

The Aging Woman in the 21st Century: A
Personal Journey into Adulthood Through
Culture and Expectations

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Abstract: This collection of poems explores the coming of age experience as a woman as well as growing older in a way that indelibly links the interior experience of aging with cultural notions of generationality and age. Aging is often identified through the changing of cultural ideas and icons and the ways in which, over time, we start to notice the recurring themes and messaging in culture. As we age, most of us reject these new objects of desire. We are no longer fooled by them since we have seen them in many other fashions before. These narratives examine expectations versus reality of life and the ways in which our expectations and desires change with the passage of time. I often change the voice within my poems to make my meditations both personal and fictional, but they all stem from the same experience of being a woman in the 21st century and changing in the public eye.

Keywords: Early Childhood & Childhood Education, Elementary Education, Poetry, Poems, Women, Perception, Culture, Social Media, Aging, Love, Expectations

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The Middle Ground

Traveling from home

to back home

an hour away.

Forgetting

where you put

your most precious thing

six months ago

when you last organized

your precious thing collection.

Saying “hell”

at the dinner table

and feeling your stomach lurch

with the anticipation

of verbal retribution,

only for the conversation

to shrug

and move on.

(Still) choosing your favorite

backseat (the one on the right)

on the long drive

while being

fully capable

of steering.

Familiar and foreign moments

mark the

crossing

of two existences.

I have my own car—

the old family Subaru

my parents hardly ever use.

This vessel

moved their only girl

from playdate

to gleeful playdate,

moved me from seven

with chapped lips and frizzy hair

to somewhat established at twenty-one.

My driveway

holds the headstone

for everything I will

ever miss

about seeing a pediatrician.

Sometimes,
I just can't bear
to drive it,
out of fear
I will crash
and cremate
the physical body
of radio karaoke,
of pointless conversations,
of my parents' overlapping laughter,
of arriving home,
slamming the door,
closing the trunk
and running inside
to do whatever
was important
ten years ago.

Tumblr

Among the digital ruins
of the once bustling hub
of a generation's intercontinental communications,
lie the oversaturated photographs of her youth.
Buried in a shallow grave,
her memories remain available to anyone as long as
they know
where to look.
Dusted with the volcanic ash
from an extinction nobody can quite remember clearly,
the bent and curling photos
remain digital antiques of
her first finger tattoo,
the dorm cat,
breakfast at Henry's,
and the crash that cost her the first car
she ever owned.

Now,
she clicks her pen
throughout a (nearly pointless) meeting
that should have been an email

(she has a coffee cup that says that).

Turning over her hand,

she sees it on her pointer finger:

faded, blotchy, and black.

She digs up the memory of when

the artist asked, “Are you sure?”

and she nodded as she sunk into

the designated “tattoo seat”

with a classic handlebar mustache

printed as the guide,

her first questionable decision at eighteen.

Listening underwater,

she recalls the people she swore

she would never abandon,

how she thought

she was special,

would never change,

and that the inside joke

permanently etched on her finger

would always be funny.

Slinking down into the uncomfortable office chair,

she revisits the digital ruins of her life
as she taps on the newest version
of the same phone,
released fifteen times.

With accuracy and precision,
she utilizes the echolocation of the depths of her memory
to pull from the ashes
the picture of the freshly inked
mustache tattoo on her finger.

“This will never not be funny,”
Remarked someone fifteen years ago,
who mattered only when they were
in her line of vision.

And it remained her most treasured joke
one
three
even two years later,
until the dorm cat,
Henry’s breakfast,
and her first car disappeared.

Her mustache tattoo:
a symbol of youth—

of ironic uncaring
for the permanence
of ink.

It used to be her
comedic “in”
to conversations
hosted on the ever-changing landscape
of culture.

Now,
her bold, inescapable,
generational marker.

In the break room
one Monday afternoon
she recalls
the way she lifted her finger
to graze her upper lip,
and realized the interns
weren't laughing at the joke.

Digitally and physically permanent,
she does not regret the tattoo.
However, she does reflect
on the hours of thought wasted

on formatting her LinkedIn
and how the world of adulthood
smelled her youthful impermanence,
took thirty years to pounce,
then swallowed her whole.

Feminist

Sometimes (every day) someone is able to achieve (with visible effort: zero)

what I have been working toward for longer than they have.

Logically, I recite to myself

“I have natural talents too.”

If I am in a good mood

or if I have gone to therapy recently,

I remind myself:

“There will always be someone

who has the ability to touch the stars

when you are still building your rocket ship.”

