What Are You Going to Do with the Rest of Your Life?

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This dissertation titled
What Are You Going to Do with the Rest of Your Life?

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ABSTRACT

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What Are You Going to Do with the Rest of Your Life?

Director of Dissertation: Dinty W. Moore

This dissertation is comprised of two sections: a critical essay entitled "Postmodern Persona Creative Nonfiction" and an essay collection, "What Are You Going to Do With the Rest of Your Life?"

"Postmodern Persona in Creative Nonfiction" examines the use of multiple personas within nonfiction. For writers working within the era of Postmodernism, the self-identified fractured self often requires a multi-voiced persona to best explore complicated issues. The critical essay then examines these personas as they manifest in Truman Capote, Alison Bechdel, Janet Malcolm, and D.J. Waldie, as well as in the author's own work.

"What Are You Going to Do With the Rest of Your Life?" contains essays that examine notions of identity and self as affected by sense of place, race, education, job status, and external appearances. The essays juxtapose personal experiences and external events in the goal of creating narrative.
DEDICATION

For Polly Jean Harvey and sweet, buttery biscuits
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POSTMODERN PERSONA IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

In “Saying Good-bye to ‘Once upon a Time,’ or Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction,” Laura Wexler argues that contemporary nonfiction is ideally suited to telling difficult stories because of the contemporary author’s recognition of fractured truth (26). With the advent of postmodernism and its bedrock principle of subjectivity, the concept of Moses climbing Mt. Sinai to receive stone tablets went out, to be replaced by the understanding that positionality—based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, etc.—effects perception. This awareness makes writing nonfiction as if it were objective text flat at best, or even disingenuous. More interesting and more authentic is to complicate the issue. As an example, Wexler gives the relatively recent outing of Thomas Jefferson’s sexual relationship with Sally Heming. Given Jefferson’s role in forming the United States viewed against the country’s history of racial conflict (among other issues), a mono-narrative could only come up short (28). Post-Heming, the singular narrative of Founding Father frayed; to pretend otherwise now rings false. Writing about Jefferson afterwards requires accepting multiple points of view and embracing intricacy.

Luckily for the genre, nonfiction is well placed to thrive within the complications postmodernism has brought. Going back briefly to Michel de Montaigne, it’s worthwhile for us to examine how the famed essayist’s role in the development of nonfiction set the stage. Montaigne explored topics ranging from bad breath to dishonesty, but always in the context of exploring the workings of his own mind, and he often reflected on the
reflexivity of his own thinking. In *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*, Carl Klaus discusses how Montaigne in “Of the Affection of Fathers for Their Children” observes that, as he writes, the mind of the author (himself) who began the essay is not the same as that of the person writing later—the very act of writing altered his mind (15). Montaigne explored the digressions of his thoughts, preferring to wind up contradicting himself than to turn around. Throughout his self-portraits he records his process and the problems therein of simultaneously observing and writing about oneself. In his work the essayist demonstrates how nonfiction offers a unique situation in which to explore the inner workings of the author and the self, as well as a way to convey these inner workings to readers.

Montaigne, while he marveled over his many selves as they manifested, would not, of course, have categorized himself as a postmodern writer. The terminology did not yet exist. For writers today, postmodernism and its perspectives are nothing new. So what of the contemporary writer, for whom positionality and self-reflexivity as precepts have been givens for years now? In “The Postmodern Memoir,” Hugh Ryan considers authors who have grown up reading postmodern works, who have long accepted the unknowability of objective fact. For these authors, the fractured self is a starting point. As a result, nonfiction writers have been “consciously creating books in which the unreliable narrator is themselves” (2). If truth is contingent based on context, then so is the truth about the self.
The potential of the nonfiction author’s fractured self, while great, requires a deft hand. In the end, choices must be made, for a fractured self does not exempt the author from writing comprehensible prose. The goal remains to communicate. To fall back on Lee Gutkind’s definition of creative nonfiction, the writer must have "the ability to capture the personal and the private and to make it mean something significant to a larger audience, and to provide intellectual substance that will affect readers—perhaps even to incite them to action or to change their thinking—in a compelling and unforgettable way" (179). Awareness of positionality does not mean the writer can pass nonsense off as a concept.

Given the above considerations of nonfiction in the postmodern literary world, examining personas in American nonfiction is a useful strategy for navigating inroads of craft and literary criticism. While dividing nonfiction into subgenres—biography, autobiography, memoir, essay—helps better define genre, the excitement in nonfiction lies in the multiple voices inhabiting the persona—the chorus that nonfiction writers build to create a unified work. These voices create a framework for our understanding of postmodern nonfiction, by defining tactical approaches authors use in creating sustainable personas.

One hallmark of contemporary nonfiction is the exchange within its subgenres. While straight biography, autobiography, and memoir (for instance) are still being written and published, many authors combine genres, or, to be more accurate—juggle, amalgamate, morph, splice, and reconfigure—to offer up a verb sampler of the
possibilities. A pioneer in nonfiction mixology was Truman Capote, author of *In Cold Blood*. Perhaps Capote’s assertion that he invented what he termed the “nonfiction novel” was more hubris than fact, but in his defense, he is one of the few authors to loudly proclaim his work a definitive classic as he was writing and to fulfill the prophecy. It is this resolute persona of Capote’s, the one that existed both in his real-life persona and in his literary one, that deserves attention.

Traditionally, reportage is written from the vantage of the "bank camera eye," as if the author were sitting in a fixed, elevated location and reporting information objectively. Capote's innovation was to utilize this persona of the reporter while folding in another one—that of the memoirist. Initially, describing *In Cold Blood* as memoir might seem misapplied, as Capote never writes about himself. However, for all his claims otherwise, he operates as a character within his own story, even if he is rarely explicitly self-referential about his presence. That Capote spent a great deal of time in Holcomb, getting to know the town and developing meaningful relationships with his subjects, is not surprising to learn. Over the course of the book, Capote’s first-hand experience in the investigation, as well as in the subsequent trial and execution of the criminals Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, affects his perspective. As a result, his persona moves further away from the reporter and closer to that of the memoirist, mirroring Montaigne’s long-ago observation that he had changed in the course of writing his own essay.

Although the reporter persona initially dominates, Capote's alternate persona of memoirist appears from the first paragraph. The book begins with the establishing shot of
Holcomb, as the author infamously describes the town as situated “on the high plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call ‘out there’” (3). The reporter relates hard-to-dispute facts (high plains, western Kansas), but the memoirist is also at work. The word “lonesome,” for example, conveys a different feeling than, say, “expansive.” Furthermore, this sentence relates a distance between the narrator and the people who populate the setting. The author is not local. “Out there” is what Kansans would call the area, not Capote. That Capote reported feelings of alienation while in Holcomb (probably predictable for an odd, flamboyant homosexual crashing a small town wrecked by tragedy) is not a shocking revelation. Capote was no Jane Goodall, sitting quietly among her subjects until she established trust. Rather, the author arrived on the scene sporting a sheepskin coat, a long scarf that reached the floor, and moccasins (Shields 138).

Still, for the early part of the novel, the persona remains mostly that of the spider watching from the ceiling—if a highly observant spider. Capote describes the Cutters’ daily life and introduces the murderers with minimal authorial intrusion. Throughout the first act, “The Last to See Them Alive,” the narrator remains omniscient as the Cutters and the murderers move in parallel scenes towards their fate. Instead of ending with the murder, choosing to tease this line out further, Capote concludes with the discovery of the crime scene by the initially unsuspecting Holcomb residents. Here a shift occurs. To convey a feeling of immediacy, Capote writes in the first person of Nancy Cutter’s English teacher, Larry Hendrick. Five full pages appear in quotation marks as the teacher
narrates walking through the house, describing the scene, and his own reactions as he tries to process what has happened. The uninterrupted passage creates a narrative within the greater narrative. Additionally, the use of the quotation marks reveals that Hendricks was telling this story to someone, this person being, of course, Capote. The effect is similar to that of an actor in a play breaking the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly. Or since Capote is telling a true story, perhaps the effect of this monologue is more similar to that of a documentary, specifically when a subject speaks to the camera. Understood in this situation is that there a crew behind the scenes sculpting the final cut, affecting how characters will be interpreted (sympathetic, unsympathetic, etc.).

Capote's slant is beginning to make more of a presence.

As the novel progresses, the point of view continues to morph from omniscient to more of a close third as Capote's voice continues to increase in prominence. Notable is that the first act of the novel all took place before Capote arrived in Holcomb, with the chase of the murderers, their arrest, conviction, and execution all remaining to unfold. Beginning with the second act, events for Capote began taking place in real time. He is no longer trying to pry open the past, but chasing the story taking place around him. Capote began living his book. He developed a personal relationship with Detective Alvin Dewey, the FBI agent assigned to the case, and through this relationship gained the inside track on the investigation. From this point on, Capote was writing scenes where he was either physically present or getting the information soon after. He became a local figure. He was no longer interviewing strangers but checking in with regular contacts. As a
result, beginning with the pursuit of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, the tone takes on more immediacy as Detective Dewey closes in.

Capote’s depiction of Smith, especially, reveals authorial presence. While the arrest took place relatively quickly, the trial and execution dragged on. Over this time, Capote developed a personal relationship with Smith, visiting him at his jail cell regularly for interviews. Smith’s looming execution affected Capote greatly, sending him into deep depressions (Shields 194). This attachment is clear in that Perry is generally described in a way that makes him sympathetic, persuading the reader to consider that this criminal, who was also an artist and musician, could have had a different fate. Smith’s traumatic childhood, his artistic abilities, and his struggles of conscience are all portrayed in detail. From the first description Capote casts a soft focus lens around Smith: “It was a changeling’s face, and mirror-guided experiments had taught him how to ring the changes, how to look now ominous, now impish, now soulful; a tilt of the head, a twist of the lips, and the corrupt gypsy became the gentle romantic” (16). By contrast, the initial physical description of Dick Hickock lies firmly in the persona of reportage, as if read off a case file: “Dick was wearing a blue jumper suit; lettering stitched across the back advertised Babo Sands’ Body Shop” (23). Over the course of the novel this trend continues, the book turning from the story of a murder investigation, to an intense profile of Smith. By the end, Smith is a more complex character than any member of the Cutter family. Capote’s attachment to Perry shows in the sheer number of detailed physical descriptions—the trademark move of a writer who wants to convey physical attraction.
Capote's relationship with Smith grew to the point that most conceded he had fallen in love with him (Shields 195). They grew close enough that Capote was invited by Smith (and Hickock) to witness the hanging, but Capote wept and fretted in his hotel room over whether or not he could stomach it. He did in the end go, but it turns out he didn’t have the stomach; he became sick as Smith approached the gallows (245).

George Garrett, in "Then And Now: In Cold Blood Revisited,” compares and contrasts Capote's hanging scene to that in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and the hanging of Popeye in William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. Garrett notes that, while Melville and Faulkner used the literary device of pulling back on the drama during dramatic events, Capote, by contrast, dives in (469): "The hangman coughed impatiently, lifted his cowboy hat and settled it again, a gesture somehow reminiscent of a turkey buzzard huffing, then smoothing its neck feathers—and Hickock, nudged by an attendant, mounted the scaffold steps” (Capote 339). Next, with Smith, Capote pulls out the stops: “His sensitive eyes gazed gravely at the surrounding faces, swerved up to the shadowy hangman, then downward to his own manacled hands. He looked at his fingers, which were stained with ink and paint, for he’d spend his final three years on Death Row painting self-portraits and pictures of children, usually the children of inmates who supplied him with photographs of the seldom-seen progeny” (340). This detail invokes the reader's sympathy for Smith, whose unfortunate, abusive childhood had perhaps led him on the unfortunate path to this grim death.
Capote, however, in the end knew that his readership would never want to 1) leave the story on a death 2) not see that death as a justified one. Therefore, he does not finish with Perry. To conclude, he writes through Detective Dewey’s perspective—the vantage point of the lawman who wouldn't question the delivery of justice. Even so, Capote conveys dramatically how this stoic law enforcement agent has to close his eyes during the moment of truth, and opens them to see the “childish feet, tilted, dangling” (341). Capote writes that Dewey was so disturbed that, in that moment of death, he flashes back to a memory of talking to a friend of Nancy Cutter's when they meet visiting her grave. There the book ends as it began, on the high prairie. Given Capote’s predisposition for granting himself artistic license, one might wonder whether it was Dewey who was this upset, or the author, or even more likely the author manipulating the scene to fit his narrative desires. Wherever one’s speculations about authorial intention might lead, the last chapter is undoubtedly, as Garret writes, “one hell of a hanging scene” (473). Capote is no longer “out there.” He is, as Gertrude Stein would say, “there there.” The persona has shifted from objective reporter to dramatic narrator.

This evolution reflects Capote’s authorial innovation and his masterful use of a multifaceted persona, which gives depth to the story. Many of Capote's findings have come into question, ranging from questionable character descriptions to his practice of writing pages of direct quotations when he refused to use a tape recorder. Nonetheless, *In Cold Blood* has achieved classic status because it conveys the artistic truth of Capote’s insight into the current culture: that a “desperate, savage, violent America (is) in collision
with sane, safe, insular, even smug America” (Garret 473). Capote’s intense investigations, both inward and outward, propel the novel with great intensity to the final page.

On a final note, it is worth considering that if *In Cold Blood* were written today, Capote would probably be a character in his own book. For one, the story of writing the nonfiction novel is a good one: two childhood best friends from the same rural town of Monroeville, Alabama, who eventually both grow up to write best-selling classic novels, embark on an adult adventure to investigate a murder in a remote town in Kansas. This story has since been documented in biographies and in a film called *Capote*. Harper Lee, at the time, was generally Capote’s lackey, but while Capote bragged about his eidetic memory, Lee was taking copious notes, many of which were used verbatim (Shields 178). In many ways Capote and Lee pioneered immersion journalism, but it remained for future authors to recognize that when the nonfiction author spends so much time with his subjects, he becomes, willingly or not, part of the unfolding of events.

Contemporary nonfiction writers have begun acknowledging this evolution of the writer as she becomes engrossed with her subject. Rebecca Skloot, for example, over the course of a decade of research, wound up developing such a close relationship with Deborah Lacks and the Lacks family that she eventually felt compelled to write herself in as a character in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. The story of herself as an outsider—a white reporter—working to gain the trust of Deborah Lacks, a woman in recovery from years of institutionalized racism, emerges as a thematic metaphor for the
very controversies central to the book. Skloot has stated that including this first-person story was not her original intention, but over time, leaving herself out began to feel disingenuous. Where Capote denied his slant to the end, Skloot decided to acknowledge her own presence.

Likewise, Tracy Kidder in *Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, is what could be called “the reluctant participant.” Kidder has written that he had never before put himself in as a character, preferring to remain in the role of the reporter. But as his relationship with Dr. Farmer became representative of his subject’s effect on people, Kidder decided that his presence was necessary to the story. Thus, both Skloot and Kidder, even if large sections of their books remain written in third person, felt compelled to write themselves in as characters. Capote's relationship with Perry similarly developed a meta storyline central to the theme—the question of culpability and justice. Capote's authorial presence, however, is oblique. Skloot and Kidder, by contrast, write full chapters from first-person point of view, telling their story in the story, thereby demonstrating the logical extension of Capote’s process.

In writing *My Life as Laura: How I Searched for Laura Ingalls Wilder and Found Myself*, I experienced challenges similar to those of Capote, Skloot, and Kidder in striking the balance between research and personal story, as well as in constructing a persona that could sustain the entire book as time rolled on. Originally, I had conceived of the book as based mostly in investigative reporting, in which I developed relationships
with the people of each small Midwestern town from the *Little House* books and located a story within these profiles. When I retraced the pioneer journey of Laura Ingalls Wilder in fourteen days, this blitzkrieg tour of middle America was initially meant to be a scouting operation for a book proposal, not the sole research trip. But while the book proposal did successfully land an agent, the agent then reneged on our contract because another author had sold a book about Laura Ingalls Wilder based on the same premise of visiting the historical homesites. A small publisher agreed to take on my book, given a few chapters I sent, and then asked for the "rest of it," which I had not written yet.

I relate this story because these circumstances changed my approach and, ultimately, my persona. For one, I was now faced with the problem of no financial resources from a book deal combined with the concern of writing a book similar to another one. For these reasons, I decided to draw upon the strength of my blitzkrieg trip, which was immediacy of experience. What I had lost in reporting I could gain in telling what would now be a Twainian yarn akin to *Roughing It*. I also found myself writing more memoir, telling stories of my childhood based on the age Laura Ingalls Wilder had been while living in each town I was visiting. Some of this decision was also, I must admit, based on the need for content. As a novice reporter, I simply hadn't gathered that much material. My final idea was that to write a unique book, and the best bet was to rely on personal story.

And so I dug out field notes, my journal, pictures, tourist pamphlets, and snippets of video I had haphazardly gathered. These materials would be all the primary
sources I would have as I would not be returning to De Smet, South Dakota, to locate and interview the woman from the historical society who had snubbed me. I also turned to secondary sources, gathering historical information that would enrich my knowledge of the *Little House* books. For instance, I studied the locust plague that devastated the upper Great Plains, a central plot point of *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Even so, I knew I didn't want to write a book that focused on the history behind the *Little House* books. And while I was reading biographies Laura Ingalls Wilder, I also knew that I didn't want to write another one of those. My goal wasn't to break ground in nineteenth century American studies, or even in Laura Ingalls Wilder studies. I did want people who hadn't memorized the story of the Ingalls family or read the books over and over to be able to follow the narrative. I also wanted the depth that outside research could bring to the book.

In the process of writing and researching my book, I experienced a dilemma opposite to that of Capote, Skloot, and Kidder. Instead of becoming a character in my own story, due to ongoing experiential research, I was reliving the same two weeks over and over, as writing the book took years. Since I had never written a book before, it took me a while to realize why these situational concerns were all wreaking havoc on my persona. I had changed and was changing. Creating a consistent self on the page became increasingly problematic. I had taken the trip in 2007 and finished my final draft in 2011. Meanwhile, the "I's" were piling up. There was the Kelly who had moved to Montana, the Kelly who took the trip, the Kelly after the trip, and the Kellys who continued to evolve as Kelly wrote and researched the book and moved around the country. Which narrative
arc was the most important one? Where should the story end? In the end I decided upon two personas for the memoir. The first was the person I was before the trip, and the second was the person after the trip—whom I could not confuse with person I was while finishing the book.

My other problem was that, while the object of my extended profile was long deceased, my perspective of Wilder was evolving as I learned more about her. In terms of research, I wove in that which served the memoir, trusting the reader to make certain leaps as my voice changed in order to deliver information more efficiently. In short, while I pursued a persona that was the investigative researcher with a bit of the scholar, my investigation began to hinge on how my study of Wilder was changing me—so again the dominant persona became that of a memoirist, and I folded in other personas to meet that need. The other personas would take a back seat.

In My Life as Laura I argue with certain biographers, most notably William V. Holtz, author of Ghost in the Little House, whom I thought was unfair in his treatment of Wilder. In one way, this approach worked as a way to sneak in biographical information, which Wilder non aficionados would require. I also created a storyline wherein I could question my utter faith in my heroine as a plot point for me to return to later as I resolved the crisis. Janet Malcolm, in The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, goes a step further in her use of an investigative scholarly persona. While tackling the stories of the famous poet couple, Malcolm effectively demonstrates Laura Wexler’s claim that postmodernism is ideally suited to addressing complex issues in nonfiction. Malcolm
casts aside the traditions of biography, opting instead to write a story about the complexities of writing biography and the unique struggles of the biographer. In other words, instead of seeking to be the author of the "definitive" Sylvia Plath biography, she writes a deliberately indefinite biography. As Malcolm examines the stories of other biographers and their attempts to tell the story of Plath’s life, the poet's relationship with Ted Hughes, and her eventual suicide, Malcolm focuses on other people's interpretations of the events. In her approach, she adroitly moves between personas of reporter, memoirist, and scholar as needed to tell her own story of writing her book, in the end creating a meta persona of essayist as she posits that recognition of the subjective truth can enrich the writing of biography.

Malcolm begins, perhaps in order to help the reader embrace her unique method, in a mode of traditional analysis. She engages in close readings of two introductions Hughes has written to the collected journals of Plath. In both he admits to having burned one of the journals. In the first introduction, however, Malcolm assumes that Hughes writes a singular narrative of the poet whom Plath was versus the poet she had become by the end—what Hughes says was her “true self,” the self who wrote the iconic poems from Ariel (“Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” et al.), studied in English literature courses today. After this narrative, he ends with the confession of the burned journal, claiming it would have been too hurtful for surviving members of the family, which included children, to publish. In his revised introduction, Hughes begins with the admission of the burned journal. Malcolm writes that this move has the effect of addressing the controversial
action and how it might reflect poorly on him, getting it out of the way. Continuing in the persona of the scholar, she analyzes the altered, less singular narrative approach of the second introduction, arguing that Hughes can “no longer sustain the fiction—upon which all autobiographical writing is poised—that the person writing and the person being written about are a single seamless entity” (5). As evidence, she cites how in the second introduction he changes the wording about the burning of the journal from “I destroyed” to “her husband destroyed.” The transition to third person reflects Hughes’s own acknowledged disconnect from the person Hughes was then, as Plath’s husband, versus the person he had become by the writing of the second introduction.

Malcolm’s scholarly persona throughout her first chapter is a reasoned one, that of the lawyer building a case, and on the surface appears to be a traditional approach. Craftily, however, in this introduction she has set up the metaphor of her book—how personal perspectives and human agenda affect biography. This metaphor sets Malcolm up for her overlying persona, that of the essayist, where, in the style of Montaigne, she unravels the nature of biography as well as questioning the stereotype of the biographer—the dogged, stalwart researcher who lets no one get in the way of the Real Story no matter how unpleasant his revelations might be. Malcolm writes how her subject, Plath, is especially well suited for her case, because a famous poet who kills herself in the middle of a dramatic romantic situation is forever fixed in that controversy (33). What evolves in the forthcoming pages is how the story has been rehashed so many
times that the telling of the story has taken on its own life. In facing this history, the biographer will encounter peril in any attempt to reapproach old ground.

In her quest, Malcolm regularly returns to scholarly analysis as she explicates other biographies, and analyzes the letters and poems of Plath. She also engages in traditional reporting, most notably in her profiles of Olwyn Hughes and the Plath biographer Anne Stevenson. Hughes and Stevenson had their own complex interaction, and Malcolm works to unravel what happened in their interpersonal conflict, interviewing both women. Olwyn Hughes’s fierce desire to control the story of Plath and her brother, as it turns out, has had a formidable effect on Plath biographers. Stevenson's literary life, for one, was devastated for years after the Olwyn Hughes effect. Hughes insisted on rewriting certain parts, upon threat of rescinding literary access to the Plath estate. Stevenson compromised and was then excoriated by reviewers for weakness, for giving in to pressure rather than writing the truth. What evolves from this story and others like it is an essay by Malcolm on the nature of trying to write a biography when the estate still retains control over the intellectual property.

In the process of unraveling facts from fictions, Malcolm places a first-person self at the center of her search. This decision brings continuity to the book, as her story within the stories becomes the organizing principle. In chapter two, Malcolm sets up this through line when she reveals that she had a personal relationship with Anne Stevenson, as they had been students at the same time at the University of Michigan. From that moment forward, Malcolm is a character in her book. She travels through England, meets
with Stevenson, develops her own complex relationship with Olwyn Hughes, and ultimately falls subject herself to the “Plath curse” as she experiences her own struggles completing and publishing her book. Like Stevenson, Malcolm finds herself having to stand down the wrath of Olwyn Hughes. Malcolm's response, however, instead of compromise, is to relinquish the idea of "the complete biography" entirely. Malcolm writes about how she herself would have included more of Plath's poetry in her book, but the struggle for access, and the control Olwyn Hughes wanted to exercise over Malcolm's analysis, caused her to abandon their inclusion.

