THIS WOMAN’S WORK

A Project
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
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Fall 2009
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A Project

by

Sarah T. Knowlton

Fall 2009

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DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated to my mother who said she was proud of me before I ever even did anything, and to David who understands when I tell him to ignore my tantrums. I love you both and thanks for all the support.
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This project could not have been completed without the support and encouragement of many people. Foremost among them is David, who always reads my work when I’m done, even if he doesn’t want to. Thanks also to my mother for always encouraging me, my sister for being her, my grandparents, Eunice and Claude, for helping to raise me and never understanding me, my aunt Kim, my inlaws -- Pat and Len for their interest, and my friends -- Susan, Poppy, Dawn, Hallie, Monica, and Amanda-- for understanding that I still like them even when I never call, or email, them back.

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If I’ve forgotten anyone in this acknowledgment, please forgive me. It is not from a lack of your influence, but a lack in my memory. Every writer’s work is an inspiration to me, as is each discussion of literature that pushes me to look deeper into the craft of writing.
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ABSTRACT

THIS WOMAN’S WORK

by

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Master of Arts in English

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The idea of gender specific roles is a common theme that modern society wrestles with even in today’s more enlightened times. The title of my project, This Woman’s Work, then acts on multiple levels referring to the work included in this collection as well as to the more literal meaning of what a woman’s work is supposed to be. The work of the woman here is not the stereotypical woman’s work of cooking and cleaning, but that of writer, teacher and scholar.

All things are interconnected and continue to be born from past experience as they move forward into a new existence. This mixed genre collection of poems and creative non-fiction is no different and involves many topics that speak to each other as each finds its own life within this space. These topics include what it means to be a woman dealing with an expanding world of desires and expectations, as well as mining the themes of family, politics, and nature. In its continuing journey, this collection

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brushes against the fringes of larger concepts like privacy and the search for self while it seeks to reveal truth by examining the everyday experience. It reveals the cyclic nature of the day-to-day as well as delving into the historic nature of life as a contiguous, ever-evolving story -- specifically the story of this woman’s world.
PART I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Pray God you can cope.
I stand outside this woman’s work,
This woman’s world.

-- Kate Bush, This Woman’s Work

Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experience, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.

-- Italo Calvino, Six Memos For the Next Millennium

The first memory I have of writing creatively: I was in third grade at Bethel Lutheran Church School, in a class of about 10 students, and we had been charged with the task of writing a haiku and drawing a picture to go with it. This is my first haiku:

I ask the ocean,
Why are you so blue? Only
the waves answer me.

But I didn’t stop there. Oh no. I was so inspired by this assignment that I wrote another one:

Oh, Caterpillar,
How beautiful you will be
when your wings unfold.

I really enjoyed making these poems. I thought it was fun trying to fit the words into the 5/7/5 rhythm of the form and also creating the visual aspect of the drawing to enliven the words. Now of course, I would tell my creative writing students that if the image isn’t implicit in the written word then they aren’t doing their job, but I guess in
third grade it was acceptable to help the image along a little bit with a picture rendered in Crayola. This writing experience didn’t spark me into becoming a great haiku master, although I did really remember the act of writing the poems. In fact, I remember the poems as if I had just written them. As simple as they were, they made a mark on me, but they didn’t turn me into a writer.

The next memory I have concerning writing is maybe two years later, being upstairs in my grandparents’ house and looking at a set of those Reader’s Digest all-the-literature-you-need-to-read-to-have-read-all-the-important-literature sets that was forgotten on a shelf in the spare bedroom. I flipped one open to this passage:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes: (1-4)

Back then I had no idea who George Gordon, Lord Byron was, but I was struck by his language. I thought it was strange and beautiful. Whatever poetry was doing with language here, it was taking words to the next level. This wasn’t the way my grandparents talked nor was it the way I talked to my friends. These words were working together in a wondrous way. The book also contained Keats, Shelley and Shakespeare’s more famous sonnets, but those four lines above still resonate. Loving those four lines of poetry, however, didn’t turn me into a writer.

I continued to dabble in writing. We kept a year-long journal in sixth grade where I shared my deep insights about politics (I wrote, “Ronald Reagan is a very eloquent speaker,” and yes I really wrote “eloquent” back then and was brainwashed into
liking a Republican by my grandparents) and I wrote what I was doing in my day-to-day life ("I can’t wait for recess!"). When I became a teenager I started keeping a personal journal (that my best friends would read, kind of like a pre-internet blog with an audience of two) but I didn’t write about boys. I gave detailed information about my day-to-day existence with commentary about everything I came in contact with, including movie reviews that got extra stars for the number of explosions they included. I wrote plays that my friends and I would videotape using Barbie Dolls as actors, and also wrote the mini-movie we made for our high school senior project in photography class. I wrote some poetry as a teen that was very much teen poetry. But I still wasn’t a writer.

I excelled in English. I loved to read and discuss texts and write essays. It was clearly my best subject. I went to junior college and focused on English, took a creative writing class, but I still wasn’t a writer. I attended California State University, Chico, getting a BA in English and a BA in journalism and a minor in creative writing. But I still wasn’t a…wait a minute. I like to read; I like to write. And I do write a lot. How could I not be a writer? Looking back now, I see I was born into writing that first day I started scratching my haiku out on that gray-lined paper. And each experience added to my slow progression of becoming a writer. The length of this evolution, and being too close to the experience, made me blind to the fact I was becoming a writer, a journalist, a poet and essayist.

I realize now that I always liked to write things for other people to read. I like to entertain people. I like to entice them with the way I see the world into thinking a new way and through reading my poems and essays invite them into a kind of long distance
conversation with me. I write to make pictures, sort of a way to redraw reality into words. Writing creates a word camera that freezes this image, this moment, so that we will remember. It gives me the ability to look back on the past, to bring the picture back into focus and then share it with others so they can see what I see. I write to communicate the thoughts in my head to the thoughts in your head. A poem, or essay, on the page becomes a tin-can-string-phone joining it to the tin-cans of your eyes with the hope that meaning can climb across slack string. Through my writing, I’m working on ways to keep that string taut.

I must write to continue to pin things down. I keep telling the students I teach to keep it concrete. Hard. Real. So I write to, “Keep it Real?” Oh no. Now I sound like Dwayne Wayne from *A Different World*. The *Cosby Show* spin off? Who remembers that show? That’s my point exactly. See, I write to remember. These words sit there on the page, indelibly marked, unless I scribble them out.

There’s an old saying involving a tree that falls in the woods. If no one is there to witness it, does it actually fall? Writers are the witnesses of the world. If we don’t write it, does it happen? Oh, it happens. But if we don’t write it down, I’m not sure if anyone will remember it happened. Maybe/Maybe not. Are we capturing history or creating history? Probably both, but it’s true that what we choose to focus on is what is remembered at least by the few who read what we write. But it’s not just a straight history like some kind of court reporting. The art of creative writing is focused. Much the same way a cinematographer pulls focus in a film to the most important aspect of the frame, a writer pulls focus to the most notable aspects of life. What is notable, however,
seems different for every person and resides within a state of flux. Art is not just aiming the camera and letting it go. The art of writing lies in how the picture is captured and what beauty and truth can be revealed by the writer’s attention.

As a writer, and really as a person, I am striving to fit into an accelerating American landscape that threatens to leave many of us on the side of the road. We live in a fractured world of technology and instant gratification. Our lives are made up of disparate pieces combined to make a whole. This is the “combinatoria” that Italo Calvino discusses in the second epigraph. My collection of writing is a combinatoria in itself, a compilation of poetry and nonfiction. It is poetry about family. It is poetry about women, about nature, about relationships. It is essays about me, about women and our expected roles in contemporary society. The essays are written in a plain, conversational -- dare I say humorous -- tone, while much of the poetry is written in or owes allegiance to form, lending it an air of formality. This is my combinatoria of writings, the encyclopedia of me. That said, it’s not as if each piece in this collection is only to be read in and of itself; while they could seem like unrelated pieces of writing, they still speak to each other through common subject matter. I explore feelings of disenchantment with modern life in the poems “Halloween Everyday,” “Wreak,” and “America.” Poems dealing with women and their lives range from meditations inspired by and dedicated to my grandmother, like “The Settled Life,” “Curtains,” and “Echo,” among others, to a character study of an older woman trying to recapture youth, in “Overripe,” to the disconnected experiences of exotic dancers in “Dollar Dances.” There is a current of history both familial and cultural in my poems.
In this collection, my creative non-fiction is in the form of the personal essay. I gravitate toward the real/factual. I work in personal essay to speak to the reader. Non-fiction is where I get to talk -- I am the narrator and I am talking to you. You know that what is on the page is me -- my voice -- but it is not just nonfiction that allows this type of voice; poetry can be like that too. While there is still the Wizard-of-Oz-behind-the-curtain effect of the speaker in poetry, it is so much more transparent than fiction. The idea of truth or represented reality in poetry and nonfiction brings me a step closer to the reader. Fiction seems to try to hide the writer, while non-fiction puts the writer -- right there -- like, Hey, how ya doing? My poems, while often based on true feeling/perception, sometimes take a turn that bends the literal “truth” to continue a thought or to develop a more involving storyline; I can’t say every poem is me speaking directly to the reader. Then it wouldn’t be poetry; it would be really short nonfiction.

In poetry, I like the compactness -- the impact -- of the line. I like the ability to move words around. It’s like word Tetris. You turn the words around, trying to find the right piece that fits perfectly into the puzzle in order to get the right effect. The right piece completes the line. The problem lies in all the wrong pieces that seem like the right pieces. I also like the power of poetry to make the words matter more. This is the effect that “She Walks in Beauty” had on me as a young girl. Poetry seems to be writing -- plus one. It takes it to the next level, to the feeling of discovery. In reading poetry we have to read on many levels, not just for the literal meaning but for the visual meaning, the aural meaning and the feeling of the poem. This is not just information. The different types of meaning collaborate, weaving together to create a whole, and beyond the words on the
page is the relationship that develops between the writer and the reader. I like the
closeness to the reader that is created within the boundaries of poetry and nonfiction. I
want you to hear my voice. I guess I’m some kind of egomaniac. Must speak to you and
tell you everything. And yes, of course, you want to listen to me.

It’s hard for me to get out of the way of the poem. I want to stand there and
direct the whole thing. I’m used to being in charge. Richard Hugo said that a beginning
poet has an “impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has
already conceived to be the truth” (4). I am guilty of this. I know what I want to say and I
will twist the poem to make my point and usually this does not strengthen the poem. I’m
too in my head. This cerebral spewing serves to place the emphasis on the word (not in a
sonic sense, but in a meaning sense) to the detriment of the image. So as I worked on the
revisions of the poetry in this collection, I focused on coupling new strictures of form
with a greater attention to image.

In his essay “Four Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry,” Gregory Orr
posits that there are four areas within which a poet can find their strengths. He identifies
these as Story, or the dramatic unity, Structure, the measurable pattern, Music, the rhythm
and sound, and Imagination, or the flow of image to thought. He finds positive aspects in
each of these areas but finds that those poets weighted in the Story/Structure areas are
limited in their expression and are thus unable to explore, while those weighted in the
Music/Imagination areas are limitless, thus unbounded and directionless (269-70).
When I was little I thought I was going to be a lawyer. I was seven, telling people I wanted to be a lawyer because I liked to argue. I also won arguments all the time with adults. At seven. I still like to argue (and win), but the lawyer idea went out the window a long time ago (Too much school. This is funny because I could have been a lawyer three times over by now considering how long I’ve actually been in school). Now I write and I have to reign in that desire to argue. To prove my point. That makes writing poetry a difficult prospect for me, but one whose difficulty I didn’t realize until recently. I thought the poetry I was writing was poetry. It looked like poetry to me, but what I didn’t realize is that it was poetry divorced from the things that make poetry poetic, like image and music.

In an essay on poetry entitled “Self-Consciousness,” Tony Hoagland talks about writers losing their ability to write when they become cowed by their lack of talent in comparison to past masters. I had an experience like this when I joined the master’s program. I wrote the second poem in this collection, “The Settled Life,” that semester. In fact, when I submitted it to Watershed it was almost as I had written it in its first draft. It was accepted and published and the reaction to it was really favorable. Then I couldn’t recapture whatever it was about that poem that worked. I was self-conscious. I was in classes trying to emulate poets I admired like Li-Young Lee, Elizabeth Bishop, and Tony Hoagland and I was failing. Hoagland writes, “Self-consciousness in writing, as it does in life, opens up a kind of delay between impulse and action, between thought and word” (62). The delay was there and it was causing me to over-think my poems. I was suddenly trying too hard to make poetry, and it wasn’t turning out right.
I was so concerned with story, or message, that I was losing the music. I was too literal, so I was losing the imagination. I wanted to spell it all out and tell the reader what to think in the process. This made my poems less poems and more poem-shaped manifestos or diatribes (here comes the argumentative side of me again). When I began revisions on the poetry I had been writing as a master’s student, I was assigned the task of using form, or structure, which is the other one of Orr’s limiting properties, to try to reign in my tendencies to spell it all out. Orr describes the Structure temperament as “akin to higher math, geometry, theoretical physics -- the beauty and balance of equations” (269). Even though math has always been my weakest subject in school, I do enjoy a good puzzle. The structures I chose to work with in my revisions were the villanelle, the pantoum, tritina and the ghazal. Though form is, in and of itself, a limiting aspect representing Orr’s idea of structure, the forms I chose are lyrical thus encouraging the creation of music and image. Using lyric forms I was able add to my poems’ power and yet keep my lecturing tendencies in check. I also found through my revision process that it’s not all about sticking to the form exactly, though it is an excellent jumping off point.

One of the poets that I find myself drawn to, Elizabeth Bishop, effectively uses form in her poem “One Art” (37). This piece uses the tightly structured form of the villanelle to create boundaries, trying to impose an order on the ever expanding subject of loss. Although even with the form, the subject seems too powerful to the speaker to be contained. Bishop shows this by modifying the form a little. Her rhyme scheme is sound, following the prescribed pattern of the villanelle, but her line repetition varies somewhat from traditional structure.
The structure of the villanelle is as follows:

Stanza 1: A1/ b/ A2//
Stanza 2: a/ b/ A1//
Stanza 3: a/ b/ A2//
Stanza 4: a/ b/ A1//
Stanza 5: a/ b/A2//
Stanza 6: a/ b/A1/A2

Bishop is faithful to the A1 repetition until the last stanza and then she modifies it to "...the art of losing's not too hard to master"(18) instead of "The art of losing isn't hard to master"(1). This modification shows the change in the level of control the speaker has over their emotions. The A2 line "...to be lost that their loss is no disaster" (3) is changed in every repetition. The first repetition is "...to travel. None of these will bring disaster"(9). Then, "I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster"(15) and finally "though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster"(19). The only completely common element between the lines is the word “disaster,” which in deconstruction brings that word to the fore of the poem.

The repetition in the poem seems to escalate in intensity as the content of the lost items in the poem escalate in importance. Bishop starts with missing car keys and a watch and at the end has moved to losing a person which actually is a disaster to the speaker. Inspired by Bishop’s use of the villanelle form, I also wrote a villanelle, entitled “Echo.” In my piece the speaker remembers a time she couldn’t save her daughter from being injured while visiting a lake. The images of the blood and the shock continue to
haunt the speaker years later. The returning, or echoing, nature of the villanelle is a key piece in illustrating the haunting of the speaker. The images keep returning as the lines repeat in the form. Unlike Bishop, I stay true to the exact repetition of lines in my villanelle; however I did experiment with the idea of subverting form in “Semantics,” a pantoum about language and meaning. This is probably the most idea-centric poem that remains in this collection.

The structure of a pantoum, a poem built of full repeating lines that leap-frog each other while incorporating new ideas, is as follows:

Stanza 1: 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/
Stanza 2: 2/ 5/ 4/ 6/
Stanza 3: 5/ 7/ 6/ 8/
Stanza 4: 7/ 9/ 8/ 10/
Stanza 5: 9/ 3/ 10/ 1

In “Semantics,” as I present the fluidity of language, the form breaks down from the first appearance of line one, “Sometimes, it seems like, all words exist to lie,” to its reappearance which should be the same, but has changed to “All words exist to lie. Meaning: there is no sometimes, seems, or like.” Throughout the piece, Saussure’s idea of word meanings as socially-agreed-upon illusions flirts with the changeability of perception. At the end of the piece, the speaker’s perception has shifted, becoming more sure that there is no real meaning in words because they lie in their very existence. This realization of the speaker causes the break in form, mirroring the perceived break in the power of language. “Semantics” was built from the foundation of an earlier poem called
“Expectations” that rambled across the page and asked a lot of questions but didn’t answer any of them. I took one line from that poem, “Sometimes it seems like all words exist to lie,” and that became the basis for the new, structured poem.

The limitations of the structure created an opportunity for music to come forward in my poems. When I dumped the didactic underpinnings, the poems were able to free themselves and emerge in sometimes unexpected ways. The poem “Only Child” started as a piece called “Sister” that originally sprang from a meditation on what it would be like for a half-black child to grow up in a predominately white town with a white mother and white sister, basically without a cultural female role model. This was based on the relationship I have with my half-sister who is twelve years my junior. The piece was rambling and rehashing territory that was better explored by other writers.

When I performed a form experiment on the piece I chose a tritina, a half sestina, which is a form involving repeated end words that must also reappear in the last line resulting in a ten line poem. The repetition of my chosen end words -- mother, two and steal -- created a line where the older speaker accuses the younger sister of stealing the mother. This line was a surprise that came from fitting the ideas into the form, giving rise to a whole different type of speaker. This speaker was not trying to empathize with the sister; she was resentful and angry that this sister had interloped into her life. This is a direction I probably would not have found for this piece, but the form presented a fresh opportunity that allowed me to veer into uncharted territory.

The form experiments created new versions of many of my pieces. I’m not sure where I fall within Orr’s four temperaments now. I guess I’m in the crosshairs
dipping my toes into the different areas. I found that the stricture of the form allowed me new levels of creativity by focusing what I wanted to say without letting me ramble. That focus made me really look at the line and the music of my poetry.

Though I have always tried to pay attention to sound in my poems, there would often be sonic pockets buried under the message portions of the pieces. I didn’t use form to rewrite every piece in this collection. Some I was able to reign in without the use of form as a catalyst.

A poem entitled “Forever” that strove to capture the beauty and the cyclic nature of the autumn season fell flat into a kind of new-age meditation on Halloween. In revision I changed the title to “North Valley Story” and focused on the concrete idea of what is harvested in this area finding lists of crops that had built in sound repetition: “almonds, walnuts, pecans, pistachios,/ apples, apricots, grapes, pears,/ peaches, plums, prunes, olives, rice.” Just in this list of crops I found the “l” and “p” sounds popping off the page. And suddenly I had a list poem told as the story of autumn in Chico. I was able to extend the sounds into other areas of the poem for example, “the land sleeps fallow beneath winter’s tule blanket,” that illustrates the continuation of the “l” sounds.

In his book of poetry, *Behind My Eyes*, lyric poet Li-Young Lee wrestles with many issues, among them, the definition of love, the expectation of religion, the experience of being a refugee as well as ties to family and ancestry. Though I wish I could emulate Lee’s style of quiet imagery, the influence I take from him is more grounded in subject and the way he ties his poems together.
There are three poems that follow each other in *Behind My Eyes,* that use apples as an image of family and heritage. The poems, “The Mother’s Apple,”(50) “The Father’s Apple,”(51) and “The Apple Elopes” (52) create a complex web that show the inescapable importance of heritage to Lee and, to a more removed extent, the importance of heritage to every adult who strives to become autonomous.

“The Mother’s Apple” is about the speaker’s relationship with the mother, but also about the speaker’s journey toward adulthood. This is illustrated in this quote: “My sweetening draws death nearer, it can’t be helped. / My bitterness about it is skin deep” (2-3). The speaker ages in the same way that an apple ripens toward rottenness, and the speaker’s bitterness about the finiteness of life, which is a human characteristic, is skin deep as the skin of an apple is bitter to the taste. It ends with the speaker’s desire for change.

This image leads into the beginning of the next poem, “The Father’s Apple,” which starts, “He says I won’t always be an apple” (1). This poem shows that the speaker will not just be the son to the parents, but will go out and create his own identity. At the end of “The Father’s Apple,” the speaker is neither apple nor seed: “Some nights, when the whole house is asleep, / I sneak out with the pollen” (21-22). He is floating around as the pollen floats around fertilizing and preparing to create new apples. This is a child becoming ripe and ready to bear his own fruit. This moves us into the final poem in the section entitled, “The Apple Elopes.”