If I am running late,

or my car has broken down,

or my therapist is on vacation at the Jersey shore

and I learn a six-year-old girl

has performed Mozart’s Piano Sonata No. 6 in D major

at Carnegie Hall,

I feel like shouting at myself (but in the direction of her)

"Stupid slut!"

(With no basis for the word *slut*

except for the mere fact we are females

and a total shame for having the word

come out of my mouth
because I'm a feminist)
and stealing myself away somewhere
to mourn the peace prize
I definitely could have won
if I arrived on time,
or my check engine light miraculously fixed itself,
or I did more deep breathing exercises from the anxiety workbook.

Even if I did steal myself away
to learn the art of
saving the white rhino,
teaching gorillas sign language,
changing the minds of big oil,
or writing the next dystopian YA novel,
someone somewhere would create a newer, better goal,
(something like creating eternal life,
Ending kill shelters,
or curing menopause)
and complete it in half the time, though.
So, what does it matter?
Why should I strive to create
if someone else can do it better than me?

I am just a stupid girl
(but just so you know,
all the other girls
are really smart though,
and could win one-hundred peace prizes
or grammys
or other bullshit signifiers
regardless of anything
(I'm a feminist, btw)).

Pajama Set from Christmas 2014

Wearing the pajama pants

I was gifted at 11:

they are snakes around thighs

that constrict blood flow.

Will I feel as awful

wearing the pants I bought last week

11 years from now?

Am I a horrible person

for asking?

I believe every body is beautiful

except mine.

Inside of me there is a little girl and a shadowed figure

kicking her like a soccer ball

and screaming obscenities so loud

she can't hear her own thoughts.

The shadowed figure ignites a fire

in the safest part of my mind

and tries to set aflame an 11-year-old girl

crying and begging on the ground

while laughing and kicking her head until

she stops moving.

Over cookies,

I asked Nana if

she thought I was fat

and she replied,

“I’d tell you if you were.”

I remember sighing in relief

that at least someone would watch

my weight for me.

Nana, who counts out 23 Teddy Grahams

to equal 100 calories,

who also bakes with an extra stick of butter,

was my reliable judge.

The bombardment of images

of people who have figured out how to fit into

their perfect silhouette,

whatever it may be

for them,

is inescapable.

I just wish I knew what the right answer

was for my own body

to look my best.

I have preemptive dread

for the day I have to contend

with the fact that my form

no longer reflects that I

am 21.

Dollywood

Today I saw a billboard

That said

"Kindness: Pass it on"

With a picture of Dolly Parton.

For the second

My eyes glazed over it

Before returning to the road,

I considered it a good message.

But then I saw the strip malls ahead of me

With dilapidated auto body shops

And the same Valero gas station copy and pasted a half mile from the last,

And I didn't feel so sure anymore

As the metallic taste of spare change sat on my tongue.

The four lanes

Spanned ahead from coast to coast

Surrounded with an architectural collage

From 1980

To today:

A hodgepodge of

Unrenovated McDonald's

And stores that look as if

They've never had a single customer.

I looked to my right

To check the exit sign.

Pennies poured onto my lap

After seeing an ad

For God.

Shit billboards tell me:

How wonderful everything around me is

And how I should invest my money

In their version of

The World's Highest Standard of Living.

There's no way like the American way!

As I drove on the highway

With dividers full of weeds

And decaying grass,

And maroon walls

Keeping the oceanic waves

Of tree branches out,

I pointed the air vent

Away from my face,

Tapped the steering wheel

To my dad's favorite radio station,

And asked how the hell

They managed

To commodify

Kindness

And (laughing),

What does it have to do

With Dolly Parton

Staying a millionaire?

(Does the change

Under my mat

Go to her?)

“oh yeah, women’s literature is over there next to the porn magazines”

I swim around to find the shortest book in the whole store

titled "How to Focus"

then flip through without reading a word.

Next to it is "The Right to Sex"

from a feminist perspective.

On the ground, a pile

of "Heavy Metal" porn magazines.

Oh, well.

I open my phone to take a picture

of the obvious irony

(I don’t think the editors at “Heavy Metal”

cared too much about women’s liberation)

but get distracted by a notification with

Samsung’s new terms and conditions

followed by an e-mail for

Act Fast! 20% off a lobotomy.