In *My Life as Laura*, I also experienced problems with the estate, which in turn affected my persona. After repeated inquiries to HarperCollins, I was finally given the contact information of the inheritors of the Wilder estate (no relation to Wilder). I was told that, for use of quotations, they required $200 per book, which added up to $1400. For a large press, this charge wouldn't have been a problem. For a small press, and for a graduate student whose only payment would be royalties, this sum meant a great deal. In the end I wound up rewriting much of my book, using paraphrases in place of quotations and deleting entire sections where I had analyzed text. Unlike Malcolm, I did not include my difficulties in dealing with the estate, as my story would have suffered from this line, rather than benefit from it. For instance, I wrote how rereading the first sentence of the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, had inspired me. Writing about how I had pay $200 for the right to publish that sentence would have only thrown a cold bucket of water on the story. I had already decided that my "present-day" self, the narrator of my book,
existed forever in 2009. To reflect on my issues with copyright infringement would have confused an already confusing timeline. This alteration, however, nudged my persona even further towards that of a memoirist, as my edits whittled sections where I had appropriated the tone of literary analyst.

Malcolm, while including the personal perspective, deconstructs her subject as a medical examiner would autopsy a body in search of the cause of death. In this approach she shows how the body—the body being in this case the genre of biography—functions from the inside out, demonstrating how the stories people tell themselves are as constructed from emotional needs as anything else.

On the “I” in nonfiction Janet Malcolm herself writes:

The “I” character in journalism is almost pure invention. Unlike the “I” of autobiography, who is meant to be seen as a representation of the writer, the “I” of journalism is connected to the writer only in a tenuous way—the way, say, that Superman is connected to Clark Kent. The journalistic “I” is an over-reliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation, like the chorus of Greek tragedy. He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life (Malcolm).

Through a multi-voiced approach, Malcolm exposes her own character flaws and vanities, and interrogates her own motives and reactions as much as she examines her subjects. In the process, her strategy to acknowledge openly the constructed nature of the
self creates a more credible persona and a more suitably complex approach worthy of Sylvia Plath, as well as of those who have lived and written in the wake of her tragedy.

Alison Bechdel's graphic novels *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* and the sequel, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, illustrate how an author, when approaching a similar subject—in this case that of relationship with a parent—finds herself constructing different personas in service to the work. For each book Bechdel uses a parent (first her father and then her mother) as the foil for her narrative. In the first, however, she remains primarily a memoirist while weaving literary analysis and essay. In the second, Bechdel morphs into an essayist, as she weaves in an analysis of psychology texts in the exploration of her relationship with her mother, turning to a more meditative persona who contemplates the relationships of daughter and mothers in general. Comparing and contrasting Alison Bechdel’s two works presents an opportunity to examine how one author moves between and blends personas.

Setting aside the progressive format of the graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* functions essentially as traditional memoir. Through the perspective of her present, wiser self, Bechdel re-examines the story that revolves around her coming of age in her Vermont home, a story triggered by the death of her father, who spent his life as a closeted homosexual. Complicating the situation is that Bechdel, haunted by her father's dysfunction, struggles to accept her lesbian identity through adulthood. As a tool for delving into the complexities of her story, she organizes chapters with segments of memoir juxtaposed against analysis of literary classics. She then draws parallels that
enrich the personal narrative. For example, chapter three, titled “That Old Catastrophe,”
refers to her mother’s favorite poem, Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning.” The phrase
has traditionally been interpreted as a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and
implies the tedium of weekly worship in the context of a crisis of faith. In her chapter,
Bechdel details her mother’s gradual subsumption by her domineering, sometimes
abusive, father. The famous line from the poem becomes a metaphor for her parents’ long
suffering marriage, specifically as her mother’s ambitions are overshadowed by the
father. Her mother sacrifices her artistic life to try to have a traditional family.

The chapter revolves around Bechdel's parents’ courtship, and how events shaped
their dysfunctional relationship. Bechdel hadn’t been born yet, so she pieces together her
insight the best she can through family artifacts, such as old letters. Due to her parents'
recalcitrant natures, Bechdel has gaps to contend with, and so her use of literary
comparisons help fill out her speculations. For instance, in trying to understand the origin
story of her parents’ dynamic, Bechdel relates the story of her mother and father meeting
during a college production of The Taming of the Shrew. Bechdel writes, “It’s a troubling
play, of course. The willful Katherine’s spirit is broken by the mercenary, domineering
Petruchio” (69). Her mother’s performance as Katherine becomes a foreshadowing of
her mother's giving up her artistic dreams to be with her father. The parallel story of
Petruchio and Katherine adds a layer of complexity.

A third literary connection Bechdel draws in the chapter is between her mother
going abroad to Paris and the character of Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady. Like
Archer, Bechdel’s mother had a choice of suitors, yet she selects a cultured but dissolute man. Similarly, both her mother and Archer discover too late that their husband is an adulterer, in Bechdel’s mother’s case, the husband slept with other men. Generally speaking, Bechdel’s literary interpretations are of themselves standard; however, the analogies drawn enrich her family story, especially given her family’s affinity for these classics. The search for identity through literary truth is especially apt in the Bechdel household, for it’s not every mother whose favorite poem is “Sunday Morning” or everyone's father who was a high school English teacher. While unable to discuss emotional issues, the family did engage in intense discussions about literature, often as a substitute for more addressing other conflict.

As did Malcolm in The Silent Woman, Bechdel employs self-reflexivity in questioning her perception. She often wonders about the accuracy of memory and speculates about what people in her life may or may not have been thinking, including herself. Since her father was so secretive and, like Plath, took his secrets to his grave, essaying is one of Bechdel’s main resources. Both Plath and Bechdel's father committed suicide, leaving questions that can never be answered. Bechdel unearths letters, asks her mother for answers, and reviews her own journals, but in the process she recognizes how her investigation is inevitably flawed. By admitting her doubts about the accuracy of events and her interpretation of them, she creates trust, addressing her own frustration.

Again, Wexler’s point that a postmodern approach to a complex subject can be the most effective one is borne out. Bechdel’s transparency about her obsessive
compulsive disorder, for instance, not only helps the reader understand her way of rehashing the facts, but also endears her to the reader. Bechdel writes about how her father's intense need to hide his personal life not only made the researching of his story difficult; his shame affected Bechdel’s personal development, contributing to her development of OCD. Her reliving of her disorder through her writing and rewriting of events creates, ironically, a stability of narrative. Bechdel's transparency about her neurosis serves to reinforce trust between the reader and author—because of course a person suffering from OCD would have to review and re-review her findings. Bechdel reveals how even as a kid she had trouble with the truth and began inserting the phrase "I think" compulsively in her diary. “How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for were my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst” (Bechdel 141). The passage serves as a meta observation for Bechdel's thoughts on writing the memoir and her doubts about acting as a singular speaker.

In *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel takes these questions about subjective truth further. She shifts from the persona of an author essaying in service to the memoir to one of writing memoir in service to her essay. This result, to some degree, is due to a shift in her sub-persona of literary analyst. In her second book, instead of using literary works as foils for her thoughts, with the emphasis on the storylines of these works and how they parallel her life stories, she uses *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, by Alice Miller, as a springboard for psychological speculation and dream analysis. Although ostensibly a
memoir about her mother, Bechdel’s self-analysis creates the mood of an essay as she utilizes stream-of-consciousness prose to direct her query. Barrie Jean Borich, on the website Essay Daily, similarly argues that Are You My Mother? is an essay, not a memoir. As evidence Borich cites how the questioning of self and daughterhood take place within the structure of larger questions about the daughter-mother relationships and the nature of human attachment. Bechdel is pondering why she needs to know what it is not possible to know. This tactic of self-reflexivity echoes Malcolm, as the reader becomes aware of an author’s personas writing in complex conjunction with one another.

Interestingly, the reader responses (as gauged by Goodreads and Amazon) are not as glowing as that of Fun Home. Part of Borich’s agenda in her essay is to defend Bechdel’s sequel and to offer readers who felt sour a chance to reconsider. While reader reviews can be problematic, their relative emotional transparency offer a different insight from professional reviews published in literary venues. In this case, reader reviews indicate that Bechdel’s sequel is, at the very least, written in a different mode from the first.

"Cathartic but only for Bechdel," writes beta99. "I bought this book as soon as I heard about it, having been a huge fan of Fun Home. This book almost seemed to be written by a different author. The rich detail and layers of discovery in Fun Home are completely lacking."

Another typical reviewer is Nervous Girl, who complains, “I bought this book since I loved 'Fun Home', but this is nothing like it. So, do you want to sit through
another person's gringly dull psychoanalysis sessions? Do you want to read obscure philosophical child psychology? If so, this is the book for you. If you are like most people though, you will probably find this book terribly, terribly boring.”

In these posts and others by disgruntled readers, Bechdel is accused of the most dreaded of nonfiction sins—navel gazing. Borich points out the inaccuracy of these accusations, since Bechdel as an essayist is looking outward to broader subjects, not inward. Borich argues that while Fun Home revolves around Bechdel's coming out story, Are You My Mother? is another kind of project, and, in terms of the artist’s career, a more complex and ambitious art because she had no single storyline on which to hang her thoughts. Instead Bechdel tackles the "immersive societal lie about mothers and daughters, a master narrative bound to gender conformity, heterosexuality, and sentimentality, none of which apply to the relationship of Bechdel and her mother" (web). Since the mother is still alive, their relationship is ongoing, and the complexities of their interactions continue. Whereas Fun Home tells a story, Are You My Mother? raises and complicates questions.

The lesser degree of accessibility of Are You My Mother? might additionally reflect how the persona of the essayist can be the trickiest to convey, for the nature of that persona is to perambulate and leap. With a memoir, the reader can forge a connection between the narrator of the story and the author photo. The essayist is a more slippery self. Some of Bechdel’s readers did not choose to make the jump, and Are Your My Mother? has significantly fewer five star reviews than Fun Home.
In "Experiments of Living Chemistry," "Yankee by Birth, Southern by the Grace of God," and "Know Alabama," I employ a technique similar to that of *Fun Home* in that I utilize outside works to function as a mirror to the self and to complicate the persona. In "Experiments of Living Chemistry," I use the story of my performance in a play, in this case *Macbeth*, against my own coming-of-age story. At a summer enrichment camp I am cast as Macduff, which at the time feels like a tragedy unto itself. Approaching puberty and already tall for my age, being forced to cross dress and play a man mortifies me. That storyline runs parallel to a coming-of-age experiment, where for a chemistry class I secretly swab my vagina and monitor the results growing in a Petri dish. My performance as Macduff is a flop, but my bizarre growth in the Petri dish is the hit of the class. Like Bechdel, I take an outside work and then use this device to unravel a personal story about discovering myself as sexual person. I, however, do not analyze the role of MacDuff in the play and how his story might parallel my story. Instead, I'm juxtaposing a classic work of drama against the smaller drama of my own for the sake of comedy. The particular classic work or the particular character is less important. What's relevant to the story is my mortification over being cast as a man, although the irony that during the Elizabethan era men were often cast as women might add another layer. Overall, however, I decided the memoir functioned better when I let the subject matter of the play and the gender roles within function as subtext. My persona throughout remains primarily that of a storyteller.
In contrast, in "Yankee by Birth, Southern by the Grace of God," I step outside of my narrative to reflect and self-consciously analyze the outside work, in this instance the classic song "Sweet Home Alabama," by Lynyrd Skynyrd. What begins as an immersion memoir, the story of my attending a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert, turns into an essay about what it means to be Southern and my internal debate with Southern identity. I begin in the setting of the concert—describing the scene and my interactions with the people I meet. But when Lynyrd Skynyrd begins "Sweet Home Alabama," I push a pause button on the narrative, and my persona changes to that of an analyst. During this suspended time I deconstruct the lyrics to try to determine whether the song is a loveable anthem or a racist abomination. Not surprisingly, much like the South, I find the situation complicated. Some of the lyrics when researched turn out to be not racist at all. Another lyric I learn has been dropped from the live performance, and a third is too obtuse to lead to a definite conclusion. In the end, I find myself more confused than decided. In a turn, what happens is that I find myself identifying as Southern in reaction to some young men being obnoxious during the encore song, "Freebird." After all the internal intellectual debate, I learn that Southern identity is based more on emotion than on analysis, and so the essay ends with the more unapologetically biased vantage point of the memoirist.

Finally, in "Know Alabama," I mimic the format of my fourth-grade history textbook, Alabama: A History, by Charles Grayson Summersell, in order to search for a sense of my personal history. My search works within the visual framework of a textbook—the reporting of factual information—but in this case the history is my own. In
one sense the goal is to be playful and to satirize the all-knowing voice. I mimic the often corny images from the dated textbook, and tell odd stories about my childhood in direct contrast to the noted historical events that usually comprise school texts. My hope is that the format functions much like that of a textbook, to make the unfamiliar appear familiar. In this instance, I am instructing the reader in my history, how I was taught history as a gradeschooler in Alabama. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was no concept of revisionist history. Facts were facts. In the midst of all the confusion of growing up, the dogmatic lessons and pedantic summaries of significant events were not only boring but useless in terms of learning what it means to be human. By contrasting the strict format with loose memoir, my hope is to show the need for the retelling of stories and how what is going on with us personally has more impact than skill and drill.

In "Know Alabama," by using black and white photos such as those of famed Alabama football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant and my former eighth-grade junior high school history teacher, I wish to re-examine the focus on white men in history. In one sense I am using the form exactly as it is employed in my old text, as portraits of General "Stonewall" Jackson, etc., would have been used as visual aids. In another, I am questioning these choices of veneration. The recurring images also serve to create a sort of consistency, just as they would in an actual textbook. While I am in no way saying my insertion of pictures offers the same richness of Bechdel's illustrations, I am working in a similar associative mode, asking readers to make mental leaps through visual connections. Bechdel, as a graphic novelist, employs images she has drawn to create
elaborate motifs, which function in the way of associative poetry. The images create connective tissue, not only through each book separately but through both. For instance, Bechdel’s father was killed when he was hit by a Sunbeam bread truck. The image of the perversely smiling girl in the Sunbeam logo recurs through both books. *Are You My Mother?* begins with Bechdel driving for a visit home, wondering how she will tell her mother that she is writing a sequel, in which her mother will be the subject. In the midst of her personal dilemma, she is cut off and nearly crashes due to a Strohemann Sunbeam Bread truck. The image flashes the reader back to images Bechdel drew of her father’s accident and becomes an urgent reminder of how death is always present. These visual connections add a lyrical component to Bechdel’s persona.

Sue William Silverman, in her essay “The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction,” asserts that autobiography, immersion writing, memoirs, and personal narrative are driven by an action and are therefore centered on an “axis of action,” while meditative and lyric essays center on an idea or emotion, forming an “axis of contemplation, whereby images form a constellation” (8). *In Cold Blood* demonstrates a novel built around the axis of action (the story of law and order), while Malcolm works around the axis of contemplation (how to write about a “true self”). Bechdel’s two books show an author who transitions from action (the death of her father and her coming out) to contemplation (what is the nature of human connection?). The
final outside work to be considered here, D. J. Waldie's *Holy Land*, shows how a multi-voiced persona can be expertly combined to create the constellation Silverman describes.

In *Holy Land*, Waldie writes what he describes in the afterward as a “memoir of place,” about the Lakewood, California, post-World-War-II suburb where he grew up, a suburb that would become the prototype for a nation of replica neighborhoods. He structures the book in 316 vignettes, reaching a total of 179 pages, which has the overall effect of organizing his work along a “grid,” the structure mimicking the suburb itself. Reading the book is like walking the suburb, with house after house looking mostly the same but slightly different. While one house or one vignette might not be so much to look at, a cumulative effect builds.

The divisions allow Waldie to move fluidly between personas, since each white space prepares the reader for the transition. Also, certain personas begin to become familiar as they recur. For one, Waldie uses the persona of the reporter when he relates historical facts about his neighborhood and how the landscape of the suburb came to be invented. The perspective, though, is always filtered through his experience, simultaneously creating a sense of memoir. Unlike Capote writing about rural Kansas, Waldie is an insider, a resident, a person with stakes in his environment. Mostly he writes from third person when in the persona of the reporter and in first person when telling personal stories (in the persona of the memoirist). This pattern begins to feel familiar, and then a third persona emerges. When conveying the most emotional aspects of his personal story, such as the narrative of his parents’ deaths, Waldie writes in third person, creating
a melded persona of reporter and memoirist. Although clinical in voice, the intimacy of the stories being told belies the narrative distance.

While white space can be, as Joy Williams once said, “the writer’s false friend,” in this case Waldie’s ability to build, connect, and create callbacks belies this potential criticism. The combined effect of his structure, which repeats certain personas, creates a new persona, that of the lyricist, where the overall narrative is sustained more by the conventions of poetry than by those of prose. By creating his own language map, Waldie’s “memoir of place” makes connections that are more associative than linear. At times, the structure of the prose reflects the observations being made, Waldie contextualizing the self through imagery and language. For example, in vignette 172 Waldie writes,

"The critics of the suburbs say that you and I live narrow lives.

I agree. My life is narrow.

From one perspective or another, all our lives are narrow. Only when lives are placed side by side do they seem larger” (94).

Use of anaphora with the words “life/lives” mimics the houses side by side, repeating one after another. The line breaks create physically “narrow” lines of prose, which reflect the repetition of that word, similar to the act of driving down the streets of the suburb, crossing intersection after intersection. Through these techniques, Waldie creates a lyric persona who makes larger observations about the self as defined by the
suburban landscape. His artfulness creates a counterexample to those who would describe suburban residents as cookie cutter.

Waldie follows the lyric section of 172 in 173 with a story of his neighbor, whose infant stopped breathing and died (94-95). The language, by contrast, is very matter of fact, conveying the persona of the reporter, or perhaps Waldie as city employee. The distance of the persona creates a stark contrast. Still, the poignancy of the story is unavoidable. In less than a hundred words, Waldie demonstrates the individuality of the “life/lives” taking place within the grid, in a way that only a personal story could convey. The persona creates an empathetic connection by avoiding over sentimentalizing the personal experience. In the juxtaposition of these two vignettes and others, Waldie demonstrates how a multiplicity of personas can be crafted to create sustained narrative.

Hugh Ryan notes that in a less deft writer’s hand, Waldie's grid could be reduced to “mere metaphor,” but *Holy Land*'s stark structure “gives us an inroad to understanding the actual subject, it is a roadblock to comprehension. We are all alienated from the subject by the monolith of suburbia—exactly as the author himself is” (3). And yes, this sort of existentialist dilemma is presented in the form of transparent self-reflexivity—the gift of postmodernism. However, the analysis of Waldie above might instead demonstrate Waldie's intense *connection* to his subject. While writing the book, he still lived in the same house where he grew up. He writes not only from the place of reflection but from his present condition, and the persona focuses in and out, with close ups and panorama
shots, the way a camera lens might. But we are also reminded that Waldie is writing from the inside out.

In "Second Best," I work around what Silverman would term the axis of contemplation, versus an axis of action, and this approach alters my persona. Like Waldie, I use vignettes to switch personas as I move in and out of first and third person. The vignettes juggle 1) my story of trying to be a rock star drummer, 2) the story of drummer Pete Best getting fired from the Beatles, 3) stories of other people who came this close to fame but pulled up short. The persona in the first thread is the first-person memoirist examining a time in her life. The second and third threads are written in third person, as if an excerpt from an encyclopedia. These informational threads are woven, however, to run parallel to my personal story. Since my story is about fear of success in music, the famous story of Pete Best works to prove what disaster getting fired at the last minute can mean for a drummer. While most people are not drummers, many have had sympathy for Pete Best. Through quotes, articles, and interviews I attempt to let Best tell his story. The third thread works to present ideas about what success means in general and helps the reader make the connection to my larger concern. In the end my goal is akin to that of Bechdel in Are You My Mother? The memoirist persona is in service to the essayist who grapples with a subject.

My hope is that examining these previous works demonstrates the diversity of narrative nonfiction personas in contemporary literature and their potential for compelling work. Within our many selves, we as writers can do justice to the complicated
stories that need telling. Postmodernism can be confusing, precious, obtuse, deliberately opaque, pretentious, or just plain empty. Alternately, postmodernism can be playful, accessible, delightful, and smart. In creating personas and switching between them, nonfiction writers take risks, walking a fine line of credulity, but in dexterous hands, these moves can be complex while building connections with readers. The author who intelligently acknowledges her positionality can work within this awareness to create fascinating work. It is in the spirit of wishing to forge connections with a readership that I introduce my collection of essays.
REFERENCES


PBR AND A SHOT

The poet and I have settled on the Smoking Porch of No Return when the gap-toothed, retired stripper from Gallipolis lumbers from behind all Frankenstein arms.

GOD I WANT TO GRAB YOUR ASS, she says.

I turn.

You can say no, she says.

I look to the poet and that’s when I know I’m in trouble, looking to a poet for answers. Say ‘no,’ he says, stoically flicking cigarette ash over the fence because ‘no’ is, so very obviously, the correct answer.

All night this woman has been campaigning for the stripper life, about how great it was (and did I know what a vibrator was, for chrissakes?) and that she supports her daughter who is now a stripper 110%. Still, I can’t help but see sadness.

Um, no, I say.

My bra strap has slipped again and I should probably slide it back in place. Instead the poet orders another round. He is a fussbudget, or a man of particular standards—depending on one’s mood—so when he says that I’m one of the few people he’ll really miss when he moves, that I’m one of his favorites, emotion seizes me and I lurch to squeeze his Keatsian frame. I weep. This is embarrassing because I’ve heard that the hot bartender’s nickname for me is “Foxy Lady” and crying blotches my face but too late.
The poet is thin but stronger than he looks and smells of cinnamon-spiced wet leaves. I want to tell the poet that I love him but I can’t, because we are separated by lack of romance. Instead, we try to bromance and for a woman I make a great bro. I play golf and poker and darts. I hang. I debate topics that carefully circumvent our emotions. I come over with bottles of Bourbon just because—and not to mention, I have a great eye for attractive women. The problem, though, is I am not a bro and it’s last call, the final shot, time for everyone to decide where they are sleeping tonight, and so I have to ask why nothing ever happened.

Because if we got together it would have to be a relationship, he says.

At least I will giggle for days over the look of abject terror on the poet’s ruffled owl face when I drive us home and swerve accidentally on purpose a few times at mailboxes but in the end I’m alone at home knowing that the reason I paused in my reply to the stripper was because it’s been a long time, longer than I like to remember, since anyone wanted, really wanted my ass like that.
YANKEE BY BIRTH, SOUTHERN BY THE GRACE OF GOD

It wasn’t until I sat on the prickly Astroturf of the Cincinnati Riverbend Amphitheater at a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert listening to a pack of dude-bros chanting “U.S.A! U.S.A! that I discovered my Southern heritage. I had to double check to make sure, but yep, there it was, like that jar of watermelon rind preserves stashed in the cupboard all that time.

The idea behind the concert had been to celebrate my birthday with a fellow Alabamian, who also had a birthday, who also now lived in Ohio. After a few bourbons we had decreed that a Skynyrd show would be the perfect occasion to reflect on the past, speculate upon the future, shout “woo!” and drink more bourbon. Whatever else, the event struck us as an adventure—why not? Then my friend’s mom broke her shoulder. If I were feeling kind I’d say he was being a good Southern boy, tending to his momma. Mostly I suspected this last minute cancellation was an old fashioned wuss out fueled by an attractive nurse. Either way, I was stood up. At this development the “woo!” factor went poof, the spirit of “why not?” boiling down to the residue of a nonrefundable, prepaid ticket. I considered bailing myself but maintained that I should probably see Lynyrd Skynyrd before the last surviving original member died.