In this poem the apple has divorced itself from its parent trees. This apple/child is distancing himself from the watchful shelter of the parents. “Counting backward, / I
plunge, // sprung from the branch / of a name, fast // toward the growing shade / of my ripening, // past my mother asking / from her window, Have you seen my comb?” (1-8).
At the end, the apple has become something else as the father foretold, and there is no returning to the former state of apple in a field of falling petals. This apple is ripe and declining and nothing can be done except to keep changing and coming to terms with its role in life. The theme of the movement into adulthood from sheltered child is also mirrored in the forms of the poems.

When the reader looks at the first two poems on the page, they can see they are similar. “The Mother’s Apple” is twenty-three lines long, while “The Father’s Apple” is twenty-two lines long. Each poem appears blocky with similar line lengths. They stand side by side on the page as the two parents would stand side-by-side when rearing the child. In “The Apple Elopes,” the form changes radically. There are twenty-one lines, but they are much shorter and choppier. They are also spread out in couplets, perhaps to show the new pairing with the person that is being eloped with, and perhaps to show the splitting apart that the young adult feels as it leaves the shelter of the family. The last line of the poem is not a couplet but a single line. The apple is now alone, no matter that it has supposedly eloped with another. It is separate from the old family structure and separated from that structure, it is now alone, and as the line says, “There’s no going back!” (21).

Li-Young Lee ties these poems together through image clusters, subject matter, style and theme. He uses these tools to create ideas that transcend from one poem to the next providing deeper meaning for the reader through comparison of multiple poems that seem to be different aspects of a person’s journey into understanding their past. The
reader can then understand how that past helps make the speaker into an independent adult and, from a wider perspective, to realize how family and ancestry influence, not just the speaker in the poems, but also the reader who can then apply the art of poetry to the personal human experience.

Like Lee, I too seek to explore family history focusing primarily on my grandma as the dock the rest of the family is tied to. In the first section of poetry the first poem is about a family losing its history and the next five poems are about or inspired by my grandma. “The Settled Life” is my attempt to encompass a life in a page. It is based on events in my grandma’s life and the speaker in the poem is an adult looking back on the grandma’s life trying to fill in the blanks by guessing. This is similar to Maxine Hong Kingston’s essay “No Name Woman,” where an adult narrator tries to understand the life of her aunt through supposition.

“Curtains” picks up the grandma at a hospital much later in life. The grandma in this poem is a product of her upbringing and is worried that she should have her teeth in and her hair fixed for visitors, even though she is in the hospital. “Curtains” is in pantoum form. As shown earlier, the pantoum form is tightly interlaced which creates a returning, cyclic sensation. This form works well with this piece as it adds to the trapped, timeless quality of visiting or being in a hospital. It also shows the confusion of the speaker who is trapped in this space with a loved one. The next piece in the collection, “Echo,” a villanelle, flashes back to an event in the grandmother’s life where her youngest daughter injures herself. This piece shows the grandma reminiscing about an event that has haunted her for years. As I said earlier, the events of this piece coupled
with the villanelle form create an almost Gothic contemplation on the things that haunt us. “Giver” focuses on a granddaughter’s memories of her grandma using the images that the child’s eyes remember as an adult. The hands of the grandma begin to represent the spirit of her and in the villanelle form, the memories twist and turn and build on each other becoming more solid with every line.

The last piece in the grandma poems is “Silver Dollars.” This piece is not in form, but tries to capture the special in the ordinary. The grandma in this, as well as in all the other pieces, is a caretaker. She cooks for the family, but like a mother bird, she feeds everyone else first before she eats. In “The Settled Life” she has become a housewife, perhaps against her wishes. She gives up New York to change diapers. In “Curtains” though she is ill, she is cheerful to her visitors. In “Echo” she is haunted by the hurt that she couldn’t prevent. In “Giver” she is teaching the granddaughter what it means to be a woman by showing what you have to do to take care of a family, and how to work hard. She is a role model.

Though the pieces aren’t specifically tied together by image clusters, they do speak to each other through subject matter and when taken together, they begin to show a woman’s life. They are a kind of combinatoria of views that create a larger picture of her and in turn work with the rest of the pieces in the collection to create a picture of me.

I’ve alluded to the idea that I think poetry and essay are related in that they are often based in some kind of reality, or true-to-life truth. Creative non-fiction has an idea of truth built into the name with the whole non-fiction aspect, although the creative gives
it a little wiggle room. For poetry, ever since the confessional poets began plying their trade, readers often think the speaker is the poet anyway, no matter how often we protest that we don’t hate our little sisters or that we have never been exotic dancers (well, those are the caveats I have about this collection, other poets might have their own). To me, the leap from poetry to nonfiction is less of an Evel-Knievel-jump-over-100-buses leap, and more of a jumping-over-your-marker-in-hop-scotch kind of leap.

In this collection, I have arranged the poems interspersed between the essays and I have grouped thematically. The collection spirals out from the first section of poems dealing with family and a woman’s life that I discussed above, that then lead into the essay “The Trouble With Eyebrows,” which deals with the expectations put upon women to be feminine. I follow this essay with another section of poetry whose themes deal with social dissatisfaction ranging from consumerism in “Halloween Everyday,” to politics in “Wreak,” “America,” and “Portland Zoo” to homelessness in “Downtown” and a look at language as a failing sign system in “Semantics.” These poems lead into “Ponderings on the Potty,” an essay dealing with America’s puritanical attitude toward bodily functions. This essay also examines how public restrooms function in society as a sort of necessary evil while delving into the ideas of privacy. The next five poems focus on different representations of women. Here we see exotic dancers in “Dollar Dances,” and a bitter sister in “Only Child.” There is also a look at the societal pressure that causes eating disorders in “Seeds,” and a woman testing the boundaries of her relationship in “Two Days Gone,” while an older woman, a “cougar” if you will, tries to keep up with the younger generation in “Overripe.”
Following these poems about women is my final essay, “Baby’s First Haircut,” which strives to understand how people get entrenched in routine, thus becoming stunted. Through the idea of a new haircut, this piece also addresses some ideas of feminine ideals and what women will do to look good for society, but also for themselves. I finish the collection with three poems; “Constant,” which evokes the relationship of the writer with nature and love; “North Valley Story,” a piece about Chico in autumn and the beauty of nature; and finally the ghazal “Carry,” which explores scenes of nature as well as delving into the idea found in “Baby’s First Haircut” of a woman held in stasis. I ended the collection with these poems because the natural images allow the reader to connect to the larger context of the natural world, yet the last line of the last poem brings the reader back into the experience of the singular woman, the author, who is writing the collection.

An author like Peggy Shumaker, a poet who released a memoir called *Just Breathe Normally*, really makes the leap from poetry to nonfiction look as easy as stepping off a curb. She writes her memoir, not so much as a long contiguous story, but as memory flashes that join to tell a complete story. The attention to language in her prose creates stories that read as poems. This is a complete story, “Iron Filings,” from her memoir:

Down in the arroyo, we took our magnets, lifted metallic fur from black swaths in the sand. We filled film canisters, heavier than you’d believe, with whiskers of iron. The way each strand leapt onto our little red horseshoes let us know -- the earth is full of attractions nobody can see. (58)

Shumaker’s above work is a prime example of nonfiction and poetry behaving as kissing cousins. I won’t claim that my nonfiction is similar to Shumaker’s, since the
style of what I have written falls closer to humorist personal essay than to memoir, but I feel that my poems and essays fit together like Lego’s to build a complete picture, in a similar way that Shumaker’s poetic prose bursts lock together to create memoir. Shumaker’s memoir and my nonfiction extend from personal experience and don’t try to claim the plausible-deniability cushion of fiction. The persona of nonfiction is much more transparent than that of fiction, and to a lesser extent, poetry. That’s why, with just a hop, skip and a jump it’s onto non-fiction land.

In my non-fiction, I like to write about everyday things, not the kind of things that shake the world’s foundations. That’s not the kind of life experiences I’ve had. I represent the lower middle class and my experiences reflect that. So, I’m shining the spotlight on the humdrum and the mundane. I like to take some kind of everyday activity and, through observation and a little humor, try to throw attention upon the things we ignore. This is where I focus my writer’s visual camera lens. Like Chuck Klosterman, I like to write in a conversational style about things some people might think are of questionable importance. In the introduction to “Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto” Klosterman explains his aesthetic:

The goal of being alive is to figure out what it means to be alive, and there is a myriad of ways to deduce that answer; I just happen to prefer examining the question through the context of Pamela Anderson and The Real World and Frosted Flakes. It’s certainly no less plausible than trying to understand Kant or Wittgenstein. (ii)

While my essays don’t focus on pop culture to the same extent as Klosterman’s, I do tend to write about subjects that may normally not be considered
worth reading about. When he says he is writing “A Low Culture Manifesto,” I can relate.

My non-fiction essay “The Trouble With Eyebrows,” is the true story of getting my eyebrows waxed for the first (and only) time, which becomes a kind of commentary on beauty and culture and the lengths people go to even when they realize that they’re being seduced by consumer culture. In this piece I combine a dramatization of my personal experience of getting seduced onto an esthetician’s table by a desire to fit into a body hair-hating culture. I also include some history on hair removal techniques, and musings on the point of a seemingly useless bit of facial adornment. In a larger sense this essay is talking about issues of expected female beauty and the media manipulation of a cultural standard that modern women are expected to strive to achieve, no matter how much pain they have to endure to get that perfect arch in their brow. This essay does not seek to blame the media however, as those who participate in the beauty rituals are complicit in the continuation of the ideal, and not always to their dissatisfaction.

My next non-fiction essay, “Ponderings on the Potty,” focuses on the public bathroom, a shunned area that is really a hub of communication and not just germs, contrary to popular belief. This piece also deals with the importance and loss of privacy in modern culture and asserts that perhaps we are happy enough with illusions of privacy in a technological age where every aspect of our humanity becomes revealed through a society hungry to share and devour everyone else’s business. In this piece I combine some of my observations of people’s attitudes toward public restrooms (mostly disgusted), some research on cleanliness (not as bad as you might think) as well as
putting forth some tongue-in-cheek rules for bathroom etiquette (always wash your hands. Seriously).

The last non-fiction essay, “Baby’s First Haircut,” is just as much about hair as it is about society, culture and a resistance to change. Another piece about beauty? Well this one is not so much about beauty as it is about the ruts people can find themselves in without even realizing they are there. This piece follows me on a personal journey of cutting off my long hair. Along the way of trying to figure out the importance of hair culturally, I have to talk myself into a change that seems small on the outside, but becomes monumental by the time it happens. This piece is about choice and about consequence and fear, in this case a fear of change, which seems groundless, but can become paralyzing in its very existence.

So in essence, this collection contains an essay about eyebrows, one about bathrooms and one about a haircut. Like I said, in my essays I try to pull out the events of the everyday and draw attention to the art of life. You might say, *But I also live an everyday life; the last thing I want to do is read about one.* In fact, in a creative writing workshop class a few years ago, one fellow student told me that when he received my essay to workshop, he couldn’t believe he was going to have to read fifteen pages on eyebrows (it’s longer now, so if you are in it for the long haul, you’re going to have to read closer to twenty. Be brave!). That same person told me that by the end of the essay he was totally engaged in what I had written. (So there may be hope for you making it all the way through it after all). Quite frankly it never even entered my mind that people wouldn’t be interested in what I had written. I do have a healthy ego.
I think that the trick to getting people to read my essays is the way it seems like I’m talking to the reader. This is that grand conversation idea again. Through my essays I can share and converse with the reader. This type of direct address allows me to create a casual and personal feeling and it even allows me to step back from what I am commenting on to comment on myself. How meta-nonfictional is that? It is true that it is a kind of one-sided conversation, since the reader doesn’t really get to interject, but they can react to what is on the page, and I try to anticipate what the reader might say and address it in the text.

For example in “Baby’s First Haircut” I spend twelve pages bemoaning the fact that I have to get a haircut and freaking out about how difficult it will be to do it (don’t worry, it’s less irritating than it sounds when you read it) and since I know the average reader would be thinking: *Jeez, it’s just a haircut. Get over it,* I address this feeling in the text:

I don’t even know how to go about getting a haircut.
I know, I know. Boo Hoo. There are harder things in the world than getting a haircut, but this is seriously like being in a foreign country and not knowing the customs.

In this way I’m able to forecast the response and address it in the same way I would if I were having a conversation in real time with someone.

This type of casual voice seems common in modern essays. Another device that adds to the causal feel of my essays is the use of parenthetical asides, when I take a step back and either comment on what I’m writing or when I really want to step out and address the audience perhaps in the middle of a thought. I do this quite frequently in all
my essays. Here is an example from “The Trouble with Eyebrows” in which I am discussing a person I knew who had very small eyebrows:

Using my powers of deduction, and the internet to practice my amateur doctor diagnostic skills, I think she might have had Trichotillomania, a nervous disorder which causes people to pull out their body hair with their fingers. (Don’t worry there’s not going to be a test on this -- you don’t have to memorize this term.)

Or like this example from “Ponderings on the Potty”:

I always feel like I need to take a Lysol shower when I come out of a port-a-potty. Although I think most people feel like that every time they use a public restroom. (They have this vision of microscopic germs having a disco dance party on every conceivable surface, but especially the toilet seat. More on that later.)

Having the speaker step out in parentheses to make comments is a common occurrence in contemporary essays. Joan Didion does it in “Notes from a Native Daughter,” for example:

Later, when I was living in New York, I would make the trip back to Sacramento four and five times a year (the more comfortable the flight, the more obscurely miserable I would be, for it weighs heavily upon my kind that we could perhaps not make it by wagon,) trying to prove that I had not meant to leave at all…(176)

Didion steps out of her narrative and makes a personal comment that reveals something about her attitude, and she does it with humor. Essayist Sarah Vowell also uses the parentheses as an aside as evidenced by this passage: “Most of the time, I feel Canadian. I live a quiet life. I own no firearms (though, as a gunsmith’s daughter, I stand to inherit a freaking arsenal)” (152).
Chuck Klosterman also does it, although he also uses footnotes in much the same way to comment on what he has said in the body of the essay. Here is an example of Klosterman’s use of parentheses for a humorous effect:

As I meet other Sims in the neighborhood, my initial options are to talk with them (understandable), joke with them (also understandable), tickle them (somewhat less understandable), or sneak up behind their back and scare the crap out of them (pretty incomprehensible, but hard to resist). (21)

I have not attempted to use footnotes in an essay, but as a reader I find them distracting because they require a little more work than a parenthetical insertion. Footnotes seem to take me out of the reading. I prefer the parentheses, which seem to accomplish a similar effect with a smoother transition. They still make the reader pause for a moment and allow the author to give something a little extra emphasis, but the reader doesn’t get lost (and throw the essay down in disgust). These asides serve another function in the text beyond creating emphasis. They also reveal the essayist’s character through the conversation that is created with the reader. It is a way for the writer to speak directly to the reader thus creating a deeper rapport.

Beyond the voice and stylistic devices like parentheses, I realize that a collection of essays needs something that makes them a collection. Klosterman’s essays all revolve around his search for meaning through lowbrow culture. Sarah Vowell’s book *The Partly Cloudy Patriot* has a common theme of her brand of patriotism running throughout the essays. As I began reading Joan Didion’s essay collection, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, the thing that first struck me was her focus on place. In the introduction to the book she claims that she is looking at the world through an experience
of “atomization” (xiii). To Didion, everything is falling apart, as it does in the Yeats poem “The Second Coming,” that the essay collection takes its name from. She feels that there has been a loss of what matters in the world. As I read her essays, it seems like she is striving to reconnect to what is real by anchoring her writing to physical, real places. Maybe society is falling apart, but the cities, the states -- the land remains constant even as its human inhabitants strive to use it for their own purposes.

A collection with a focus gives the reader something to mentally grasp onto beyond each individual essay. While three essays is a small collection, I hope that these three, coupled with my poetry, coalesce into a unit that shows a woman who is trying to understand what it means to be living in 2009. Like Klosterman said, “The goal of being alive is to figure out what it means to be alive,” and for me, how we live in an accelerating technologically-saturated (cell phones, Facebook, instant messaging, Twitter… I’m going to the grocery store to buy bananas!) society. And yes, this meditation on living is couched in terms of trying to conform, or trying to figure out why public toilets have such a bad rap, or realizing that change isn’t such a bad idea. I’m trying to understand the world in terms of what I know about. This is not the high art of the Literary Canon. Much like Klosterman, the subject of my art is low, but my essays aspire to discuss these subjects in a way that elevates them into the higher aspects of life and culture. These are essays that are happy to be dealing with the common thing.

At this point I feel like I have to pull old John Gardner off my bookshelf (I mean I do study under his shadow in Taylor Hall). Gardner argues for moral art, art that betters people through their consumption of it. In his book On Moral Fiction (which
discusses his views on art in general, not just fiction) Gardner’s definition of morality is as follows:

Let us say for the moment that morality means nothing more than doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted, and doing it with at least a reasonable expectation that in the long run as well as the short we won’t be sorry for what we’ve done, whether or not it was against some petty human law. Moral action is action which affirms life. (23)

So something moral affirms life. In the book Gardner argues that this morality needs to be transparent so that even the least perspicacious reader/viewer would understand the lesson. So for it to be art, it has to impart something: to teach us that the world is good. I don’t see what affirms life more than focusing on the day-to-day aspects of being alive. The little things like haircuts and going to the bathroom, for example.

Gardner goes on to say, “An artist is someone who believes in art, who believes that art reflects something which is real in life, who tries to see and reveal to others what life is in his own time by making it art” (169). So in this case, the artist reflects life back on the world and that reflection is some form of truth about life.

Not just anything can be reflected, however. That which is to be reflected should be something that should be emulated, but that’s not an artist’s job nor is it art’s job. Art is. I feel that an artist shouldn’t have to compromise what they want to create just to shoehorn some higher message that could be copied by society. Artists aren’t doctors trying to heal the world through art. My essays are not Band-Aids that will stop genocide (I mean clearly, they could probably barely heal a paper cut). Even if the topics of my essays don’t seem to represent John Gardner’s Aristotelian criteria of moral (or should I say worthwhile) art, I think that they still engage the reader. They still entertain and
enlighten, and not on just a surface level, but by engaging emotion and deeper understanding of certain topics. Gardner would probably call my art *minor* since it doesn’t serve to better mankind about deeply felt moral truths, but it really seems like he was just cranky sometimes. I do agree with him when he said “art reflects something which is real in life,” and I try to do this with my essays. I look at real issues to reflect the real life that I am living. I do this while trying to use a humorous, conversational voice because there’s no reason not to enjoy what you’re reading. Gardner says the artist “tries to see and reveal to others what life is in his own time,” and I strive to do this in my essays. My essays may seem silly or shallow in parts, but they reflect life, and me, and in my definition, that is art.

I’d like to place my nonfiction voice in the company of modern essayists like Klosterman, Vowell, Didion and Mary Roach (who borders more on literary journalism, but does it with a funny twist, so I think she is my peer in that way. If I was writing literary journalism, I would sound like a Mary Roach rip off). Other nonfiction writers that I admire like Peggy Shumaker, David Sedaris, and Augusten Burroughs tend to write more anecdotal memoir, which I haven’t made the leap into as of yet. I hope in voice and humorist elements, although not in poetic language in Shumaker’s case, that I can add them to my family tree of writers. While I don’t claim to write exactly like any of these authors, I see my style as similar in the way that it creates an inclusive welcome to the reader to enter into the essays and hopefully identify with them, or at least be entertained by them. (Of course, if I really want to write like David Sedaris or Augusten Burroughs, I just need to dig up some dysfunctional family members. I’ll put that on my to-do list.)
Beyond wishing I could write more like Li-Young Lee and David Sedaris, where do I fit into the great conversation called literature? Twenty-Five years have passed since I put that giant pencil to the blue-lined gray pulp paper and scratched out my haikus. During that time I realize that writing has been a constant pull for me. It’s kind of like a toothache. It throbs in the background until it’s taken care of it. (I should know. I was getting root canals in kindergarten. Dentists love me. Well, more like they love my money.) I’ve worn many hats throughout my writing history. Academic writer. Journalist. Editor. Poet. Essayist. And through these years I have had a lot of time to ponder writing and how it fits in to my life. Time to remember the joy of the word first discovered in third grade and the fun that was to be had from creating a piece of writing for its beauty and not just its function. Time to wonder, what makes writing art and what makes that art worthwhile, or good (and not in a stuffy John Gardner way)? I find myself wondering these things, especially as I go over my own work and begin to think of it as fitting into the worlds of other works that I have been studying.