I like to imagine somewhere in the past

a person drenched in petticoats and stockings

went into a bookstore,

picked up a book,

and felt her attention slip to the box of condoms

displayed behind the desk.

The goldfish with the attention span of seven seconds

Might outdo us yet!

Her bed is clear but for her purse

She lays down to sleep with

12 gum wrappers (used, oozing dried green)

Lip gloss (lemon cake scent, on sale for \$2.99 instead of \$6.49)

Pull alarm (pink, gift)

Emergency inhaler (prescribed)

Phone (case: glitter nail polish fading)

Pen (new paltz center for student engagement)

Change (loose, caked in gum)

2 ChapSticks (she needs 2 in there because one will always get stuck at the bottom)

Headphones (fall out often, ears not the right size (who measures standard ear canal size?))

Indeterminate amount of bobby pins

3 hair ties (the squiggly kind to keep her bleached hair healthy)

Dirt (leave crumbs, brown

forgotten trinkets of walks

picked up to be put in a notebook

to flatten and keep for life.

Specks of what could have been

if she had remembered:

leaves are brittle and pens are sharp,

leaves are wet and gum is sticky.

Pick up some oak or sycamore

to take with you to remember this moment.

Forget it in your pocket forever.

Discover what you meant to cherish

and then spread dead pieces like ashes in the

kitchen trash can

and try again.)

unsolicited dick pic

What can I say about womanhood

that has not already been said?

Commonly known stanzas

about unfairness,

about intersectionality,

about free bleeding.

How do I summarize

a gender spectrum?

Does everyone feel connected

to their gender

in some monumental way?

Is there a voice in the back of the woman's head going

"I'mawomanI'mawomanI'mawoman"

like a positive affirmation mantra?

Or does it only hit when they look in a mirror

or receive an unsolicited sext

with an unfortunate attachment?

There are people who want what I have

with such prolific yearning

that I wish I could just break a piece of me off

and say "Here, let's share."

But what am I giving them?
The essence of being femme
feels like some heretic fantasy
with enchantment and perfect smiles
being the orthodox
and the ability to lance
in a suit of armor
being the part of the equation
where people get confused.

If I have to say anything about being a woman,
I do so with a sighing breath because my words
have been said before in other epochal ways
and I make no claim to them.

I repeat what those have said before me
and what others will say after:
you can wear hairbows while holding a sword.
Non-conformity overthrows power structures
of what a patriarchy wants you to believe
and augments the word “woman”
to have infinitely expanding meanings
like stardust running away from the big bang,
until the definitions all converge upon themselves

and poof into one big dust cloud.

I'm sorry you cry when they call you beautiful

When she twirls,
she glitters and shines,
refracting light and shimmering:

Crystalline Goddess
of heart and mind.

Her stunning features
are visible in skin tags,
and moles,
and burns,
and age marks.

Quality assurance of the soul
is assessed through action,
and heartaches,
and hair strokes,
and smile lines.

She has been every age from 0 to 96
and still when she twirls,
they applaud.

There are those with souls identical
who watch from the shadows
with their own reflections just as divine,

condemned to dark
compartmentalized cubicles of their minds
by offhand comments
remembered words
(from: mom, dad, the man, the boss, the stranger)
still echo in cranium
with acoustics like an opera house.
Some women have learned to hide
for fear of being perceived
as proud, full of themselves, egotistical,
or any other way language can be used to weaponize
a person's perception of their body or mind
as an object of shame.

We will all return one day,
will be blanketed gently by the Earth.
In the ground, there is no final judgment,
just the recycling of our existences
into beautiful soft green grass
and dandelion seeds.

Girl reincarnated

Observe the

Weight of the moon

With every star hung from unmoving clear thread.

A match strikes and burns a single paper star,

Edges shrivel and embers float on air.

The fishing wire hangs empty,

Swaying as if blown by breath before coming to rest

As the memories of an extraordinary end

Find a place to be renewed:

In the formation of tomorrow's next newest star.

Honeyed

Softened over the years,

the essence of "true self"

flows from her sacral chakra:

fulfillment, contentment, meditative relief.

Yet, handmade artisanal soap

and well water

cleanse her stomach of lifelong churned sweetness dwelling within.

Nurtured goldenrod center

replaced with an insatiable hunger

for the intangible object

of her desire.

For only a tap of her honey and a tap of her card,

she fits the mold of her fleeting desires

until the next change of season.

Eternity****terms and conditions apply**

My mom was a devout Catholic for all her life,
the epitome of a
good Christian:
she went to church every day,
she volunteered through the church weekly— all of that.