The first “Freebird” sounded at 5:35. Too soon. We had barely recovered from the Ticketmaster fees and the parking lot cartel of the Cincinnati Riverbend Music Center, our tailgate buzz formative at best. This October show was the last of the outdoor season and grey skies foreshadowed the chill of winter. No need to rush. No reason to encourage
jokers when the rest of us were here to rock without irony. The call was ignored and the premature ejaculator, humbled, slunk back in his hoodie.

As for myself, I maintained a low profile. I worried I had gotten myself in yet another social situation where a Southern man didn’t need me around, anyhow. Born in Buffalo but raised in Tuscaloosa, I’d hadn’t always been good fit in Dixie. My entire childhood was spent plotting my escape from Alabama and for all the stereotypes one could imagine—racists, homophobes, survivalists, Pentecostal snake charmers, cockroaches, and people who would kill a mockingbird. I had been slapped by a poofy-haired girl named Tammi who said “I better love Jesus or else,” called “fag” by guys driving by in trucks, and suffered countless diatribes by would-be diplomats’ three point plans to fix the Middle East—1) BLOW 2) IT 3) UP. Imagine growing up in a state famous for a governor who yelled “Segregation forever!” and diabetes. The pride of the state is football and I tried but it was never my thing. Then the granddaughter of Paul Bear Bryant hit on my high school boyfriend by asking him to the Civinette Miami Vice Fall Formal.

At eighteen I moved away. The only times I returned were for strategic parental visits, whisking in and out of the airport like a CIA operation.

Yet twenty years later here I was, trying to fit in a crowd that had always rejected me. My first social misstep was already chafing at my waist—skinny jeans. While my square black glasses and pixie haircut would have been camouflage at a Brooklyn poetry reading, this was strictly a bootcut/sparkle back pocket crowd. I flashed back to junior
high when I was the only girl who couldn’t get her stick straight hair to feather back, plastered wings of White Rain falling forward on my face.

Again I cursed my erstwhile date who was supposed to have been my beard, and not a beard as in the slang term wherein a woman pretends to be a gay man’s date. Beard in this case meant strawberry blond shrub explosion from the chin, i.e. a man who is a dead ringer for an Appalachian garden gnome who helps an urban-styled woman blend at a Southern Rock concert. Looking around, I could see big beards were a common accessory for men, as was sporting a big-bearded male date for women. I had no facial hair to offer.

In search of social analgesic I went to the Stand Which Sells Beverages Designed to Soothe Awkward Situations and forked over $7.75 for a Bud Lite. A woman with neatly styled hair and pleated pants who had to be someone’s mom carded me, even though the idea of anyone being underage at this show seemed a stretch.

“Montana!” She said, looking at my license. “Why goodness, what are you doing all the way over here?”

I admitted I was in Ohio for graduate school, which has always struck me as admitting I’m an impostor.

“I just love John Denver. Rocky Mountain High. All purple skies and bright sun. Is it like that there?”

I agreed that it was, as if two years out west had made me an expert in western climatology. I did not bother to say that John Denver had been singing about Colorado or
that the only reason I had ever lived in Montana was also graduate school. Or that
Missoula was often overcast due to its location in a valley. Or that I had lived in Ohio
four years now but still could not call the place home, or apparently make my way to the
local Division of Motor Vehicles to update my expired license.

Oddly, all this muddle of where I was from made seeing Lynyrd Skynyrd in
Cincinnati all the more appropriate. Born in Buffalo but raised in Tuscaloosa, I grew up
as a living, breathing gray area—a bit this and a bit of that, much like Southeast Ohio.
The area is more Kentuckian than Yankee, and political analysts align the area with
Southern voting. People like their guns. Overalls happen. But no Cincinnati chili recipe
will ever grace the cover of Southern Living for the Mason Dixon Line endures. During
times of slavery, crossing the Ohio River technically meant freedom, although then again,
most fugitives used Cincinnati as an Underground Railroad stop on their way further
north—the lesson being here that while lines on maps can be drawn, it is not so easy to
make them behave.

I looked down to see that my beer going for fifty cents more than the current
minimum wage was gone.

I bought a bourbon at another stand where the cashier cared not for my age or my
background, but approved of my choice of Four Roses, and entered the arena. It turned
out that lawn seats technically meant Astroturf but oh, well. Aside from beards, men were
festooned with bandannas and fringe leather vests. Women adorned their bodies with
sequins and zebra tops. Faded tattoos were everywhere. A man in front of me put out his
cigarette in a used nacho sauce bin and suckled a Mello Yello—a beverage whose existence I had blocked from my mind since 1983.

Eight Rubenesque muses topped the amphitheater’s stage, which seemed an odd choice of architectural embellishment, although the more I considered these statues, the more I liked to imagine Terpsichore jamming on her lyre with 70s rock bands of former glory. For now, three-piece The Cadillac Black hammered guitar riffs and wailed songs of Southern pride and woe. They fit the opening band criteria, which is to be a younger version of the headliner with no hits. The singer tagged the usual country themes of women, whiskey, and riding around in the back of granddaddy’s truck. The band wasn’t breaking new ground but they covered old ground with fresh energy. I was getting in the proper mood when I saw their Confederate Flag waving.

—Sound of record scratch.

Although tiny and off to the side, the flag caused a familiar twitch in my eye. People like to argue for Southern pride and all that but I will go ahead and state my belief that the confederate flag needs to be retired. Any symbol connected in any way to slavery needs to go. It just does, y’all. For me, the flag meant I was not sure I could get behind The Cadillac Black, despite their ability to rock.

For herein lied the rub.

Attending a Lynyrd Skynyrd show raises ethical questions, the main one being: Is it okay to rock out to “Sweet Home Alabama” and not be a racist? Just because a person finds a guitar hook catchy doesn’t mean she can condone the song. Granted, most of the
lyrics are happy, feel good stuff praising an agreeable climate and blood kin—the down home version of "California Dreamin’." The song was written to be an anthem, a reason to shout “hell, yeah!” for the whole family. But as most people know, lyrical problems arise.

In verse two the first conflict takes place:

_In Birmingham we love the governor._

_We all did what we could do._

The first line implies that “we” in Birmingham supported George Wallace’s infamous 1963 speech in support of segregation. By association, then, “we” includes former Mayor Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor and his racist cronies, so doing “what we could do” meant bombing a church where children died. Wait, could that be right?

What sort of horrible people would write that song?

And what kind of horrible person would sing along to it?

Growing up, I had always heard the lyrics as racist and turned my back on “Sweet Home” despite the undeniable siren song of the sweet riffs and sing-along lyrics, changing the channel on the radio and generally making a nuisance of myself at bars and barbecues. Then I grew older, and as I took more and more road trips on increasingly lonesome highways, I began to rethink my stance because, well, partly I was bored and homesick and needed a song to sing, but also I had assumed the band was racist without putting any real thought into the matter. Having played in bands myself, I imagine the recording studio that day was not exactly an intellectual salon for debating social matters.
Instinct told me these guys were jamming in the studio and then these lyrics worked with the music. They had probably been into a fifth of Jack Daniels by noon.

Still, times have changed and we need to question if “Sweet Home Alabama” should be extracted from eternal classic rock rotation the way Walt Disney has to pretend “Song of the South” and their Uncle Tom production of “Zippity-A-Dee-Doo-Dah” never happened. As it turns out, analysis of “Sweet Home” gets complicated fast. Rock research reveals that singer Ronnie Van Zant asserted that the backup singers after the word “governor” sing, “Boo! Boo! Boo!” versus the more typical “Ooo! Ooo! Ooo!”

Boo is different from Ooo. Ooo just means—ooo? But boo means bad, as in what Wallace and Mayor Connor did was wrong. Given boo, then the second line of “we all did what we could do” becomes more excusably innocuous. Not a laser sharp civil rights rally cry perhaps, but not overtly racist.

A close listen supports the claim of boo over ooo. Last time I had a Crown and Coke at the local Maplewood Bar and Grill, DJ Sweethock blasted “Sweet Home” so loud that the “b” sound raised in the mix almost knocked me flat.

“Boo,” then.

We’re basically good to go then except for a little lyric that slips in at the end.

—And the governor’s true.

As the chorus repeats for the finale, only one instance of this lyric appears. Mostly the skies are blue and the singer is coming home to you. Fine. But then the governor’s true. At this point can I just say, dammit Skynyrd. I understand the verse where y’all
defend the South against Canadian Neil Young and his songs based on stereotypes. Young himself has since described his own lyrics to “Southern Man” and “Alabama” as accusatory and condescending, not fully thought out.” All y’all had to do for the win was continue to sing praises of the Southland everyone can agree upon. Weather. Music. Family. Sweet buttery biscuits. The “boo” idea was perhaps not the best, but at least it had an explanation. But now this little aside of the governor being “true” messes it all up for everyone who just wants to rock out and not have to feel guilty. (Me).

But no, here we are again in the land of ethical confusion and the lyric refuses to deliver a straightforward meaning. What “truth”? Which “governor”? Wallace made his big segregation speech in 1963 while “Sweet Home Alabama” was released in 1974. Wallace had been re-elected in 1970, so he was the governor at the time the song was written. Then again, there was a Wallace who reversed his position and apologized to black Alabamians and in later elections carried a vast majority of the black vote.

So where did Wallace stand politically in 1974?

It seems Wallace was, alas, still spouting a racist platform. He had abused race as a political tactic in his 1970 election, one of his more infamous slogans being, "Wake up Alabama! Blacks vow to take over Alabama."

Then Wallace was shot in 1972.

Perhaps Skynyrd was simply trying to lend a little support to man shot in the back and confined to wheelchair.

Still, a paraplegic can be a racist.
Then again, many people consider the shooting to be the turnaround for Wallace.

But it was not until the late seventies that Wallace made his public apology to black Alabamians.

No wonder Southerners drink so much.

Another aspect to consider is that the lyric could be “and the governors true,” no apostrophe, meaning the governors of Alabama are true in general. Alabama’s current governor was James Bentley who, incidentally, had been my dermatologist back when pimples were my greatest problem in life. In 2010, Bentley enacted some of the most stringent anti-immigration laws in the country, which lead to an exodus of workers in fear of deportation, as well as a few embarrassing incidents where a few very legal Japanese and German executives who work at pricey auto manufacturing plants were harassed by law enforcement. By my political standards, Bentley was not true.

Finally, as if this situation was not complicated enough, there is one more line to consider, thrown in at the end.

*My Montgomery’s got the answer*

Who’s Montgomery? Ronnie Van Zant’s?

More probable is the implied comma:

My, Montgomery (has) got the answer!

Great. What answer would that be?
There is no asking the lyricist now, who died in a plane crash in the Mississippi backwoods along with guitarist Steve Gaines and vocalist Cassie Gaines in one of the more infamous rock tragedies in history.

Not to mention Lynyrd Skynyrd came from Florida.

All this controversy sure does weigh down a song meant to be sung while cruising the back roads with the windows rolled down. I found myself envious of Mello Yello man, and Guy-Spitting Chaw Into Astroturf, and the women who gamboled in sparkle stretch pants without shame. But I was not trouble free, and it was no use pretending otherwise. I had questions that needed answering tonight, the main one being, had Skynyrd changed their position? Assuming I accepted the “Boo” part, did they still sing, “and the governor(s) true?” And what of the line about Montgomery? Did Skynyrd still fly a Confederate flag?

I had seen a few black people around, a couple of men and one woman—not together—and I have to admit I was curious as to the draw here. I wondered if they had ever bothered to deconstruct the lyrics of “Sweet Home Alabama,” or if they gave a damn.

The Cadillac Black was gearing up for the end.

“Man, we get to see our idols up here every night and get drunk and have a great time. We’re the three luckiest longhairs in this place I tell you what.”

That being a “longhair” still meant anything was news to me, except continued rebellion against the dominant paradigm by looking effeminate, but let us leave those
concerns to the queer theorists of seventies hair rock bands. I had more pressing needs, such as bolting for the women’s room. As any woman who attends stadium events knows, the timing between giant watery beers and bathroom visits must be calculated with Newtonian precision—one misstep and you are trapped in a smelly stall as the crowd roars outside. Although it turned out I needn’t have worried. A woman of substantial persona and girth from Cleveland (Riiight?) barked nasal military orders. Loiterers would not be suffered.

"LADIES, you know what it’s like here when you’ve been DRINKING and YOU GOTTA GO so everyone better MOOOOOOVE.”

Bless these Ohio women, they did moooooove. I couldn’t help but think in the South the reaction would be to ever-so-politely take forever, or the saltier types might have flat taken this woman out, but in this war of Northern Ohio Aggression, Southerners did not resist. In Southern Ohio, you can mow someone down and the person will apologize from a prone position. Therefore, one motivated woman could have great effect on Midland pacifists and I was back on the Astroturf before I knew it, with plenty of time get antsy for the real band along with everyone else.

A couple with matching “American by Birth, Rebel by Choice” t-shirts walked by. A man called out “Hey baby!” in a way that made me wish he meant me. Another guy put his phone down his pants and sent the picture to his girlfriend sitting next to him. I realized I had forgotten the real reason we all used to go to concerts—to make out. I had
not even thought to be sad that I would not be making out with anyone tonight, which in turn made me sad that I could be so disconnected from my youth.

Then the drums began to thunder and lights flash around.

Johnny Van Zant: “How you dooooooin’ Cincinnatiiiiii!”

Us: “Woooooooo!”

The lead guitar player tore into a twangy slide riff and we were off.

Now at this point clarification is in order. Despite what my treatise on the lyrics of “Sweet Home Alabama” might indicate, I was not at this show to spend my whole night analyzing everything to death. Social politics and philosophy aside—Skynyrd rocks. This admission over a few bourbons at my local dive bar was what had gotten me here in the first place. A legendary story in Skynyrd history concerns when they opened for The Who and blew them off the stage.

That’s The Who, y’all.

So maybe my look said modern art gallery and my conscience did trouble me on any number of issues, but aside from all that, my rock and roll heart lies with searing guitar riffs, backup singers who can belt, and drummers who thwack a snare on the two and four. In short, I’ll take a Skynyrd show over a bunch of mandolin plunking, Digital Delay pedal abusing, yodeling hipsters in orange jumpsuits any day.

To be sure, the band was thirty-five years past their heyday. The only original member was guitar player Gary Rossington, who survived the crash despite breaking both arms, legs, wrists, and ankles along with his pelvis. More recently, the original piano
player died in 2009 at the age of 56—cause unknown. Let’s call this death by touring. The mortality rate for the band is high. Members have been stricken down by everything from heart attacks to liver disease. I could not help but get romantic when I thought about all this dying. These musicians had sacrificed their lives to rock the way Keats sacrificed himself to poetry. It is probably better that musicians are not crazy the way they used to be, but isn’t that edge of the cliff what made rock, rock? Now everyone is so damn reasonable. That was why we were all here tonight, to reminisce about the times when people jumped first and looked after. Before we all became the adults who regretted investing in that Branson timeshare.

For the cynical, it would be easy to think this incarnation (resurrection?) of Skynyrd was here to punch the timecard and milk that hit teat to the point of latching pain. And yet. Despite the years, despite the rotating lineup, despite the drummer’s Flashdance inspired sweatband, authenticity pierced the fog of secondhand smoke. These were people who loved music and played because that is what musicians do. Ronnie’s younger brother Johnny had taken over in 1987 as frontman and was a dead ringer for his sibling. He sounded like him. He looked like him. His presence gave the band heart. Ronnie and Johnny had been brothers and that kind of sincerity can’t be Photoshopped or tweaked in the studio with ProTools.

Johnny: “Good evenin’! How the hell you doin’ Ohio? Turn on the lights!”

The lights shined on the audience and we all waved and cheered.
Johnny: “What’s up? Y’all doin’ good or what? Hey, y’all guys ready to have little fun with Skynyrd tonight? Put your hands together y’all! It’s time to make a little noise. Let’s go get some down. South. Sugar.”
Us: “Woooooooo!”
Johnny: “C’mon y’all, let’s boogay!”

Boogie we did. And here I didn’t even know people boogied anymore! Okay, so I had questions about “Sweet Home” but in the meanwhile, it seemed safe to shake it to “Gimme Three Steps.” I joined the collective. For the next hour and a half we would forget that we had lost our waists during a Bush administrations. We would lay aside our concerns of late mortgage payments. It was time to willfully deny that our once adorable children had long changed from chubby toddlers to disturbing incarnations of our younger selves. We sang songs word for word and hollered. By now, we were drunk enough that no one cared the price of Bud Lite was a violation of human dignity. One relief had been that Skynyrd flew an American flag, a change from old concert footage I had seen from the past. I hated to break it to Brad Paisley but not only was he an “Accidental Racist,” but his lyric about wearing a confederate flag just to “show he’s a Skynyrd fan” meant he had proved himself an out of date idiot on yet another count.

At this point I had made friends with my neighbors, a trio to my right. Caleb was the chatty one with trimmed hair. Sully had a brown trimmed beard and piped in every so often. Yoder, well, Yoder was a gomer, or at least tonight he was. He had long grey hair, a long grey beard, and a long grey stare into the middle distance.
“Yoder here smoked up a whole bag before we even left Chillicothe.” said Caleb.

Caleb, Sully, and I looked over at Yoder, who blinked two times for yes.

“I love shows. I’ve been to about 500, I guess. Now these guys still got it. You go to many shows?”

“Some,” I hedged. (Not really).

“Have you ever seen ZZ Top?”

“No, but I had an ex-boyfriend who played bass in a tribute band called Tres Hombres. He could play but he didn’t look at all like Billy Gibbons. Imagine Woody Allen in a fake beard. Like when he tries to look like a Hasidic Jew.”

“ZZ Top kills it. They’re still kickin’ it. You watch Bones?”

"What lonely middle-aged woman hasn’t?"

“Have you gotten to the ones where Billy Gibbons plays Angela’s father? His plays a famous Texan rock star. You know, himself.”

“I would guess he’d be pretty good at that.”

“Dead on it!”

Johnny: "This is Lynyrd Skynyrd, y’all!"

Us: “Wooooooo!”

“I’ve seen these guys a few times. They always bring it,” Caleb said.

As if on cue the lead guitar player burned though another solo that would have spliced half the bands touring today. Caleb and I saluted with our beverages.

Johnny: “Skynyrd’s in the houuuuuuse!”
“Right on,” Sully said.

Caleb and I moved on to our mutual worship of Heart.

“I remember seeing Heart back when Ann Wilson was thin. But she can still sing. I tell you.”

“Let’s be honest,” I was getting real now. “She could sing your balls off.”

“Right on,” Sully said.

Yoder tried to nod approval but failed in the attempt. Caleb patted his friend on the back. We continued to chat up music and I impressed the guys by singing the first few lines of “Run to the Hills” by Iron Maiden in falsetto. They even took it pretty well that I was a grad student from the college town of Athens. Life was coming along pretty well until a dude-bro with a backwards baseball cap rolled up. Dude-bros comprised a small yet substantial segment of the crowd who had come, I supposed, to create some sort of “epic” story for the frat house later.

“Hey man, mind smokin’ me up a little?”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” Sully put on his best dumb hillbilly face, designed to ward off undesirables.

“C’mon, man. Hook me up.”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

Caleb and I avoided eye contact while Yoder did what he did best—stare. But the bro had to try one more time.

“Drugs are for thugs,” Sully said, joining Yoder in a vacant look.
The dudebro slunk away and at this point I was feeling pretty smooth. 1) Soon as Senior Weeniewank left, our collective good moods returned. 2) “Mind smokin’ me up a little?” was exactly the lame line I had used but with an enthusiastic response.

The guitar groove for “Saturday Night Special” united the individual fans into a crowd. So this had been the seventies—cut-off jeans, shaggy beards, and gender-neutral flip-flops as thousands joined together as one. Not for the first time was I sad to have spent the decade reading alone in my room. True, thirty-five years later some songs held up better than others. The lyrics to “That Smell” repeat the word “smell” five times in a chorus that repeats five times. For those counting at home, that would be twenty-five smells. The song is said to be about Rossington’s drug addiction, meaning the smell of cooking heroin, but I still kept getting the feeling that I’d forgotten to apply deodorant.

“What’s Your Name?” likewise caused a blip on my twenty-first century radar. Given the current collective age of Skynyrd, the story of a rock singer hooking up with a “little girl” from Boise was creepy. If these guys had not been on stage, they would have been that icky dude at the bar and even on stage that status was debatable. But in the larger picture, it seemed we all understood that this song, the entire show even, was a time to be ageless, a tribute to times past, back when the women around me in DD support garments had been braless babes in wifebeaters, riding on their mustachioed boyfriends’ shoulders, no back support needed.

Right then, as if exiting a time portal, a young blonde ghost of classic rock past walked by. Wherever Tommy Lee was at this moment, he had a boner. Her flat-ironed
platinum tresses and skintight jeans could have caused some serious damage at Woodstock ‘69. Her cool confidence reminded me of every girl who ever made my life hell in junior high. I wondered what kind of life that was, walking around as a physical ideal, how that affected a person. I had always tried to believe that my modest, brunette looks had made me deep, but at thirteen I would have done anything to look like her. Where had being “deep” gotten me anyhow? Sitting on a blanket at a concert with no one to make out with, that was where.

Johnny: “What an audience! What a great night. It is a great night isn’t it? You know what? Every night I ask the audience this question—Are y’all diehard Skynyrd fans?”

We were.

Johnny: “Now look here, if there is anything here you should now we are real, real, real big supporters of our troops and their families.”

Whistles. A few people yipped like miniature terrier dogs.

Johnny: “Let’s stand united. United as one, no matter what. So let’s stand together. This song goes out to our troops. Sing it loud. Let ‘em know your spirit.”

Skynyrd began “Simple Man,” which as advertised, is a straightforward ballad about a mother telling her son to take life in stride through its ups and downs. This song had taken on more weight with age, given all the band’s mothers who had suffered through the deaths of band members, taking on a poignancy that younger performers could not have conveyed. The band then went into some song I had never heard of, which
meant we must be approaching the end stretch of the set, which meant the big hits, which meant “Sweet Home Alabama.”

Sure enough, the familiar guitar hook we had all waited for reached in to grab us by the nostalgia. The time had come to let loose of whatever reserve we had stashed away. Anyone who has traveled a distance farther than ten feet in a car knows this opening:

*Big wheels keep on turnin’*

*Carry me home to see my kin*

As someone who has driven home to Alabama to see her family many, many times, can I just say how satisfying these lyrics are? Even if I only have moderate-sized wheels and my overeducated family isn’t exactly “kin,” I still get the warm fuzzies. And I find the word “Alabamy” cuddly. Years after the fact, the second verse that tells Neil Young off has more of an affectionate brotherly tone about it, as if one had bested the other and wouldn’t let him forget it. One rumor was that Ronnie and Neil were talking about a collaboration before the plane crash.

Johnny: “Whaddya say Cincinnati?”

Us: “A Southern man don’t need him around, anyhow!”

Johnny: “Sing it, baby.”

The experience of listening to this song felt like skiing down an obstacle course at a high speed—thrilling but terrified I might splat into a tree.

I approached hazard #1:
Johnny: “In Birmingham they love the governor. What do you say?”

Us: “Boo! Boo! Boo!”

Amazing to me was that everyone in the audience seemed to know the “boo” was important.

From here we dug on the Muscle Shoals swampers, raised our hand in the air through the solo, and careened into the finale. The backup singers sang as if to levitate the dead.

“Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh—Alabama! Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh—Alabama!”

The band slowed down for the final sing along to the chorus before dropping out, so Johnny could lead the crowd in an a cappella sing along.

Johnny: “Sweet home, baby. I can’t hear you!”

Us: “Where the skies are so blue!”

Johnny: “And the governor’s true. Sing it loud!”