When I think about writing, or art, I often find myself in the position of “the man” from Kafka’s “Before the Law,” standing before a great gate of knowledge. Beyond my gate lies not the law, however, but art, literature, and an understanding of what is good. It doesn’t seem to matter how many literature classes or how many theory classes I take, the view past the gate remains hazy and the road is plagued by wrong turns and dead ends. Sometimes it’s hard to even figure out, “Hey, I’m on the wrong road,” until I’ve wasted a bunch of time thinking I knew it all only to find, I won’t say an epiphany, but a sudden new understanding of the world and how I fit within it.
The world is full of contradictions and distractions that cause people to lose focus. But humans need distractions. If people focus on the horrors in the world they live in, they’ll end up straight-jacketed. The information glut is at an all time high, so people gloss over everything, made numb by overexposure. Nothing shocks them anymore. People are becoming numb to experiencing feelings. We are inundated by a constant stream of news. On TV, online. Who can feel pity for the victims of a shooting when five minutes later ten are killed in a plane crash? The cuts are too fast between scenes and there’s no time for character development. They’ve seen better special effects in the latest Bruckheimer movie and they are not entertained. How do people make meaning in a world so inundated with image, when meaning is handed to them like a TV dinner, prepackaged for their convenience?

Some postmodernists say language must be reclaimed, combined in new and interesting ways to form work that becomes art because of or in spite of its very existence. Though I don’t consider what I write to be postmodern (I mean, I do like to step out of the narrative and comment on it, but really Shakespeare did that in every aside in the plays he wrote, so that’s about as postmodern as I get), I do identify with the importance and the machinations of the postmodernists in their fight to create new works. In his essay “Not Knowing,” Donald Barthelme describes the effects of this new combining of words: “The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generations of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (21). So not
only does this combining make art, but it puts people in touch with the very essence of what it means to wake up and regain what it means to be human.

On a side note, my recent foray into writing poetry in form has revealed the power of Barthelme’s idea of combinatory surprise that is created by form when the writer strives to stay within its requirements. As I said earlier, several times I found lines that I would never have written without the form suggesting it, and that was almost like an outside hand showing me the magic of unsuspected combinations and it did surprise and delight me.

Yet, if we think of everything as connected, then when we look at literature, we are looking at life. But this connection is being subjugated by the fact that as a species we are becoming more and more isolated. Some people are removing themselves from humanity through compartmentalized specialization and computer culture, and others through selfish disregard for anyone beyond their sphere of experience. We are becoming alien unto ourselves. How can we begin to empathize with anyone if we haven’t experienced something similar even through reading it in writing? The stories of other people are just that, stories. Even if they are true, they are created texts or versions of reality. So what does art/writing have to do with all this, right? The further we isolate ourselves, the more we need art to pull us back and anchor us to humanity. It’s like the privacy idea. We don’t like contact with others which is why everyone wants to use three toilet seat protectors.

I argue that the most important role of art is to make the person experiencing it feel something. Really feel anything. Happy, sad, disgusted, irritated, validated,
understood, whatever. To speak to Gardner again, art is not something to emulate, it’s something to wake people up. Modern society teaches people that it is their role to suffer, without agency, in a world that works on them, not one that they can work on. But people can work on the world through the art of writing. Writers can pay attention to what is happening and record it, and readers can give their attention to that writing. The writer is, in a way, the journalist of life, reporting on the facts of the world, but also through this reporting, or recording, making the facts. Making the history. The writer is always seeking the answers to the questions. But unlike a journalist who is supposed to be an unbiased recorder, the writing artist has the freedom to take reality and frame it in such a way that it begins to speak on multiple levels, as not just a recording, but also as a discussion, a comment, on life.

Donald Barthelme saw writers as involved in a process of “Not Knowing,” that he discusses in his essay of the same name. He said, “The not knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (12). And he goes on to say, “What I do know comes into being at the instant it’s inscribed” (12). This description seems to show writers floundering around and bumping into happy accidents of art, but their art comes from recognizing the positive outcomes of these accidents as flashes of something worthwhile, as art. The idea of the “I don’t know” as the motivating force for writers was also entertained by Wisława Szymborska in her 1996 Nobel Lecture. She said, “Whatever inspiration is, it’s born from a continuous ‘I don’t know,’” (xv), and that genuine poets, “must also keep repeating ‘I
don’t know.’ Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final
period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer
was pure makeshift, absolutely inadequate’” (xvi). So Barthelme is searching and
Szymborska is searching and so am I.

Writing is a kind of circular process of discovery. A process of not knowing
what life is and what you can create out of it and seeking to discover it through writing.
Richard Hugo said that all writing is a form of discovery, even critical writing, “since if
one is writing the way one should, one does not know what will be on the page until it is
there. Discovery remains the ideal” (54). These discoveries should somehow be pushing
into new territory. Barthelme thinks writers should strive for the “as-yet unspeakable, the
as-yet unspoken” (15). This search for discovery co-opts writing as some kind of tool for
an inquiry into humanity. So somewhere in the sliver, between the undiscovered and the
written, is where the writer finds those things about which they should be writing. For
Gardner it is the moral life. For Barthelme it is the unanticipated and undiscovered word.
For me, it is the discovery of what even the most seemingly common of lives means in
the shadow of the world. I will continue to mine the sliver.

I’ve spent the last few years of school learning to talk about academia as a
group of people having a large conversation that extends forward and backward through
time. So, critics are all talking to each other through their essays and theories, but it’s not
just the theorists participating in this conversation. Authors join in the conversation by
writing what they write and the readers by what they read. If we really widen the lens and
pull it all the way back into space, all people are involved in a global experience of
interconnectedness. This interconnection is of history, of texts, and now the great web of the internet. Anyone who has played “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” knows that every person is connected by six steps or less, although the connections threaten to fall apart every day because of the new insularity I spoke of previously. It’s up to art to keep us connected. It is a connection that allows us to experience humanity. Tony Hoagland realizes that “modern consciousness may indeed be splintered, but it is one function of poetry in our time to fasten it back together” (171). When poetry, or writing, snaps people out of their individualistic fog then a “sense of being alive is heightened and intensified” (171). Art draws us because we want this interconnectedness and common experience.

All art is social; it is collaborative. In writing there is the writer, but there is also the reader. You can’t really have one without the other. They need to work together for the art to be or exist beyond the writer’s mind. But beyond this relationship lies the art, the writings and oral stories, of history as the foundation for all that comes after.

As a developing writer I constantly feel wonderment that there is anything left to say about anything. Facing a blank sheet of paper is disheartening. Especially as I sit in moments of self-doubt thinking of the 4,500 years of words preceding anything I have to say, facing the daunting idea that I’m going to try to say something new. (Here comes that self-consciousness that Hoagland was talking about.) It’s all been done before, right? How many times has even that phrase been said before rendering it trite? I mean, I think it may even be a Barenaked Ladies song now. (It is.)
Still I find that every word written, good or bad, while influenced by the past is a creation of the experience of that particular writer. Their writing, or their art, is an original work from that person. Even if humankind sometimes feels like it has all been done before, it hasn’t been done by you, or me and so it will be new at least in that respect. Tony Hoagland writes, “it is good to remember that Everything has not been done. Possibility has not been exhausted. More reality is being made at the reality factory every day, and new ways to handle it are being invented -- language is a technology after all. Its adaptations are legions; its evolution is hardly over” (67). So while language is evolving, I’m evolving as a writer struggling to master an evolving medium.

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino paraphrases the ideas of Carlo Emilio Gadda, who sees the world as “a knot, a tangled skein of yarn” (106). I like this image of the world, but perhaps the yarn is not so much tangled, as just wound round itself over and over. An enormous ball of string that keeps wrapping around an ever increasing middle. If you tried to unravel it, you would just get layer upon layer of strings, but together it makes a whole. It is a great spiral, a triskele, and this is writing. The triple spiral is always moving forward, seeking. Yet it is contained within itself, always finding a point of regeneration to begin the next spiraling out.

Much like an ever revised piece of writing, I realize my understanding of writing and myself as a writer will be formed over my entire life as I am exposed to new literature, criticism, and life experience. I will go back and revisit what I know or what I thought I knew, and expand my knowledge, and my questions, as more information reveals itself. In the introduction to *Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter notes that
he is going to address “the storytelling of everyday life. The habit of narrative is unceasing. We understand our lives, or try to, by the stories we tell” (xii). I don’t write much fiction, the stories I tell are revealed through poetry and non-fiction. But the sentiment translates to those genres as well. Poetry and nonfiction also deal with the storytelling of everyday life. At least mine do.

I know I am a product of all my experiences. I am a collection of all the readings I’ve studied; of what I’ve chosen to internalize, what I’ve discarded as superfluous and still of new things that will change what I already know, propelling me forward. I bring all this to my experience as a writer. I know I write out of a desire to share ideas, to make people feel what I feel and to entertain. All art is good when it is created with purpose. Its meaning will remain evolutionary and interpretive depending on the person who is experiencing it. And all art is good that connects with the person that has decided to interact with it. As William Gass said, “The poet, every artist, is a maker, a maker whose aim is to make something supremely worthwhile, to make something inherently valuable in itself” (35).

I am a maker. I make art that has value and will make a connection with the reader. It is my hope that readers remember their experience with my writing and value it, (if not for a lifetime, than at least longer than they remember who won American Idol last year.) Meanwhile I will continue to add new work to my collection of essays and poems. Maybe dip my toe into memoir, even fiction perhaps. The combinatoria of my life continues as does my evolution as a writer. And the great ball of yarn keeps spinning.
PART II

THIS WOMAN’S WORK
I wade ankle deep through the beginning of this river.
I walk in the water that has traveled miles from its source,
from the top of the states to the bottom, artery of the nation.

It grows from a slow pumping spring, traveling the nation
as my grandparents did, moving from the river
to the ocean. My family has traveled far from its source.

How do I swim these miles, back to the source,
when there is no one left to tell me the stories of the nation?
All that’s left is the water, always flowing, in the river--

The river that remembers its source as my nation forgets its own.
The Settled Life

What was it like for you back in 1943? Just married, moved to New York City from Minnesota. New husband enlisted in the Navy before he was drafted. You alone in your one room walk-up, waiting. But you had Jesus and your looks. Rode the subway by yourself. You were a strong woman. Did you miss your family? You must have missed the lakes, stuck in the city. A city of new experience. Of music, art and all those streets filled with new people. How did you entertain yourself? You drank some, and you certainly smoked. You told me you taught yourself to smoke when you were on the road, so people thought you older and would take you seriously. You might have seen the sights. Made acquaintance with other Navy wives. Maybe the girls went out for a little fun, had a drink of two with a sailor who was not their husband. You posed like a model in New York City, when he came home on leave. He liked to take glamour pictures of you, so far from the farm girl who sold beauty to ladies in drug stores. You both went back to Minnesota after the war. Built the dream home, but lost the dream baby boy -- So you adopted the girls. Did you ever, elbow deep in diapers, miss the NYC glamour? You might have settled for this quiet life of wife, mother, grandmother, but you seemed happy. And later, if you ever thought of those boys who were not your husband, no one knew but you.
Curtains

Her false teeth smile at me in her hospital room.
Held tight within the curtained walls, privacy is spare,
I want to show some cheer, yet all I feel is gloom,
doctors drift by checking charts, acting like they care.

Held tight within the curtained walls, privacy is spare.
Light never changes here, whether it’s midnight or noon,
doctors drift by checking charts, acting like they care,
confusing clocks, the curtains block the sun and then the moon.

Light never changes here. Whether it’s midnight or noon,
the clothing choice is all the same, a paper gown for her to wear.
Confusing clocks. The curtains block the sun and then the moon,
no one knows what’s up or down -- don’t bother with her hair.

The clothing choice is all the same, a paper gown for her to wear.
Visitors sit and wait some more, then rail that life’s not fair --
no one knows what’s up or down. Don’t bother with her hair.
Despite this she lays there optimistic. Real positivity is rare.

Visitors sit and wait some more, then rail that life’s not fair.
I want to show some cheer yet all I feel is gloom.
Despite this she lays there optimistic, real positivity is rare;
her false teeth smile at me in her hospital room.
Echo

I can still hear the sound, the sudden screams --
I thought the older girls were teasing Kim --
as they pulled her from the water, blood streamed.

One girl cried. I remember in my dreams
visions of Kim playing tag with her friends
I can still hear the sound, the sudden screams --

Noise stretches slow; who can freeze frame this scene?
Kim jumped off the dock, from the unsafe end
as they pulled her from the water, blood streamed.

The rusted dock wheel, submerged, wasn’t seen.
Now lake water and blood slip down and blend --
I can still hear the sound, the sudden screams --

Someone stop the sounds -- the animal keen --
Stop the movie running inside my head.
As they pulled her from the water, blood streamed

a hundred years in a minute. It seemed
time might slip past. These images won’t mend;
I can still hear the sound, the sudden screams --
as they pulled her from the water, blood streamed.
When I think of you, the first image is your hands --
think back to things they did for me each day --
see hands knitting, cutting, putting up things you canned.

The way you’d brush my hair, not gently, and
pull braids tight before I could go out to play.
When I think of you, the first image is your hands --

in youth, my best feature you said, but damned
if you’d stay indoors all day hiding from harmful rays,
see hands knitting, cutting, putting up things you canned.

Sullen sun bloomed age spots instead of youthful tan.
You told me stay out of the sun; listen to what you say.
When I think of you, the first image is your hands --

your hands, not like mine, which turned soft golden sand,
but leathery, brown, the color of silt in a churning bay --
see hands knitting, cutting, putting up things you canned.

Hands that could do. Hands that knew work, washed pans
raised children, made clothes, drank gin, always found a way.
When I think of you, the first image is your hands --
see hands knitting, cutting, putting up things you canned.
Silver Dollars

For my grandmother

I miss pancake night.

The daily routine happily toppled
when you would sing out

*pancakes for dinner* -- somehow
always seeming against the rules --
breaking up the baked-chicken-
Del Monte-canned-green-bean-
scalloped-potato triumvirate
which ruled the 5 pm dinner table.

This delicious break with the expected --
found our plates lifted to receive
your offering to us,
baby birds bellied up at the kitchen bar.
Front row at the griddle show,
watching you pour & flip & pour & flip
always waiting
until we had our fill

before you stopped, to eat.
Drifting

For my grandpa

When I was four, grandpa taught me to swim
in heartbreaking blue pools. Chlorine burned
my toes, scraped raw on concrete edges.
Human driftwood floating hour-by-hour

in heartbreaking blue pools, chlorine burned
my delicate eyes. They turn red and tear, as I become
human driftwood, floating hour-by-hour.
Now pool’s long gone, grandpa, bound to his chair.

My delicate eyes -- they turn red and tear, as I become
the caretaker, lugging oxygen tanks, diapers.
Now pool’s long gone, grandpa, bound to his chair --
no more pruning, no more swimming,

the caretaker, lugging oxygen tanks, diapers --
wondering what happened to lazy days.
No more pruning, no more swimming --
every day sliding into one long day.

Wondering, what happened to lazy days:
my toes, scraped raw on concrete edges --
every day sliding into one long day,
when I was four -- grandpa taught me to swim.
The Trouble with Eyebrows

Eyebrows. Most of the time we take eyebrows for granted as yet another mundane feature of an average person’s face. Everyone has them (well almost everyone, but more on that later). I stand staring at mine in the bathroom mirror. Well, less staring and more minutely examining. Squinting -- looking for rogue hairs. I can’t allow any of those buggers to take root. Some need to go, but some need to stay. I’ve recently learned that plucking an eyebrow is as fine a balancing act as building an arch out of masonry. Any one hair could be the capstone. Pluck the wrong one and the whole arch construct could fall back into uncivilized ruin.

So what’s the big deal. It’s not like they matter too much in the grand scheme of looks or fashion. Sure, many people pluck them, or pierce them, or if you were a Vanilla Ice wannabee in the nineties you shaved lines in them. We can buy tons of products to shape them, dye them, or remove them, but mostly they’re just there -- so much a part of everyone’s face, that they must be truly freakish to draw comment. Of course, when they are freakish (i.e., outside the boring old brow) they can be the only thing you see when you look at a person. I once knew a girl named Kelly who had the weirdest eyebrows. Using my powers of deduction -- and the Internet -- to practice my amateur doctor diagnostic skills, I think she might have had Trichotillomania, a nervous disorder which causes people to pull out their body hair with their fingers. (Don’t worry there’s not going to be a test on this -- you don’t have to memorize this term.) All that she had left of her eyebrows was the closest part by her nose. I think she used to pull the rest
out when she got nervous. Every time I saw her I had to work really hard not to stare
fixedly at the tiny little eyebrow apostrophes she had left over her eyes. _Self, don’t stare
at the eyebrow freakshow._ And if I’m doing it, I know everyone else must be doing it too.
How can we help ourselves? Thanks to the great corporate advertising machine,
Americans are trained to strive for perfection. Not a hair out of place (and definitely not
gray), no odor, no wrinkles. In fact, we should be like obedient robots with credit cards.
Inputting data and reacting logically. All people should strive to be perfect to fit into
society’s templates of beauty. To be perfect one must focus on every little detail. Thus,
we are a society secretly obsessed with eyebrows.

One time when my friend Poppy had her eyebrows waxed, the esthetician (a
fancy name for someone who pulls hair off of people) made them so thin they looked the
way some Mexican women like to wear them when they wax them off and draw them
back on thin with a pencil. You know what I’m talking about. Well, I thought she had
done them like that on purpose, so I didn’t say anything like, “Why are you trying to look
like a chola?!” but she told me later after they had grown back in that she hated her
eyebrows like that and that the esthetician was a friend’s mother who must have been
delusional when she scalped her. (Poppy unfortunately had her driver’s license picture
taken when they were like that and so nearly ten years she’s had a picture with goofy
eyebrows. We renamed her Horchata in her license picture. In fact we call everyone with
those drawn-on eyebrows Horchata. Yes, I know Horchata is a rice milk drink that has
nothing to do with eyebrows, but for some reason it fits.)
Sure, eyebrows in general are kind of weird if you stare at them long enough, and if they’re a funny shape, like those old guys who look like they have bristly gray escarole over their eyes, but what’s even weirder is if someone doesn’t have them at all. It’s such an oddity that you just stare, trying to figure out what’s wrong with their face. You know something is wonky, like their teeth are off center, or they don’t have a nose, but you can’t quite figure out the problem. Like when I watched *The Terminator* for the first time and Arnold Schwarzenegger starts looking for Sarah Connor, and I’m spending the whole movie trying to figure out why he really does look like a freaky cyborg, besides the fact that he’s Arnold Schwarzenegger, and it hits me. No eyebrows. *Agggghhhhh!!!!!!* Or just take a look at Whoopi Goldberg or Uncle Fester. I mean, it looks fine if you’re going for a space alien thing (Mr. David-Bowie-space-oddity circa 1972, I’m looking at you), but otherwise you need them for balance or something. At least Groucho Marx, who used to shave his off, drew them back on to be funny. He knew the power of the eyebrow. He used his to communicate his comedy in the same way most people use theirs every day to communicate with each other. They help us show surprise, or scowl out our anger.

