

*Dear readers,*

The question “how does one heal?” was my invaluable mantra. I set out with this work to capture an era, but I realized to achieve this I could not skirt the fire—I had to walk directly through my own trauma. For the first time in years, I found myself actively crying while typing. While I resisted re-living these bleak and hellish moments, I came to realize that they were still very much living within me. This is a work about navigating the world with an illness. I am attempting to subvert the narrative that “sick girls” lack multiplicities or spend our days accepting our inevitable psych ward deaths and have no cherished memories—that we aren’t active participants in our healing, our “what-comes-after,” our in-betweens.

I first conceptualized this project last year, inspired in the oddest of places—a group on Facebook called “it’s 2005 and this is cool as hell.” Here, young people gathered together to reminisce about a time period in our lives that seemed rife with possibility. A day rarely went by without a thread discussing reasons we wished we could return to this era. As someone who spent my formative years existing in the seemingly-liminal early 2000’s, I became intrigued with exploring reasons why we seem constantly to look backwards instead of ahead. This cycle—teetering between our nostalgia and our present—seemed to mirror the non-linearity of healing and the way we clutch our illnesses, shun them, welcome them back again.

As I crafted a first mapping of how I thought the work might go before it shaped itself into something else, I recorded 35 moments in the early 2000’s I was interested in writing towards. But as time passed, I became debilitated by the idea—especially as I tried to craft works about Hurricane Katrina—that I was writing someone else’s narrative. As I sat on poorly-written attempts at poems about rising oil prices, I found myself moving away from events and towards cultural artifacts. This is why I do not hesitate to call objects by their name: Maybelline Dream Matte Mousse foundation, Xanga, Mountain Dew, Lacoste, AIM. For many Millennials, these objects invoke era-specific feelings, tastes, and memories. I hope in doing this I have not overly-isolated other age groups; my desire is that these artifacts serve as mere lenses through which larger themes of isolation, real and metaphorical hunger, and trauma/healing can be examined.

My generation is America’s lab rat. In the early 2000’s, all music was at our fingertips,

all news a fresh-click away, but the cost of our new and overly-connected world led to our disconnect with one another; we continue to be critiqued for buying into that which was sold to us without a warning label. We were pushed into a sometimes dangerous, always unregulated landscape online and flooded absolutely with information. I hope to evoke this sensation by leading you through hybrid pieces. This is a manuscript of poetry, but it is also a one act screenplay, a short story, a Xanga post, a Facebook status, a journal entry, a 35 mm snapshot, an away message. Before you can get comfortable with one form of narrative, the genre turns; I hope this choice mimics the ways in which we were and continue to be constantly inundated with new information before we have had time to fully process.

There are few poems that were forced restraints—“CATHOLIC SCHOOL GIRLS” and “drunk & warm-bellied” had to be crafted only with the words/groups that already existed. But truthfully, I spent over a decade restricting myself, and so I generally avoid restraints on my work. I almost wish I had a more profound reason for the works being in my own voice besides that I wanted them to be, and so rarely do sick women get to control their own narrative. It is my form of resistance. However, throughout the process I continuously consulted the Facebook group, my own parents, and groups of friends with one resounding question: “What does grief look like to you?” I see their voices as most in the mothers/the fathers/the boys/the girls.

I would not feel right leading you down my path of production if I did not take time to acknowledge authors and works that absolutely mapped the ways I pushed forward before I knew where my feet were headed. First is Evie Shockley’s *semiautomatic*, wherein I became fascinated by her narratives of war and the ways in which women walk through the world with necessarily fatalistic steps. Next is *Beast Meridian* by Vanessa Angélica Villareal for her words on generational trauma and narratives of displacement within failing school systems; her unflinching examination of high school/formative years gave me courage to deem my own teenage years as worthy of exploration—to take my younger self more seriously, even though the world did not. I am indebted to Eve Ewing’s *Electric Arches* for her re-imaginings of her own “black girlhood;” while our experiences of oppression differ, our bodies were placed against the same Midwestern, urban-centered landscape. Hanif Abdurraqib’s groundbreaking work, *They Can’t Kill Us Until They Kill Us*, inspired me to pursue my desire to write sincere and authentic narrative lyric essays that used music to ground them; this part of my thesis absolutely became

my favorite. Last, this entire work could rightfully be dedicated to Suzanne Scanlon and her *Promising Young Women*, which indefinitely inspired me to push past a standard “psych ward narrative” and on to something rarely written about in works about institutionalized women, about “sick girls”—our deep desire to get “better,” whatever that may look like.

I have always considered myself an emotionally literate person, yet learned how often I have resisted truly examining at my own trauma. I can now claim it, nurse it, and come closer to releasing habits of mind that protected me in childhood but no longer serve me. Writing this has brought me closer to myself, and while I believe healing is not a linear process, there is something to be said about how my hands no longer shake. While I hope this work leaves the rooms of graduate school and am determined to make it so, what is most important to me is that I have learned to sit with my sadness. Writing this has done wonders for the spark that had become dim in my eyes. I literally *look* more alive. I hope this work not only renders a “sick girl’s” suffering legible, but also awakens some sort of self-examination within you. At the very least, I hope sometimes it makes you smile or laugh that particular type of laugh that comes from shared experience, from making it out only singed along the edges, a triumphant fist in the air.

Thank you for our precious and invaluable time together,  
*dee mcelhattan*