_Dammit Skynyrd._

Here I was about to break into the clear when I had slammed headlong into a longleaf pine. Skynyrd did leave out the “My (,) Montgomery” line but that seemed more out of convenience. Again, for the unadulterated win, all the band had to do was drop one little bit of a lyric that isn’t even important. Now a song called “Sweet White Alabama” has no hope, but this little change was so minor, why not make it? Or was I missing something? I had no idea why the current lineup of Lynyrd Skynyrd (who again, are from Florida) would have such an investment in the Alabama governor. Or why the “boo”
would be so important while the governor’s true business was also important. Whatever Montgomery’s “answer,” no doubt I was in the grip of the South and all its paradoxes. I was flummoxed.

Johnny: “Now y’all be nice when you talk about the time you came to see Lynyrd Skynyrd.”

The music began dissolving to signal the end, weaning the crowd from the music. The piano keys winked goodbye and drums crashed as the lights gave one last burst of power—

“Good night, Cincinnati, Ohiooooo!”

BLAM.

Darkness and the band went backstage.

By now the sun had set and the Muses glowed white. Orange dots of burning cigarettes dotted the crowd and a few people ran for their final beer and bathroom runs. Most of us held still. The mood grew tense as we awaited our due, roadies hustling around while we cradled our lighters. Maybe bands in their heyday can skip “the hit” under the guise of artistic integrity. But not musicians three decades past their Billboard 100 peak. This was a sure thing.

I took a deep breath and cradled the lighter I had carried along for just this occasion. Skynyrd was going to make us do it. When I bought the tickets I’d had my suspicious, my expectations even, but now that the time had arrived. Against all odds, a sprig of glee bubbled up inside. Age has buffed my emotions down over time so these
moments come fewer and farther between. But here it was! A real, live inner “woo!” By
gum, it was time to shake life’s barnacles loose for ten minutes and thirteen seconds. I
jumped up and had just flicked my lighter in the air when a group of dude-bros to my left
started chanting.

—“U.S.A.! U.S.A!”

Now, for years had I not all endured a plague of jerkstores yelling the wrong song
request at every other show I had ever attended in my rock show life? I had suffered this
injustice at every concert from The Flaming Lips to Loretta Lynn. Anytime the music
stops at a show, a pit of dread births from deep within my bowels. Don’t say it, I have
prayed over and again to an unfeeling god. Just don’t say it.

But someone does. Someone always does.

The inner “woo” was the flint that had rousted my emotions, which now sparked
my temper, which flared in full flame. How dare they take my joy? I wanted to put the
hurt on these know-nothings in athletic jerseys who dared disrespect the legacy of
Skynyrd and by association, Alabama. These chumpdoodles had no idea what the South
had been through, what suffering had torn people apart. I doubted severely they had ever
enjoyed the pleasures of white sand beaches or the rich scent of gardenia. I don’t know
that I was ready to take on General Sherman’s army to save the family silver, but I dare
say that a lone woman confronting a group of drunk guys counts as an act of bravery.
This was Lynyrd Skynyrd and we were going to show some respect for the most
requested encore song in music history. I stomped over to kick the pooka-shelled posse's
ass. Be they sweet or not, turns out concepts of home and family are defined by who you'd beat up to protect.

“Mind yourself!” I said.

To my amazement, they stopped.

A tambourine rattled like a Texas snake.

Us: “Wooooooooooooo!”

Johnny: “We’ve got one more song for you tonight. Take care of your friends and your family, y’all. In the honor of Ronnie Van Zant—Ohioooooo--- What song is it you wanna hear?”

We answered.
EXPERIMENTS IN LIVING CHEMISTRY

The first morning after my last day of fifth grade, Mom informed me that my summer vacation and girlhood were over.

Me: Reading *A Wrinkle in Time* in my room, hoping to pull a Meg Murray and tessaract to another planet.

Mom: *cursory knock while opening the door.* “Great news! You get to attend those Summer Enrichment Seminars you enjoyed so much last year. And you can wear…” she pointed with her thin, well-manicured finger at the second dresser drawer—“your little bra.”

That was how she pronounced those words, *italicized,* the final “ahhh” birthing in slow motion. I ignored her. She smiled and shut the door, knowing we both knew that none of this news was great at all. I was going to be shuttled off to a glorified babysitting venue, and the two pink pop-up tents on my chest could no longer be ignored.

I stared with great intent at my book, praying that Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit would come for me, after which Calvin O’Keefe would remove off my glasses, see past my frizzy hair and braces to the real me, where my oddball quirks increased my charm.

I pointedly avoided the drawer where the dreaded, white-eyelet garment lurked. Inside, straps criss-crossed to the apex of a tiny pink rose, cups padded with wisps of cotton to puff the nipple buds into a shape. A training bra. The phrase conjured images of
Wheaties box champions, teams of pre-teen girls racing, arms outstretched, as they competed for Olympic breasts.

   The pink rose didn’t fool me. We were in training, training for The Curse.

   The first day of the Summer Enrichment Seminars I lucked out. Mom enrolled in summer school so Dad would be driving me. No way would Dad confront me about anything to do with undergarments. That morning I insisted on wearing my yellow rainslicker to cover myself, even though it was June in Alabama.

   “I’ll freeze in there,” I insisted. I had a point. Southerners, in retaliation to the heat, generally keep their interiors the temperature of a meat locker.

   Dad gave me a sideways glance but he didn’t argue. We drove in silence. I didn’t even whine about why I had to attend more school right after school was out. I hated the constant shuttling about, and many of these so-called educational events were suspect.

   My go-to defense was the time I took baton twirling in a trailer. Once, just once, my mother had conceded that “maybe that wasn’t so great” and I had pounced on that admission like a trial lawyer, turning to Dad for help.

   “Dad! It was a trailer. A trailer! All she did was sit there and yell at us while she ate McDonald’s. Why can’t I just stay home?”

   Dad sighed heavily and stared at the ground.

   “Boy, when I was a kid I sure wish I could have done all this great stuff.”
Dad had grown up in a cold, grimy Catholic orphanage in Buffalo, New York, and there was just no arguing with that. He had scrounged and strived so I could live the pampered life of a middle class ingrate. Still, I’m guessing Dad never had to Fancy Strut in front of an a former soy bean queen who yelled, “Glimmer, little glo worm! Glimmer!” between bites of her Big Mac.

All I am saying is this: If you are going to eat, you should bring enough for everyone.

I was plunked on the curb of Holt Elementary with a bologna sandwich and a Chronicle of Narnia stashed in my shorts. I filtered inside with the other nerds of Tuscaloosa County. We were handed a regimen ranging from Life Sciences to macramé, and dutifully marched to our classrooms so we could become enriched, like flour. The Seminars were for “Gifted” children, those of us who had passed some third grade Mensa quiz that made sure we never got to spend our summers hanging out at the pool or skipping rocks.

Our first activity of the day was Dramatic Arts, which was held in to the gym. When I put on my rainjacket that morning, I had counted on the usual Alabama indoor arctic blast. The gym was a sauna. Within a minute I had mortifying armpit stains and removing the slicker wasn’t an option. I waited in dread for one of the odd looks directed at me to become an outright accusation. At some point I knew some loud-mouthed girl (there was always a loud-mouthed girl) would shout, “Why are you wearing that stupid
jacket?” while everyone stared and I stammered through some lie. I carefully shifted around, kept myself a moving target.

To my relief, this teacher was the bossy kind who left no room for chitchat or humiliation. Her hair was albino blonde drawn back in a severe bun. She wasn’t old or young. She didn’t wear make-up or speak with a southern accent. Her thin lips like a slash said there was a special treat in store for all of us. We would get to perform Macbeth. She informed us she was real live director from the Alabama Shakespeare Festival who was going to help us perform a modified version of the play. We came to understand this woman was no ordinary educator, and we were very fortunate to have her. This opportunity would be an experience.

We tried to look impressed even though we had no idea what she was talking about.

“Shakespeare was a great playwright!” shouted Norvin Richards, a scrawny dweeblet who came up to my neck. Norvin was a tow-headed, philosophy professor’s son with glasses held around his head by an elastic band.

The director dutifully acknowledged Norvin’s superior knowledge, which fired the geek cadre into life. We were all used to being number one in our classrooms, but now all the number ones were gathered together. Who was number one now? We didn’t know anything about the Great Bard, but we knew enough about school plays to know that someone would get to be the star. The director furrowed her brows for a minute before she grabbed and arranged us in groups. Then she stood back, hand on hip,
scrutinized, frowned, and re-arranged us again. This second grouping appeased her. I was moved to the back. The slicker stuck to my arms from where her hand cinched my forearm before it sucked back off again.

With a heavy sigh the director handed out scripts and explained how things would be: There wasn’t much time, and this wasn’t how a theatre was usually run but she would make do. We were not to *roughhouse* around the stage props, which were very *generously* on loan. Auditions would be held at our next meeting. The performance held in two weeks.

It wasn’t too hard to figure out that if the name of the play was “Macbeth,” then the female lead was “Lady Macbeth.” While the director paced and lectured I took inventory of the competition. These girls with bony limbs and wedged terrycloth onesies weren’t of the sleek blow-dryer tribe from public school. One girl with a freckle-smeared face adjusted her scoliosis brace. Another bent to scratch her scabs. No gleaming, tanned, tube-topped cheerleaders here. I had a shot. The Norvin kid poked my arm. A shot of panic ran through me. I had almost made it through the day unnoticed.

“Hey, lemme tell you a secret,” he said.

I bent down. He cupped his hand over his mouth, leaned into me, and belched.

Our last enrichment of the day was Living Chemistry. Within a minute we were all in the thrall of Miss Bussian, a college chemistry student with honey blonde hair, tan
skin and a mesmerizing Aztec skirt. The despair of our lost summer vacation melted in a desire to merge with her orange blossom scent. She loved us each the best, we could tell.

Miss Bussian gave us each a Petri dish and a sterile cotton swab. We were instructed to lightly touch a surface, and then lightly touch the agar, and see what grew on the special medium. Just like real scientists!

Being the enriched child I was, I gripped my swab and over-analyzed the situation. I had already bombed Life Science earlier that day. While everyone else had oohed and ahhed over the paramecium flagella in their microscopes, I had faked fascination over a water bubble. The pressure of redemption weighed large. This was my chance to make visible the microscopic, to reveal an object’s true nature. Everyone seemed confident as they ran around the room, dabbing the aquarium or the pencil sharpener, but every time I started to make a move, I froze. I mean, who really cared to reveal inner spirit of a crayon?

Then I thought of something I wanted to know more about.

I snuck the swab into the bathroom, locked the door, pulled down my shorts, and performed a pre-teen version of a pap smear. I slipped back in the classroom, stealthily lifted the glass lid, touched the cotton end the exact way I was instructed, and sealed the dish.

“Out, damn spot! Out, I say!” I practiced in my closet, to escape parent scrutiny. If I tried to add intensity, I only sounded shrill. Mostly I sounded drab, put to shame by
the dramatic skills of the housewife who mourned “those dirty rings” on her husband’s shirts, before she discovered the delights of Spray and Wash. For the sake of High Art the word “Damn” had been approved for minors, but it stuck in my craw. Raised in the Bible belt, I just couldn’t shout a curse word. As I tried to project “How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me,” I knew the word “milks” was gross somehow, causing me to fumble.

Yet I persevered. My desire for the female lead was rooted in a long history of frustration. As an early puberizer who had always been tall for her age, I had been assigned male parts in school plays.

First grade all the girls were sunflowers except me—tree.

In the play about a cavity, I was the dentist.

In *Charlotte’s Web* I played Fern’s father, Mr. Avery. For my big moment I got to waddle on stage in overalls, slop Wilber, and shout,

“That’s one terrific pig!

Our fifth grade production of “Broadway Musicals” featured me lip-syncing “Go Greased Lighting” in a mechanic’s suit.

I was determined to break the chain of my dramatic roles in drag. In my closet I persisted. I knew I didn’t sound like a Scottish queen driven to psychosis, but the blah blah of a Peanuts character with a southern twang. Yet I had experienced transformation again and again in my piles of books; so technically, I know the experience was possible. Surely the bright lights of the stage would inspire more than the inside of a closet.
Everyone knew it took the pressure of a real challenge to forge greatness. One day I would be Megatron, whose stubborn nature defeated the evil It on the planet Camazotz, who saved her father from alien mind control through the power of her love.

That next day the director shouted our roles while we squirmed. My heart thudded as the bit roles were doled out. Eventually, there were no female parts left except Lady MacBeth and I allowed myself a giddy whiff of hope until—

“Kelly Ferguson! Macduff, loyal Thane of Fife.”

I didn’t even get to be a Weird Sister, and worse, I had a wife. Lady Macduff and I avoided eye contact. Ashley Phelps, a willowy girl with blond hair, freckles and a soft persona was awarded the prize role. She squealed for joy and we all hated her.

One look at the director, already back to grabbing people by the elbow, made me realize it was no use complaining. For our first read-through I wandered Birnum Wood (in this case potted banana trees) with Macbeth, Norvin Richards. As the director went to work on the Weird Sisters we giggled and horseplayed with the props. That we were not supposed to touch anything made wearing the helmets and scurrying around all the more awesome.

At Living Chemistry Ms. Bussian told us to check on our Petri dishes.

“Don’t be disappointed if you don’t see much,” she said. “It can take up to a few weeks.”
We had labeled our dishes so everyone could keep them straight. Needless to say I had no intention of writing with black marker on a piece of masking tape, “My Vagina,” so I wrote, “Inside Desk.”

Despite everyone’s excited swabbing, most kids only had a few dark specks, while most had nothing at all—Special Class once again specializing in the mundane. But in the back, one disc emerged from the wash of spotted beige. Encased in glass, one black furry caterpillar crawled across Nevada.

“Wow,” said Miss Bussian. “That’s really something.”

She checked the label and looked at me askance but no way was I telling. Everyone gathered around the dish, and gawked. I worried that Ms. Bussian, a science expert, would know vagina growth when she saw it, that I would be outed somehow for cheating. Given the creature coming to life in the Petri dish, perhaps I should have been more worried about personal hygiene. God knows what that swab picked up from the Holt Elementary bathroom. But health was a small sacrifice to pay for glory. I found myself pleased as Miss Bussian examined the dish in the fluorescent light.

My macramé bracelet was crooked. I still only saw water bubbles in Life Science. The more I tried to project in Shakespeare, the more my atonal persona matched my limp cardboard sword. But in Living Chemistry, I was a star. As the weeks passed other kids had blotches, smatterings, maybe a little gray fuzz. An unfortunate few, like Lady Macbeth, still had nothing (ha!), her surface blank.
Miss Bussian tried to interest us in the periodic table, and she brought in some liquid nitrogen, which was pretty cool, but really we all just wanted to see what was growing in our Petri dishes, or more to the point, what was growing in my Petri dish. By the end of the week the caterpillar had morphed into baby hamster surrounded by tornado funnels dervishing in the air.

“Dude!” said Norvin Richards in admiration, whose beige slab sported only an unimpressive smudge.

The day of the play it was time once more for me to perform male. My mother slicked back my long hair with Depp gel. I was allowed to wear make-up, but only base and extra eyebrow pencil, not eye shadow or lipstick. The true horror of my situation emerged when I put on my costume— tights with a man’s white shirt (my father’s) worn over the top and belted. The shirt, though, came up too short for comfort and was transparent. With my mother involved, there no avoiding another debut—*the little bra*.

Today girls can opt for a training bra that is more like a little tank top—the Velcro version of shoelaces. In the seventies, bra training was more serious. We were thrown into the deep end of adjusting straps that dug into our shoulders. We trained for discomfort, how to adopt a constant, half-smile when in fact we were freaking out over the elastic bondage, strangling our torsos. We trained for the telltale straps that everyone could see through our blouses, and how to maneuver our arms so we could hook and unhook the back. The “wiggle in” technique worked for the novices, where we assembled
the gear and stepped in and shimmied up. All this training supposedly existed for the purposes of modesty, but these bras only seemed to highlight the two chest beacons that would define a part of how we would be perceived as women—forever.

When I shuffled out in my Scottish warrior garb, my parent’s hands slapped over their mouth, trying to disguise their mirth. My overall look was completed by a pair of old moccasins, making me a dead ringer for the last pirate Mohican. My parents had just pulled it together when I reached for my sword wrapped in aluminum foil.

“Lead — on — Macduff,” Dad sputtered, and they fell over again, wheezing and gasping with tears glittering cruelly on their cheeks. I ran to my room and slammed the door. No way was I going to be in that damn play. Eventually my Catholic heritage of guilt and duty kicked in as my parents reminded me of my responsibilities. When they wanted pictures, however, I balked. No gruff personas, guilt trips or sighs from Dad could make me budge on this point. I didn’t care what sort of selfish, ungrateful, wretch I was.

“She’s feeling sensitive, Patrick,” Mom said, the corners of her mouth twitching, and all I can say is it’s a good thing that sword was fake.

At the auditorium Lady Macbeth was in full regalia. She wore an Empire waist lavender gown with gauzy layers floating around her, her blonde hair piled in a medieval topknot with ribbons. We thanes and witches choked with envy. I looked around to discover that all the other Scottish warriors at least had a real tunic and real tights. My tights were Legg’s support hose—I looked as though I had forgotten my pants. Now I
was pissed. Not only had I been miscast, I had parents who would rather be thrifty than make sure their daughter didn’t look like a complete idiot. Perhaps some of my own Scottish ancestry kicked in; I was ready to go on stage and kick some serious Elizabethan ass.

The problem is while internal pep talks and personal belief are the cornerstones of children’s literature; they’re best left to those with the ability to tessaract across outer space, a skill I would soon pray for the moment I debuted. Once I had been given the part of McDuff, I had lost interest in the play, goofing around with Norvin Richards during rehearsals and reading Madeleine L’Engle books at home. I hadn’t learned my lines. When it was time to take the stage, I had absolutely no idea what to say.

Terrified my shirt would fly up, I minced across the stage as I kept my sword clutched by side, shoulders hunched to hide my little bra. I patched together pieces of dialogue, hoping to mask my botched lines, but the hot white lights and auditorium of staring parents did nothing to help. My tepid storming of Dunsinane castle had the texture of Velveeta. The bird-chested Norvin Macbeth could barely lift his sword. My brawny guns, strong from after school activities and fueled by resentment, made the outcome of the duel a gimme, my execution perfunctory as I splatted the corrupt King to the ground in one swat, thereby killing whatever there might have been of a crush as well.

Tomorrow?

Nobody thought so, not three times, not even once.
My one consolation was that all the enriched kids bombed. Lady Macbeth wailed through her soliloquy with wretched melodrama. The Weird Sisters were depressingly normal, hunched and giggling through all the best lines. As thanes flung fake mutton at one another, I wondered if anyone had really ever seen a paramecium in Life Science. The director spent the performance running around and hissing lines. Her hair pulled tighter and tighter, causing her expression to resemble a botched facelift. Banquo’s ghost was the only success. His comedic interpretation, a brilliant improv where he “did the Hustle” around the banquet table, brought the performance to life. At curtain call we shuffled out hangdog to take our bows, but Banquo sprang to the front, arms outstretched as the applause meter surged from golf clap to the real thing.

Afterwards, I hid backstage pretending to fuss with my props. I didn’t want to face my parents, who would tell me I had been good while their amused smiles told me otherwise. I was in pantyhose. All the parents would chat with other parents, who would all say how great it had all been. I would have to congratulate Lady Macbeth and have my picture taken with Lady MacDuff—my wife—all of us squirming while the adults suggested we get together and play sometime.

I was too old to play.

I made my escape. The heavy door clicked, erasing the small talk echoes of the auditorium. I ran down the hallway, my hose sliding on the glossy linoleum. I checked both ways before entering the Living Chemistry classroom. It was dark and silent except for the gurgle of the aquarium. No one could see. I tip-toed to the back of the room,
where the rows of tiny, quiet moons gestated on the counter. The growth in my Petri dish was now a longhaired guinea pig smooshed between two clear Frisbees. I put a brown paper towel in my hand to keep from leaving fingerprints. I formed a tiny teardrop of drool, and just when it was about to drop, lifted the lid and gently spat on the fuzz of my genius.
Most people squeal when the iconic neon HOT NOW sign signals a fresh batch of Krispy Kreme’s Original Glazed®. *God*, they moan, gripping my arm, *I love those freaking doughnuts.* I smile but my lips are thin. I bow my head in reverence—and clutch my stomach.

I was once a Southern girl who delighted in the Krispy Kremes. Like all kids in the Alabama ‘burbs. I loved going with my parents to select a dozen. Once in the door we time-traveled back to the fifties—to an era of chipper employees in paper hats, gleaming tile, bar stools, and chrome. The crystalline-sugared beauties glittered in their display case. After debating the classic to cream-filled ratio, selecting each gem with care, we returned home where I grabbed the box of joy and stuffed my little face. This was the 70s. Back then teachers and parents didn’t monitor sugar consumption. Little Debbie Snackin’ Cakes were a food group.

Alas, my guilt-free bliss was short lived. All too soon I discovered that I would be judged for my body, and that this body needed to be thin. I was in third grade when I proclaimed myself “fat” in a bikini. That first time my inner thighs made contact as I walked home from the pool, I freaked. By junior high, the battle against my body began in earnest. I studied the instructions in women’s magazines, devising architectural plans for my body. I scooped cantaloupe and asked Mom to buy Melba toast. My best friend and I went on the Beverly Hills Diet and ate papaya until we got the runs. I don’t know how it is I have bones, as I spent my formative years drinking Diet Coke for meals.
At first, the ritual of dieting added mystique. I weighed boneless chicken breasts and measured celery like a chemist. I computed and scheduled according to the rules. But it wasn’t long before all this ounce of this and half an ounce of that business got old. I discovered it was easier to not eat. My body was changing, ballooning, betraying me—but with discipline, I could change it back. Then I’d be popular and boys would like me and life would be perfect.

But I was hungry. My young body craved fuel. I grew so fast I still have the stretch marks on my thighs, which I naturally mistook for cellulite. Nights I lay in bed and recanted my eating day bite by bite, counting calories like sheep. I devised schemes such as ordering Chicken McNuggets but peeling the coating off, or chewing food only to spit it out in the trashcan.

“Oh God, just eat something,” my mother would say, exasperated at my dinner plate picking, knowing later she’d find a Texas gallon of ice cream missing from the basement freezer.

“I’m full,” I lied.

Such was my eating life until the occasion of a particular family barbeque. These neighborhood gatherings were the dieter’s nightmare. While normal eaters came over to grill meat, drink beer, and har har har, I spent the entire event trying not to eat. At these public events people watched to see what I put on my plate. They wanted to make sure I scooped a hearty portion of their creamy casserole and tithed at the Church of Duke's
Mayonnaise. Nightmarish were the piles of hamburgers, hot dogs, potato chips and brownies.

Then there was the Krispy Kreme tower. Every Southern cookout, potluck, or gathering featured a giant stack of these boxes. The Alabama fundraising product of choice, the green and white polka dots were omnipresent, everyone hoping to unload their dutiful support of junior varsity football teams and marching bands. Compounding the problem was the yeasty Krispy Kreme doughnut’s brief shelf life. From the moment the HOT NOW sign is lit, the value plummets, with each passing minute the sugared fat begins to taste less like magic and more like sugared fat. Getting the family to “eat ‘em up” became more of a chore with each passing day. Just when progress seemed possible, another cheerleading squad knocked at the door.

This particular summer afternoon I went through the usual routine of pretending to fill my plate, when all I really ate was a slice of lettuce and tomato. The grownups were too far into the Milwaukee’s Best to notice. They wanted to sit around the back deck and forget they were parents. I snuck away to avoid malt-breathed interrogations. *How’s school? Do you have a boyfriend?* I hid. I read. I watched TV. I stared at the wall. The entire time all I thought about was the buffet. This was the main problem with dieting in the suburbs—life was so boring there was nothing to do but think about food.