I remember the first time I consciously realized the eyebrow had power as a communication tool. I was about 15 and I had just watched a rerun of *Gone with the Wind*. I loved Scarlett. She was so feminine and powerful and cool. And she could raise one eyebrow. There is that scene where she is wearing the green dress made of curtains and she raises her eyebrow and it says so much. It says, “I’m smart and I’m going to do what I have to do, and you can kiss my Georgia-peach ass.” I wanted to be able to lay
someone low with just one look. I practiced raising my eyebrow. I figured out to get that Scarlett look, you have to tilt your head down a little bit and look up imperiously through your eyelashes and then raise up one eyebrow as if to say, “Ohhhhh, reallllly.” That’s what I say with my left eyebrow. It does a nice arch. The right is a little lazy, and it involves the left coming down flat while the right goes up a little. That is my skeptical face. Like, “Ha! Whatever! I’m skeptical of everything you just said. Ever.” It really is a phenomenal skill to have. Thanks to Scarlett, I can say so much without saying a word. I think I mostly do the skeptical look though. I don’t have to lay anyone low with the power of my eyebrow that often, but when I do need to, I’m ready. Of course, I just admitted that I sat looking in the mirror as a young woman and tried to emulate what I saw in a movie. I really wanted to be Scarlett. That’s why stupid shows like Jackass say “Don’t try this at home.” Not to go all Breakfast Club, but it really seems as if we all want to be like someone else: cooler, prettier, more in control. And really, there is nothing more controllable than our physical person and how we chose to present it to the judgmental public. For years I subconsciously choice to do nothing to my eyebrows. I thought they were fine the way they were. I was raised in the eighties and women (sexy and iconic ones like Madonna, and Brooke Shields) had big eyebrows. It was the look. But somewhere in the evolution of beauty the eyebrow thinned out again and I looked at mine and thought, “They’re not so big. I think they look fine.”

For many other women, waxing the brow is part of a beauty regimen they ritualistically subscribe to. For something that seems insignificant, the eyebrow really does shape the way a person looks. When people get their eyebrows waxed, it opens their
eye area up. Sometimes it even looks like they have had plastic surgery. Like you can suddenly see their eyes now that the overhanging bush has been beaten back. The fact is, people have been shaping their eyebrows one way or another for thousands of years. In ancient Egypt, women were reported to make depilatory creams out of arsenic and quicklime. (And we think the chemicals in Nair stink! How about putting straight-up poison on your skin?) Around 500 B.C. Roman women were known to pluck their eyebrows with tweezers. Currently in Egyptian and Arabic cultures women use a practice called threading that involves wrapping a cotton thread around a row of unwanted hair and then yanking it out. (In fact I was walking through the mall a few days ago, right here in Chico, CA, which is not exactly on the pulse of trends, and there was a threading kiosk where a woman sat in a chair holding her skin taught while another woman looped thread around the unwanted hairs. And she did it really fast, like loop-loop-loop. Uh…don’t try this at home, it is definitely for professionals.) Beyond threading, an ancient Egyptian method of hair removal called sugaring is also still in use. This involves using a natural “wax” made of cooked sugar that becomes similar to caramel that is placed on the unwanted hair and then removed when it hardens. Worst candy ever.

Cultural attitudes toward removing body hair range from the necessary, like the armpit and pubic hair removal in Islam due to what they see as religious cleanliness issues (although they don’t endorse eyebrow modification because it is vain), to a moderate dislike for extra hair, like in Europe where people seem to shape their brows but may not care about the rest of their body hair, to the U.S. where fashionistas equate
people who don’t remove extraneous body hair with uncouth hillbilly people from the
*Deliverance*-‘Bama backwoods.

As for myself, other than the professional-eyebrow-raising training I
derwent almost 20 years ago, I mostly just let my eyebrows be. I let them do their
thing, and they let me do mine. Sure they’re a little bushy, but they have a kind of arch
and they aren’t freakish Bert-brows or anything. They don’t really meet in the middle; I
mean not unless you look really close, you know, since I’m a blond, but those little guys
are hardly noticeable. So what if the *Star* and the *Enquirer* show celebrities like
Gwenyth, and Angelina, and Jen staring out at me with their little shapey-waxed perfect
brows while I wait in the Safeway checkout? So what if those brows also peek off the
covers of *Women’s Day* and *Ladies Home Journal* and, okay, fine, all the “magazine
ladies” have their brows done, so what? So, it’s not just for movie stars anymore. The
magazines tell us what we should be doing; how we should dress, how we should look,
how thin we should be and how much hair on our faces is too much. Well, whoop-de-
doo! Like I said before, if bushy brows looked all right in the eighties for Brooke
Shields, then they should be all right for me. Of course it’s no where even close the
eighties anymore, and would I really wear any of the clothes I used to wear in the
eighties? We’ve all laughed at the people who can’t seem to give up their Z Cavaricci
pants, so maybe I shouldn’t be holding on to the old eyebrows anymore.

I do know a little bit about fashion beyond what I see at the check stand. I’ve
worked in a clothing store for eight years. A plus-size clothing store. All day long I try to
help women size 14 and up find outfits that don’t make them look like an apple on two
toothpicks, or a sausage stuffed into denim leggings and a tunic. It’s my job to try to help them attain “the look.” I see people every week searching for the next look even though most “looks” from the runways don’t translate well to anyone who is less than six feet tall and has more than 1% body fat. Recent “looks” include low-rise jeans, which can make even skinny girls look fat, and super-long tunics over skin tight jeans, which tend to suck right onto the rolls and bellies of your average Woman. (“Woman” with a capital is secret code for fat woman. That big “W” says it all.) The fact that these clothes look terrible on them doesn’t stop the fashion-hungry, plus-size woman. They all hope that the next sweater or pair of pants will make their size 24 body suddenly look like a size 4, because that’s the only thing that is desirable by media standards.

In her book *Fashion Victim*, Michelle Lee, former editor of *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* magazines, identifies an evolving culture of style addicts who are being influenced by the media to keep up with the ever faster trends of the fashion industry. An item of clothing that may have been “in” for a year in the past now only stays “in” for a month. Working in the store I see styles come and go quickly. The newest one, “Sublimation,” involves printing designs on top of finished clothing so that the plain areas missed in folds and creases show through the designs. I know that this style is not long for this world. It’s the “Giant Flower” of 2009.

People spend a fortune trying to catch up to fashion. I do love clothes, don’t get me wrong, but I try not to spend too much money on items I see as trendy because, through experience, I know that shirts with unfinished edges or woven with glitter or “sublimated” will only be “in” for one season and then you’re stuck with them moldering
in the back of your closet. Many women and men are trapped in a whirlwind of trying to be “in.” You can never catch up. If you are now wearing bootcut jeans, next month everyone will be wearing skinny jeans. That’s why I tell people to buy what looks good on them, not what is “in.” The same is true about hairstyles and other body modifications like tanning and eyebrow thickness. People spend hundreds of dollars a month on clothes and salon services trying to get “the look.” I don’t have the money for that. Working in retail doesn’t pay that well, and I can’t justify spending $15 a week to get my eyebrows waxed or $30 for a manicure that I can do myself for free.

So what does this have to do with eyebrows? Trends, Fashions. Thick eyebrows, thin eyebrows. I think the ignoring of my eyebrows was part me bucking the trend, and part me not wanting to go through a painful procedure. I continued on blissfully until one day about five years ago when I saw my then eighteen-year-old sister Jessica had done something to her eyebrows. She had plucked them out so she looked kind of perpetually surprised. This was an unfortunate eyebrow rendering on par with the Horchata incident. It also served to reinforce my belief that my eyebrows were just fine the way they were. I knew for sure I didn’t want to look like I just discovered a drawer full of cockroaches every minute of the day, although, I did start thinking about the whole process after seeing her new eyebrows.

My sister is not a super fashionable person. The proof is in her idea of around-the-house wear that involves a blown-out tank top that is stretched all to hell and stained -- with her bra hanging out -- and jeans so baggy that the butt bags and the legs drag on the floor. Outside clothes involve the same jeans and some kind of tee shirt. (Evil-
fashion-slave-puppet-me has to pop in here and defend herself. I know this sounds bitchy, but I just want my sister to “fit in” in the same way people have been trying to fit in since Jesus started that clique called the apostles and probably before that. Cool-anti-conformist-me says it shouldn’t matter what a person wears or how they look, but she is also a pragmatist and she knows that in American society it does matter. It especially matters if you wear your pajamas to the grocery store (which my sister does not, thank goodness). That’s just plain trashy. Although it’s also Cool-anti-conformist-me who won’t pluck my eyebrows. I guess she figures she has to draw the line somewhere. Eyebrows are her Alamo, but everyone remembers how that ended.) I’ve taken my sister shopping. She has other clothes. This seems to be how she likes to hang out. So stop thinking about how I work in a clothing store and I should help her dress better. The point of this is that she plucked her eyebrows. My totally unconcerned-with-looking-fashionable sister suddenly plucked her eyebrows. What? And this local eyebrow revolution didn’t stop with my sister. Even guys are getting all “metro-sexualized” out because of shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and magazines like *GQ*. (I know that *Queer Eye* isn’t even on anymore and that *GQ* has been around forever, but these are just examples of how guys are being pressured to de-hair themselves just like women. The era of *Magnum, P.I.* is over. The new equation we have learned is hair = bad. Unless you are Borat. Then apparently hair = sexy time.)

Anyway, around the same time my sister suddenly surprised me (and herself) with her eyebrow pluckage, my husfriend (boyfriend/husband) David and I sat on the couch watching an episode from season one of *Queer Eye*. Kyan, the queer guy in charge
of grooming, was schooling Andrew, the guy getting a makeover, about “manscaping,” which seemed to involve waxing off back hair and shaping chest hair with a trimmer the way guys trim their beards as well as shaping the eyebrow and getting rid of nose hair.

“You want me to get manscaped, don’t you?” David asked me. I looked at him. David is Italian and somewhat prone to growing body hair but at that point we’d been together for seven years and a little hair wasn’t really going to come between us.

“Do you want to get manscaped?” I asked back.

“See, that means you want me to do it,” he said.

“No, you should only do it if you want to do it.”

“Well maybe I should at least do my eyebrows,” he said fingering the hair growing in-between his brows.

“And your nose,” I said nodding.

Even though hair is natural and it’s there for a reason, we’ve been conditioned to hate it. Personally there is nothing creepier than talking to someone and seeing the nose-nest trying to escape. They make those little trimmers for a reason -- to control the uncontrollable. In much the same way dry brush must be cleared away from the home to help prevent the spread of forest fires, extraneous hair must be cleared away to prevent the spread of unattractiveness. Really, I think it does look better to try to control the hair that wants to spring uncontrollably from our orifices. If I start growing hair out of my nose and ears, I will be on hair-watch everyday. Mostly because a woman with ear/nose hair is like a ten out of ten on a what-the-hell scale of personal grooming, whereas a woman with un-plucked eyebrows is probably more like a four. I can live with a four.
Meanwhile, everybody was still getting waxed. Finally even my no-make-up-no-earrings-no-frills mother, Kathy, had her eyebrows waxed. I came in one day and she looked totally different. We had the same shaped eyebrows and now hers were tiny and where did that leave me? As the family Sasquatch-face? This eyebrow epidemic had A-bombed my home. It divorced me from my comfort zone. The plucked eyebrows on magazine covers were no longer just theoretical. They were in my family. The mirror of the familiar shattered and I was now an outsider. I had no more excuses. It seemed that it was time to jump off the bridge. And, why not? I never liked Brooke Shields anyway.

Okay. So I’ve decided to conform and shape my brows. Now I’m supposed to run out and pay someone to rip the hair off of my face? Whatever, not when I can do it myself for free. I bought a pair of tweezers at Target and started pulling my eyebrows out one-by-one. I pulled the ones on the corner that made them go down too far and a few from in-between, but then I just stopped and looked at them all. Where to start? What if I make them crooked? What if I pulled out the wrong ones and made a straight line across my forehead? I’d look constipated. Plus pulling them out one at a time hurts like a mother. I’m not lying. It sucks. Seriously, there had to be a better way.

I was on the hunt for something to pull out eyebrows. I didn’t really know what kind of product to get. I had looked at that Australian ‘Nads reusable hair remover stuff, but all the little hairs stay in the goop and party around in the jar until the next time when you pull the same ball out and add more eyebrow friends to the jar. It’s like a nonstop facial hair mixer. I pictured the ‘Nads turning into some kind of hairy super ball
by the end. It made me a little queasy even thinking about it. So, that stuff was out. I then
turned to Poppy, who was working at a beauty supply store. On one of my visits to stock
up on nail polish, I asked if she had any wax.

“What do you need wax for?” she asked.

“Um well, David wants to wax his unibrow,” I said. “And I thought maybe I
would try to shape mine too. I don’t know how though. I don’t want to screw them up.”

“Well, they grow back.”

“I know that, but I don’t want to walk around all deformed because I couldn’t
do it right.” She of all people should know about bad eyebrow experiences.

She pointed me toward a wax that didn’t need strips. You just heat it up on the
stove, slap it on and rip it off. Voila, super easy! I read the top of the can. “No-Tweez–
Raising eyebrows since 1929.” Perfect. Now I was ready to really get down to business.
Unfortunately, I didn’t remember to buy any sticks to put the wax on with, so the next
morning at Starbucks I grabbed a bunch of extra wooden coffee stir sticks with which to
put my depilatory plan into effect. After work I went home, and put the little metal tin of
wax on the stove. I watched as it melted into the consistency of caramel. I wished it was
caramel, because then I could dip an apple into it instead of sticking it onto my face. I got
a stick to stir it with but then realized I didn’t have a mirror in the kitchen. Agh! This was
so complicated. I ran and got a compact out of the bathroom. The wax looked melty
enough. I took the tiny stick, which was really way too small to try and put wax on with,
and gooped some of the wax between my eyebrows. It was hot but quickly cooled into a
hard little nub. I picked at the edge and pulled it off. Okay, it stung, but not too bad.
I looked at the rest of my eyebrows. Where should I put it? How could I get the right arch? Then I looked at my little blond moustache hairs. Maybe I should slap a little wax on those bad boys while I try and figure out what to do about my eyebrows. I slathered on some of the wax and let it dry. Then I started picking at the edge. That hurt a little more than the midbrow area. I picked a little bit. No, it hurt a lot more. I decided on band-aid mentality. Just rip that sucker off. Oh... My... God! Ice! Ice! I swear I thought I was going to look in the mirror and see that I’d ripped my upper lip skin off in some Freddy-Krueger-style flay job. News Flash: This do-it-yourself idea is crap! Sure it’s cheaper, but you have to be nuts or at least seriously masochistic to want to put hot wax on your face then pull all the little individual hairs out. There was NO WAY I was going to try to do my own eyebrows. In fact right then I decided that my eyebrows could just damn well stay the way they were. They didn’t look that out of date, and it wasn’t like they were contributing to human suffering by being thick. There were no WMD’s in my bush-brows.

So for about two years, I forgot all about my terrible idea to conform to the eyebrow Gestapo’s idea of beauty until one summer when I went to a beauty salon called Bliss. This was my first time in a “real” salon. I’ve never had my hair professionally cut. I keep it long, trim it myself and I haven’t colored it, so I don’t have to worry about having pictures of myself with chunky highlights or a mohawk, wondering who talked me into that idea ten years down the road. I do my own manicures and pedicures and I’ve never had a facial. I kind of wanted to see what it was all about, though, so I asked
for a gift certificate for Christmas to have a pedicure with Becki at Bliss. I actually work with Becki at the clothing store, but she is also a nail tech. I was very excited. Someone was being paid to touch my feet. I waited until summer to have my pedicure, because I wanted to be able to flash my newly tricked-out feet in sandals. I showed up to my appointment not knowing what to expect.

The pedicure was nice. Lots of foot scrubbing and nail painting and chit chat. Somehow I mentioned I was thinking about having my eyebrows done. I don’t know why, it was like someone’s hand crept into my body and moved my mouth up and down. I know who it was; it was Evil-fashion-slave-puppet-me. She never was happy that I hadn’t gone all the way with my brows. Becki suggested I get it done right then. She said the girl who did hers, Lexie, could do them right then. I wasn’t sure how I had talked myself into getting my eyebrows done. I was hesitant about the whole process having mentally scarred myself. What if it hurt so much I cried? That would ruin all my street cred. What if the eyebrow person turned me into Horchata II: Electric Boogaloo? Becki turned to the girl sitting at the receptionist’s desk and asked if she could fit me in. The next thing I knew the receptionist, who was actually the salon’s esthetician, was beckoning me back to her lair.

I duck-walked after her in my slippery flip flops, careful not to mess up my toes or my fingernails, which had been painted to match. Was this girl really an esthetician? Why was she answering the phones? What if she made my eyebrows crooked? I checked her out as we walked to the back. Decent haircut, fake nails and her eyebrows were thin, but still there. Still there. Okay, that was a small reassurance that she
wouldn’t facially scalp me. We stopped when we got to the door of a walk-in-closet sized room. I watched her give my brows the once over.

“So, what do you want? How do you envision your eyebrows?” she asked.

Envision my eyebrows? Um, arching like the backs of the graceful dolphins as they break the surface of the eternal ocean?

“No plucked all the way out!” I almost shouted, “I mean you don’t like to make them really thin do you?” Please say no. Please say no.

“No way, that drives me crazy,” She said. “These women come in here all the time with nothing -- I mean they pluck and pluck until there’s like five hairs left and then they come to me for a wax and there’s like nothing to work with, you know? I tell them to go home and come back when they grow in.” She looked at my virgin brows again -- perhaps she was planning how best to plunder them. A tyrannical torturer with highlights.

“Come on in and lay down.”

She motioned me into the tiny room that was just big enough for a brown padded table, a little wooden table with her wax warmer and sticks, a chair in the corner and a trash can. I managed not to look into the trash for the remnants of the victims who were there before me. The room was painted a sunny yellow like the rest of the salon. Yellow is my least favorite color. There was a fake ivy plant hanging in a basket in the corner next to an aerial view poster of a Hawaiian Island. It said “Getaway” across the bottom. Was the room trying to tell me something?

I eyed the rickety-looking table. I’m not a small person. I decided to take the 50% chance that the table wouldn’t fold up like a Craftmatic adjustable bed when I got on
it. Lexie didn’t look worried. I awkwardly climbed onto the spindly-legged table and it held. Hallelujah!! There is no dignified way to get onto tables like those. It’s like going to the gynecologist’s office and trying not to fall off the end of the table. (That happened to a friend of mine once.) And I thought to myself “At least I’m not naked,” which is perhaps the only thing that could have made the whole experience more mortifying.

Lexie moved in behind me and sat in the chair above my head. “Oh shoot! I’m out of strips,” she said. Suddenly I heard the sound of plastic ripping open. Then scissors. Snip, snip, snipped. Great, she is experienced in torture. She must have known it is more effective for the torturer’s subject not to know what you’re doing behind them. The imagination makes the implements and plans a thousand times worse. She could have been doing anything back there. Was she sharpening little metal pointy things? Preparing to slaughter a chicken? I didn’t know -- I’d never partaken in this kind of ritual depilation. Then it hit me. This reminded me of going to the dentist. Lying down. The mysterious goings on. The way they sit behind you. The noxious yellow room. Gah! I decided to try and concentrate on the poster. Yes, relax... Hawaii... It wasn’t working. I didn’t think pulling the hair out of my tender eyeskin was going to be in anyway similar to going to Hawaii. Um, okay so not Hawaii. Eyebrows. Blue Lagoon. I thought of Brooke Shields. What would Brooke have done? She would have told Lexie to get the hell away from her and run out of the room. Stupid Brooke.

“Would you like some numbing spray?” Lexie broke into my rambling thoughts.
“Uh, sure.” Who the hell would say no to numbing spray? Of course I wanted the numbing spray.

“Now tell me if this is too hot.” She spread the melted wax along the underside of my left eyebrow and then placed a fabric strip over the top of it, and smoothed it down with reassuring strokes. This wasn’t so bad.

“This reminds me of that waxing scene in The 40-year-old Virgin. Did you see that movie?” I said.

“Oh yeah,” she laughed. She repeated the wax spreading and again placed the fabric this time under my right brow.

“Remember that awful part where he’s on his way home and there’s blood coming through his shirt?” I asked.

“Oh that happens,” she broke in. “They really do bleed.”

“God!”

“Okay, are you ready?” As ready as I’ll ever be after the bleeding story. “One. Two.”

RIPPPP!!!!!!!

Agh! She ripped on two. She ripped on two! Why?! Lexie quickly covered the flaming area under my left eyebrow with her hand pressed down lightly.

“Ohhhh -- Woaahhh -- Okay!” I stammered out as the burning-stinging-ripping sensation started to fade into a dull throbbing. What would this be like without the numbing spray?!
“Yeah,” she agreed with my pain. “You’re right-handed, right? The left brow always hurts the worst on right-handed people and vice versa. Weird huh? I always do the left brow first to get it out of the way. Now the other one will be easy.” She waggled the wax and hair encrusted fabric in front of my eyes.

“Look at all that hair,” she said triumphantly. “Can you believe that?”

