

Augustana College

## Augustana Digital Commons

---

Audre Lorde Writing Prize

Prizewinners

---

Spring 2021

### ABVD.

Briana L. Kunstman

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward>

---

#### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Kunstman, Briana L.. "ABVD." (2021). *Audre Lorde Writing Prize*.

<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward/40>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Audre Lorde Writing Prize by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

ABVD.  
Briana Kunstman  
WGSS-130  
Jennifer Heacock-Renaud  
Spring Semester, 2021  
Personal/ Reflective Prose

ABVD. Adriamycin, Bleomycin, Vinblastine, Dacarbazine. Those were the 4 different bagged drugs infused into me every other friday. 12 rounds, for 6 months. A cancer diagnosis was the last thing I had expected last year, especially at 18 years old, but even more unexpected was the way in which cancer took away the one thing I thought I'd had control over. My femininity was fragile. I didn't realize that I wasn't living loudly and occupying space in the way that I could have been before cancer. To better explain the ways in which I learned to take up space, live loudly, and rock being bald as a woman, I have compiled descriptions on how each bag of chemotherapy, came equipped with their own side effects simply because I am a woman.

Adriamycin- the A in my chemotherapy. This first bag of liquid poison came in the form of Angering remarks about my hair. I had long brown hair for my entire life, and more than anything I feared it all falling out. Around the time of my second chemo, I began pulling clumps of hair from my scalp. I didn't even have time to mourn this loss, as my focus fell on needing wigs. This shift was purely one that showcased the way in which feminine ideals have been ingrained in our minds whether we realize it or not. When we think of women, we think of long hair. We think of fun styles, hair dye, and bows that we have seen marketed as “for females” since birth. So when I shaved my head finally, I cried. I cried not because I was in pain, but because I felt that I had been stripped of what made me feel like a woman. How could I, as a woman, possibly present myself and be seen as beautiful and feminine without hair? I soon realized that this was not even the worst part, rather the accompanying comments were. “You're really pretty for a cancer patient”, said one person, and another said “You look so good, even without hair!”. The one comment that really drives this point home was the classic, “Well don't worry girl, it'll grow back”. These were all said as if being bald disproved my femininity, as if they made me less of a woman. I was “pretty” even without the standard “female hair”. Of course my hair was important, but I wanted the focus to be on my strength and perseverance to fight, not on how I looked. I wanted to be asked about my well being or how my last chemo session went, instead it felt like the focus was on my appearance. A woman's hair doesn't define her, whether it's shaved, dyed, long or short; our existence and validity as women does not boil down to the hair on our heads.

### **The length of our hair does not define our femininity.**

Bleomycin- the B in my chemotherapy. This vicious second bag came in the form of Blending in. Before my 7th chemo started, I was struggling to breathe. I was sent to the hospital and then put into the ICU because of “bleo toxicity”. In short, this chemotherapy drug had poisoned my lungs and left me on bedrest and oxygen. While I was inside of the ICU, they had

to put me on prednisone, a steroid that came with 50lbs of weight gain, a moon face, and a buffalo hump on my back. This steroid is the reason I am still alive, however, it is the reason that I began feeling unapproachable. This rapid change led me to wearing even bigger earrings and finding comfort only in a ton of makeup and a wig. While this seems like a small thing to note, the importance of this is in the “Why”. I did this because I felt that the way I appeared to others was not feminine enough to be acceptable. In every single movie and book, women have been described as having long flowing hair and a petite and slender frame. They are always noted as having beautiful facial features. I did not have that at all. I appeared ill, and I felt the constant need to show everyone that even though I looked the way I did that I was still, well, a female. Most of the time, I’d say to my mom before we left, “Are you sure I don't look like a man?”, because I was so desperate to feel that beauty and femininity that I had before. Her answer was always no, however this never alleviated the pressure I felt to present as feminine in public.

### **Our physique does not define our femininity.**

Vinblastine- the V in my chemotherapy. This third bag came in the form of comments about my Visions for the future. This bag hurt a lot. As I was filled with various drug cocktails and asked to recite my name, I’d hear the question, “What are you studying?” or “What do you want to do when you graduate?”. Without fail, every time I gave my answer, the doctors would stare at me confused. I often wondered if they knew the profound effects that their doubt had on me. I’d say, “I’d love to try working in a prison, or a mental health facility. My passion is helping those with mental health issues and I’d love to be some kind of counselor in those environments”. I was immediately met with comments such as “You're too pretty for prison work!” or “But that doesn't seem like you at all”, and finally my favorite, “Aren't you worried about the creepy men you could meet?”. Each of these comments revealed a bigger, more disturbing problem of its own. To others, my appearance determined my capabilities. Why does my appearance have anything to do with my career? My beauty should not serve as your reasoning for thinking I am unable to succeed. I am more than just pretty, I am a woman with a mind of my own and stories to tell. I have advice to give and the world to change so please think of something else to say. We as women exist to be more than what you see on the surface, Others failure to to recognize our importance beyond that proves my point exactly. We are more than the career roles we play in everyday life, we are amazingly unique and capable. and soon society will come to realize this distinction. To society we still have a long way to go in showing our function to be more than mothers, nail techs, models and beauticians.

### **Our choice of career path does not define our femininity.**

Dacarbazine- the D in my chemotherapy. This final bag came in the form of Disbelief that my trauma lives on, though invisible. Day in and day out I worry that I am not seen as feminine due to my scars, short hair, and changed features from steroids. More so, I hear the

stories of my friends who are also fighters and how they wonder if they are seen as overly emotional, I can't help but wonder the same. Let me explain by using this example; this statement is the cancer survivor's equivalent to "Are you on your period?", but instead it is "But aren't you in remission now?". Yes, I am, but that does not mean that the trauma disappears. It does not mean that my hair will magically be long again and I will feel 100% happy 24/7. In fact, at times it means the complete opposite. It means that I tear up at the sight of the classroom I used to sit in not knowing that I was ill. It means getting defensive when someone makes a comment about my diagnosis because I am so used to being questioned and told that I'm lucky to be alive. It means that some days I am so burdened and exhausted mentally that I feel I cannot move from my bed. I am not "overly sensitive". I am not "being dramatic" or "just looking for attention". This is too common. I am sick and tired of beating myself up and of seeing other women penalized for feeling. We are not weak or dramatic, we're human. Stop equating our gender to our mental strength and kindness, it has absolutely nothing to do with it.

### **The way we emote does not define our femininity.**

ABVD. Adriamycin, Bleomycin, Vinblastine, Dacarbazine. Those were the 4 bags of drugs infused into me every other friday. 12 rounds, for 6 months. A cancer diagnosis was the last thing I had expected last year, especially at 18 years old, but even more unexpected was the way in which cancer took away the one thing I thought I'd had control over. My femininity which I am now reclaiming. The length of my hair has nothing to do with how feminine I am. It plays no role in being a female. Additionally, I am going to take up as much space as I can. I am going to laugh my loudest, dress my boldest, and smile at those who "just don't get it". I do not exist as a man's woman. I do not exist as the ideal of those in movies and books written by men who expect the submission of their female counterparts. I exist on my own and as a voice for those women who have faced countless obstacles. ABVD could have killed me, but instead, it woke me up.