Her family thought she would never have a boyfriend
and assumed she would become a nun.

My grandparents expected subservient perfection,
undoubted faithfulness.

Then she met my dad
and that idea washed away quickly.

After she got pregnant,
the tide of unconditional love receded.

Her mother's church
turned their backs
and treated my mom like a terminally ill patient
destined for the elevator down without redemption.

She devoted countless hours over nineteen years
and her entire community
let her drown on her own

instead of teaching her to swim.

Water did not exist in Catholicism,
so they didn't talk about swimming.
Sex and treading water aren't all that different,
but only one can be done without vows.

Mom and Dad got married
before she had my brother
but that didn't change the minds
of the holier-than-you clergy.

She stopped taking me
to Catholic church
when I was about eight,
about twenty-four years
after the church said
she was going to hell.

All of my brothers got Saint's names.

I never got confirmed.

I hope God did not see my wet dream

I pray some nights when I remember to

but sometimes I forget to say

“amen” at the end,

and I wonder whether it’s like leaving the receiver

hanging from the bungee telephone cord

and God can hear every single thought I have

and can see my nightly visions.

I feel a little paranoid when I wake up in the middle of the night

and realize that the wall phone of my mind is still hanging

and the call is live.

A guide: OCD on love

We are lying like cocktail shrimp on a plastic platter

when I turn around to kiss you out of love.

Whispered with warm breath on your cheek and my hand in your hair:

“Sometimes my loving comes out of an obsessive thought

(which cannot quiet itself)

that I will never ever see you again

because you will get hit by a truck

while walking with those damn headphones in.

And if that happens, I will have my

‘I told you so! See?’ moment

that I would really prefer not to happen.”

He laughs and pulls me tighter

but I am not quite sure he heard what I said

because nobody has ever loved me for my intrusive worries.

I hope one day, we will be old and smiling

with those weird partial dentures

for him (he has trouble remembering to brush his teeth

even though I remind him every day)

and that we will still have the ability to curl

like ringlets around each other

to sleep.

Don't you love your baby?

She falls asleep while holding her baby—

her baby!

She awakes and her breath hitches,

to see the sight of the rising and falling chest of baby.

This placates something in her that is not exactly maternal,

no,

more like falling asleep at the wheel

and the relief of catching yourself before you hit a telephone pole.

She listens, despondent, to Friday night football playing quietly in some other room

as she wraps the smallest one tight in the polyester slash cotton.

Baby coos,

the mother grimaces and sets it in its cradle.

She swings the mobile

and then walks out of the nursery to clean up the half-eaten TV dinners and used tissues.

A friend stops by and offers to help,

remarking as she goes about the apartment:

Why the tissues?

You cry a lot nowadays.

When I had my boy, I was just so happy.

Babies should be wrapped in pure cotton, you know.

Why didn't you finish your meal?

You need to be healthy so he has something to eat.

Do you talk to him? No?

When is the last time you told him "I love you"?

Why don't you love your baby?

he is/was loved

I mourn my seventeen-year-old cat

I've had since I was four

who isn't quite dead.

He sleeps most hours

and once in a while I check

To make sure he's still breathing.

I worry that if we don't give him

his thyroid medication

it will be all my fault.

Am I being inhumane

by propping him up

like a stuffed animal?

I can't let go of

specialty food

and pill capsules

when he seems

like he is too tired

to keep going.

I can't let him go.

I drag him around like a doll

behind me
a child's toy, ragged,
holding on by well-loved
stuffing and threadbare felt.

Frozen in time
he sits still in my highchair
with a bib around his neck
looking with wide eyes at the camera,
tolerating me for the moment,
but ready to scamper away.

When you're ready,
please wait for me to get
to you in time
to say goodbye.

Screen Test

Everyone quiet

quickly please

people need to get to their places.

Oh!

Are you here for the show?

please follow me to behind the screen,

they are all waiting for you.

Oh, don't mind the cameras,

we don't turn them off.

Yes, stay right there...

don't sit like that,

don't sit like you know we're watching.

We want unposed and not upsetting to the eyes...

we prefer you not slouch either.

Okay, wonderful.

Don't flinch,

it's just the flash.

We'll be right back

we just have to talk to the director.

murmur murmur

So we think something of you

but not highly enough.

Can you come back tomorrow for a personality test?

If you are the right ratio humble to beautiful

we will consider you for a role.