Um, no I couldn’t. Jeez, did I have any eyebrow left? Ow. Ow. Ow. There was no going back now as the wax hardened under my other brow.

“Ready?” she gripped the other strip. “One --” She pulled. DAMN IT! Did she think that was funny?! Son of a Bitch! This was way worse than pulling out my own mini-moustache. I asked for this?

“Now a little off the top.” Spread. Smooth. Yank. Spread. Smooth. Yank. “And get these little guys between your eyes.” Spread. Smooth. Yank. She took a little tiny eyebrow comb and brushed them out. “Now I’m just going to give some of these a little clip to shape them.” She snipped the ends of some of my eyebrows off with her scissors. I realized I was having the tiniest haircut ever.

“There you go! What do you think?” She thrust a mirror over my face and I struggled to see into it, to behold my new and exciting brows. I took the mirror. I felt a little shell-shocked when I looked at them. The skin around them was an angry red. But there they were. Still there, just smaller. Like they had gone on Jenny Craig or something. I saw shiny bald face skin that had never before beheld the sun. Huh. The left one looked like it started farther out from my nose than the other one. Huh. That, plus the flaming skin, was a strikingly unattractive look.
“You’re really red. Some people get like that, but it will fade in a day or two,” she said.

“They’re great. It really makes a difference,” Evil-fashion-slave-puppet-me said. This is all the fault of those magazines and my own ridiculous idea that I should have thin eyebrows. Nothing else on me is thin. I should be used to that by now. What was I thinking? “Thanks.” I stumbled off the table and back into the bright sunlight ricocheting off the yellow walls of Bliss. Becki was sanding the fake nails off an older woman.

“Oh they look great,” she gushed. “What a difference.”

“Really?” I asked. I thought ‘Don’t they look off balance to you? Can’t you see it? I think I’m kind of crooked. No? Hello, is this thing on?’ I went to the front and pulled out my checkbook.

“That’s $13, and here’s a stamp card. You get fifteen waxes and the next one’s free.” I wrote the check out for $15 and took the stamp card. I thought about the idea of going through this fifteen more times to get a free one.

“Thanks again.” I waved as I shuffled toward the door trying not to fall since my feet were still slippery with the lotion from the pedicure. Fifteen waxes then the next one’s free? Is everyone nuts? I had to get the hell out of that torture chamber. Hot wax, drills, bleach. How was that place legal? Bliss? Ha!

I drove to work to pick up my paycheck. I felt embarrassed. Like everyone was staring at me. Everyone knew Evil-fashion-slave-puppet-me had finally allowed me to succumb to society’s pressure to get the perfect eyebrow. Must have cute little mowed
eyebrows. Must be like everyone else. I went into work and waited for them to say something.

No one noticed.

“I got my eyebrows waxed,” I fairly yelled in the middle of the store. My co-workers Leanne and Mary stared at them.

“Oh, I guess you did,” Mary said. “They’re all red.”

“What did they look like before?” Leanne asked.

That was it? That was all I got? So there it is. After working myself up for years about this, nobody cared. Here I thought there was going to be some kind of major change in the way people viewed me and no one could tell I had done anything. I went home and looked at them in the bathroom mirror. They still looked uneven to me. I probably could have done that myself. Okay. Thinking back on it, maybe not.

So now three years have passed and one might expect that I’d have given up on all this. The truth is that I’ve continued to maintain my new styled eyebrows. I let the crooked bit grow back in, and I use my trusty Target tweezers to pluck along the arch that Lexie so painfully created for me. Plucking feels awesome compared to waxing. I’ve decided there is no better way to control the brow sprouts. At least plucking is a bunch of tiny “ow, ow ows” and not one huge “OWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!” I haven’t been back to a salon for my eyebrows. What’s the point of having someone pull them out with wax again? See, there is a little secret that no one tells you about having your eyebrows waxed. The hairs start to grow in every day. Every. Day. It’s like an eyebrow
five o’clock shadow. Having your eyebrows waxed is like trying to change the course of
a major river. Your eyebrows want to grow in a certain way and they will continue to try
to flow back into their natural course. The only way to stop this is electrolysis and I am
so not going there.

All this extra work is not easy. First of all it takes skill. One of the first times I
plucked after my waxing experience, I pinched a chunk of skin out with the hair. Ow!
You have to learn to pull the skin tight and to only go for the hairs that are out far enough
to get a good grip on. It also takes dedication. I now pluck in the morning before I put my
make-up on and at night when I wash my face for bed. If it’s not long enough in the
morning, it probably will be that night. I think back on all the times I saw people whose
little eyebrow hairs were growing in and I thought that they had plucked them and just
given up, but that was probably only a couple of days worth of growth. This eyebrow
plucking thing has turned into a minor obsession for me. I’m not talking Trichotillomania
or anything, but I do instinctively check to see what’s brewing along my brow line every
time I happen into my bathroom. How did this happen to me? Me, the person who
eschewed the eyebrow trend for the last fifteen years?

Most of the hair on our faces has been selectively bred out, but our good buddy
the eyebrow perseveres. Our cave mothers and fathers must have liked mates with a
healthy pair of eyebrows for them to still be dangling on the ridge of our brow like that
hang-in-there-kitty from the posters. Let’s picture great-grandmother (to the millionth
power) Targa standing in her cave looking over what’s left of the men after a mastodon
hunt. Who’s left but that strapping Urgg who was able to run the fastest since his bushy
eyebrows caught all the sweat that would have blinded him while he ran away from the rampaging beasts. Targa decides he’s a keeper and now we have them to thank for the furry awnings that sit over our eyes, keeping our eyes shaded in the sun and dry when sweat rains down. A sort of hirsute visor giving us the ability to see danger and survive. Who knows, without the eyebrow we might not even be here today having been made extinct by the fact we couldn’t see the saber tooth tiger standing in front of us because of all the sweat in our eyes.

So thanks to Targa, here I am staring at my eyebrows in the bathroom mirror. Well, less staring and more minutely examining. Squinting -- looking for rogue hairs. And it’s not just the dark ones: what about all these little blond hairs that are growing back? Am I supposed to pluck them out too? And guess what? I read today that the Brooke-Shields-style thicker eyebrows are coming back in fashion. If I listen really hard I can hear Brooke’s eyebrows laughing. What the hell? Here go the styles changing again. But the truth is, I like the way they look now that they’re plucked. They look neater, more streamlined. And I know it is more work and a lot more trouble than I used to go to, but it makes me feel more put together now that I have them done and that makes me feel better about myself. (I’m not sure what enjoying my conformist behavior says about me, but I do recognize that it’s sad my eyebrow holds that much power over me. I guess I’m caught in that postmodern position of seeing the way society works and shrugging my shoulders about it.) Sooooo, I guess I will buck the trends again and keep them plucked. Like I said earlier, you can’t really keep up with fashion, so you should do what looks best on you, and plucking doesn’t really hurt that bad. (Okay, that is a total lie, it does
hurt, but I’m going to do it anyway until Evil-fashion-slave-puppet-me tricks me into something else.)
Halloween Everyday

See, the real moths flitting, dressed as children, waiting.
Child candy collectors grow up quicker these days,
trained to haunt concrete streets looking for the fix.
All-year zombies wandering toward what light?

Ghoulish faces, garish under guttering yellow lamps
drag bags of sugar-coated symbols: the apple, the blackberry.
Fruit that will not keep the doctor away. Don costly costumes:
$500 shoes, jeans, sunglasses, purses: such a sweet treat!
And no cavities
except the ones carved into hollow chests.
Vacuums must fill so the buy, buy, buy train chugs on --
passengers need to plug the want hole: always empty, hungry.
Yes, I’m here too. Riding with the rest lulled into line:
grasping, gulping, gagging and secretly loving it like all the rest.
Wreck

Drive along feeling the thump, thump of the flat, bumping against the tired road. Can’t pull over:
The sign says No Stopping Here; Just drive until tire shreds fly -- rubber shrapnel parade confetti -- A minor hazard.

Drive on the rim, bright sparks cut deep the I-80 artery, metal gouged ruts run oil, leaking slick puddles to pool in the mouth -- bitten tongues swell a thick, black flood: swallow or choke. Along for the ride. Drive. There’s no where to go. Drive. All the signs say No Stopping Here.
America

I want to see the real America.
Open the car door: Feel America.

The eagle, the arrows, the olive branch
More war than peace, your seal, America.

So many people out of work again,
will we give out free meals, America?

This country is depressed. Get dressed, go out,
make some friends, feel some zeal, America!

A blindfold, a cigarette, a last wish.
Chamber the round, please kneel, America.

You’re so bad; but she can’t say no to you,
Sarah sees your appeal, America.
Portland Zoo

Eagles perch silent.
Clipped wings hunch beneath gray sky
and mesh. Protected

from harm, and also freedom.
Which should matter more to them?
Downtown

My hands are empty, my pockets are full.
Money locked tight in my wallet.
Dirty cat man, looks sad, tries to tempt me --
Ignore him. Hammer down pity with a mallet.

Money locked tight in my wallet;
I’m indignant. I work for my money; I don’t live free.
Ignore him. Hammer down pity with a mallet.
I have a cat. He has a cat. That’s as close as we’ll be.

I’m indignant. I work for my money; I don’t live free.
I have a job, a family, a car and a roof.
I have a cat. He has a cat. That’s as close as we’ll be.
There’s no other similarity, no other truth.

I have a job, a family, a car and a roof.
I keep telling myself we’re separate --
There’s no other similarity, no other truth --
Should I give him something before it’s too late?

I keep telling myself we’re separate --
Dirty cat man, looks sad, tries to tempt me --
I should give him something, before it’s too late --
My hands are empty, his pockets are full.
Semantics

Sometimes, it seems like all words exist to lie.
Complicit, we agree representation is thing. Meaning:
Here chair. There desk. But sit on the desk, now it’s a chair.
Communication unspools, unravels the central lie: Meaning.

Complicit, we agree representation is thing. Meaning?
The desk -- becomes a chair. Significance formed by our angle,
communication unspools, unravels the central lie. Meaning
lives stall against word walls, tangle within word nets, while

The desk -- becomes a chair. Significance formed by our angle,
our viewpoint, outlook, perspective, our slant. Do we see
lives stall against word walls, tangle within word nets, while
what we agree is belief -- is created by the dead to frame the living?

Our viewpoint, outlook, perspective, our slant -- Do we see
a word cage, word tomb, word sky, word balloons?
What we agree is belief. Is created by the dead to frame the living
as the live strive to make meaning, create undeniable proof that is

Here chair. There desk. But sit on the desk, now it’s a chair
as the live strive to make meaning, create undeniable proof that is:
All words exist to lie. Meaning: there is no sometimes, seems, or like.
A few months ago, I was walking through Taylor Hall at California State University, Chico, where I teach and study English. Making my way toward my classroom, I dodged yet another student with a flying backpack when a door opened suddenly to my right and I reflexively turned and looked at a young man coming toward me out of a room. My eyes slid off of him through the door he held agape. Then it hit me: Men’s Room! I was peering straight into the men’s room like, “Hey, I wonder what’s going on in there? Stare. Stare. Stare.” As soon as I realized what I was looking at, I quickly jerked my eyes forward, wondering if anyone just saw me gawking in through the forbidden door. If they had, would they be thinking that I’m some kind of perverted bathroom peeper? The type of person who doesn’t have anything better to do than to walk by various men’s rooms at strategic junctures in the hopes that someone will open the door enabling a titillating peek at someone literally with their pants down (although I hear the pants down thing is bad men’s room etiquette and shouldn’t happen, but more on that later). I felt like yelling, “I wasn’t really looking in there. I wasn’t. Well, technically I was, but I wasn’t looking-looking. My eyes were just pointed that way. I didn’t see anything. Stop judging me, all you strangers riding around on your I’ve-never-accidentally-ogled-into-the-opposite-sexes’-bathroom high horses. I didn’t ogle!”

Looking around the hallway however, I realized everyone was just going about their normal business running off to whatever appointment awaited them. Nobody was pointing a boney finger of accusation at me. The whole “incident” probably took less
than five seconds. I was relieved I wasn’t going to have to sew a scarlet ‘TP’ on my
clothes to identify myself as some kind of Toilet-Peeper. Even though no one witnessed
it, I felt as if I had committed some kind of visual transgression, seeing into an illicit,
private domain. As members of a recovering puritanical society, Americans seem to have
tacitly agreed that certain things should remain private, for example sex (unless you’re
Paris Hilton or Pam Anderson or paid) and whatever goes on in the bathroom (unless it’s
a featured bit in a gross-out comedy for example the five minute diarrhea scene in *Dumb
and Dumber* or the ‘battle shits’ scene in *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* or the
ridiculously long peeing scene in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*). Sex and
bathroom behavior are things we are supposed to do behind closed doors. That’s why
they make good comedy fodder. We love to laugh at private actions brought into public
forums. But not in our real lives. We don’t want to laugh when we are using a public
restroom. We want to get in, do our business and get out otherwise people might start to
get funny (not ha-ha) ideas about us, and we don’t want that.

Public bathrooms are associated with dirty business. They are gross. Crawling
with bacteria. We don’t even want to be reminded that they exist, let alone having to
focus on them for long periods of time. I am going to be sharing a different office with
another teacher this semester. It is in the building I teach in, it is closer to parking, the
office is nicer and bigger than the one I’m in now, but everyone who hears I’m moving
into it pulls a face and says, “It’s right across from the men’s room.” Then I say, “Uh,
so?” and the responses vary from “the door opens and shuts all the time,” to “you have to
hear the flushing all the time.” My office-mate laughs and says she has three kids and is
used to bathroom antics and I really don’t get what the big deal is. It’s not like I love public bathrooms, and I am definitely not going to sit in the office and stare out of the door towards the men’s room. I think I covered that already. But beyond that, it’s just another room. With flushing. These reactions are interesting to me. The fact that this office is across from the men’s room trumps all the good aspects of the office in other people’s minds. I’m not sure if it’s bathrooms in general that are bothering people, or the fact that it’s the men’s room which usually has the reputation of being even dirtier than a regular bathroom, but it’s not like the ‘dirtiness’ is going to crawl out of the door across the hallway and get on me like *The Blob*. These people are grossed out by the idea of being in proximity to a public bathroom. There seems to be a two-pronged problem with public restrooms. First, we have a buried hatred of having to go to the bathroom with other people because we are basically like my cat in that we don’t like to be watched when we are relieving ourselves. And second, we are a society of germaphobes worried that public bathroom users are out to infect us with all the cooties we didn’t catch in grade-school. I wonder how we are able to suppress our conditioning and go to the bathroom in public. There must be a moment in our lives when we agree to buy into the illusion that going to the bathroom in public is still a private act (I’ll get to the cleanliness issues in a minute).

David, my husfriend, and I went down to Santa Rosa to see David’s parents and his brother’s family who was visiting from New Mexico. As a family outing, we all went to the beach at Point Reyes. We stopped at the visitors’ center where all the adults used the restroom since there were no real facilities on the beach (only outhouse style,
My seven-year-old niece, Siena, wouldn’t use the public restroom. She claimed she didn’t have to go. We told her to try. She went into the stall stood for a minute and said she didn’t have to go. She finally went into a different stall with her step-mother who then had to turn around before Siena would finally use the bathroom. She obviously has some privacy issues. At seven she has found her shame. When we are babies we don’t care because we don’t know any better yet. We go naked and potty right in our diaper as there isn’t another choice. As we get potty trained we want to show off our accomplishments like, “Look what I did, where’s my prize from the potty fairy.” Then something happens and we don’t want to go to the bathroom in front of anyone or be naked in front of them any more. We are shamed by our bodies. Shamed that we even have bodily functions. We want to be clean like robots. But we’re not clean. We’re just big, house-broken animals that have very fancy litter boxes.

I’m not exactly sure when I found my shame. When I was a little girl, I was a total nudist. I loved being naked from toddler age to around six. I understood that I couldn’t do it outside and I had to put my clothes on whenever grandma came over, but other than that, my mom let me run wild. My favorite game was to catch a neighbor’s cat -- since my mom was allergic and we weren’t allowed to have one of our own -- bring it in my room and get some yarn and string it around while the cat chased it. One time my mom peeked in my room and saw this, and thought it would be funny to take pictures, which have become infamously known among my friends as the naked cat pictures. The nakedness was, of course, coincidental since I was naked about 90% of the time. But then something changed. I am sitting alone right now, and I am not naked. If fact I try my
hardest not to get naked unless I have to. The point of this story is that I’m not sure where my love of nakedness went. It might have coincided with my moving in with my straight-laced, Lutheran, Minnesota-raised grandmother when I was about seven. Running around naked was not in her playbook, but shopping was and that seemed like a pretty good trade-off to me. So what does this have to do with bathrooms. Shame. Hiding the body and its functions. Privacy. Check.

Now don’t get me wrong. I actually love bathrooms. I have happy dreams about bathrooms. As a youngster I decided that bathrooms were great places to be. Of course, when I’m speaking of my admiration for bathrooms, I’m talking about private bathrooms. The bathroom at home was a playroom. The echo -- great for singing. The mirrors -- great for admiring myself as kids (and adults) love to do. The bathtub -- great for pretending you (or Barbie) are having a swimming adventure.

Now I see the private bathroom as fortress-like. Once that door is locked behind me, it’s me time. No more projecting a persona. No more worrying about what look I have on my face, or my tone of voice. As an adult, especially if you live with other people, it is the only place that a closed door really means do not disturb. It is a private area, for doing private things like actually using the toilet or even just reading the end of the book that you can’t finish when someone is talking to you. Many commercials try to market the bathroom as a spa -- an in-home escape from reality. I don’t know if anyone would believe that the bathroom is a spa, but it is a good place to get away from it all for five minutes. I personally do a lot of my best “thinking work” in the shower.
It would be nice if we could spend all of our bathroom time in our personal domains, but that is not realistic. Unfortunately, our bathroom experiences must go beyond the cocoon of privacy in our homes, where we can uninterruptedly use them to take care of business -- or as Elvis would say, “TCB.” Now, I don’t blame my niece for not wanting to use the public restroom. I have had many experiences where I open the stall door and think *if I only had a hazmat suit*. But the public restroom can’t be ignored, especially when one’s office is right across from it. So let’s talk about public restrooms. Yes, to do our private business, we must venture into common areas shared by a public who thinks delightedly to themselves as they use the facilities: “Whatever, I don’t have to clean it up.” This is where things start to get complicated. Or gross, depending on the point of view. So while I do enjoy my private bathroom as I’m sure most of us do, this is not an essay on the pleasures of the private bathroom, but a meditation on the horrors of public restrooms. Eee! Eee! Eee! (That is supposed to represent the screeing sound from *Psycho*. Work with me here, I know that the printed page is a little difficult for those of us used to sound, but you know what I’m saying. The horror! The horror!)

First let’s talk about some public bathroom worst-case scenarios. I was a city girl growing up in the California bay area. We didn’t go camping in my family. When we took road trips we went in my grandparents’ Cadillac or later in the 33-foot Allegro motorhome. So, roughing it meant a motel or sleeping in the RV that had a small bathroom in it. I didn’t have any experience with using the great outdoors as a toilet as a kid, that is until the first time I had to use an outhouse. (Now I know that technically this
is not “outside” but I think that the “out” in “outhouse” clearly illustrates that it was “out-
side” of my comfort zone to plop onto a board and pee into a hole in the ground.) This
experience happened on a trip with my grandparents back to Minnesota. We had gone out
to one of the old family farms to look around and after a long day of tromping around in
old barns and looking at farm equipment, imagine my city-girl surprise when I was
informed that if I wanted to go potty, I was going to have to use the outhouse. I knew
what an outhouse was, but I’d never actually seen one. My grandma accompanied me to
the rickety old wooden structure that looked like it had been there since my grandparents
had left and moved to California thirty years before. When we opened the door, she
explained to me about one and two seaters and told me how lucky I was that this one had
a toilet seat affixed to the opening as opposed to the open circle cut in a piece of board
that most outhouses sported. I was horrified. I was afraid I was going to fall through the
hole into the stinky pit below. (No, I was not teeny tiny. I was just thinking of worst case
scenarios.)

