change it.

Give me a place without

Racism

Sexism

And Classism

Take all the ism-s

And know I's Still Mine.

What we do now does not erase history.

But it can change it.

WGS-4960-01 Senior Seminar

A crippled woman appeared at my door

And made me question everything.

She gave me a book

And upon opening the page

I was sucked inside

Life operated at cripp time

As I fell through the infinite portal of lights

Scenes flashed all around of abused black bodies

Raped, beaten, and tortured.

As the children were taken

I tried to close my eyes

But prongs labeled feminist

Kept them wide.

I saw a nation,

That abuses their gays,

Use their deaths

As a rallying cry.

I thought how backward and twisted this all was

For life in 2016

And how I wanted to wake up from this horrible dream.

It is 2020

And I have returned.

Forever changed by my journey.

But finally understanding of reality.

That little first year needed a shove

To understand that this world needs some goddamn love.

Homage to Home

The lights dazzled that first night

When I was drawn in

By the soft warm air

A doe-eyed girl of only 18

Embracing the scene and flair.

A magical city

Where the streets were safe to walk

And neon glowed on lovers' talk

A twisting river

That had history

In ever moonlit wave.

Whiskey lips

And moving hips

Populated Broadway.

Too young was I to know,

That I would call this city home.

It's not where I was born

Or where I've been the longest

But it's where I've been alive.

I know who I am

Looking out on the Pedestrian Bridge.

I know where I'm going

When I lie at Wilson Hall.

I know who I've loved and who will love me

When I feel the grass of alumni lawn.

This severe goodbye

Is not fitting

For the place who loved me so tenderly.

But I know in my heart

This was all not to last.

So home will always be

The quiet lake at centennial

Home will always be

A Mayfield of lifelong friends

Home will always be

The Batman building at night

Home will always be

This place

That took a broken girl

And created her anew.

Nashville,

I'll love you forever.

And you'll always be mine.