Toyota Corolla

Car door closing,

Metal on metal screaming.

I peered over to you

To see your eyes straight ahead

Silence falling like hail.

I felt trepidatious fight or flight

in the center of my chest.

"My parents can pick me up instead,"

My voice walking all over the glass

I broke by feeling too happy in front of you.

The sound of an automatic lock

and I prayed to the God my parents raised me with

for some sort of protective spell to be cast

over my body like a protective bubble.

Even though the second shoe dropped weekly

I kept putting it back on

because I was too afraid of being alone

and of what you might do

if it was off for good.

When you are in the car
with someone who hates you as much as they love you,
you learn how to cry quietly
and text your family "I love you" covertly.

I think about this particular night and can see my mom
folding laundry and planning out the next day in her mind.
"I'm sorry that happened" blank and without inflection.
Maybe she was preoccupied
or maybe she was tired
of telling me not to gamble my life on a human pinball machine.
I was always jumping around and putting on a show,
hitting the flipper button to keep you in high spirits.
You keep the ball up as long as you can,
but inevitably you always lose
and it all comes crashing down.

My heart races when I see men like
you, vultures.
I watch from an omnipotent perspective
as they swoop down to peck out the kindness from my body.

Fuck you and the girl you tortured out of me in your attic.

She was mine and you took her to slaughter

for your own interests.

I can still see her laying bare and lifeless

with intestines picked through by selfish beaks.

I know peace because I held her for hours

and got to say goodbye.

I take comfort in doing better than you

even if I am ashamed for hating you so openly.

I hope you know my joy and know you will never cause it.

I am obsessed with never seeing you again.

ChatGPT

she is her laptop screen, the surface she dives under
she is the anonymous face upon billions
who are being replicated by ai generators
her voice has been ripped from her to be used
for a voice-to-text reader for someone else's profit
she is so famous for her beautiful voice
(that has been made to hurl slurs and read audiobooks as a personal chatbot)
which she does not control
she signs autographs on the red carpet of blood of the people who will lose
their jobs, hobbies, humanity
she admits to being part robot to her friends and family
who all lick her face, puppies
who wag their tails in excitement
for the big hurdle to be jumped
next
the constant feeder implants under her skin for uninterrupted ads into her psyche
then
the world ends in fiery flames because everyone plays dumb for the camera
finally
the ai historians will say they never knew it was coming

reveal

The hip bones turn in upon each other and pop the balloon uterus
blood pools like ketchup to dip a fry in on their 10,000th date
while they talk about meaningful sludge of day-to-day when she grabs her front
like a pork bun they serve at the mess hall at the hospital
when they tell her that she is empty again
she wanted to pry open her womb like a wishbone and grab the bigger half
and stab it in herself to try again
to have some sort of meatball in her arms

Declarations

I tried to write a poem for you in the middle of the night

About how when I kiss you while you sleep,

It feels like rain pattering against a window frame

And humid, fresh air.

When I reached for something to write with,

I knocked over a glass of water

And spilled it all over my new book.

I nearly cried—

Not because I cared for the book,

But because

You awoke,

Helped me clean,

And then took the book in your hands

And began putting paper towels between the pages.

With you,

There are never thunderstorms,

Only passing showers

Bouts of rain that you

Dry me off after.

When I kiss you while you sleep,

I hope to show the same affection

As you do me,

Performing life-saving surgery

On a paperback.

Lifespan of a Girl

(Made up of moments

Familiar and foreign)

I learned how to tumble

Down the hallway with no windows

And the hole in the wall

Where the vacuum used to connect.

Then,

I emailed my sixth grade teacher

And told her I didn't know how

To solve the algebra problem

About chocolate candies

For homework.

After,

I graduated

From high school

And college

Very quickly.

=====

Following that,

She burned eggs

In her shared kitchen
And covered her ears
While standing atop a chair
To turn off the blaring smoke alarm.

Going forward,
She found a job she liked well enough,
But was always searching for more.
She learned to laugh with the interns
And make the deadlines.

Continuing,
She put to sleep her wicked fantasies
Of hating her hips,
And opted for acceptance and joy.

Suddenly,
She was a mother
With every precious thing she'd ever owned
Belonging to small hands
And just as suddenly,
She was alone again
Wishing there was more.

Finally,

She had forgotten how to tumble

But learned what it meant to be a woman.

With years of love aging the walls

And a pot of water on for tea,

She classified her life as a job well-done

In the home she was so happy to have bought at 35.