My grandma told me that when she was little they recycled the pages of the
Sears and Roebuck’s catalog as toilet paper and that it was always really exciting when
peaches came into season because they came wrapped in softer tissue paper that was
saved to use as toilet paper. My grandpa told me that when he was a little boy in the
freezing Minnesota winters he would lay in bed until he saw one of his parents go outside
to use the outhouse, and after they were done, and the seat was all warmed up, he would
run out to use it so he wouldn’t freeze his buns off. These stories were cute and old-timey
but for a city-princess like me, having to use an outhouse instead of a real bathroom was
similar to having to swim in a lake instead of in a swimming pool -- foreign and just not right. (These outhouses belong to another time, not just by virtue of the fact that plumbing is really standard nowadays with septic systems, but really, a two-seater? Oh yeah, come on in and set a spell there bathroom buddy. Public restrooms are bad enough with the toilets separated by “walls” but really right next to each other, that’s a whole different level of TMI. I don’t want anybody that up in my business.) By the end of that trip I had been in several outhouses and while I never got totally used to it, I was able to tolerate them, and, really, any outhouse is a thousand times better than the horror that is a port-a-potty. (Although I will take a port-a-potty over no potty. I have peed in the wild all of twice and both times I peed on myself. Really, I have to say that ladies are not equipped for this type of activity.)

I will go pretty far out of my way to avoid a port-a-potty. Though sometimes it is unavoidable as I go to a lot of concerts and they sure like to use them when there are hoards of people who consume massive amounts of liquor (not me, mind you I’m there for the music). Drunk people + bad aim + a port-a-potty = something to avoid if at all humanly possible. Not only are they crusty, but they are like toilet coffins. Plastic green/brown boxes that you cram yourself into. Not only are they small to start with, they always look like someone walked into them and exploded, so you have to pretzel yourself into a knot to avoid coming away covered in someone else’s bodily fluids. That is the one type of bathroom facility where I really practice my hovering skills. Ug. I always feel like I need to take a Lysol shower when I come out of a port-a-potty. Although I think most people feel like that every time they use a public restroom. (They have this vision of
microscopic germs having a disco dance party on every conceivable surface, but especially the toilet seat. More on that later.)

So that brings us to regular old public restrooms. They vary in order of usability. Gas station restrooms are the worst, followed by fast food places but if you are able to find a coffee shop or a supermarket, their bathrooms are relatively decent. Once we are in the public restroom we have to go to the bathroom with strangers. At least there is usually some kind of segregation in public restrooms. Half the public is kept out, separated by sex. So there are a few less people in the world who may have the privilege to hang out with me in the bathroom. Who isn’t relieved -- in more ways than one -- when they walk into a public restroom that doesn’t have anyone else in it? Ah, sweet freedom. You can just go in, do your thing and get out. You don’t have to follow society’s rules for public behavior. What rules you may ask? No these are not common sense rules like “don’t play in the toilet and draw on the walls of the stall making poo-poo art,” but these are unspoken, public behavioral rules that make us conform for maximum expected social interaction and outcome. I figured that there must be different sets of rules for the men’s room and the ladies’ room (you know since they are from Mars and I am from Venus or some ridiculousness like that). Not knowing the rules that govern the men’s room drove me, like any good researcher, to Google “men’s room etiquette” and a video entitled “Men’s Room Etiquette” popped up. How literal. I’ll have to assume these rules are “factual” since they are on the internet -- they must be true.

**Men’s Restroom Rules (as gleaned from a comedy video)**

1) Get in, do your business, get out.
2) Don’t take your pants all the way off at urinal.

3) Never make eye contact. It could be seen as a threat or an invitation.

4) Never look at another person’s body in any way.

5) Urinal selection goes: outside, outside, middle and never next to another person. At that point go to the stalls. If that doesn’t work, leave. There must be a buffer.

6) No noise pollution, especially grunting.

7) Absolutely no talking. Ever.

Of course at the end of the video, two men holding a conversation in a bathroom cause the breakdown of modern society, so I’m going to assume there is an edge of satire to this. To further my research I asked, David, how factual these rules were when he got home from work. He agreed with many of them, but he said that, contrary to popular belief, you can go to a urinal next to someone else if it is crowded and that he wished Rule No. 6 was a real rule.

According to David, the Target bathroom in Chico is apparently one of the city’s bathroom hot spots in which men feel free to “release the hounds” with sonic abandon. He usually comes running out of that bathroom looking somewhat disturbed. So, I guess these rules, like most satire, have some basis of truth to them and even though I’m not a Martian, I do understand the root of these ideas. Many of the fundamentals, of trying to keep a private act in a public place anonymous, translate across the hallways from the men’s room into the ladies’ room.
For example, there is no pooping in the ladies room. It happens of course, but it is kind of like that movie, (or for those of you who prefer to read -- book -- by Chuck Palahniuk) *Fight Club*: the first rule of fight club is you don’t talk about fight club. And that’s really all I need to know. You don’t talk about it. Same rules apply to ladies and pooping.

So imagine my surprise the other day as I went into a public stall to “tinkle” (as my grandma would say), and heard the person in the stall next to me, I’ll just say -- “dropping the kids off at the pool.” I finished my tinkling and went out to wash my hands. Now, the proper action for the pooping woman would have been to stay in the stall until I left to avoid the awkward, hey-I-listened-to-you-poop face-to-face meeting that can happen in public restrooms. (The left-over Lutheran in me thinks it’s bad enough that human society has decided that a thin floating wall is enough of a barrier between me and the next gal as we drop our drawers and let fly with our intimate bodily functions, but really, how far from digging a hole in the ground is this? Are we animals? Remember my litter box idea? We may be indoors with plumbing, but we are still sharing something with strangers that many people find embarrassing.)

Here’s a fun fact. In Japan there was a lot of water being wasted because of women suffering from paruresis, which is a condition where people are afraid to urinate with others in the room because their urination may be heard. So, these women with paruresis were flushing the public toilets repeatedly as they urinated to hide the sounds they were making. To help with this problem, an electronic device was created called the “Sound Princess,” which has been installed in many public restrooms in Japan. The
“Sound Princess” makes a loud sound like a toilet continuously flushing and creates some sonic camouflage for the shy ladies of Japan who don’t want everyone up in their business, but who also are environmentally conscious and don’t want to waste extra water. And who can blame them for wanting to keep their bathroom antics private? I mean, it does seem like if I’m in a room with someone and we both have our pants off, we should be married or at least best friends.

Anyway, back to the lady in stall No. 2. who had just finished “baking some brownies.” Instead of hiding in her stall for the proper 30 seconds, she came out and started washing her hands next to me.

Now, I have to pretend like I didn’t hear anything while I try not to look at her because if I ever see her again she will be always be “The Poop Lady.” Why doesn’t she know the ladies’ room rules? Probably because I hadn’t made them up yet and written them down for study. So, let me spread the knowledge to avoid an awkward situation like this in the future. Here are some rules for women’s public bathroom etiquette according to me, based on my years as a woman who has used many public restrooms.

**Women’s Rules (arbitrarily made up by me, but they really make sense)**

1) Never cut in line. Get between a woman and her turn in the stall and she may cut you.

2) Try to look bored while you wait in line and don’t ever look like you’re listening to the people in the stalls.
3) If someone busts in doing the pee-pee dance, let her go ahead of you in line. You, as a woman who has spent large portions of her life waiting in bathroom lines, know what this feels like. What goes around, comes around.

4) No pooping. If you accidentally start to poop, you must hide it by only going when other people are flushing the toilet, or loudly washing their hands. Or, if you know you have to, you must find the furthest bathroom in the most deserted part of the building, far, far away from any other people. Do your business as quickly as possible and get the hell out of dodge before someone comes in and catches you. If you are caught see Rule No. 5.

5) If you do something unexpected (i.e. loud pooters or poop) then you stay in your stall until everyone who could have possibly heard you is gone, or locked in their own stall. Then you make your escape.

6) If it’s unclear whether a stall (or single) is occupied, gently try the handle, or walk quickly by the stalls glancing at cracks for color. Don’t ever stare through cracks. Keep it casual. Staring through the cracks is like staring into the men’s room -- not well received. And the person in the stall can see you staring at them.

7) If you run into someone you know as you come out of the stalls, make inane small talk as you wash your hands to downplay the fact that you just listened to each other pee (e.g. “Oh, hey, what’s up?”).

8) Always, always wash your hands. Everyone is judging you. If you don’t wash your hands you might as well just paint “I’m a gross jackass” on your
forehead, because everyone in that bathroom is thinking it. Even the people in the stalls who can’t see you, but who didn’t hear the water turn on: They are all thinking it.

Okay. Pretty easy to follow. Ladies room business should be conducted in a similar fashion to the US Government, utilizing the ideas of “don’t ask, don’t tell” and “plausible deniability.” If I don’t hear you or see you, then it didn’t happen. End of story. These are the rules that make it possible for us to use the restroom in public. As with language, we have to agree on a certain set of signs to make meaning. In the bathroom, if we don’t agree on a certain set of behaviors, then perhaps all of society could be undermined and we’d be right back to that old outhouse.

Now, several of my rules had to do with waiting in lines. Women have multiple problems in public restrooms beyond the privacy issues. The modern woman can only go to the bathroom in stalls (Although while I was reading up on toilets, I did read about some crazy female urinal thing that some company was trying to market in Japan -- yeah, I know, Japan again. They have a lot of weird bathroom stuff over there. Anyway, this female urinal involved the accessibility of kimonos and guiding the stream of urine by pinching certain areas and other farfetched non-American ideas, that would never-ever take off over here, so nobody get any wacky ideas), and since there is a limited amount of space for stalls, there are rarely enough stalls to accommodate everyone who needs to go at a single time. This is illustrated at every concert or play when you see all the men milling around during intermission talking about sports and politics, having jauntily gotten in and out of the bathroom in two minutes, while the
women join an ever increasing queue that causes them to miss the beginning of the second set/act. (Unless of course it’s an outdoor concert that has port-a-potties but we already talked about this distasteful alternative. Really this lack of accommodation for women in bathrooms probably goes all the way back to Ancient Greece. While the men were getting ready to sit back down on their patch of stone to enjoy the second half of *Agamemnon* after a stimulating intermission of quickie pee breaks and admiring each other’s togas while discussing the senate, the poor ladies were lined up around the amphitheatre waiting for their turn to squat over some stone hole. I’ll talk about that later too. *Squatting*! Okay, back to modern times.) Of course, because it’s necessary to always sit in a stall, the problem of cleanliness rears its ugly head.

There’s no handy unzip and go without touching any surfaces in the lavatory for women. Going to the ladies’ room involves some kind of partial undressing. Hike up the skirt and hold it up off the toilet area, or if the outfit consists of pants, there is always the danger of dipping the pants hem into the mysterious puddles on the floors of high traffic public restrooms. So, women have to become adept at pulling their pants down and up at the same time. If this isn’t enough of a contortionist feat, many women won’t allow themselves to actually sit on the toilet in a public restroom. They have been told for years that they will get cooties from the toilet seat if they actually place their skin on it, so if there is no seat protector (and sometimes even if there is), there is no way they are coming close to placing their hind end on a seat that has been intimate with so many other ladies. The toilet seat has a bad reputation. This usually causes them to miss the toilet altogether causing the problem they are trying to avoid. (Stop. This is annoying!)
About six years ago, when I took a women’s health class, my professor told us that seat protectors weren’t necessary. She explained that the only way anything could really be transmitted via toilet seat would be for someone to sit on the seat having some kind of open sore on their posterior and then the next person would have to sit down right afterward and have an open sore on the exact same spot and then there could be some kind of transference of disease. She said the chance of catching something off a toilet seat is super minimal. So, I stopped using the toilet seat protectors. That made sense to me, and I decided we could put that tissue paper I didn’t use to better use wrapping presents or something.

I told a friend about these toilet seat cover facts and she confided to me that she often didn’t use the seat protectors, but if there were other people in the bathroom she felt like she had to. If she didn’t, she felt, the people would judge her cleanliness. They would sit in the other stalls in silent judgment thinking, “I didn’t hear the crinkle from the woman in the stall next to me. Unclean!” I can believe this, because we already know by rule No. 8 that if you don’t wash your hands after using the facilities, you may as well go straight to becoming the mayor of Dirty Town. (I mean even the State of California judges you with those signs in every restaurant claiming that “the law and common decency” requires hand washing. Common decency, don’t you at least have that, people?) So, why shouldn’t they judge the absence of the crinkle? I once worked with a woman who was so freaked out about sitting on public toilet seats that she would steal toilet seat covers from other public bathrooms to carry with her just in case she got in a situation where she needed one and didn’t have access to one.
We know that our society is obsessed with the idea of cleanliness, but why are we so focused on the toilet seat itself? There are no protectors for the rest of the bathroom. In my ongoing research I ran across a Yahoo Answers page where someone asked the question: “After using a public restroom do you touch the door handle when leaving?” The answers varied but most said they wouldn’t touch the door and they waited for someone else to do it. People are crippled by their fear of germs. I can imagine them stuck hanging out in the bathroom all day waiting for some fool, uninitiated in the ways of the germy door, to come by and pull it open to set them free. A lot of answerers also identified themselves as “foot flushers.” That means that the normal people, like me, who flush the toilet with their hand, like a human, and not their foot, like a monkey, are touching yucky-floor-creepy-crawly-foot handle. Nice. (See women’s rule 8: hand washing, because, um, Gross!)

In a 2008 article called “Conquering the ‘Ewww’ Factor of the Public Potty,” journalist Elizabeth Landau decided to tackle the question of the public’s fixation on toilet seats, and she found out that the toilet seat is the least bacteria-rich surface in the bathroom. The real danger of contracting illness from bathrooms is not from bacteria hitching a ride from a toilet seat onto someone’s booty, but from unpleasant critters ranging from e. coli to the common cold virus coming in contact with the hands from other bathroom surfaces like faucets, paper towel dispensers and door handles. From the hands to the mouth is a short trip, and according to the article, only 77% of people wash their hands, women more than men, but still, that seems like a really low percentage of women washing their hands, since the women that I am in the bathroom with seem to
always wash their hands (see women’s rule 8: hand washing). Although even the people
who do wash their hands, rarely wash them as long as they’re supposed to. I must confess
that I don’t either. You are supposed to wash your hands for the amount of time it takes
you to sing “Happy Birthday” twice through. Do you know how long that is when you
are standing at the sink in a public bathroom? It’s like forever. “Don’t mind me; I just
have another 15 seconds of hand washing to go here while you wait behind me. Happy
Birthday to me…doo, doo, doo, doo, dooooo.”

Then there is the practical application of all this. Do you leave the water
running the whole time you are singing (in your head, you don’t want them calling the
cops to get the crazy person out of the bathroom)? No, of course not, then you’re wasting
water. So you have to wet your hands down. Turn off the water, then put the soap on.
Sing “Happy Birthday” twice…wait how do you get the water back on without
recontaminating your hands? Oh jeez. Remember the faucet has more germs on it than
the toilet seat. Now what? Okay seriously. How can it be this complicated to get out of
the restroom? Let’s say you get the water turned back on with your elbow. Now you have
to touch the paper towel dispenser and get out the door. Unless it’s one of those
automatic feeder ones, but those always seem to jam up. There is no way to get out
without touching something.

Meanwhile, we are so focused on getting contaminated in the bathroom, we
lose sight of the fact that when we leave the bathroom we are being coated in germs by
touching everything else in the world, including other people. We are just fixated by
bathrooms because they involve the dirty, private parts of the body that are supposed to
be locked away out of sight and those “private” parts involve the dirty functions that are not for public eyes or ears or noses. It’s the shame factor again. It’s all so ‘dirty,’ so of course everything associated with bathrooms has to be crawling with cooties. But, think of other public areas. Computer keyboards. Pens used to sign for purchases at businesses. Money. Now think of the 23% of people, teeming with germs, who didn’t wash their hands before leaving the bathroom. Not good. My point is: stop freaking out about the toilet seat and the toilet handle. I don’t want to sit in your pee (even if it is sterile) and I don’t want to touch the flusher covered in floor goop.

This judgment about cleanliness is a difficult social burden. Sometimes, if I’m in the bathroom with someone I know, I also feel peer-pressured to prove to my stall mates that I’m not “dirty” and so I pretend to use a seat cover. Like I just touch the protectors and make crinkly sounds so it seems like I’m using one since they know it’s me in there. You see, people can judge you if you don’t use the toilet seat protector because they don’t know about all that stuff I was just talking about, like how the toilet seat isn’t that germy. And seriously, that information, while valid, just seems like an awkward topic of conversation when you are in the stalls next to someone else. “Hey, by the way, stall neighbor, did you know you don’t actually need to use a toilet seat protector?” Yeah, not so much.

However, I’m not saying never use one. Sometimes I use one if it looks like a murder was committed in the bathroom I’m using. Or if I’m in a gas station, pretty much anywhere. Or any men’s room because of the whole peeing on the seat factor since men seem to take the “horseshoes and hand grenades” approach to the toilet. I’m just saying.
(Although sometimes I think using the protector is worse than just taking my chances. They fall in the toilet before you can sit on them, or they stick to you when you stand up. Sometimes they dunk in the toilet and then they stick to you. They do make a good back up when the stall is out of toilet paper, however. They’re not great, but they’ll do in a pinch.) Okay. But seriously, you don’t need to use one every time you go to the bathroom. I guess I’ll add in Rule 9: Play it by ear when it comes to toilet seat covers. (Men, if you’re sitting for some reason in a public men’s room, because you must be having what I like to call a “poo-mergency,” you might just want to use two covers.)

So, how did we get here? Floundering around, trying our hardest to maintain all these social rules of proper bathroom behavior while taking our private actions into the public sphere and not touching anything in the room in the process. Let’s think historically. In ye olden times, people just up and did their business, perhaps if one was lucky, behind a tree. When our very distant ancestors stopped schlepping across the land chasing down animals with spears and decided to build permanent communities, they must have realized that they couldn’t keep running into the forest to do their business. The first toilets were discovered in Scotland at the Neolithic site of Skara Brae, a settlement that existed from around 3100 BC to 2500 BC. When the site was excavated researchers found drains running under some of the houses. How civilized we were becoming. These were undoubtedly squatting toilets like a good portion of the world still uses. I recently learned a lot about these squatting toilets. I have never used one myself, but I see all sorts of problems with them, the least of which flashes me back to the peeing
outdoors problem of splashing all over my feet and pants. Squatting toilets? I had heard people say that in some countries the toilets were holes in the ground, but I thought that was their version of the urinal. I mean, squatting toilets for everybody? For women?!

Even though many countries have both types of toilets, I just don’t know what I would do if I was faced with a hole in the ground. I admit that I am one of those sheltered Americans who has never made it out of the country. I used to feel that this was a lack in my life, but now that I have been made aware of this epidemic of the squatting toilet, I’m not sure I have been missing much. Seriously. Squatting. Like a dog when you take it for walks. Except we get to squat into a hole indoors and rinse it with a bucket. What? I guess I can only go to Western Europe if I take a trip. Unless I want to have a nervous breakdown trying to use the toilet. Learning about these squatting toilets is the roughly the equivalent of learning that Santa isn’t real.

Much like the Japanese female urinal that I was talking about earlier, there is no way that squatting toilets will catch on in the United States. Jane and Joe Average won’t trade in their sitting western style toilet for a squatter model. Talk about people judging you. Let’s imaging Jane’s Bunco party friends discovering that Jane now has a hole in the floor for her guests to use. Get to squatting, ladies. Or imagine Joe’s NASCAR buddies needing to make a pit stop only to find the commode gone and in its place: a hole that looks like a giant shower drain with footrests on the side of it. I can’t even imagine the logistics of using one of these toilets. I would have to take all my lower clothes off. There is no way that I wouldn’t soil myself. Bad enough at home, but what about if you were at a restaurant, or at a mall? And what about the workplace and
productivity? Restroom breaks would end up being 15-20 minutes long as everyone would have to take a mini shower afterward to clean themselves up and then put their clothes back on. There’s a reason they call the western toilet a throne, and let me tell you, this princess couldn’t live without it. So maybe public restrooms aren’t so bad, eh, Americans? You could have a hole.

And while you are doing your time in the stalls you can even find some entertainment. I always enjoy reading the walls in the bathroom while I am in there. I think it is similar to people reading books as they use the bathroom. It passes the time. I find on campus that the English building has the best graffiti conversations. I learn a lot of things in there. For example: apparently the women of Alpha Phi are not of pure intention and a lot of other women don’t like them. Meanwhile, others want to profess their love for their (insert type of guy identified by job, or hobby, like sailor or soccer) boy, and disappointingly a lot of people still don’t know the difference between their and they’re and you’re and your. (Although some smarty pants helpfully corrected their grammar for them. Darn it, they got there before me. In fact, I mentioned bathroom graffiti the other day and a classmate said that he was forced to write on the bathroom wall because he had to correct someone’s grammar while he was standing at the urinal. Ah, English majors.)