I slunk back to the buffet “just to look.” I picked at some Fritos and cut the ends off a few brownies, but that was all. Getting a plate meant admitting defeat. I needed a
way to circumvent my complex regulations and my brain, low on fuel, was beginning to turn in on itself.

Then I saw the green and white tower—and I cracked.

I snagged a box and scuttled back to my room.

The first five went down like butter. Anyone familiar with these glazed sweets knows that even past their prime, they require the merest gesture of a chew. Krispy Kremes belly flop down in a gleeful slip n’ slide to the stomach. Within a minute my hibernating mechanisms of digestion cranked back into full operation, my body roaring as it remembered how much it liked food after all. I was in vanilla euphoria. It wasn’t until number eight that my stomach began to send up warning flares. Hey Kelly, maybe this is enough? Um, Kelly? But my mouth wasn’t listening. As I closed in on the dozen, which signaled a sort of finish line, I began to cramp as the once delectable sugars began to ferment. No matter. I was no longer eating out of hunger. Now I chewed to fill the void. There was an emptiness inside from all the denial and hatred directed towards my body, but Krispy Kreme would complete me.

I went and grabbed another box, my heart flitting in rapid fire from a mixture of guilt, sugar rush, and early onset diabetes. By now each bite was self-abuse―eating was punishment I deserved for wanting to eat. I could sense the impending sugar free fall. All I could do now was make this hurt as much as possible before I crashed. I crammed in the sugary evil as fast as I could, polishing off a second box. I stared at the crystal residue
and for a dizzy moment contemplated the grease stained sides—a mistake—for hesitation was my undoing. The saccharine bolus in my stomach came to life with a tidal lurch.

Which got me thinking.

I snuck into my parent’s bathroom and locked the door. Picnickers lollled and laughed outside the window as I rifled the medicine chest for a remedy my mom had kept since I was a kid and ingested a bottle of dandruff shampoo. I excavated the ancient bottle of ipecac syrup—a crusty-capped relic with the label yellowed and peeling off. This medicine would cure me. I could be right back out before I was missed, the entire mortifying event put behind me. I downed a shot straight from the bottle, choking down the bitter taste of poison.

I knelt over the toilet and waited. I coughed. I gagged a bit. But the expired medicine only angered the beast, which now roared in complaint. I graduated from bellyache to full-on torment. Desperate, I stuck my finger down my throat. Nothing. Turns out I had just discovered I have a stubborn gag reflex. Now my throat was all scratchy from my fingernail and coughing as the Krispey Kremes waged war inside of me. I panicked, waiting to hear someone to ask where I was, or need to use the bathroom. But I was determined to finish my mission.

I went out for another box and dragged it back to my porcelain lair. Eating in the bathroom was a new low, I knew this. My logic was that I needed to push the writhing, syrupy, glob past the tipping point. Chew after sugar-glazed chew I force fed myself and chased the next batch down with more ipecac. I rolled on the bathroom floor, counted
brown tiles, the caulked lines, and finally, the tiny black hairs on the tiles. I prayed to a recently-discovered God for an end to this misery. My answer was the cold silence of the universe. As soon as I could muster the strength, I crawled off to bed to suffer. That night the only remedy for overeating would be a gut-wrenching night of old-fashioned digestion. From that time on, I might have continued a mental battle with food issues, but I would never again try to purge.

Since I’ve left home, I’ve lived too far North for the Southern doughnut chain to appear very often, so I often forget to give thanks to Krispy Kreme for its contribution to my healthier lifestyle—I don’t eat donuts or regurgitate my dinner. My last encounter with my tough love savior took place at Point Clear, Alabama. That evening I strolled the boardwalk that semi-circles the Mobile Bay and absorbed the warm, briny air. One story, old wood houses built by a lost generation of Southern money surrounded the lapping water. These homes feature simple, open construction so the water can swish in and out during floods and hurricanes, a system that worked for almost hundred years—until Katrina.

Alabama being the state that spells Tradition with a capital “T,” most owners rebuilt in the old style. All the owners except for one, Billy Dorgan, the local Mr. Krispy Kreme owner of several franchises. Much to the chagrin of the old guard, Dorgan built a Tara-inspired behemoth. The house is beyond overmuch—too many stories high, too wide, with too many windows and giant columns. I stood in front and imagined the
interior. Bloated, golden cherubs, gilded mirrors, oil portraits, and chandeliers appropriate for a pre-revolutionary Versailles. No doubt a gaping foyer split the house open with a sweeping staircase, so the Lady of the Manor could run down in her hot pink Juicy Couture trailed by a pack of white poodles to sign off on the delivery of Faberge eggs.

I lightly touched my midsection in homage.
HELLO, MAY I HELP YOU?

The website claimed that through a series of facial calculations, it could determine my doppelganger. Photos flipped like slot machine fruit as the program calculated the width between my eyes and the curve of my chin. I had, naturally, uploaded a flattering picture, but I fretted the result. I don’t have the trademark, angular features of film stars. No cheekbones, only cheeks that create a moony, wide white expanse. No matter the season, I look as though I might be squirreling a few nuts away for winter.

Let’s just say supermodels, ingénues, and James Bond girls were out. So far as serious actors went, I had a shot at Diane Keaton or Dianne Wiest—post-menopause, when every woman’s face becomes mine. I speculated there might be a Food Network celebrity chef in there for me. Or an 80s sitcom mom. The program made a fluttering noise as it continued to search, apparently stymied. I began to fear a match with the Pillsbury doughboy when the picture settled on a middle-aged brunette woman with bright shiny cheeks, who aside from the helmet hair spackled in a thick wave, did, admittedly, look quite a bit like me.

Smiling onscreen was former First Lady of the United States, Laura Bush.

We all have the day of reckoning, the moment of young adulthood when we look in the mirror and realize the final product is at hand. Through puberty I hoped my supermodel face was a slow build, but no, short of liposuction the toddler chub wasn’t going anywhere. Even more devastating, everyone said I was the very image of my
mother—emotional DEFCON1 for a teenage girl. Friends and relatives gasped about how we were clones while I puckered and painted in the bones. I wanted to be Madonna, all sweeping bleached blond hair and black lace gloves with arching eyebrows and a pointed chin. Terrible was the truth—that I looked as though Mom, with all the might of her working class German heritage, had pressed her nose against a Xerox machine glass and fixed the photocopy on my neck.

Another problem with a round head: You look like a target. My cheeks soon became pincushions filled with barbs. Football players hissed at me in the hallway. Popular girls smiled with gritted teeth and turned their backs. Tears rolled over the swells of my cheeks as I retreated to the bathroom and tried to repaint my dripping contour blush. Why couldn’t I look evil? Nobody ever messed with a villainess. I didn't want to be grounded brunette girlfriend, but the fiery seductress—Poison Ivy from Batman, Princess Ardana from Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, or Princess Aura from The Adventures of Flash Gordon. Alas, my only hope was a cameo in The Muppet Movie.

As my self-esteem dissolved, I became dead ringer for the last person in the twentieth century to have contracted a fatal attack of the mumps. I looked dis-eased—not-at-ease. Ill. Sodden. My person exuded the aura of the species that should not evolve. The lame wolf that the pack eliminates. I can’t help but believe devastating cheekbones would have helped my formative years. Did people see a wuss and then treat me that way? Or did I convey an inner wussiness that confidence could have cured?
Agreeability became my first survival mechanism. Charlie Brown might have landed splat trying to kick that football, but he was always one of the gang. I crafted a personality that matched my expression. Thai food? Sure! You hate Thai food? Fine!

But how did I feel about Thai food?

For years, I had no idea.

After college I moved into a community home of people whose main source of community was talking about how pathetic I was. My first clue should have been when I was given the room that used to be the pantry. I had been walking around in roundheaded kid oblivion when this random woman at a potluck said, “Just so you know, I think how they all talk about you isn’t okay.”

What? I was crushed, but then the truth washed over me in a series of flashbacks a la *The Usual Suspects*. I now saw the looks, the smirks, and the silences when I walked in the room. I lived out a miserable year, my squishy self unable to make sharp decisions, such as moving out and finding nicer housemates.

Around the same time, two coworkers from the restaurant I waited tables at asked me to lunch. After we finished eating they picked up the check.

“We just wanted to do something nice for you,” they said. “We think how everyone talks about you isn’t fair.”

Agreeability, then, while seemingly a good quality to possess, is not so great for the one who is expected to agree all the time. Enough already. If I couldn't angle my face, I could sharpen my tongue. I befriended masters of snark and learned how to pinpoint a
person’s insecurity. My sensitivity granted me acute powers of observation and I became a master of my craft. I studied Courtney Love, learning how she clawed her way up, snarling at anyone who dared cross her. At the next house I put my belongings in the biggest room without asking. No more pantries.

This time, I would be the girl with the most cake.

Now I must admit, assuming one survives The Lord of the Flies phase of life, the perk of a pleasant face is that one will always find friends, such as the co-workers who took me out to lunch, who I remain in touch with today. I understand that my projected persona of Nice White Lady allows me to move through the world with certain ease. People like me, they really do, just like Sally Field, one of the few cherubic celebrities to find fame. Sally and I, our faces belong to the world, bubbling fonts of public service. I read once that one can spot a Libra right away by our round, pleasing expressions and wide-set eyes. Hello, may I help you? our faces ask.

Yet here again, comes another burden. Where-ever I go people assume I’m a friendly local, forever plying me for directions and local dining tips. I could be in New York City, Chicago, or rural South Dakota. In Paris, I was inundated by nervous tourists who thought I was the one nice French person. Without fail, shoppers at Walmart and Target stop me in search of advice.

“Where can I find Q-tips?” a person might ask. Or, “What would you recommend as a gift for an eight-year-old boy?”
The strange part is I always know the answer.

Regularly I’m informed I have a twin, or that I remind someone of a lost friend from long ago. These stories have a certain charm, since people usually remember this person fondly, as the sweet gauze of nostalgia casts a soft focus over their eyes. Apparently, I am the spitting image of this woman who used to sell hot dogs in Raleigh. But I am not that woman. Really, I’m not. Sometimes conflicts arise when people become overly insistent about how they are sure they knew me long ago, even when we deduce that there’s really no way I could have been their ex-boyfriend’s sister in Cheyenne that summer of 1996.

“Hmmm. Nope, sorry,” I say and their smiles fall to the floor—their Sherlock Homes moment snatched away.

In the face of this disappointment my pleasant face remains gratingly pleasant, because it’s only expression I am capable of having. My pleasantness begins to insult the defeated observer. Maybe I’m lying, these people think. Maybe I’ve gone in witness protection or I’ve made America’s Most Wanted List and I’m purchasing this pint of ice cream or pumping gas as this random gas station because I’m on the lam from beating young girls to death with their own pet hamsters. If I inform people that I “get this all the time” that only makes the situation worse. People hate being told they are ordinary.

So, with great face comes great responsibility. I must treat the public’s connection to me as special, an incredible kismet, a big “wow” straight from the universe, helping them sustain the comforting belief that there are no coincidences. I must remember to
smile as I’m walking down the street, because otherwise I will inevitably be told to
“Smile!” by some man and want to bludgeon him.

“That could have been me.” I try to say when recognized. “Maybe I was in
Belarus working at a fur hat factory during the Cold War.”

I am pleased to report that with adulthood, my relationship with my mother and
our twin heads has improved. Turns out a round face ages well—the circumference
endures. Sculpted faces grow haggard with time, pinching inward even as the skin sags,
but a fathead plumps lines out like nature’s Botox. I’ve learned that should I care to
purchase more time, I would take to a facelift well because there’s excess material to
tuck. Those cheekboned beauties are the ones who come back looking like The Joker.

When my niece was born I gasped. As the first baby of the family, everyone
played the game of “who does she look like?” but from first look, Mom and I knew. We
just smiled agreeably as other relatives vied for features. “Her nose is the spitting image
of Aunt Frannie!” or “Sometimes she gives a look that’s exactly like Mike.” But I have
always known Joy’s facial destiny. She knows it, too. One of our games is to look at
images of Hello Kitty! and giggle.

“She has a fat head!” Joy says.

“She does!” I say.

“A fat head like US!” Joy says.

“YES,” I say.
My niece is a Taurus, a sign known for being stable, strong-willed, and decisive—everything Libras aren’t. Libras are defined by internal struggle as we strive for balance. My agreeability and my snark war within. My self-esteem was built up layer by layer, and only after I learned how to defend myself by throwing shade. Having invited a poisonous vermin to live in my tongue, I can’t always control the strike. I lost a close friend two years ago this way. One night she texted me to tell me she was trying to get pregnant. Me, tired and cranky and not thinking texted back, "Welp, see you in 20 years." (Hint: Wrong Answer.) From there I tried to backpedal but sometimes there is no going back. An email exchange eventually ended in her telling me what jerk I was on many fronts, right down to my insincere interest in poetry. Here I began to balk. Hey, enough now. I didn't write back.

In situations such as these, which recur, I don't know if I’m a strong woman bound to occasionally, as a friend once said, "pay the price for being fierce," or an old fashioned jerk. My worst fear is that I'm still a doormat. That people would never write long, mean emails to someone who projected a strong center, someone who hadn't built a self by gluing together the shards.

As for my niece, I hope she can escape these dramas that lead to self-questioning and doubt. I hope her self-esteem remains forever in tact and the world treats her as such. I believe in the possibilities. After all, Hello Kitty! has enjoyed a great career.
While Laura Bush was First Lady, I didn’t give her much thought. She wasn’t powerful as Hilary Clinton and she wasn’t popular as Nancy Reagan. She just seemed like a nice person who had made an unfortunate marital choice. But now she was my doppelganger. I took a closer look. I discovered we both love Laura Ingalls Wilder and the *Little House* books—the books—not the television show. Once I learned of this common obsession, I had to believe in her. Anyone who loves Laura Ingalls had to be someone who puts doing what is right over doing what is easy, who finds courage in tough situations. I learned Laura Bush was a librarian, and that her foundation raises around a million dollars a year for public school libraries. And funny. Laura Bush is funny. I found a video where she stole the show at the 2005 White House Correspondent’s Dinner. In her Texas drawl she jokes how George is usually in bed by now, and that she recently told him that if he really wanted to end tyranny in the world, he was going to have to stay up later.

“Nine o’clock, Mr. Excitement here is sound asleep and I’m watching ‘Desperate Housewives.’ With Lynne Cheney...I mean if those women on that show think they are desperate—they oughta be with George.”

Laura and I are both pro-choice and pro-gay marriage. She had a coming out of her liberal views on the Larry King show. This moment was supposed to be his big “gotcha” but she didn’t flinch. In the interview Laura isn’t wearing the pastel of her First Lady years, but black, and very little make-up. Her expression remains inscrutable, the blank slate that the women of America once projected themselves upon. Her cheeks are
still full and pink. Her smile, how could it be anything but kind and sincere? She is the
very face of trust. The bearer of soft, chewy cookies on a rainy day. But given a closer
look, the discerning observer will locate a crease at the corner of her mouth worn like
mine from so much smiling, the hardened line that doesn’t budge.
DANCING LIKE A WHITE GIRL

In my room in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, with white princess furniture, I devoured The Black Stallion series by Walter Farley, about a boy who tames a wild Arabian stallion and wins horse races. I read The Black Stallion, The Black Stallion Returns, Son of the Black Stallion, The Black Stallion and the Blood Bay Colt, The Black Stallion and Satan, The Black Stallion’s Filly, The Black Stallion Mystery, The Black Stallion and Flame and The Black Stallion and The Girl. From The Black and his rider, Alec, I learned about success. I knew to ignore the crusty veterans who said “It’s impossible, kid” and the mother who wrung her hands because it “all seemed so dangerous.” Through hard work and a special bond with your steed, you could win prestigious horse races against all odds, forcing even the greatest cynics to toss their tweed caps and shout — “By God! Look at them fly!”

In third grade my parents sat me down to tell me I would have a teacher who was very nice. Mrs. Brownlee was very nice. She taught me cursive writing.

In fourth grade there was a black kid in my class named Tommy Dougherty. He kept a pencil in his Afro.

During pep rallies Riverside Junior High School, all the black students sat on one end of the gym and all the white students on the other. The best cheerleader was Daphne
McGee, the only black cheerleader. Her hip thrust/shoulder shimmy to “Another One Bites the Dust” devastated. The white cheerleaders drooped by comparison. When it was Daphne’s turn to tumble or solo the black side of the gym erupted. I sat alone on the white side of the gym and although I didn’t stand and yell, I thrilled at her charisma, that she could command an entire room even when half the room was pretending not to care.

In ninth grade I won a scholarship to the private school, Tuscaloosa Academy. The school was probably the best academic offering in town, but it also happened to be built the year desegregation laws went into effect. Our mascot was the Knights, but at least no one ran around in white sheets.

My junior year the first black student enrolled at TA. Natasha Wilson floated the alabaster hallways a brown ghost. Cosby kids were fine for TV, but no one knew what to do with one in real life. In a parallel universe she was the popular girl, pretty and an honor roll student, but at Tuscaloosa Academy she was the black Barbie in a cellophane box.

Many of the country club kids referred to their “nigger maids” on a regular basis, complaining how lazy they were, and how they had to be nagged every minute about how to iron the Ralph Lauren shirts. My small band of academic, liberal friends (who had one Ralph Lauren shirt we carefully rotated) gasped in horror as we applied for out of state scholarships. We were always careful to say “Negro,” as that was the polite term of the
day, although “African-American” was coming into vogue. “Colored” was for old people. “Black” was considered scandalous.

In 1986 we were let out of school to see Ronald Reagan campaign at the Memorial Auditorium. The event was like a service at a megachurch with Reagan at the pulpit. The disciples roared their approval. My friend Mari Plott and I stood on chairs and acted like cheerleaders, because we found that to be satirically hilarious. “Roooooooooooll Tide!” we yelled as we extended our arms and fluttered our best jazz hands. To our delight we were given a posterboard sign that said “Black People for Reagan,” which we waved furiously at the television cameras, hoping to get on CBS as, predictably, we did not see a single black person around.

My first college roommate at the University of Alabama was a sorority girl named Joanna. She had two posters: one of a sleeping puppy that yawned, “Wake me up for the weekend,” and a second of a kitten mewing “Hang in there!” My spray painting of the anarchy symbol on our cinderblock wall horrified her, as did my JC Penney wardrobe. I came in one day and Joanna was waiting for me along with a friend of hers. They wanted to talk about a roommate switch.

“My roommate, she’s very nice,” Joanna’s friend kept saying. “Kind of religious. Uses lots of lotion.”
For reasons I can’t justify, I was scared of the lotion. I remembered the smell from seventh grade gym. The black girls didn't shave and would slather on their foreign moisturizers in broad, creamy strokes before and after gym, the heat working like a potpourri burner. The lotion was acidic yet flowery, a real nostril burner that took over the enclosed, steaming locker room and made my eyes tear. The girls were loud. They had seen some shit and I had not.

I panicked.

“No,” I said. “I don’t feel like moving.”

I rationalized that I didn’t want to be manipulated by that sorority bitch but I could no longer claim the self-righteousness of the Wronged Liberal. I knew now that polite language didn’t mean squat.

Throughout the term Joanna and I continued our cold war. I blasted Skinny Puppy and slept in a thermal blanket. Joanna hummed Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All” as she fluffed her Laura Ashley comforter. We both had 8 a.m. classes but left separately. She drove a Honda Prelude with a sunroof. I walked.

One night, after my friend Emi Mochuzuki and I drank two bottles of Boone’s Farm Strawberry Hill, we decided it would be an excellent idea to redecorate. We bought a Playgirl and used the pages to wallpaper over my roommate’s Monet prints, prom pictures, and puppy posters.
The crowning glory of our hijinks came upon us in a flash of brilliance. Joanna’s pride was her Clairol True to Lite Make-Up Mirror, with knobs to flip the light filters for “Office” or “Evening.” Joanna would spend hours preening over her reflection with her arsenal of department store silver tubes.

For our grand finale, we took the centerfold, a beefy black man with curly chest hair and taped him to the middle of the mirrored triptych. We then closed the doors leaving him for my roommate to open and—surprise! We fell to the floor laughing, helpless at the power of our own wit as we enacted this scenario again and again.

After awhile though, our senses kicked back in. Emi and I savored a proper afterglow but then took down the pictures. In a berried haze we ran out for munchies and wound up finding guys with beer and crashing somewhere else. I woke up the next day, cheek-to-cheek with some unvacuumed carpet. It was then I remembered that we had forgotten Playgirl of the Month, hidden behind the closed mirror doors.

I fled back to find Joanna’s side of the room cleared out except for the mirror. I never saw her again. I’m not sure what happened with the mirror, but I still have the Playgirl of the Month. Against all stereotypes, he has what seems to be an invisible penis.

Remember 1988, when for ten red-hot minutes liberals believed Jesse Jackson should be president?
I finagled a transfer to the University of North Carolina. Chapel Hill presented a slicker, liberal south. The hottest local band going then was The Veldt. This was the year Living Colour won a Grammy, when people thought black rock bands would be the next big thing. The Veldt had a write up in Spin and it was pretty much accepted they would be famous. They looked the rock star part with their chic couture and short stylish dreads. They dated rich, artsy white girls. This gang of hipsters would cruise up and down Franklin Street in what was known as the Veldt Van. You never knew when this rattleclap of cool might come thundering by, making you feel hopelessly staid.

Summer of my junior year my roommate needed a subletter. When she sat down to tell me she had found someone, she dragged her pointed toe back and forth along the carpet, avoiding eye contact as she described who would be moving in.

“She’s cool. I mean. She’s kind of funky,” my roommate said.

I blinked, confused by what she meant.

“She’s wears these gold hoop earrings,” she went on.

Oh! My roommate was trying to tell me that this woman was very nice. This time I was ready. I answered quickly: The-roommate-was-totally-fine-with-me-no-problem.

Right away Jovan Jones and I had that easy thing, sharing food and space and clothes without measure. She let me borrow her wrap dresses with bold prints. The bright oranges and yellows looked awful against my ruddy skin. I started wearing gold hoop earrings. I stole her lotion. High on sugared cereals we jumped around the apartment to Sheila E.’s The Glamorous Life, singing and beating air timbales with imaginary sticks.
Weekends we went clubbing, and one night, at the Stab and Jab in Fayetteville, I first experienced what it was to be the only white girl in the room.

A friend of mine worked backstage at UNC concerts, and he got me and two other friends in to see Experience Unlimited, a funk entourage band most famous for their hit “Da Butt,” featured on Spike Lee’s *School Daze*. For whatever reason, perhaps lack of black students on campus or promotion, my friends and I were the only people at the show. Even so, the band played as if they were Prince at The Superbowl. I mean, there was a synchronized dancing horn section.

A less famous song the band had was called "Dancing Like a White Girl:"

*She flails her arms in the air
Waving like she just don't care—
She's dancing like a white girl*

I represented my people the best I could—flinging my limbs and jumping like a dying fish, no pause for water breaks.

I was running late for Ultimate Frisbee (See “Stuff White People Like” #110) practice but my gas tank was empty. That I needed to not run late was imperative at the time, and I was rattled. But running out of gas would be a disaster, or at least, my idea of disaster then. I pumped a few gallons and when I went to pay there was a line. *Argh!* I
dithered for a few seconds before I cut in and threw down my five on the counter so I
could bolt.

“You need to show some respect and wait your turn!” the black cashier yelled, his
eyes flashing hate. “I’m tired of you people!”

My cheeks burned white hot with shame as I slunk out the door. For weeks I cried
about being a you people, even while knowing I had done nothing to earn that level of
grief.

In 1990 Public Enemy released Fear of Black Planet. Everyone white person on
the planet bought it, blasting “Fight the Power” from their Jeep Cherokees.