And these are real conversations. They respond to each other. Like one message said, “Where are all the good looking Lesbian girls under 23. I am a 9 or 10.” And someone responded, “Too bad for you I’m 25.” One message was written by someone who advised people not to alienate all their friends because you could find
yourself alone crying in a bathroom for two hours with no one to call for a ride home. This is like some kind of crazy soap opera. Why are people sharing all these things about themselves while doing their private business? Perhaps in the accelerated internet age we are realizing that nothing is really private anymore.

A Psychology Today article called “The Decline and Fall of the Private Self” discusses the idea that having a private life is lost in the current world of Facebook and Twitter. Now more than ever, we are putting our private selves out into the public eye. I think it’s kind of like going to confession without the incense. People who use the bathroom in Taylor Hall are relieving their conscience while they are relieving their bladders. Or they are complaining about something. Or they are focusing on social injustices. Or they are looking for a good time. Whatever the case, the walls are still being put to good use by these public writers.

Of course, no one ever signs their comments. They want people to know about their lives, but they don’t want people to know who they are (and they are probably worried that the school would hunt them down and make them scrub the walls clean). There must be a certain dirty thrill in doing something wrong and also pleasure getting to constantly address a captive audience with a chosen message be it some sad advice or a quote by William Blake. This seems like the ultimate blending of the public and the private. Here in the public restroom where we are doing our most private business, we are also revealing our private lives to the public without censure. There may be judgment about the toilet seat cover, or the hand washing, but no one knows that you just wrote what you wrote on that wall. It could have been anybody. That’s why staying in the stall
until everyone’s gone covers you from other embarrassing situations. It could have been anybody.

So, while a public restroom is usually not the kind of place people normally would want to spend time and for good reason, I recommend that next time you find yourself with a few minutes in the restroom -- whether you are using the facilities or just taking a time out from having to look at another human being -- think about where you are. Remember, man or woman, always to follow all the rules because you are expected to behave as if you understand how our society works. Remember to really appreciate your bathroom at home because you know exactly what every speck on the floor is. Remember that the public restroom, while truly dirty, is still no dirtier than most of the other places you will come into contact with for the rest of the day. (Follow Women’s rule No. 8: hand washing. In fact Men -- you need to follow that rule too. It is now also Men’s rule No. 8. I don’t care if you only touched yourself, who knows where that thing has been.) Remember to read the writing on the wall, there might be something you could learn (or you might be able to correct someone’s grammar, that’s always fun, kind of like solving a sudoku puzzle). And always, always remember to give thanks that you don’t have to squat over a hole in the ground. You could be in a country that doesn’t even have toilets (ethnocentric but really, come on).

While we are still in a public space in a public restroom, in a time where it is harder than ever not to succumb to total transparency in every aspect of self, at least the two-seater is a thing of the past. We have that floating wall to maintain the illusion of privacy in public restrooms, though sometimes it seems like illusions are all we have left.
Dollar Dances

Man hands, dollars,
all satellites revolving
around these women:
Sell sex, sell symbol.
Ice-picking g-string bullets
straight through the brain --
the kind of death men --
line up for

Eyes, pinpoint spikes
zeroing in on the dollars,
make men believe:
Yeah, Baby I saw you
from the stage
I want
You --
You know? To get paid

Backstage, all business,
girls pulling on armor for battle,
paint on a power mouth --
the tiger teeth. Becoming,
The bad girl who sees
The bad side of man. Becomes --

No one cares about
seeing the reality,
They came to see
The Show
This isn’t love, it’s
all biology, baby. That’s it

the expected slinking cat,
grinding crotches into hungry knees:
writhing against the floor, the pole
each other -- Putting on a show,
for men eating hamburgers,
using greasy dollars as napkins --
then, compliments

remember: No
Touching!
Just watch
the dance --
actresses play their parts --
clean up the stage
for the next act.
Only Child

Little sister, people asked if I was your mother
when I was fourteen and you were two.
Later wild child, used to sneak into my room, steal

my things. I didn’t know why you’d steal
my lip-gloss, my sweater, my necklace, my mother.
Why you suddenly came between the two

of us. I was happy when we were just two.
Little girl, I know you didn’t mean to steal
her. There is love enough inside a mother --

But she was my mother first --

    And know that I too, can steal.
Seeds

Bending under her own hated weight, Sunflower begins to die. She wanted to shrink like pretty Violet, so she decided not to eat. It’s a slow death, tying a knot in her stem -- won’t eat, won’t drink.

Look how small now. Practically perfect. Who needs to drink? She doesn’t care that it’s going to kill her. In the end, we all die -- later or now, Sunflower is wasting away, wilting. She will not eat.

Her leaves tender, a rasping hiss in the dying wind. She can’t eat. Sunflower’s petals dry, fall brown to the ground. She can’t drink. Nothing’s left but her seeds that die and dry and dry and die.

We’re satisfied when she dies; happy to eat her babies while we drink.
Two Days Gone

I want to spread out
across forbidden territory --
slide onto your side of the bed,
but I’m blocked -- a tiny,
invisible fence complete
with a mental *keep out* sign
says: Stop.

Only gone a day --
the house, quiet
without you in it --
I think I could get used
to a place all my own --
with books and poems
piled high to fill the gaps,
but I miss talking circles
with you. Miss the beers
and the walks, the songs
and the everything else
stitching us together
with solemn threads.

Tomorrow,
I won’t say *I missed you*.
I won’t say *don’t go again*,
because buried within constancy
lies a strange understanding:
I will one day try the boundaries --
see what sleeps on the other side.
Overripe

She waits at the light, impatient,
a shriveling summer fruit,
on a graying October day.
She’s already out of season.
Fruit colored -- from the poodle puff
of her peach perm -- the apricot foundation --
the plum polyester sweater
that hugs the girdled rolls of her barrel torso --
to the downy fuzz of faux suede pants,
she hurries trailing scent of perfume pesticide
starting to show some rotten spots of vanity,
the tightened face,
the sassy diamond pedicure
peeking coyly through the re-enforced toes
of her nylon-covered feet
cradled in comfort-style high-heeled sandals.

This fruit must hurry, hurry
hope to be chosen by distracted buyer before
she expires, for aging fruit withers quickly
this time of year, spray tans melt --
even fake breasts sag --
freshness depends on quick consumption --
the next shipment is being picked
as she waits, still competing for market.

This fruit is mostly pit --
the tough flesh past palatable --
fit only to spit out --
like the reaction to biting down
on something that shouldn’t be there:
a piece of tooth, an angry truth --
a sudden realization that all the waxen fruits
who paint their flesh and pare off the bad spots --
should have rotted naturally years ago --
the trees uprooted violently
the orchards burned to ash
to fertilize fresh crops.
Baby’s First Haircut

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair, so that I may climb the golden stair.”
---“Rapunzel” The Brothers Grimm

As a little girl I loved the story of Rapunzel. My grandma would read it to me from a collection of *Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales* and I would request that one the most often, I think, because I felt a kinship to Rapunzel. She was trapped in her tower and she let down her long blond hair so her witchy step-mother could climb it, or her prince later. True, I didn’t have the whole imprisoned in a tower thing going, and I lived with my grandparents at that point, not an evil step-mother, and, feminist implications aside, I liked this idea. I had long blond hair (not long enough to climb, obviously, or I’d be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*) so I could easily make the leap and see myself as similar to her. It was kind of like being the star of the story. I could pretend to be Rapunzel because she looked like me and she was praised for it. Her hair was her beauty and it was the lure (that and her singing) for her prince charming. So what little girl wouldn’t want to emulate this fairy tale ideal of Rapunzel-like golden hair?

So I let my hair grow. And grow. And grow. Not just because of Rapunzel, although I did love that story, but also because people complimented me on it. They would tell me I looked like an angel. In fact, I was chosen as the angel Hark in a Christmas pageant for in my fifth grade class partly because of my hair and probably because I looked like a chubby cherub. That and I can sing passably well, but the hair must have played a big part. Beyond the attention, I liked the way my hair looked. I
thought it was pretty, long and shiny gold. I was a real California girl, except that I was a pudgy child and I’ve grown into a fluffy adult. In other words I’m “big boned,” as my pediatrician so kindly put it in my chart -- I read it upside down -- and my grandma (probably a closet anorexic) never let me forget it. The old such-a-pretty-face-if-only-you- could-lose-some-weight scenario. That didn’t seem to be happening, so having pretty hair became a way to be more beautiful. (Don’t feel bad for me like, awwww she doesn’t think she’s pretty. Although I’m not typically beautiful by American media standards, I have an extremely healthy ego and find myself very pretty, fluff and all. Yes, I am confident, so sue me.)

Anyway over the years the hair grew and grew. Through my twenties it reached past my hips and I have heard children tell their mothers that I look like Rapunzel when I walk by on one of the rare days I wear my hair down. Then the mothers usually say how beautiful it is and how the little girl will have hair like mine one day if she takes care of it. And the girls solemnly agree. They want my hair. So I guess I did it. Childhood fantasy complete. I have become the long hair role model for little girls as Rapunzel once was for me. I let my hair grow, and while that is something of a passive talent, it takes dedication and a kind of freakish adherence to sameness that most people are unwilling to commit to these days. And really, who would want to? People in general get bored by sameness. They want something different every five minutes. That’s the whole short-attention-span-MTV-Generation thing, that technically I should be a part of, but somehow, in this instance, I have missed the need to change. While I have stayed the
course, the styles of the world have passed me by and left me stranded with bad hair and I
didn’t even see it happening.

Well, perhaps not bad. Not like the time my friend let the beauty college dye
her hair and it turned out Cheeto-orange and fried. Or like the way any perm turns out.
But it is time for a change. (Actually more like past due for a change by about 20 years,
but who wants to split hairs: pun intended!) I need to cut my hair because the last big hair
decision I made was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. The year was 1988. It was
my fifteenth birthday. To reflect my impending adulthood, I decided I needed a more
adult hair style. I would go from long blond hair with bangs, to long blond hair -- without
bangs. Now that was a big change. It took years to grow the bangs out so my hair was
more or less the same length, and that style somehow sustained me the last twenty years,
although it has managed to get progressively longer in that time period. When I wear it
down now, the wispy ends reach my knees. I’m not sure how that happened. It seemed
like it was around my hips and then suddenly I noticed it was a lot longer. Freaky long.
But that’s what my hair did. It grew. That’s who I was.

While styles came and went -- The Rachel, The Pob, The Dido Flip -- I
staunchly continued on with my same old long hair. I told myself Long hair is always in
style. It’s the ‘Little Black Dress’ of hairdos. And we all know a classic black dress will
never go out of style. (Although I must say it can start to look worn out and tired after
repeated wearings and washings. Unless it’s made of polyester.) Another side effect of
having this never changing hair, is that I look the same in every picture from 1990 to
2009. Good luck figuring out what time period I’m in from my haircut. Is it high school?
Is it junior college? Is it yesterday? You have to look to see if I’m wearing pegged pants to figure that one out. Also, it has gotten to the point that I never want to wear my hair down. It either gets in the way, or makes people think they have an open invitation to talk to me. It hangs out there, a signal flag that says, *sure I want to have a discussion with you complete stranger*, but more on that later.

The most important thing I have to say today is that hair matters… Pay attention to your hair. Because everyone else will.

--Hillary Rodham Clinton

“How do you wash it?”

“How long does it take to dry?”

“Does it give you headaches?”

“How long have you been growing it out?”

“Can I touch it?”

There was never a conscious decision to keep my hair long. No epiphany where I said, *Yes, I will let my hair grow long, forever.* It just somehow evolved into my identity. The girl-with-the-long-blond-hair. It is such an immediate identifier. When I help people in the clothing shop I work for, customers ask for me as The Girl With Long Blond Hair. (I started wearing it up at work almost all the time, unless I just washed it that morning and it’s still wet then I leave it down to dry. “I didn’t know your hair was so long, wow!” *Yep. It sure is.*) Long enough that I have begun to feel trapped by my hair. Ensnared in its very being. Complete strangers asking if they could touch it. People stopping me at work and while I was shopping, telling me never to cut it. One person
telling me it was a gift from God, a woman’s crowning glory. (If that wasn’t reason
even enough to chop it off, I don’t know what was.) It was very important to other people that
my hair stay long. I figure it was some kind of validation for them for every haircut that
had gone wrong in the past, or some kind of kinship to the long hair they had cut off at
some point in their life. Throughout the years, having long hair became important to me
too. I started to think people only knew who I was because of my hair. (Not in a famous
way, but more like if I cut it they wouldn’t remember who I was. Like my hair was the
only thing that made me a person. Made people notice I was there.)

It also didn’t hurt that it was a guaranteed way to get compliments. All I had
to do was wear it down and almost instantly: “Your hair is so pretty.” (Not that I was
trolling around fishing for compliments. I mean, everyone likes a compliment once in a
while of course, but I didn’t set out saying “Gee, I think I could use a self-esteem boost.
Okay hair, work your magic.” In fact, almost all people ask the same questions. To avoid
all that, I usually liked to pretend I didn’t hear people when they would point my hair out
to companions as I walked by. “Look at that girl’s hair!” La La, I can’t hear you. That
way only the really persistent hair freaks would chase me down to talk to me about it. My
favorite comment/compliment is “Your hair is so long!” My response: “Yes. It is.” You
can’t really say thanks to that or say something really snaky like Good observation of the
obvious, Jay Leno. What else can you say? Of course for most people “Your hair is so
long!” really equates to “Your hair is so pretty!” because long hair is somehow valued in
our culture as more feminine, more beautiful. But still. I know it’s long. They don’t have
to tell me.)
In a way, I think this is what celebrities feel like. They get approached by different people all asking the same thing and then wanting some of their time. It’s a strange invasion of privacy. Having something out of the ordinary (in their case fame and in my case hair) gives people an in for communication where normally people would just ignore each other. Not like I hate people. I just don’t like every person thinking they should come talk to me like I’ve been waiting all day for someone to notice my hair and comment on it. Humans are social creatures for the most part, and people really just want to talk to each other, but we are still socially bound by the old-timey constraints of ignoring people with whom we haven’t been properly introduced. That way we can go about our business without interruption. Unless there is a reason people can find to make conversation with you. Something these social butterflies can find to get that conversation ball rolling. That’s why the weather is such a popular, and trite, topic. For me, every person thinks they are the first person to notice my hair:

“Your hair is so long!”

“Yes, it is.”

“People probably say that to you all the time.”

Yes, they do. “Oh well, you know…”

The answer to the most commonly asked questions are: I pile it up on my head and just soap it up; It dries in about two hours depending on the weather; No, it does not give me headaches anymore than anything else in the world; I’ve been growing it since I was a little girl and Yes, you can touch it.
I always say they can touch it, even though I’m not too keen on strangers in my personal bubble. The truth is that the last thing I want are a bunch of who-knows-where-those-things-have-been fingers (remember those hand-washing statistics) combing through my hair, or fingering it for density or plucking out a hair to curse me later, or whatever touching it does for them. And even though I think, \textit{You have the same thing on your head}, it somehow makes them happy to just feel it.

The truth is, I am afraid to get it cut. Afraid of change. What happens when you change your appearance? In a way, you change your identity. You become a new version of you. It was like when I got my tattoo. First, I was Sarah-without-the-tattoo, then I got it and became Sarah-with-the-tattoo. Different. (Oh it’s not a huge tattoo, just a little stylized triskele and some leaves on my back, but it is indelible. It did change part of how people will view me and it changed how I viewed myself. Now I’m edgy like a biker. Okay, not really.) In a similar way changing my hair will change how I am viewed by other people and myself. I would cease to be Sarah-with-the-long-blond-hair and become…Who? Just Sarah? What differentiates this me from the billions of other people out there? And of course that differentiation is very important. We all want to be special in some way and if I cut off what seems to make me special, then I just become ordinary. In American society, is there anything worse than that? (Oh yeah, being poor. Well, as a perpetual college student I’m close to that too, so ordinary on top of poor would be a negative double whammy for me.)

I think maybe my hair has invaded my head and is calling the shots now. Anytime I think about cutting it, I magically talk myself out of it. \textit{I’m not ready. I don’t}
want to get a bad haircut. I don’t know where to go. What to do. What’s wrong with this hair? It’s healthy and shiny and long hair never goes out of style. Oh it’s really not all bad. This isn’t a war between myself and my hair. If I say anything for the stuff, I guess it’s tenacious. It does its job. It grows and grows. Oh, and I mentioned that it is shiny and that seems to be a good thing for hair. Shininess, and excuses, aside, I’ve been talking about getting my hair cut for about five years. But no one believes me since I’m the girl who cried wolf one too many times.

My friends and family think I’m too attached to it to get it cut. But it’s not really an attachment; it’s more like being used to something and not taking the effort to change it. Like an old pair of broken-in shoes. Or those capri pants I bought full price that I’m going to wear until they disintegrate. Or maybe even the way I have been working the same dead-end job for eight years while I pile up degrees and debt on the treadmill of higher education. It’s easy to get stuck in a rut while you wait for something to happen. Wait for your life to start. This hair is comfortable because it just does its thing and I don’t have to worry about it. But it’s also a symptom of the trap I find myself in. Meandering toward an unclear destination dragging my fear of change with me. No trims, no styles, no upkeep. Just wash and wear. This old hair is like polyester and that stuff lasts forever and looks exactly the same. Of course polyester lasting forever is not necessarily a good thing. Think leisure suits. (At the end of the world: cockroaches and piles of polyester clothes. And maybe my hair on top of the highest pile shouting King of the World!)
So yeah, my hair is “low maintenance,” meaning that I can ignore it. At least that’s what I told myself, but the truth is I still have to do something with it every day. I can’t just let it loose as it gets all over the place. Just letting it hang long is almost like a handicap. I sit on it, kneel on it. Other people sit on it. I shut it in the car door and buckle it into the seatbelt, roll it up in the window. It gets caught on the buttons on the back pockets of my pants. One time at work, when I bent over to pick something metal off the floor before I ran it over with the vacuum cleaner, I accidentally rolled over my hair when it hit the ground and sucked it up in the vacuum cleaner. I’m surprised I’m still not stuck to it. It’s true, my hair is actually quite a pain. It’s not as easy to deal with as I like to pretend it is. Yet it’s still on my head. I’m telling you: it’s controlling my thoughts.

*Gimme a head with hair*
*Long beautiful hair*
*Shining, gleaming,*
*Streaming, flaxen, waxen*

*Give me down to there hair*
*Shoulder length or longer*
*Here baby, there mama*
*Everywhere daddy daddy*

*Hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair*
*Flow it, show it*
*Long as God can grow it*
*My hair…*

---“Hair” from the musical Hair

So, I am going on a real vacation for Spring Break this year. I’ve never really done anything fun on Spring Break. I’ve been going to college for thirteen of the last eighteen years in some form or the other. (A normal person would have a PhD at this
point, but that’s not in the style of the Renaissance (Wo)Man model that I’ve been following. I’ve clearly got to dip my fingers into as many pies as possible to make sure I eat the right one. No banana cream! I guess math is the banana cream of school.)

Anyway, I usually just stay home and catch up on school reading and work the whole break at my retail job, but not this year. I requested the week off of work, and I decided any homework could wait until I get back. I’m going to act like regular people. People who do things. Now my idea of a fun Spring Break is definitely nothing that would ever be featured on MTV involving bathing suits and cases of beer. My fun vacation consists of driving from Chico, CA to Portland, OR with David, my husfriend. I’m excited. I’ve booked a four night stay at the Westin Hotel there and we’re going to go to the Portland Zoo and Multnomah Falls. I don’t want any more boring hair pictures. I want to look at these pictures and say, “Ah, I remember that haircut. That was 2009 Spring Break in Portland.”

I go with David to his haircut appointment. He goes to a stylist because he has difficult hair. It has crazy whorls that make less-versed barbers shake their heads in horror as they try to figure out how to cut it and not make a giant mess. As I wait, I peruse the style magazines. I could see myself with hair like that, and like that. Say, this isn’t so hard. I actually found a couple ideas that I liked. I brought up the idea of cutting my hair with David’s stylist, Sean. He asked how much I wanted to cut off. I said to the middle of my back. He said that didn’t seem like such a big deal. I said yeah it is and he asked how much hair I had back there. I stood up and turned around. He said Oh. He sat down with me and discussed it seriously. Then he asked me how long it took to dry.
(Why is everyone so interested in that?) He said I should find some pictures I liked and that if I wanted to come back to him, that I should just call and make an appointment when I was ready.

I started surfing the internet looking for haircuts that I thought I could wear. I wanted to keep it mid-back but maybe with a little long bang for my buck. Back to bangs twenty years after I grew them out. I didn’t think that would happen again, especially when I remember how annoying growing them out was, and how many headbands I had to wear while I waited for them to get long enough to stay out of my eyes. I think I wore headbands everyday for at least a year, but these banged hair-dos are pretty cute, and I can deal with a little hair in my eyes. As I looked at hair websites, I found several pictures of celebrities who have stylish hair. Cameron Diaz, Angelina Jolie and Tara Reid. Weirdly, it’s the Tara Reid hair I like the best. Crazy B-List celebrity Tara Reid, who is best known these days for getting a wacky boob job and getting drunk on camera in a show called *Wild On*. Hmm. Is that really who I want to emulate? I tell a co-worker about the picture. She says it’s good that the hair cut doesn’t actually turn you into the person who originally had it. Good point. No one has to know I picked Tara Reid’s hair.

I think I really am ready to change.

*A hair in the head is worth two in the brush.*

-- *Oliver Herford*

I’ve seen tons of clips of women on Maury Povich or Montel cutting their long hair off, and crying. I’ve also seen tons of make-over shows where women cut their hair
off and cry and cry. Crying for the loss of, what? Femininity? Womanliness? For what is considered beautiful in American society? Even when the results were better (they looked current, younger, more fashionable) the women cried. *Then why are they cutting it?* Why not just cling to it, like me, even if it is outdated? Look, I don’t want to be one of those crying women. Better to avoid it, right? Just let the hair do what it wants. I already explained that I can’t wear it down without irritation (or vacuum incidents), so I spend my time figuring out ways to club it back, bind it up, make it manageable. Braids, Clips, Buns. Pony tails. Braided buns. Buns with the ends sticking out. Buns with the ends curled. Buns, buns, buns. David says I look like a librarian (and not in a good way, you know like naughty librarian or something. More like old-lady librarian. That’s not really a look I’ve been striving for all my life).

I don’t even really like my hair anymore. A few months ago I was in the office of the English department at school and I had my hair down, and a professor I had had a class with the semester before walked in and said *I didn’t realize how long your hair was* and my response was, *I know it’s freakish, isn’t it.* He said it wasn’t, but that was my snap reaction. I clearly think my hair is freakish -- not quite travel with the circus freakish, but not good either. I’ve never even really had a haircut beyond my grandma trimming my bangs pre-fifteen-years old. This isn’t as simple as making an appointment and getting a trim. I don’t even know how to go about getting a hair cut.

I know, I know. Boo Hoo. There are harder things in the world than getting a hair cut, but this is seriously like being in a foreign country and not knowing the customs. You know, like being dropped in the middle of France without a map or a translator and
trying to figure out how to find a good place for a croissant and a café au lait (people who
live there probably don’t even order those things). I don’t know why is it so hard for me
to commit to getting a hair cut. Maybe it’s because hair is so out there. It’s often the first
thing we notice about each other. Or if not the first (for example I’m probably checking
out your shoes first -- sad, but true) it’s definitely close to the first thing. Maybe overall
body presence, dress, threat level and wrapped up in all that info is: what does this
person’s hair say about them? Should I be running or complimenting? Or perhaps
wondering what they were thinking when they walked into the salon.

The hairstyles that we choose, or in my case, settle for, are sending messages
to the people around us. For me, when my hair is all scraped back in a bun, I imagine it
says something like: *this person is serious.* (Or maybe more like: *this person has some
seriously out of date hair.*) I always wear it back when I’m doing something professional,
like job interviews, presentations, and teaching. Or at least I have it braided, so it’s not
swinging all over the place like some hairy cape. When I wear it down it becomes an
entity all its own. A focus stealer. I don’t want people to focus on my hair; I want them to
focus on what I am saying or doing, not to start thinking up questions about washing
logistics and drying time.

People send messages with their hair all the time, like: I’m a rebel; Stay away;
I don’t care about my hair; I’m different….etc. The choices people make about their hair
often reflect how they want to represent themselves. People, who choose to wear
extreme hairstyles, like liberty spikes for example, seem to be saying *I don’t want to fit in
with the standardized view of acceptable hair styles.* It gives an attitude of not caring,
although I know a hairstyle like that takes major time to create, and usually requires help, so the I-don’t-care attitude really loses its punch since someone with hair like that clearly spends more time on their look than I do.

I feel that the message my hair is sending isn’t the one that I want to send. I don’t want people to think I am a librarian, or boring, or out-of-date. That is about as far off from my personality as possible. I mean, I love books, don’t get me wrong, but it’s like I picked the wrong ambassador to go out and represent me. I need to send a new message. Hair speaks for us, when we aren’t saying anything. It is part of our silent communication. A head of thick hair seems to reflect health, virility, and youth. For men, it gives an air of masculinity. When hair is lost, the perception of the newly bald person is that they are old or sick. In American society, where youth is privileged above age, someone who is perceived as old is less desirable and in turn less powerful. This is hard enough for men, but I see women with thinning hair it becomes more difficult for them because it is out of the ordinary. It’s like women who have moustaches. It’s just off. (I know we should all love ourselves, etc., but I am a product of the beauty-centric society that I was raised in. At least I can recognize that I can be shallow and judgmental and seriously, there is a thing called wax. I know all about wax and you can, too.)

This is something that I have had to start worrying about (the hair loss, not the moustache problem). I wear a bun almost everyday, the weight of my hair rests on the front hairs and it is pulling them out. I can visibly see my hair getting thinner in the front. Great. Talk about the worst mullet ever. Bald in the front and ridiculously long in the
back. Not a good look. And I have to say, this could seriously tarnish my ability to think I am cute.

It’s starting to get crucial. So really, I am ready. I have to be.

This is it. I am running out of time before my vacation. I walk outside my house to pick up a signal on my cell phone. It’s time to make the call. I know that this is rudimentary adult behavior, making an appointment, but I feel like a child. I take a breath and dial. A strange woman answers the phone. What? This has thrown me off my game.

“Uh… Hi, yes I’d like to make an appointment for a hair cut,” I stumble.

She asks if I am calling for Sean. Yes, I say.

“Cut and color?” she asks.

“No! Um, just a cut. I’ve never been there before,” I say. She takes my information.

“I can get you in tomorrow morning,” she says. My heart drops. I thought I’d have at least a week to get used to the idea. Suddenly I remember tomorrow is Friday. “I can’t, I work tomorrow.” Ah, sweet relief.

“Well, how about Saturday at 4:45?” she asks. Mind blank. No reason not to -- class in the morning, but no work later, David can go with, he wants to be there.

“Okay,” I say. That is it. Done Deal. Day after tomorrow, I would suddenly be a different person. This would be the start of a new life. Well, kind of. At least a new looking life. I walk back into the house and suddenly feel a wave of panic. The “oh crap
what did I just do” variety. I am supposed to be ready for this, but I thought I’d have
more time. I even tear up a little. Now I’m one of the Montel people, and I’m still not
even there yet. I tell my mom that the appointment is made.

“You’re going to cry,” she says. “You won’t be able to help it.” Great.

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Hair brings one's self-image into focus; it is vanity's proving ground. Hair
is terribly personal, a tangle of mysterious prejudices.

-- Shana Alexander.

So all this trouble for some protein and amino acids. I looked up what hair is
made out of. It’s apparently dead cell fiber made out of keratinized proteins. That doesn’t
sound good. It seems like something I should want to get rid of. *I had an outbreak of
keratinized proteins, but I put the antibiotic cream on it and it went away in about five
days.* Historically, hair has not only been a reflection of self, but has also been used
symbolically to display professional and religious affiliation and as a way to show
membership to different social groups. In English history, judges and politicians wore
wigs to show their status. Christian monks used their hairstyle, shaving the tops of their
heads, to show their vow of chastity. It also was a way to show the class, for example,
some well-off women in the 18th century went so far as to create sculptures out of their
hair including live birds in birdcages and miniature ships sailing in the hair. These
hairstyles showed the wealth of the family as they were costly to create and maintain.
Women were unable to work with a hairstyle like that, nor were they expected to. The
hair showed that they didn’t need to work. In the same way women now spend a lot of
time and money on their hair at saloons, although most of them do work, it still shows an
ability to pamper the self and to pay attention to beauty. Today good hair is really
expected of women to gain and show success. It is the idea of the total package: brains
and beauty. Well, I know I have the brains locked up. Now it’s time for the beauty part.

**Gorgeous hair is the best revenge.**
-- Ivana Trump

I take some pictures of my hair. It seems silly. But it’s for remembrance. It feels almost like saying good-bye to a pet that you are putting down. There is an unavoidable finality to these hours leading up to the cut. No turning around once it’s started. I’ve been telling people. They are in turns excited and horrified. That seems to be how I feel too. I brush the length of my hair for the last time. I think to myself, *this is the last time I will do this.* This is an ending. And I have to go into the bathroom and let the tears come. The unavoidable, silly tears for the keratinized proteins. If I do it here, maybe I won’t make a fool of myself at the salon. I indulge myself for a few minutes then I pull it together. David tells me I can still back out. I tell him that I want to do it. He doesn’t look convinced even though he has been pushing me to get it cut. (Not in a mean way. He knows I want to get it cut, but that I’m just too chicken to get off my butt and do it. He took me to the salon, he got me the card, he told me I look like I should be going to watch a Joni Mitchell concert in 1969. I get it. My hair is outdated. Jeez, enough already.) We
leave for Chico from Paradise and make the twenty minute drive to the salon. It’s like *The Green Mile* or something. *Dead Man Walking*. I am nervous.

Once inside I show Sean the pictures I have. He thinks they look good. He asks if I want to donate my hair. I say I do. He gets a rubber band from the other room. This is really it. This is the day I cut off hair I’ve had my whole life. Then I realize as I feel him bind it into place that it’s the idea of getting it cut that is upsetting, not the actual cutting. I feel him pull the hair taut.

“I’ve never cut hair this long before,” Sean says.

“I’ve never had my hair cut. So, I guess this is the first time for both of us,” I say, “We’re both first timers. Virgins.” He laughs. I laugh. We will feel our way through it together.

“Remember,” he says, “It’s hair. It will grow back.”

I am so ready that when the scissors start to cut -- it’s almost a relief. I feel the sawing chop. I hear the metallic whisper of the blades meeting as they sever the top and the bottom of my hairs. The strange give as the hairs part and release me from his hold. In this moment I realize I’m not just shedding the hair, I’m shedding the expectations and the obligations. The old me. The one who has been waiting and waiting to get the courage to get out there and grow up. Also, I no longer have to carry the banner for all those people who want to have long hair. No one will ever ask me if they can touch my hair again. (Of course no one will ever stop me on the street to compliment my hair, either, but at this point who cares?) And look, Ma. No tears. I told everyone I was ready.
“How do you feel?” Sean asks as he holds up the pony tail. It looks lost. A misshapen, straggly pelt dangling from his fingertips. It seems alien. It’s a part of myself detached, yet I’m happy it’s gone. I feel like I just took a step in the right direction.

“I feel great,” I say. And I mean it. “What do I do now?” I am standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. I don’t know what happens next. He hands David the pony tail and he directs me to the sink where he washes my hair.

“I haven’t had my hair washed like this since I was a little girl,” I say. It is an odd sensation to lean back and let someone wash your hair for you. It’s intimate and strange. Almost as if you have lost the use of your arms. It’s unsettling.

“I have some clients who just want to come in and have me wash their hair,” Sean says. “They say it is the best part.” I think that it is kind of weird. I don’t know what to think of it. I guess that the stylist will still get to touch my hair and wash it so there is still some stranger-danger action there, but I can deal with that. Although the sink was jabbing me in the neck the whole time. Maybe it was wonky because it was my first time. I know I felt awkward. I’ll see if it’s better next time. All new experiences have a learning curve.

Now the cut starts in earnest. I get an apron noosed around my neck. A crazy fabric tent to catch the hair. He starts cutting and at least another two inches come off in a flurry. It’s bunched on top of my head and chopped in sections. I begin to feel like a block of marble that a sculptor is chiseling bits away from to reveal the bust beneath. The layers are shaping up. Now the bangs. The sides are a bit shorter and he slides the scissors down the hair with a razor motion that sounds like a zipper unzipping. He cuts
the bangs to fall to the side, rubs something in my hair from a pump at the station, then
blow-dries and uses a flat iron. Flat-iron? Oh man, now I’m going to have to get some
accessories. A little hairspray on a brush through the bangs and done. It only took an
hour. And I emerge feeling happy. Why did I wait so long to do this?

I thank him and pay. We take some more pictures to commemorate the event.
I’m sure Sean thinks we’re crazy, but this is a big day. It’s baby’s first haircut and there
needs to be documentation.

“Don’t forget the hair,” he says.

“Oh, you don’t donate it?” I ask surprised.

“No. I don’t know what to do with it. You’d better take it.”

Um, Okay. So I carry my severed ponytail out to the car. I’m holding it two
fingered like a dead trout. David and I look at it and I decide to put it in the backseat; I
mean it seems kind of weird to have it ride up front with us. We run errands and go home
and I carry it into the house. I want to measure it. I want to know how much is gone.
Twenty-four inches. Two feet (and really a few inches more that Sean cut off when he
was styling it). Austin Powers’ Mini-Me (Verne Troyer) is thirty-two inches long. I
almost had a whole Mini-Me cut off my head. This is strangely affecting.

Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to
play with your hair.

--Kahlil Gibran

A month passes and now I face all new questions. You cut your hair? Does it
feel lighter? Are you using less shampoo? Yes, no, I don’t know. I am surprised it doesn’t
feel lighter. I figure that the heavy part was the thicker part closer to my head, and that
the ends were lighter, so there isn’t much of a difference. Still not sure why people are so
obsessed with the washing aspects, however. I haven’t noticed that I am using less
shampoo, but perhaps it is too soon to tell. I wasn’t keeping a log of shampoo purchases,
so it may be a question that never has an answer. *Do you like it?* Oh, I don’t just like it. I
love it. I am mentally kicking myself in the hiney for letting it go for so long. True, it has
drawbacks. When I wash it and it dries it is kind of puffy, so if I want it to look *really
nice* I have to straighten it. This is strange for someone who has had straight hair her
whole life. It’s still too long to really put up, but now that it is layered I can’t braid it
anymore. Buns are out of the question (much to David’s eternal happiness). It won’t even
wind up, so if I want to get it out of the way, it’s all about the pony tail, which is a little
limiting. But I can wear it down. I have forgotten the pleasure of having my hair down.
Of feeling it brush against my shoulders. Of feeling it swing around when I turn my head
super-model style. A woman I used to work with saw me and she said it makes me look
older and younger at the same time. Older because the style is more current but younger
because I don’t have all the hair scrapped back into the old lady bun. I think that was a
compliment. So that’s good, I guess, in a paradoxical way. Everyone keeps telling me
how healthy it looks. I even curled it the other night, although I have some serious time
management issues when I try to do something to my hair. I still think everything is
going to be faster than it is. I was almost late to an appointment the other day because I
only had ¾ of my hair curled and I was trying to slap make-up on with my left hand
while I curled the rest of my hair with my right. So most days I just let it do its thing, but it looks a million times better than it did.

I still forget it’s short sometimes. Right after it was cut I found myself reaching around my back near my hips to grab the ends to comb through them, because I could tell my hair was down since it was touching my shoulders, but I met empty air with surprise. This was a habit I didn’t even know I had until I went to do it and there wasn’t any hair to touch. I also constantly run my fingers through it now. I like how it stops short. Other people still see me as having long hair. It reaches the middle of my back right now. That is funny to me. This is the shortest my hair has been since I was a little girl. It’s all relative. It’s all perception. How I see myself, how others see me. What hair means on a societal level. Hair can become iconic. It can begin to take over for the self. I think of my old hair. The girl with the long blond hair. But of course I know I am more than my hair even though I want my hair to be a functioning part of the whole me. I want it to reflect me, not be me, and I see the cut as an improvement. A new coat of paint for a solid house, to help the outside match the inside. A reflection of the self that is ready to graduate and move onto the next level. Maybe a big girl job. Maybe more school. And even though I do feel the siren song of society -- to be more fashionable, more current -- I am happy to do it because in answering this call, even if it plays into an idealized model of expected beauty, it feels good to feel pretty and I feel it for myself, and not all the others who suggested I cut it, or don’t cut it. I cut it because I wanted to (and also because of that bald/mullet thing, but mostly because I really wanted to). And I would do it again in a hot second. Mark Twain famously said “never put off till tomorrow what you
can do the day after tomorrow,” but in this case I say, screw him. Go out and get that haircut. Put some streaks in. Go crazy. Remember what Sean said: “It’s hair. It will grow back.”

A few weeks later I was going to listen to a fiction reading on campus and I was meeting David for dinner, so I spent a little extra time on my hair, actually using the straightening iron and spraying a little hairspray on to make it stay nice. This of course had put me about fifteen minutes late and so I was dashing out the door and down the hill to Chico. My phone rang and I got the news that David was going to be half an hour late from work as I pulled up and parked.

“Well, I’ll just go get a table then,” I said. “It’s farmer’s market downtown, so I’ll put our name in and by the time you’re done, we’ll be in.” Either that or I’d get right in and get to drink a bonus Sierra Nevada Summerfest beer special while I waited. Win-win.

“Good idea. I’ll call you if I’m going to be later.” He signed off and I decided to leave the car where it was parked and walk the two blocks to Tres Hombres, the mexi-cal restaurant we like to go to downtown. Close to campus and good food: a positive double whammy.

I locked the car and crossed the street walking toward the 7-11 on the corner of Main and First street. I heard a bike whizzing up behind me on the sidewalk crossing toward the driveway near the convenience store. Damn bicyclists try to kill me all the
time, I swear. I looked behind me to make sure I wasn’t about to get run over and the man on the bike shouted, “God, your hair is beautiful!” as he whizzed by and into the street beyond. I smiled. I couldn’t help it. “Thanks,” I yelled back. Well, what do you know, Hair, you’ve still got it!
You stand a towering giant, tattooed with love
remembered longer on your skin than in life.
You are my writing desk, shaded by leaves above
You cradle me within your limbs, shield me from strife.

Remembered longer on your skin than in life --
the promises of lovers that shift on the wind.
You cradle me within your limbs, shield me from strife,
hide me from changeable loves, ended when they began.

The promises of lovers that shift on the wind,
rain down like dry leaves, then crumble dead dust.
Hide me from changeable loves, ended when they began.
The ashes of novas, burned with unsustainable lust,

rain down like dry leaves, and crumble dead dust.
I see the image of you toppling love, your branches withered --
The ashes of novas, burned with unsustainable lust --
But this cannot be; you stand strong while others dither.

I see the image of you toppling love, your branches withered --
you are my writing desk, shaded by leaves above --
But this cannot be. You stand strong while others dither.
You stand. A towering giant tattooed with love.
North Valley Story

In Chico, autumn snaps quick --
a seasonal page turned by impatient fingers.
Leaves rain down sideways --
slow-motion surfing still hot breezes
through September into October
when California’s bounty brings:
almonds, walnuts, pecans, pistachios,
apples, apricots, grapes, pears,
peaches, plums, prunes, olives, rice --
All coaxed from the land by disappearing
farmers, who feed the states with the
children of their labors. After harvest,
the land sleeps fallow beneath winter’s
tule blanket until the next page turns.
Carry

A speckled sunlight sways inside my hand.
I strive to hold this day inside my hand.

Peregrine heart drifts, cracked in rusted skies
plucked dead and edgeless, sways inside my hand.

Sunshine smiles burst out on well-sprung faces
while I hold tight sky, gray inside my hand.

Slit open envelopes that hold a voice,
then tuck the words away inside my hand.

Spend days locked up, useless repetition,
for nothing but the pay inside my hand.

Wander through the rustle of the rushes
and wonder, What lives way inside my hand?

The swimmers in the distance shrink in size,
to float upon the bay inside my hand.

I see reflections reaching out to me --
another Sarah lays inside my hand.
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