After graduating I moved to Durham. Fresh out of college and desperate for a job,
I got in my car and drove around, hoping something might happen. One day it did. I
found a temp agency and was hired on the spot, filing and answering the phones, etc., for
various local businesses.

Later I would temp for other agencies. I was even a Kelly Girl. But Monarch
Temporary Agency was my favorite, because no one talked in a fake perky voice, or
made me act all thrilled about mind-numbing tasks performed for a paycheck. They gave
me work. I worked. I didn’t have to pretend to love it.

At the time I didn’t even think about how my assignments were all at black-
owned businesses, with all black employees, and that everyone at Monarch Temporary
Services was black. Maybe they wondered why I was there (I seem to remember a second look when I first walked in), but I could type, and that was all that mattered.

I don’t know that MLK dreamed of black and white liberal arts graduates holding hands in the secretarial pool, but maybe it was something.

My grandma eventually died from a blocked artery in her brain, which caused her to experience auditory hallucinations of the “colored boy” next door whispering messages. *He was watching her*, she said. *He knew things.* Grandma drew all the blinds in the house and refused to leave unless my mother came and got her. The psychiatrist told us these hallucinations, because of the mini-strokes, were not imagined but that she actually heard the words. What was it the colored boy knew? Grandma never would say, shaking her head in terror.

I played drums in band through my twenties and thirties. The drums are not a private instrument and my neighbors got to know me pretty well. I was always shocked by how positive they were about it. Mostly everyone was conversational and curious, especially the black men who walked up and down my street.

“Girl, you keep playin’ them drums now,” they always said. There was something about a black man’s encouragement that felt like true validation. As though I had been rhythm certified.
These men loved telling me tales of their former glory. I discovered that on any given day, a man could walk by who had been a drummer for James Brown.

One summer I didn’t have air conditioning or many friends, so I'd go by myself to every dollar movie starring Queen Latifah or Kid 'n' Play at the Yorktowne. I’d grown up hearing whites complain about how blacks talked during movies, but I was never lonely at the Yorktowne. I sat comforted in the dark, surrounded by the audience yelling and laughing at the screen. Don’t you do it! They yelled at adulterers. Awww, shit! You gonna get it now! They cautioned evildoers. And to blonde women in horror movies—“Damn, girl, you better turn around! You ain’t no Buffy the Vampire Slayer!”

I bought stamps from a black woman at the Post Office. She took my money and said thank you.

After 37 years of living in the South, I moved to Missoula, Montana, which is 99.3% white. Technically, this situation shouldn’t have made my life all that different. I had lived among black people and had the occasional black friend, but 99.3% of my inner circle was white. My friends were white. Most of my co-workers were white. If I attended church, it was white. If I played a sport, it was white.
It could be argued that I had moved to the whitest of whitey-towns to fulfill my western, whitebread manifest destiny. There was no reason, really, to believe that my new life would be any different.

But it was.

In Missoula when I saw the occasional black person, at a coffee shop or maybe walking down the street, I had to try not to stare. “It’s just another person,” I told myself. “This isn’t a big deal.”

From Montana I moved to New Orleans. A damaged woman for a damaged city, I joked. Or maybe I could never be comfortable in Missoula, a place where everyone was too much like me. At the time I had just been dumped and acquired a second degree that promised no more employment than the first. I should have been worried about hurricanes and getting a job. Instead I went to Wal-Mart in search of a comb. I was single, I thought. Perhaps I should groom more.

I examined the Wal-Mart merchandise, noticing that relaxers and frosting kits were segregated, while combs were integrated. This was a super Wal-Mart, so there was an entire left-hand aisle of combs. I stared at the wall of plastic teeth and began to feel overwhelmed. I didn’t know how to choose. I knew not to buy a “reversible combs” (what was called an Afro Pic back in the day), but other than that, I couldn’t see any difference between white person and black person combs.
I searched for clues. Combs for black hair featured a graphic of a woman with a hairdo dating back to The Supremes. White people combs didn’t get a graphic. Next, I deduced combs for black hair were generally brown or black. White women, it was suggested, might prefer a purple or pink comb. Combs were also separated by name brand —African Pride versus Goody, but when I inspected the product up close, there was no visible difference aside from coloring and packaging. The handles, spines, and the thickness of the teeth were all the same. The combs were probably made in the same factory, with different vats of melted plastic dyed different colors.

Finally, in my studies I determined one useful difference—the brown comb was twenty cents less expensive than the pink comb.

The black cashier ignored me as she scanned my purchases, clearly beaten down by the dull haze of a repetitive job, but I got a double take when she got to my comb. Her eyes flitted between the Supremes graphic and my face.

“It was cheaper.” I shrugged.

“Heard that,” she said, shoving my purchase in the plastic bag.
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

Before *U.S. News and World Reports* hailed Durham, North Carolina, as the “Best Cosmopolitan Value,” I moved to the lost cigarette-butt city of failed tobacco because someone I knew had a room in a house. I took a job bartending at the restaurant everyone forgot about, Papagay’s, the Mexican place. Nights I worked and days I drifted, waiting for something to happen and someone to love me.

My orphaned self was soon adopted by Noel & Valerie, a couple who slung nachos to support their low paying, but highly fulfilling teaching jobs. They saw a bright spirit in my unformed self—that’s what they said. Valerie was older, almost thirty, with long, thick brunette hair and a sturdy figure. Noel was my age, curly-headed and buoyant, with a high, girlish laugh that made you join in even if you didn’t want to. Noel was too good-looking for Valerie, his Adonis body in odd contrast to her Russian peasant ancestry, but he lavished over her, which made him intellectual and complex.

Noel & Valerie spooned out praise like warm chocolate and I lapped it up. They had me over for dinner (Moroccan chicken concoctions or crepes from *The Silver Palate Cookbook*) at their apartment overflowing with tapestries and third world artifacts. They served Kroger Havarti as if a temple offering, while their golden retriever Puck flopped at my feet. Every time they got up they touched my arm, asked if I needed anything, if I was okay.

After a few liters of red wine, they would often drift into the story of how they met as if revealing it to me for the first time, a long dramatic affair that began with
Valerie living with a kind but hapless man named Percy. Then Noel—irresistible, adorable Noel—had come bouncing into Valerie’s life slicing up fajita meat with flair. Powerless against the emotional tides that drove them, they carried an affair on for over a year before the truth came out in a sordid reveal involving a faulty walk-in lock. Percy—poor, poor Percy—had been devastated and the anguish of what Valerie had done to him weighed heavily in her liquid, brown eyes. But I was to understand that The Story of Noel & Valerie was a love epic for the ages, as proven by the Tom Robbins novels in their bookshelf.

_It was terrible_, Valerie would say, remorse washing over her face, _so terrible_, as Noel squeezed her hand.

I had my suspicions but didn’t mind spooning through the pint of ice cream they offered me while the three of us snuggled on the futon. Truthfully, this whole scene was a bit too much for a recovering Catholic such as myself, but as Valerie brushed my hair, an early exit seemed premature.

“Have you ever had a massage from a drummer?” Noel asked, holding up his strong, calloused hands. After a few fishbowls of Concha y Toro Merlot, who was I to say no? I slipped into a druggy confusion, losing myself in the black and white nude portraits Noel & Valerie had had taken of themselves hanging on the wall, the folded limbs and odd angles tactfully hiding the less artsy parts.

“You know Kelly Ferguson,” Valerie said. “There’s something about you.”

“I really believe that. From the bottom of my heart,” Noel said.
I drained my goblet and decided to agree.

Days I hung out with Sponge, another friend from Papagayo’s. I was Sponge, too. Around noon, once our hangovers had subsided, one of us called.

“Hey, Sponge,” someone said.

“Hey, Sponge,” the other answered.

Afternoons before work we napped on the giant, yellow-flowered sofa at my house, our heads like bookends and legs nestled into one another. The sofa sat in front of a great window and the lemony Carolina sun streamed in, warming us, until we had to roust ourselves for another shift.

“I don’t wanna work tonight,” I said.

“People are awful. God, I hate people,” he said.

“Why did God make people so awful?” I said.

“Ask God,” he said.

“I’m sleepy,” I said.

“That’s good. You should be sleepy,” he said.

From the pile of magazines, books, and newspapers on the floor I extracted a tabloid of continuing education courses offered by Duke University. Aside from the usual Conversational Italian or Great Books offerings, there was one class that had caught my eye for two years now, ever since I had been working at the restaurant..

“What Are You Going To Do With The Rest of Your Life?”

_Instructor: Sharron Ross Ballentine_
Who are you? Who do you want to be? This course is for people who are between jobs, starting a new facet of life, or simply looking to make a change. Among other assessments, the Myers-Briggs Type Casting and Strong Inventory will help you determine skills, interests, aptitudes and unique abilities so that you can locate a career that is more than a job, but a vocational identity.

The course was pricey, about two weeks’ wages, but the expense made it seem worthwhile. You didn’t want to trust the rest of your life to someone who couldn’t make money. I studied Sharron Rose Ballentine's promotional photo. She seemed credible; thirty-ish with short, neat blonde curls and a dynamic gaze. *I’ve got what it takes*, her look seemed to say. *And I can help you get what it takes.*

“I’m gonna sign up,” I said.

“That’s good. You should do that,” Sponge said, before shifting so that my housemate’s tabby cat meowed in complaint before settling beck down.

Seven people trickled in the classroom, four men, two women and me. We were dressed like people in need of direction—mom jeans and plaid shirts. Four of the men and one woman were of retirement age, while the other woman looked forty, which made me the youngest person by fifteen years. I thought about the situation and realized this was because everyone my age had jobs. The only people who could take a course during the day were either retired or financially supported by their spouse.

Our new mentor zipped around clasping and unclasping her hands as she instructed us to go around the room and introduce ourselves. Sharron Ross Ballentine was attractive, but not so attractive as to raise suspicion. Her darting black eyes had very little
white, and her scurrying around evoked a chirpy squirrel personage. She was scrubbed and polished as if for a Wall Street board meeting and I began to question my wardrobe of sweatpants. Her enthusiasm was so overwhelming and my fellow seekers so pathetic, I was this close to bolting out the door but the moment passed, and here I was, once again, victim of my own apathy. With everyone older than me I assumed we’d have nothing in common, but discovered our mutual bond of low self-esteem transcended age.

“I’m here because my wife made me come,” said Ronald, one of the plaid shirt crew. “I was a civil engineer for thirty years. I’m not even sure what happened. But here I am.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, and meant it. I knew exactly what it felt like to work as a civil engineer for thirty years and have no idea why.

Sharron Ross Ballentine handed out the first test and I filled in the circles with my No. 2 pencil. We were to take the Myers-Briggs Test based four pairs of dichotomies (Introverted/Extroverted. Sensing/Intuitive. Thinking/Feeling. Judgement/Perception), that mix and match to create sixteen personality types that would help us determine our futures. I filled in the dots and tried to be as honest with myself as I could.

Was I actual or hypothetical? Real or surreal? Fair or kind? Would I rather direct or act?

Before work I retrieved my black pants off the floor and scraped dried salsa off with a fingernail. I pulled back my hair in the attempt to mask the greasy strands and
rifled my closet for a shirt that wouldn’t get me sent home. Sharron Ross Ballentine I was not.

“You’ll come to Noel’s show won’t you? It would mean so much to him,” Valerie said.

We scooped chips into wax paper-lined baskets, trying not to think about how long it had been since anyone had ever reached to bottom of the giant, plastic tub. Noel played drums in an indie rock band called The Iotas. Sure, of course, I would come to his show, as I had a few times now.

“You know,” said Noel. He was working the line, but took time to run up to me.

“You could play the drums if you wanted. There’s something about the way you move.”

In response I feigned a bit of The Bus Stop, courtesy of my sixth grade gym teacher, but Noel didn’t reward me with his infectious laugh. He wouldn’t let me go.

“Really, I’ve got a feeling. I’m never wrong about these things.”

I wanted to shrug him off, but this was first time anyone had noticed a unique talent in me. Against my will, warmth fired up through my dried kindling of a body. Noel promised to give me a drum lesson sometime and I tried not to believe this might actually ever take place. Not wanting the moment spoiled, I went to the walk-in cooler to hide from customers and Sponge followed me. We pried open a bucket of pre-fried chicken breasts and split one in half to eat.

“I think we should go to France. Waiters have more influence there,” he said.

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t take it,” I said.
“Me either,” said Sponge. He pressed his finger into a prepped chimichanga, as if testing for doneness, but really just to make a dent.

“You know,” I said, staring deep into his eyes. “There’s something special about the way you poke those appetizers. I really mean it.”

“Poor Percy,” he said.

“Poor, poor Percy,” I corrected.

“Are you going to Noel’s show?” he asked.

“Might as well,” I said.

“Hmmm,” he said.

For our next class, we engaged in Dyads, where we paired off and worked on psychological exercises meant to dislodge conditioned ways of thinking. The middle-aged woman and I sat face to face, palms on our knees. We were supposed to stare at one another and phrase our dream job in the form of “I am______.”

“Don’t want to be,” said Sharron Ross Ballentine. “BE.”

Perhaps my entire life had been defined by limited thinking. Who knew what could happen if I cast aside the chains of negativity? I was tired of feeling dark and sad all the time. I needed to focus on what or who, I really wanted. I focused and an image come to mind—

_I am Tommy Lee Jones._
I pictured my drum kit spinning over the arena as my helicopter blade limbs chopped to the roaring crowd. Bulbs flashed. Arms outreached. After the show I ran backstage where Noel caught me and pressed me up against the wall as we made out. He lifted me and pushed his body between my legs as I shimmied my hand to undo the buckle, deftly pop open the top button of his jeans, and—

“Is it just me?” my dyad partner said. “Or is this class bullshit? I should have taken ceramics.”

Was I adept with the handicapped? A natural facilitator? More of a researcher or a retriever? If could live anywhere in the world, where would I go?

“Oh, I am so glad you’re here!” Valerie said. “Noel will be so excited.”

The Iotas were playing the Ninth Street Bakery, a business that sustained poor artsy Durhamites with its chewy hippie bread. The venue had enough exposed brick to pass for an arts scene and a smattering of friends kept the room from feeling completely empty. Valerie sat up front, beaming. Sponge and I scooted more towards the back so we could pass a flask of Wild Turkey brought to cut the Ninth Street coffee sludge, a brew infamous for its ability to disembowel the drinker.

“Who names a band The Iotas?” asked Sponge.

“Better that than The Amoebas,” I said.

“What about Nothing? I want to see a band called Nothing.”

“For encores you could shout, ‘Nothing!’ over and over.”

“Noel says they’re changing their name to Dogtooth Violet—*because it’s the first flower of spring*,” I said in a deep, breathy Valerie/Noel voice.

“They could open for Tulip. Or would it be Daffodil?”

“Technically speaking, crocus,” I said.

The Iotas weren’t good, which isn’t to say they were bad. The Iotas were the typical mix of four best friends from college who played some party to more applause than expected, enough to sustain years of bakery gigs. Now their music lived exactly in the middle of this terrible limbo. No way would they ever get signed and go national, but there was an excruciating maybe present, a sliver of hope in the sort of catchy riffs and almost provocative lyrics. The band also suffered a curse in that the drummer was the only real talent. Noel ripped through the songs with an intense physical focus that flew past the other players and even the songs. He didn’t fiddle around with silly fills and his bass drum thuds hit your chest, his body vibrating with the energetic purpose. Here was the thing about Noel: he exuded that kind of crazy physical charisma that would could lure most women into making out with him in the walk-in against her better judgement.

“I suppose you’re staying,” Sponge said, but he paused.

“I might was as well,” I said.

“From the bottom of my heart,” said Sponge.

“From the bottom of my heart,” I echoed.

We pressed our hands to our chests.
I hung around after the set and Noel gave me a sweaty, tight hug, but then I lost him to flurry of adoring students, fans—and his girlfriend.

Nights that I closed the bar, I would wait until the last customer left, lock the door, then head for the kitchen where I heated a huge bowl of queso, got a basket of chips, and returned to the bar. Jameson and Kahlua. Galliano and Stoli. B&B and Myers dark rum. I poured a buffet of alcohol in the blender with a scoop of ice cream to make one of my famous Bodhisattva Booze Shakes. I squeezed fresh limes for Topshelf Margaritas and held the Cointreau bottle upside down for a five count. I floated grenadine in a shot of vodka so it looked like a miscarriage. I layered Bacardi 151 and set it on fire, keeping the blue-flamed shot glass next to me like a candle. I made drinks from fifties movies. Harvey Wallbanger. Sidecar. Pink Lady. Sometimes I shaked and stirred and blended only to pour my efforts out in the silver, stainless steel sink and start over.

I wrote new specials on slips of paper, careful to mimic the font, such as “Cockichangas” and “Our Fajitas are Fartastic!” then taped them into random menus for the hostess to find who would curse the asshole who did this. I threw silverware into the fountain, taking the time to create an Emily Post-perfect place setting complete with salt and pepper underwater. I sat at random tables and pretend I’d been served the wrong meal, brandishing my fork at my imaginary server. I misplaced the restaurant keys, panicked, and found them again. I made up drinks to put in the bar rolodex called “The Bottom of My Heart” and “The Dyad.” I talked to the stuffed parrot in the plastic palm
tree. “Eat a dick, parrot,” I said before I skipped through the hallway and then—back to the bar.

I peered in the walk-in tubs, picked out stuffed jalapenos and dipped them in the guacamole. I rifled through office files in the hopes of uncovering dirt. I knew Sponge was the one who liked me in a real way but all I could think about was Noel. Would anyone ever love me? Could that person maybe not be a phoney, cheating asshole? Would I ever have any kind of job that didn't involve a greasy apron? I looked at the employee phone list, staring at Noel’s number—which was also Valerie's—and cried until I manufactured a snot avalanche. Then I had to blow my nose and I might as well go in the men’s room for a single-ply tissue, where I put a maraschino cherry on top of the urinal cake.

Four or five in the morning I staggered around the restaurant and removed the evidence. I straightened the liquor bottles, wiped down the bar, and set the alarm. Driving late at night through the City of Tobacco/Medicine, I squinted at the street lamps and turned the lights into stars, or on a really big night, comets. Often I’d be halfway home and realize I left the Pet Shop Boys blaring and a bottle of Cuervo 1800 next to the microwave. After remembering I would have to go back to cover my tracks. I always remembered, though.

Until the night I forgot.
Unemployed, I attended the final meeting of “What Are You Going to Do With the Rest of Your Life?” Our reward for completing the class was a printed out sheet of all our test results. For the Myers-Briggs, Sharron Ross Ballentine explained, the four dichotomies were on a continuum, as people were rarely all one thing or the other. Over the course of the class her shine had matted. Sharron Ross Ballentine, I realized, was just another person in need of a real job. She was no one to help anyone, but seeing as how I knew how it felt to be no-one, I couldn't bring myself to be mean about it even if she had fleeced me.

My test results revealed me to be an INFP. (Introvert. Intuitive. Feeling. Perceptive.) But in all four categories, I was only one or two answers away from the exact opposite, meaning I just as easily could be an ESTJ. Or an ENTP. Or an ISFJ. Or any other type in between.

My career assessment came up with these results:

Concert violinist
Ballet dancer
Mason
Translator
Top Executive
Florist
Opera singer
Urban planner
I stared at my list, waiting for a vision to emerge from the tea leaves.

“Why, you’re an artist!” effused Sharron Ross Ballentine, beaming at my right.

Ronald’s results told him he should be an engineer.

My one drum lesson with Noel went like this:

First there was me, pretending to be in awe of a mediocre rock band at their mediocre band rehearsal playing the same set I had already seen at their shows, all because I wanted to sleep with someone else’s boyfriend. The rest of the band endured my presence before they packed up and left, everyone knowing I was there to slut it up as a groupie, as others had before. I swallowed Noel’s lame pickup lines like vitamins, followed by a toss on the dark green, Pabst-soaked rug, sacrificing my integrity and personal hygiene for half an hour of awkward groping. I blocked out that the occasion of my drum lesson was that Valerie had a butt rash. She was home alone, lying face down on the futon so her ass could absorb the ointment.

There had been, though, this one moment. I sat on the throne, put my feet on the kick drum and hi hat pedals, and looked out. I might as well have been sitting at the controls of a space shuttle for all I knew what to do. Noel slipped behind me. I picked up the sticks and he wrapped my fingers around them at an angle. I began to believe that I had not dropped by for a cheap hook up but, in fact, to rock.

“Like this,” he said into my neck.
And there was that brief glint of true admiration in Noel’s eye, when on my first try I eked out a basic, crude rock beat with all four limbs, cracking the snare with a thwack. I had impressed. That look from anyone, anywhere, was all I had ever wanted. The flash of admiration was so fleeting I almost fell over reaching for it, but I couldn’t hold on, and the conversation slipped away to stories of injuries and surgeries. I nodded as Noel said he would have never played the drums if a broken leg hadn’t kept him away from basketball—a shattered femur with plates bolted in. He had spent six months in a hospital, practicing with sticks on a rubber pad to The Who. He handed me the sticks we had been using.

“For you,” he said, wrapping my hands around them as though sealing an oath. His grip was warm and strong.

“I don’t mean to be weird,” he said, “but do you wanna see my scar?”

Soon after, Valerie took a job teaching in Costa Rica during which time Noel began an affair with fellow teacher named Steffie, a lesbian fifteen years older than him. Steffie’s girlfriend found out by walking in on them and was devastated. Poor Steffie's girlfriend. Poor, poor Steffie's girlfriend. Sponge and I drifted apart as we took other jobs. Durham began reinventing itself as an affordable alternative to Brooklyn and predictably, a Whole Foods Market arrived. But instead of organizing my lost city, the upscale grocery store turned out to be the ideal focal point of further indecision, the
perfect maze to wile away time and wonder as I grazed free samples of Marcona almonds and triple cream Brie.

One day I saw a woman set up in the nutrition aisle doling out free samples of a bright green mystery beverage in tiny paper cups. She didn’t recognize me as she offered a sample. She was too busy effusing that while she could go on about the health benefits, the cleaner blood and the energy and how chlorophyll helps with—you know—odors, all anyone really had to know was that Vita-Green tasted terrific! Sharron Ross Ballentine had the same energetic black eyes but there was a limp behind the spark, as though props held up her pupils.

If she recognized me she didn’t show it.

“Sample?” she said, lifting a paper cup in offering.

“Sure,” I said, downing the mossy elixir like a shot.
BALLAD OF THE LOST GENERATION X

When I was twenty-three I threw my heart like a girl. Weak arm. Poor aim. Silly targets. These limp flings and murky connections, I knew, would change once Joseph Ulrich Neisser saw me sparkling with star power Friday night, when the artsy crowd of Durham would admire the most coveted indie-scene object around—the chick drummer.

The charms of Joe Neisser had snuck up on me. His eyes were wide, brown, and expressive, but they weren’t aquamarine, or peering out from a chiseled brow. He wasn’t an athlete, or an artist. He was philosophy grad student with a patch of Psoriasis on his belly button, wide and slumped, his Hawaiian shirts a whiff past wash day. The odor, though, was an honest one. And Joe was passionate about the small but important things in life, like sausage and old style New Orleans funk.

I fell for Joe at a dollar matinee of Ed Wood, during the scene where the cross-dressing director played by Johnny Depp directs Bela Lugosi in a take from Plan Nine From Outer Space. The aging horror actor was sopping wet from wrestling a mechanical octopus in a pool of water. The motor that moved the arms had broken but Wood continued to exhort Lugosi through his megaphone. Desperate for a film role, Lugosi remained ever the professional. “Argh!” the old actor growled as he struggled to flail the heavy arms. “Arrrgh!” Lugosi growled again and again as Wood yelled encouragement despite the dead limbs splatting the water.

“Arrrrrggggghhhhh!” Lugosi yelled before collapsing in a heap.
Joe and I paused a beat, then spewed our popcorn and laughed way louder and harder than necessary. The couple sitting next to us left in a huff and Joe passed me his flask of whisky. I nestled in his thrift store tweed jacket and filled my nose with the deep, sincere odors of barroom smoke and failed deodorant. I could see it. Our disheveled but warm home filled with books and our Prince CD collection, dirty laundry sitting in a pile while we brewed more French press coffee.

Inspired, I began an earnest campaign of romance. I lit candles and blew the dust off my Al Green CD. Months later, our relationship still had all the romance of a diaper bag. Subdued affections were fine for twenty years from now, as we perused Russian novelists in our refurbished New England home. For now it was a problem. I poured Wild Turkey down both of our throats and a few times succeeded in getting us to pass out together. We fumbled through the raw materials of a tryst but wiped out like towels in a broken dryer, still damp after hours of tossing with no heat. We needed a fresh start and my debut as a chick drummer would create it. Wasn't getting boys they whole reason I'd decided to play in rock bands anyway?

I had been playing for two or three months since I started talking lessons in the back room of a music store.

"Chick drummer!" my teacher said. "You're going to be famous!"
He was a Berklee School of Music graduate, bald, and clearly, I thought, out of touch with the rock. But I needed to believe. I couldn't take my menial life and jobs anymore. Music would be my way out.

I dutifully worked through a book called *Stick Control*, a drumming manual issued during the Eisenhower administration. The cover was ash gray, its only graphic the sparse black outline of a Minuteman. I did my homework: Rolls, flams, paradiddles, ratamacues. If the South ever rose again I was ready to rat a tat tat the boys in grey to battle. Eventually (*thank god*), I learned some beats and how to throw in a few fills. I felt ready to join a real band. Time to get moving.

By get moving I meant get famous, become a rock goddess, and hook up with an awesome boyfriend.

In one of those moments of perfect circularity, where the object becomes the instrument, Joe linked me to my first band, Zipper.

Like good Gen Xers, we were drinking coffee and talking about what we should do with our lives. As usual Joe sat that little bit close, his brown eyes intent. “What do you want?” he dared. “What do you *really* want?”

“More coffee, a pet muskrat, and a pink felt beret.”

“Lauren wants a band. He wants a drummer.”

“Lauren?”

“He’s from California.” This, apparently, explained everything.
Lauren, it turned out, was someone Joe knew from the Duke grad scene. A lit student. At first I wasn’t sure how I felt about a man named Lauren, but maybe his name had made him tough, like Johnny Cash’s boy named Sue. And really, the important thing was I needed a band and here one showed up.

“I want,” I said. “Sure, I want.”

I arrived at Lauren’s with my kit stuffed in my Dodge Colt hatchback. He lived in a large older house with a wrap around porch and sagging roof. The kind of place that houses grad students like the old woman in the shoe. I had no idea what kind of music Lauren wrote, and he had no idea if I could play. But I was going to be in his band, that didn’t seem to be a question. This wasn't an audition. I was a chick drummer and that was enough.

It turned out Lauren was as tough as a lit student could be, which is to say, not so tough. He had clipped salt and pepper hair and a trim beard to match. His small hands flapped as he talked. Wow, I played the drums, he said. What luck! He loved Joe. What a great guy. What a character he was. The South, it was a trip. He missed the West Coast (totally) but how about that pulled pork BBQ? I was from Alabama? He heard the Deep South used tomato sauce instead vinegar. He had played out some in the Bay Area, but nothing since he moved east. All he did was mention starting a band and wham, everyone just fell into place. Synchronicity! Lauren’s short, tight body sprang into action as he grabbed my gear and moved it inside.
Past the wood-floored living room and down the creaky stairs was our practice space, a typical Southern basement of mold, cobwebs and jumpy bugs. I met the singer, Sarah, also a lit student. She had a brunette pixie cut, red lipstick, and a sly smile. The bass player was some freshman (Josh?) rustled up from a Comp class. He was shy and sweet with a sweep of black hair covering one eye. A good mother had raised him, you could tell. Lauren apologized for the crappy sound system as he ran around turning knobs like Dr. Frankenstein. His gear sucked, he said, but the important part was to get started, right? As my drums were made of particle board, I had to agree.

The first song we played was called “Something in my Basement,” a peppy post-punk number. Given our setting and all the English majors, was this irony? Or perhaps the “something” was symbolism. Either way, Lauren had picked the right ensemble to impose a deeper context on the patently obvious. Given the group was more qualified for a Derrida forum than a rock band, I was amazed we could play. But within a few minutes, sounds of a recognizable song emerged. Hey, Sarah could actually sing, had this groovy torch singer presence. The Freshman (Josh?), he was funky! He played melody lines, not just plodding root notes. Lauren’s songs were catchy, and he had copped enough David Bowie licks to get by. I could lay down a decent groove.

We liked ourselves. We had a beat and hadn’t puked to it. Something had started here. After rehearsal, we sat on the front porch drinking beer and plotting our musical future. We passed cigarettes and basked in the afterglow. Lauren told us he had really always wanted to play music, but grad school had seemed more practical. Our name, he
said, would be Zipper. That was catchy, right? Our first show for his house was booked for two weeks from today.

Now began the panic. I had tried not to let on, but I had never played with anyone else or in front of people before that first time in Lauren’s basement. I had only run my Minuteman drills for my teacher and played through the walls for my neighbors, which made me self-conscious enough.

I was also completely intimidated by the Duke University lit scene, considered top in the nation. My senior year, terrified of leaving school, I had applied to one English grad program at Berkeley (California), only to be summarily dismissed. These people had graduated from places like Stanford and Columbia to attend one of the most prestigious programs in the country. They milled around Durham mourning the lack of a good sushi bar, discussing how Prague was the new Paris. I was a townie.

I decided to move up from particleboard and bought my first real kit, a set of Ludwig Vista Lites made out of clear plastic. John Bonham made an orange set famous in *The Song Remains the Same*. Mine were aqua blue.

In a creative burst, I built an underwater scene in the kick drum. I bought aquarium supplies from the dollar store; plastic plants, a deep sea diver, and a sea chest. I dressed a Barbie in a mermaid costume and streaked her blond hair with orange paint. Suspended by fishing line, she hovered in the middle, legs fused by her green sequined tail, pink lips smiling, cupped hand waving. I hung a small disco ball from the top and
glued luscious waves of blue glitter all around. Oyster shells from a beach trip coated the bottom, a costume pearl shining in each one.

The lit kids had their top tier degrees and high browed theories, but they didn't have Rock Star Mermaid Barbie.

The night of the party, Lauren’s living room was packed; he had done his work as Zipper’s promoter. I tried not to panic. While we had squeezed in enough practices that we had the basics down, we weren’t exactly seasoned. I estimated that we had about a 63% chance of no major fuckups. From behind my kit I twisted lugnuts and adjusted my seat as I spied on the Durham literati smoking and swirling red jug wine in plastic cups. I tried to not constantly scan for Joe. From what I could see, we were about to play for people who would forge entire careers on looking bored. Still, you could tell they were ready for something besides Trollope. They shifted from one leg to the other. They rolled their eyes and stared at the horizon, apparently in search of some distant concept. But their focus always came back to the music gear set up in the corner. Even I knew enough to get that Lauren wasn’t the Alpha hipster, but tonight was his night. Our set clocked at five songs and fifteen minutes. He was primed for his Andy Warhol moment.

The Freshman (Josh?) was cornered by some Mrs. Robinson type blowing French cigarette smoke in a steady stream. She smoothed the creases in her red sheath while he stared at his sneakers. Sarah introduced me to her fiancé. He looked like her male twin, the same elfin mouth and short black hair. They nodded and smiled in unison at my chit
chat, but I could tell their minds were on some domestic concern, like what Swedish furniture to buy. Lauren jumped around, running cords to outlets and talking us up to anyone who would listen. Oh, yes. We were excited and ready to play. Thanks for coming. Thanks for coming.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself to circulate. I figured I could milk the drum gig if I got stuck. I headed to the kitchen for a drink, praying no-one would try and deconstruct me.

_Ack._

I ran straight into Joe talking to a petite woman with Betty Page bangs, platinum hair, and hot pink lipstick. She looked adorable in the sort of gold vintage dress that would turn me into a seventies appliance. Her skin was princess white and she held her Solo cup as if it were Reidel crystal.

“Kelly, you should meet Trish!” Joe said, ever the social coordinator (another quality important to our future). “Trish wrote for _Spin_ when she lived in New York. Kelly’s the drummer for Zipper.” A broad hand flourish accompanied each introduction

Okay. _Spin_. Fine, I thought. I could only thank god I had an introduction now that wasn’t _You’ve met Kelly. She’s no doubt served you a combo meal._

“Cool,” said Trish, raising her cup. “Chick drummer! Chick drummers are hot. Don’t you love Sophia Melrose from Red Star Belgrade? I heard she carves her own sticks.”
“Stop the madness,” I said. I looked for Joe to catch my sass but his eyes were on Trish’s creamy cleavage. The conversation then turned to a topic I would have to endure for years: Woman Drummers of the Ages, i.e., Everyone Better Than You. Tonight we started with Moe Tucker of the Velvet Underground. Inspirational. No way could I avoid a Go Go’s reference. *Do you play We’ve Got the Beat? Ha. Ha. And of course* I knew Georgia from Yo La Tengo. The most incredible drummer ever, I was sternly instructed. I took my medicine but I didn't like it. I wanted to be the star, not Breakfast at Tiffany’s burnt toast. I gulped the sour wine and tried to nod charitably. After all, I consoled myself, Trish had only ever written about music. I actually played it. We’d see who was Audrey Hepburn and who was toast later.

In that moment I learned the great advantage of the drummer. During moments of social phobia, you can always crawl behind the kit. I decided right then a piece of my bass drum pedal needed adjusting. I went back and fiddled with the clamp. As Lauren and the gang filtered back I realized Drummer Advantage Number Two: I wasn’t going to have to stand in the front and sing songs I wrote. I was pretty much in the perfect position. If people liked the music, I could take the credit. If they didn’t, well, I was only the drummer.

I moved around front so I could tweak my seascape that had shifted in the move. I arranged Barbie’s hair in seductive waves and put back some of the shells that had come unglued. My biggest fear tonight was dropping my sticks. I only owned one pair. The drummer might get to hide behind her fort, but if she messes up, the silence is
excruciating. A skipped beat is like a heart defibrilating. If the sticks went down, then I went down, as in crawling after them. The band would train wreck as I fumbled around.

Lauren strapped his guitar expectantly, his mottled brows almost at the ceiling with expectation. Sarah curtsied and The Freshman shrugged. I explained to Barbie that things were about to get really loud, but she didn’t seem to mind.

I slipped into my seat.

The first song I heard drums playing, which must have been me. I had been worried about my sticks, but it turned out my real problem was my drum throne, tonight a folding chair and a pillow. I slid around and couldn’t get leverage for the bass drum pedal. I promised God I would listen to my drum teacher from now on, and spend money on real gear of the ugly functional kind before I bought more glitter. Even so, I managed to thud my way through “Something in My Basement,” keeping (I hoped) some sort of drive behind the chunka chunka of Lauren’s guitar.

The next number “Play,” had a disco beat. I developed an intense interest in my hi-hat, which conveniently faced the corner. Song three was “Ballad to a Lost Generation X.” The song was supposed to be a sort of rap, but sounded more like a march due to my major musical influence of the Minuteman.

*Too old for Valentino*

*Too young for Alice Stone*

*But I like my cappuccino*

*And I use the telephone*
I’m not a baby boomer but a Generation X
(I coulda been born sooner, coulda been the other sex)
I’m too old to be successful
Too young to really care
My lifestyle lets my baby
Put color in my hair
Too old to know my future
Too young to know my past
I’ve got a shadow of the present
But it isn’t gonna last

Song four pumped the beat up again. I skidded a couple of fills and probably slowed down, but held on. I cringed a bit during our last song, "Johnny B Goode." The fifties hit seemed to reveal Lauren’s age. I was more of a dirge drummer, and I could feel my ponderous beats didn’t match the peppy searing guitar. But I didn’t hurl, drop anything, or run off crying, all of which I considered major successes. At the final chord I hit the crash a few times to make The Freshman (Josh?) flinch. Ha! I wasn’t sure, but I thought I detected a few tones of jealousy from the black-rimmed glasses crew. They clapped while we blushed and squirmed. Now that we had asked for all this attention, we didn’t know what to do with it. The silence was strained until someone went to the stereo, the sounds of the latest alt rock lulling the room back into a comfortable drone.
I sat up and pulled down my stretchy black skirt sticking to my ass with sweat. Mrs. Robinson ran up and wrapped herself around The Freshman (Josh?) like a tube top. Later we were to learn she deflowered him — rock n’ roll once again bringing an end to innocence. I looked for my own reward. I had been too nervous to look up during the set, terrified my sticks would fling with my gaze. But now, I was beginning to feel the rush of my first public success. A tingle rose through my body, and surrounded me with an aura. I milled around, working the crowd. I flitted from group to group, chatting about how long I had been playing drums and plans for my musical career. Surely if I had come this far, this soon, my future was vast. It was time now for me to gracefully accept my due—the worship of an adoring boyfriend. I had to wander around awhile, but I eventually found Joe on the porch—

—with Trish.

He waved cheerfully and clapped. When I walked up his broad hand slapped me on the shoulder and squeezed, commending me. Good ole’ Kel. Meanwhile, he and Trish were standing that tiny, but oh-so significant one inch closer. The man smells bad I wanted to say. Have you noticed? He wears Lee jeans. But Trish didn’t seem to mind, and worse, her lipstick was still perfect.

Excellent show! She said. Terrific! What’s next?

But the way she said it made me realize neither her or Joe had even watched. As Joe and Trish talked without noticing me, I braced for the knife of jealous pain, the self-loathing, the despair. But it never came. Instead I was apart from them,
from this party, from everything. Lightness traveled up my body, expanding now, through my chest and out. The party began to blur and recede as I floated above the fray. Before small talk ruined how I felt, I grabbed a bottle of wine and fled. I ran the entire way back to my apartment, my strong muscular limbs, the ones that could play the drums, carrying me.

My inner tomboy activated, I climbed a tree so I could sit on the roof outside my bedroom. It was late but still warm. Insects drowned out all but the faintest hum of traffic. The neighborhood cat joined me, a mangy tortoiseshell that squawked, who I would eventually adopt and name Bocephus. Together we watched a bat swoop around the streetlight, again and again lunging at the tiny winged flashes. I drank the wine straight from the bottle and bathed in my high.

Soon, Joe would be unzipping that gold dress as Trish’s arched eyebrows rose to meet his wide brown eyes. Here I was hanging out with a bottle of cheap Shiraz, a cat, and a bat. But I was cool and clear. No pain could reach me. I was reminded of the time I had a cavity filled as a kid. Fascinated at the numbness from the Novocaine, I had gnawed the inside of my cheek raw. That night as I went from buzzed to flat out drunk, I mentally chewed at my center, thinking nothing could be so marvelous as the absence of heartache.

Within a week Zipper collapsed as easily as it began. Sarah decided she needed to focus on school and Swedish furniture. The Freshman (Josh?) was lifted by some campus
jam band. Maybe I should have been sad but I wasn’t. I was already sick of the five songs and while the thrill of my first live performance had been a rush, Zipper was going burn up the national scene about as intently as Lauren’s dissertation on the *Metaethics and Queer Theory in Tristram Shandy*.

The day I went to retrieve my drum kit, Lauren followed me around the house, shaking his head. “What happened?” He wanted me to explain. “I thought we were pretty good.” He looked like a confused toddler whose rattle had just been snatched away. “I thought we were pretty good,” he tried again. I shoved random drum parts in a duffel bag. I knew he wanted an answer, but couldn’t think of anything to say. “We were great.” I responded finally. “Thanks so much. It was…fun.”

Another drum lesson: there’s no fast getaway. I tried to work a quick and smooth exit but I didn’t have cases, so we had to carry each piece out separately to the car. Bass drum. Hi hat. Cymbals. Pedal. Floor tom. Rack tom. Snare. Cymbal stands. After the final load, I tossed in the plastic plants and shells that had fallen in the street from my crumbling bass drum seascape. Barbie was mangled in the fishing line, her blonde and orange hair a vinyl clump. The disco ball had shed a few silver panels. I felt bad about the explosion of blue glitter in the basement, on the living room floor, all over the porch, and all in Lauren’s hair, but not bad enough to clean it up. I waved a weak goodbye to Lauren all forlorn on the porch.

"Don't worry, Rock Star Mermaid Barbie," I said. "I'll fix you up when we get home."
I smoothed her hair and shut the hatch.
SECOND BEST

"Real life is, to most men, a long second-best, a perpetual compromise between the ideal and the possible"

~Bertrand Russell

COLONIE, N.Y., 2006

“As the live beat of Beatles classics begins bouncing off the walls of the Elks Lodge, a man with a gray mustache stands before his drum set and speaks in a Liverpool lilt. He tells anecdotes from the old days and takes questions from the audience. The most asked question, of course, is: Why were you replaced?

‘A mystery,’ says Pete Best.”

When I decided to play the drums and become a rock star, the reaction was universally positive.

“Chick drummers are hot,” everyone said. “You’re going to be famous.”

I believed without question. Maybe twenty-three was late to begin one’s career as a rockstar, but I played in Chapel Hill, a music town Rolling Stone proclaimed “the next big scene” every year. This was the nineties. People went from flipping pizzas to waving music awards all the time. Bands, apparently, were always in search of a drummer. And a chick drummer? Whoa.
I drove to practice with a tall boy between my legs, hammering out Nirvana and Soundgarden riffs on the wheel with my drumsticks, giddy with impending glory. Although left-handed, my teacher told me I should play right-handed, so I could jump in and play on whatever kit happened to be available, say blues or basement jams. There might be shows where I could play the headliner's kit and not have to haul my own gear. Drum sets aren’t exactly plug and play, and drummer’s don’t like to have their gear all switched around.

My teacher's suggestion made me see wood paneling and matted down carpets. I didn’t want to be practical. I wanted to tour Europe, wear sparkle glitter pants, and kick cymbals with my thigh high leather boots. I was tired of life as a drudge, of paper cuts and hands that smelled of other people’s food. The thought of escape helped me endure temp jobs by day and waiting tables by night, file after file, tray after tray. As a musician, I wasn’t this piece of chewed up gum under the boot of America but a vehicle for the power of music, and my left-handed kit would be part of my signature.

I insisted on playing lefty. And all that set up and tear down? Well, in a few years I’d have roadies for that.

Welfare economists Richard Lipsey and Kelvin Lancaster would have supported my decision. In their article, "General Theory of Second Best," they argue that unless all necessary conditions are present to implement a policy, one shouldn’t bother with the next-best allocation of resources. Instead, the economist should develop a completely
new model. For example, say you go shopping at a car lot wanting a killer stereo system, but none of cars have the killer stereo system, so the salespersons suggests a car with perfectly fine stereo system. According to Lipsey and Lancaster, you shouldn't compromise. You'd be better off changing the plan completely, for instance, decide you want a sunroof. Or spend that money skateboarding the Great Wall. Compromise will only lead to failure. Instead, make a new plan.

Pete Best had known The Beatles for a year before he was approached by Paul McCartney, joined up, and toured in Hamburg. There the band played four shows a day, seven nights a week, sleeping behind the cinema screen of the Bambi Kimbo theater next to the toilets.

When they came back to Liverpool, Best’s mom helped launch the band to local fame. She ran The Casbah, giving the band a much need venue where they could perform. The Beatles practiced in her basement and she cooked the boys dinner sometimes. The band won a small mob of followers and played shows to screeching girls. Labels began taking interest.

After a live audition, the band was pronounced “interesting” by George Martin and signed by Parlephone, a division of EMI. This was it, the big break, the way out of the basement on to radio and big shows. But with big money investment, came big money scrutiny, and while the marketability of the guitar players wasn’t in (too much) question, management seriously questioned the drummer, on whether his playing was
professional enough. On August 16, 1962, the group's manager, Brian Epstein, called Best into his office.

"Lo and behold, after playing the Cavern one day, Brian Epstein called me into his office and told me that was that," Best later said.

Ringo Starr was in.

The Pete Best of my generation was Chad Channing of Nirvana, a suburban kid from the island of Bainbridge, described by all as a living elf. The easy going lovechild was a welcome reprieve after Nirvana's previous mustachioed, beer-brawling drummers who could have doubled as Aberdeen longshoremen. Channing says he never exactly joined the band. He just kept coming over to jam until the situation took on a sort of permanence. Like Best, Channing toured with Nirvana for two years. He was with the band in San Francisco when they all got the flu, went to the free clinic, and drank forty-ouncers so they could pass out in the van. He hauled his drums for three U.S. tours and seventy thousand miles. No roadies. The band would make enough money to put gas in the van, buy a sandwich, and make it to the next venue.

As Nirvana’s fame began to grow, Channing played a brutal European tour, thirty-six shows in forty-two days. Nirvana rode around crammed in a tiny Fiat van with the band TAD fronted by the three-hundred pound Tad Doyle, who had a stomach disorder. The van had to pull over regularly so he could hurl. Bass player Krist Novoselic was binge drinking at the time, which transformed him into a six foot seven wildman.
Frustrated and tired, Cobain and Novoselic began hurling their instruments at one another on stage, in what people later described as a sort of performance art. At the last show in Rome, Cobain broke down and climbed the speaker stack, and when it started to sway clambered into the rafters, screaming at the audience the entire time. He wound up backstage where someone from the venue was arguing with the tour manager over whether Cobain had broken some microphones. By way of response Cobain grabbed the mikes, threw them on the ground, and trampled them.

“They’re broken,” he said before crumpling into the fetal position and bursting into tears.

Meanwhile Channing unpacked, played, and packed up again.

Channing appears on formative recordings *Bleach* and *Incesticide*, as well as on what was supposed to be the next release, but what instead became the demo that landed Nirvana the big time Geffen contract. During this time Cobain and Novoselic decided Channing didn’t have the ability to hammer out the kind of hard rock riffs they wanted. At least they drove out to Bainbridge and fired him face to face.

“I felt as though I killed somebody,” Cobain said.

Dave Grohl was in.

When I first played, I feared none of these outcomes. I crashed cymbals and pounded the bass drum carried by the power of rock. Early rehearsals and gigs had been a
likewise high. After my first show at a party, I skipped home like I just kissed my first boy. I climbed out on the roof of my apartment and beamed at the stars all glassy-eyed.

I played in a few bands before finding Poor Valentino, what was for me the right mix between rock and pop. In the wake of Kurt Cobain’s death, Katy Chamis had been inspired to write her first original song, “Where Are You Now?” She called up a woman named Annie Matson to play bass and found me through a flyer at the local music store. Poor Valentino had what Gertrude Stein would call a “there, there.” When we played people stopped and stared. Within months we had a buzz going and were playing venues that dictated the local scene—The Cave, Local 506, The Brewery. Even if we weren’t drawing many people (yet), we received the slow approving nod from the soundman—the real test.

Then the bass player’s bipolar disorder kicked in. After a few suicide attempts, Annie left her husband for her high school boyfriend and moved back to her rural hometown in the mountains of Tennessee.

That could have been my first clue that the music business wouldn’t be easy.

Once Annie left, Poor Valentino began the lineup rotation. Players joined because they liked the music, but we weren’t their first band and wouldn’t be their last. One problem became that our band was good enough to highlight local musicians who had otherwise been ignored. Soon as a potentially better project came along, they left. Perhaps you’ve heard of The Butchies or Caitlin Cary (aka Whiskeytown aka Ryan Adams). Probably you haven’t heard of Brown. (I’m not saying these choices were
always wise). I’d always assumed we’d be the little indie band that made it big, but the pressure to put together a professional band that would be a vehicle for Katy increased.

Within a month of firing Best, The Beatles became a musical juggernaut. Fans began mobbing the band members’ parents, begging for a sock, a strand of hair, a bar of used soap—anything that had touched a Beatle. Riots broke out at their shows. The screaming girls multiplied by exponents, so overcome they left pee on the seats. By 1963, Beatlemania was in full effect. Beatle wigs were for sale in windowshops and the band is credited with saving the corduroy industry. The second LP, *With the Beatles*, had advance orders of 250,000, which beat Elvis Presley’s *Blue Hawaii* at 200,000. Having conquered England and Europe, the band made their infamous flight over the Atlantic. On February 7, 1964, WMCA, a radio station from New York reported, “It is now 6:30 am Beatle time. They left London thirty minutes ago. They’re out over the Atlantic Ocean heading for New York. The temperature is 32 Beatle degrees.”

10,000 hysterical teenagers greeted the Fab Four at Kennedy Airport. A record 73 million Americans watched The Beatles play the Ed Sullivan show. The band became internationally famous and a riot broke out in Manila over a perceived snub of their leader’s invitation to meet. The Queen of England made them Members of the Order of the British Empire. The band went on to record such classics as *Rubber Soul* and *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and I can stop now because you, along with the rest of the world, know this story, right?
Best had a job at a bakery for eighteen pounds a week and lived with his mother.

In 1998, I was backstage waiting to play a show with the band that would make me famous. Poor Valentino had landed this break, a series of gigs opening for Cravin’ Melon, who had just signed to Mercury Records. The band played to packed houses and had an actual rider that provided a ready room, sandwiches, a cooler of cold Budweiser, a 1.5 liter of Jack Daniels, and TV. They worked with one of the few professional managers in the area, Dick Hodgen, who was scoping us out. Hodgen had the potential to take us to the next level. This gig was an audition. More time had passed and now Poor Valentino had two top Raleigh guy players on lead guitar and bass. These guys didn't want a little drummer girl that could; they wanted record contracts, and began to call Katy and argue that I should be replaced.

“We need to clear the air.”

That’s how the Katy would begin conversations that turned my stomach to stone. “Clear the air” meant I was about hear about how I needed to start making the grade or I’d get fired. Katy songs and her persona were thought to have a chance—if she had the right band behind her. I might have had a certain charisma and talent, but I knew from the beginning I could never be a studio musician.

When I picked the drums, I didn’t know how freaking hard they would be to play. The drummer is in charge of keeping time even if other players are all over the place. A glitch in the beat can derail the entire band. The drummer has to be seamless, a
continuous font of energy, a metronome, a foundation. While sometimes the object of admiration, more often the drummer is the band’s donkey—the drudge loading her bass drum, rack tom, floor tom, snare, cymbal bag, and hardware case to and fro, keeping the band together on stage even if the guitar players are completely freaking out.

Over time I figured out that while the singer/songwriter is the band, anyone else can be replaced. A drummer might be kept on just because the band can’t find anyone else yet. People had always said, "you'll always have gig, everyone always needs a drummer." Now I knew that bands always need a drummer because bands are always firing their drummers, even hot, chick drummers. One word and I would be a blip in music history—years of rehearsal, promotional legwork, gigs—kaput.

The consensus from the other band members (after what I gathered was hours of debate) was that I was almost good enough. I had the talent but I needed to practice harder. I began to live in the crosshairs, my ability to go national in question. I paid for lessons, woodshedded, and improved, but there were still many clearings of the air. As the pressure mounted, I became haunted by the fates of Pete Best and Chad Channing. What if we were right on the brink of fame and then I got canned? I’d be waiting tables while I watched my former band travel the world.

The show wasn't just an audition for the band, but a test for me. If Dick Hodgen said I had to go was that it?
I waited for our set, drank Cravin’ Melon’s booze, and watched the Winter Olympics to soothe my nerves. It was much easier to watch other people's fates in the balance.

Abel Kiviat, the 1,500m silver medalist in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, had the race until Arnold Jackson came from behind to beat him by one-tenth of a second. 70 years later, at age 91, Kiviat said, "I wake up sometimes and say: “What the heck happened to me?’ It's like a nightmare."

With "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Cobain’s screams shattered the synth-pop eighties facade, his music bonding all of us who had been alone in our little houses made of ticky tacky. Even if the linoleum gleamed, many of our families were shams. Miserable, we consumed chemicals meant for cleaning toilets and cut ourselves. The music industry, for all its stopgaps and manufacturing devices, couldn’t silence Cobain, couldn’t mix the torment out of his persona.

*Nevermind* was released in September of 1991 and went Gold and Platinum by November. The record went Diamond in March 1999. They made the cover of the *Rolling Stone*. The month *Nevermind* reached number one, *Billboard* proclaimed, "Nirvana is that rare band that has everything: critical acclaim, industry respect, pop radio appeal, and a rock-solid college/alternative base." Today kids still wear the same Nirvana shirts people did twenty years ago.
Dave Grohl became a household name. He remains a rock icon with Foo Fighters and when he plays The David Letterman Show Dave comes out from behind his desk and shakes Grohl's hand.

Chad Channing is still trying to break out.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz in his book the Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less discusses the negative effects of living in a culture based that the premise that we can choose our identity every day of our life. Choice is supposed to be liberating, but too much choice paralyzes. He discusses how he went to his grocery store and counted 175 cereal options. Curious, I went to my local Kroger and tallied 233 varieties, excluding 62 granolas and 58 hot cereals. The very act of counting made my heart accelerate from anxiety.

“Dear god,” said the young woman employee who was opening stacks of cardboard boxes, “people freak out all over me if their one brand is out of stock. They wig."

I guess so, given that they now have to decide between 232 other options.

Schwartz challenges the cultural assumption that choice is better. Instead of collapsing under the pressure of choice, we should give ourselves a break, and be happy the grocery store has cereal at all.
“That was what was really disappointing, knowing what I was going to miss. I did regret everything at first. When they kicked me in the teeth I did wish I’d never set eyes on them. I’d have just had an ordinary job, perhaps teaching, and never known this anxiety,” Pete Best, 1968.

That Poor Valentino might never be famous I could probably handle, but that the band would become famous without me was unthinkable. I'd see my best friend on television and hear her music everywhere, listening to another drummer play the songs I had rehearsed until I broke blisters to skin. I would become an object of schadenfreude, probably have to leave town.

“What happened?” customers would ask as I took their burrito order. “Weren’t you in that band I saw play the Grammys?”

Or worse, people, not recognizing me because I was such a nobody, would want to tell me about this new band Poor Valentino, and how amaaaaaazing they were. I wasn't sure I could survive that. I knew I'd become that weird person at the bar who can't shut up about what could have been. So I plotted and schemed. I made case studies of Best and Channing, determined to figure out where they went wrong. Lack of chops was the official word in both cases. Yet the less quantifiable reason was that neither quite fit in.

I read how Pete Best was generally described as an outsider, aloof. Astrid Kircherr, a German photographer famous for her early band photos and for inventing the Beatle cut said, “I liked Pete Best. I liked him very much, but he was so very very
shy... Even in those days, one tended to forget him. He was on his own, really.” While Lennon, McCartney and Harrison bonded, Best remained apart. He wasn’t good at what would become the infamous Beatle banter, and he was the only member not to get the Beatle haircut.

Channing’s hair might have sported the signature greasy, strands of grunge but from the beginning, he was an outsider, too. While Cobain and Novoselic worshipped at the altar of punk, Channing was a hippie kid. He came from a nice family and was fairly well adjusted while Cobain was known to sleep under a bridge. Channing wasn’t edgy or dark, or complicated, and looked like an an extra for a Lord of the Rings. While Novoselic and Cobain were having long conversations or launching musical instruments at one another, Channing was in his own world, often seen talking to himself. Of the three, he was the third.

Lesson learned. Nobody fit in Poor Valentino more than me. I was funny, loveable, and winsome with moptop hair like a Beatle, while concurrently dark, wry, and sincere like a grunge superstar. When I was told I needed lessons I paid for them. When informed I needed better gear I bought it, working up to about $4,000 worth. I never cancelled or bailed on gigs or rehearsals. I made flyers and invited my friends to shows. Life was hard to imagine without me.

Decca passing on the Beatles for The Tremeloes is considered one of the greatest mistakes in music history. Dick Rowe, the person responsible, has been infamously
quoted as saying “guitar bands are on the way out” and “the Beatles have no future in show business.” Decca signed The Tremeloes instead.

Nirvana’s original label, Sub Pop, fared better. Founders Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt cashed in on recognizing the unique potential of the Seattle grunge scene. Along with Nirvana, they signed other artists such as Soundgarden and Dinosaur Jr., but as their vision came true, their pockets weren’t deep enough to sustain national growth. Everyone bailed for major labels. The only reason Sub Pop survived was that they had signed a deal before Nevermind, which gave them $75,000, 2 percent of sales, and the Sub Pop logo on the back of every copy. Ironically, the label only received this cut because the band hounded Poneman and Pavitt until they put their relationship on paper.

Dick Hodgen had signed Cravin’ Melon to a development deal in the wake of Hootie & The Blowfish’s international success. The band was also from South Carolina and had a similar soft rock sound. A few years earlier, Hodgen had been approached by Hootie and Co. to be their manager. He produced the demo of what would be the band’s breakthrough hit, “Hold My Hand,” but then passed on a management contract, telling his intern to take a shot.

Before Cravin’ Melon, Hodgen had almost made the big time managing Johnny Quest, whose white boy funk almost coasted in the wake of the Red Hot Chile Peppers. JQ even had a minor hit, “The Heisman” about a woman who almost wants to sleep with
a guy, but then doesn’t. Crowds would “do the Heisman” during the chorus, shouting and shoving their hands out to mimic the imaginary booty block.

The band of Hodgen’s heart was the Flat Duo Jets, a two man showcase for genius Dexter Rombweber. I remember Dexter’s shows as mesmerizing, epiphanic blasts of rockabilly. His Pentecostal, sonic barrier-breaking guitar riffs were so intense I would have to leave. The break came when Hodgen got Dexter on David Letterman, back when that could make a band. But Dexter Romweber’s intensity, in part, came from his schizophrenia. He broke down soon after.

Hodgen became a bit infamous locally for leaping in the double dutch jumprope that one beat late. The manager of second best.

Poverty gets old. Obscurity gets old. Going national takes more than a band posting flyers around town. Going national takes a producer, manager, booking agent, graphic designer, promoter, distribution...and so artists become dependent on business people. Business people add and subtract on their calculators—they don’t evaluate with their hearts. Often, business people are actually right about aesthetic changes a band needs to make. They can see what a band needs to do to improve because they don’t have emotional attachments. It's doesn't matter the some schmoe loaned the band money or toured in a van through Saskatchewan or let everyone practice in his mom's basement.

Brass tacks come into play when it’s time to record, for no matter how many practices, shows, dreams, drinks, and road trips shared, the record is what requires financial investment, either by the band or the label. The record is what goes on the radio,
what people will listen to in the homes, cars, while working out at the gym or walking to class, twenty years later when they want to remember back when. That Best and Channing had been fired right before the breakout record was what haunted me the most.

In recordings we were making to try to land a deal, I was criticized for being off beat. I would also receive a barrage of directions telling me how I should play particular patterns and fills instead of what I was doing. Often these directions came in the form of “more kaplatz and less kapbloom, with a little tikka tikka tikka.” The nights before sessions I would lie awake and hyperventilate.

I would put on headphones and play to a metronome, practicing rolls over and over, trying to mimic the sound of helicopter blades chopping. I studied Ringo Starr and Dave Grohl’s drum parts inside and out, learning all their beats and their fills, not only turning the parts into muscle memory but trying to be them—needing to know what it was to live inside the head of success.

_He’s not the first_

_He’s not the first_

_But he’s the second best secret agent in the whole wide world_

_Not number one_

_But not the worst_

_He’s just the second best secret agent in the whole wide world_

Sammy Davis Jr.
The night of our audition for Dick Hodgen, our lyrical, artsy dirge band bombed before the room of polo shirted, khaki-clad fans called “Melonheads.” They stared at us, bored, Bud Lite longnecks in hand as they waited patiently to get their roots rock on with a band whose hit single was “Sweet Tea.”

“Meh,” was Hodgen’s post-show report.

But he continued to let us open for Cravin' Melon, and we landed a regular gig at the Camp LeJeune Marine Base. The marines loved us. There was talk of a national base tour. The infinite series of dangling carrots is the particular torment of the music business, and Poor Valentino reached for some juicy ones. We would get noticed by someone who had potential access to a big label. We would land another spot opening for a national act. We would find out that Frank Heath, owner of famous venue Cat’s Cradle, liked us, which is getting blessed by the indie rock pope. There was always another show on the calendar, this feeling we were catching on, a profile coming up in the paper, a chance for someone who knew someone to discover us, the small, starry-eyed group of fans who insisted we were their favorite band.

One rumor for Best’s dismissal was that the other members (specifically Paul) were jealous of the attention Best received from the ladies. That Best’s mother was the greatest proponent of this theory tends to undermine this idea. Still. While we’ve all grown accustomed to Starr’s winsome charm, Best was a young Marlon Brando with
chiseled cheekbones and a sultry stare. Female fans took to the streets when they heard the news of his replacement. “Pete is best!” and “Starr, never. Best, forever!” they chanted.

In recordings Best’s drumming isn’t bad, solid with a good thud—if a bit dense. Best is heavy on the toms with very little cymbal work, which makes the sound bottom heavy. Another tic is that his arrangements are this tiny bit off. In an early version of “Money,” Best’s surf beat places single snare hit on the “and” of two and then the four, which weighs down the beat, when he needed two peppy, quarter note snare hits on beat two. Best needed to be more Coldplay less Beach Boys. In a recording of “Love Me Do,” the beat moves along until Best flips the beat upside down during the bridge for variety, except the switch comes across more as a mistake than a neat trick.

I sometimes dream of an alternate reality, where I travel back in time to Hamburg, grab him by the arm and say, “listen to arrangement suggestions, get the bloody haircut, and go drinking with the lads, ye daft ass.”

Or maybe the firing of Best was inevitable:

“It was a big issue at the time, how we 'dumped' Pete. And I do feel sorry for him, because of what he could have been on to; but as far as we were concerned, it was strictly a professional decision. If he wasn't up to the mark—slightly in our eyes, and definitely in the producer's eyes—then there was no choice. But it was still very difficult. It is one of the most difficult things we ever had to do,” Paul McCartney.

Or maybe not:
“I never suggested that Pete Best must go. All I said was that for the purposes of the Beatles' first record I would rather use a session man. I never thought that Brian Epstein would let him go. He seemed to be the most saleable commodity as far as looks went. It was a surprise when I learned that they had dropped Pete. The drums were important to me for a record, but they didn't matter much otherwise. Fans don't pay particular attention to the quality of the drumming,” George Martin.

Ringo Starr suffered bouts of insecurity for years. Clearly, the band wasn’t afraid to replace a player. When he went in to record “Love Me Do,” he was all nerves. George Martin, in fact, had a pro waiting in case Starr couldn’t make the grade.

After seventeen takes Martin was satisfied, but after the break, hired gun Andy White was sitting on the drums.

“They started ‘PS I Love You,’” said Starr years later. “The other bloke played the drums and I was given the maracas. I thought, that’s the end. They’re doing a Pete Best on me.”

With Channing his arrangements were spot on, but when it came to hitting the drums Grohl pounded him into dust. Grohl played Channing’s parts pretty much lick for lick, only much, much better. There’s not much else to say.

Psychologist Dan Gilbert’s theory Second Best claims that accepting life’s “second bests” is the key to real happiness, since our concept of “best” is generally flawed. We are a country obsessed with fame, convinced that if we could only win the
lottery or that gold medal, our problems would be solved. The reality is far from the truth. Gilbert argues that we are generally terrible at judging what would make us happy. Lottery winners, for example, are infamous for leading notoriously miserable lives. Part of the problem is that we overestimate the happiness X will bring, which leads to disappointment, i.e. unhappiness.

Gilbert makes the distinction between natural happiness, which occurs when we achieve a goal, and synthetic happiness, which we create from what we have. At first glance, synthetic happiness would seem inferior, but Gilbert argues the opposite. By way of proof he cites people how people who have suffered serious setbacks—cancer, prison, bankruptcy—or, say—fired from a band who achieves international stardom, often describe themselves as better, happier people for the experience, “the best thing that ever happened to them,” even. These people have freed themselves from the burden of external outcomes. They have learned to create happiness from within.

Gilbert’s argument complements Dr. Schwartz’s views on choice. Choice, claims Gilbert, is the enemy of synthetic happiness. Ruminating over about what could have been or what could be makes us miserable. The key to happiness is not getting what you want, but enjoying what you have.

“I’m happier than I would have been with The Beatles,” Pete Best, 1994.
“Even when I look at it now, I don’t regret anything. I’d probably be pretty damn wealthy, but would I be happy? There’s a question mark there,” Chad Channing, 1998.

“I loved playing with those guys. But I was young and stupid and got carried away, you know?...But it’s like playing the Lotto—you can get five numbers and not the sixth and you’re like, ‘God, one more number!’ I don’t regret a thing. I’ll be like—what’s that guy from the Beatles?” Aaron Burckhard, former drummer of Nirvana.

Chapel Hill never was the next big scene, not the way Athens, Austin, or Seattle were. The big stars—Ben Folds or Ryan Adams—left town to make their mark. The next big scene was the internet.

Katy quit music, went back to school and became a respiratory therapist.

Dexter Romweber still struggles with mental illness and plays the occasional show.

The Tremeloes are still together and playing shows.

So is Cravin’ Melon. Dick Hodgen still manages them even though Mercury dropped the band after their first major league EP wasn't major league. From last I knew, Hodgen's greatest financial success would be the residuals from his producer’s contract of the demo of “Hold My Hand.” His son was born with a rare disease and that money footed the insane medical bills.
I wasn't ever fired. I suppose the irony of Poor Valentino (for those *This is Spinal Tap* fans) was that the band couldn't get rid of the drummer. After ten years, I was told I had the chops. Poor Valentino developed a pro enough sound that we attracted a lawyer who wanted to sign us and work some label deals. Then yet another guitar player quit for yet another band and this time, that was that. I did play on the one official LP release, financed by my credit card. I have five boxes of CDs in the basement. My $1200 silver bass drum now functions as one badass end table.

I still play the odd show. People seem confused I’m not famous. What? But you're a chick drummer? Chick drummers are hot.

The Pete Best Band still plays old hits from his Liverpool heyday.

"Let's take you back," he tells the crowd, "to the days when I used to play with a bunch of guys by the names of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison."
SURE AS KILIMANJARO RISES LIKE OLYMPUS ABOVE THE SERENGETI

I was contemplating which movie to watch in bed when Anne-marie—the party girl grim reaper—rapped on my door. Fair warning: when this woman arrives with her crook and shotglass, you might as well arrange for the wake of your next day, a time to spend moaning while clutching a box of Popeye’s fried chicken.

“Can’t,” I said. “Tomorrow is my dad’s seventieth birthday party and I have to drive up to Tuscaloosa.”

“You can sleep over and leave for your parents in the morning. You do not want to miss tonight. It’s going to be amaazaaazing.”

Anne-marie and I had moved to New Orleans two months ago so we could work on our novels (read: unemployed), following in our minds the footsteps of our Southern forepersons Faulkner and Welty—only in lousier apartments. My friend was infamous for proclaiming events: dive bars, concerts, road trips, after-hours-naked-man-dance-parties etc., amazing. Sometimes they were. Sometimes we recruits wound up lost and drunk, wandering strange roads then fearing for our lives as we fled bullets fired from Hemingway’s suicide house in Ketchum, Idaho. Other times we just wound up lost and drunk.

Usually I was up for the adventure. The catch was that I was supposed to arrive at noon in Tuscaloosa the next day for a family Sunday dinner. Clear-eyed. Sober. Presenting some faint resemblance to the framed picture of four-year-old me in a ruffled dress clutching an Easter Basket, dutifully presenting an adorable toothy grin to the
middle distance. I was turning forty and had a long history as The Family Disappointment, slipping from A student to person of promise to itinerant who worked odd jobs to support her cockamamie dreams. My baby boomer parents had paid for piano lessons, camps, and then college so I could make them proud as a professional of some sort. Instead I lived paycheck to paycheck. The least my father deserved was to not have his middle-aged daughter roll in bleary-eyed and hungover.

“How far is this place?” I asked

“How far.”

“It’s after ten now.”

“Here,” said Anne-marie, handing me an Endymion go-cup Bourbon and Coke.

“You’re coming.”

The gulf air was warm and alive as we rolled out of New Orleans, over narrow bridges to Slidell, and into the country. Anne-marie and I followed Jay who was driving his cohorts, Bradley and Bryan, into the night. Four years ago Katrina had stripped the pine trees of southern Mississippi. The tops still had their needles, creating an eerie gap along the bottom as the trunks kept growing. I had grown up in the Deep South but hadn’t lived in the area for twenty years. It’d been awhile since I’d seen a nightsky of stars. The mossy smell and insect chorus made me feel like a cruising teenager again, that tingly feeling beneath the skin that boded a life of possibility.
Our adventure hinged Anne-marie’s boyfriend, Jay, who ran political campaigns. That fall he would get Mary Landrieu re-elected to another term of Louisiana senator. A few years back Jay had worked for Walter Boasso, a Ross Perot-type who financed his own campaign for governor of Louisiana (he lost). On a whim, one of Jay’s cronies had called their old boss to see “what was up,” Southern code for could-the-old-gang-come-party-at-Boasso’s-multimillion-dollar-estate-in-Poplarville, Mississippi? Tonight our mission was a quest to his backwoods ranch worthy of a John Grisham novel. Jay drove a truck, and a bill had passed that very day making it legal to ride in the back. Folks were out celebrating, including cronies Bryan and Bradley.

_Woooooo!_ They yelled in the bed of Jay’s Ford, toasting fellow joyriders with their Pabsts.

_Wooooo!_ Answered their brethren into the night.

Two hours in we turned off the interstate. As we drove, turning onto increasingly remote roads into the deep Mississippi woods chasing grown men shotgunning beers in the back of a truck, I began to question my decision, the question being, had I signed up for Mission Awesome or Mission Disaster? Several turns in I knew there was no way I would ever find my way back out without help. I was in it now—like it or not.

We passed an endless series of small white homes and trailers and fields. My buzz was fading and I began to fret over seeing my family tomorrow. “Eating dinner like a family” had been a longstanding tradition, but this supposed sign of emotional health hadn’t always been a bonding experience so much as an experience in bondage. My
family has two acceptable dinner topics: 1) Jobs with benefits 2) How nice this is sitting
down like a family. There’s been many a meal eaten to the backdrop of clinking
silverware as real subjects remain untouched, such as how by the age of forty I had yet to
ever hold a job with benefits. Ours was not the big Southern family spinning yarns and
passing the cornbread. My parents had moved to Alabama from Buffalo and packed a
giant helping of Yankee Irish Catholic guilt, along with a tradition of eating mutant, waxy
rutabaga which, after lingering away for years at the A & P waiting for the lone northern
shopper, required a machete to chop and hours to boil.

Since I left home, family dinners had become even more complicated when Dad
went vegetarian. In teenage retaliation, my brother’s diet came to resemble that of a
Yukon wolf pack. Mom had been left to negotiate this daily battle and she hates to cook.
(Quote: “You know what’s cruelty to animals? Forcing a wife to prepare two meals for
twenty years.”) Tomorrow’s lunch would begin exactly at noon and the Queen Anne
dining room table would be set with china and cloth napkins in rings. One bottle of Sutter
Home White Zinfandel would be decanted in crystal and we would each receive one
carefully poured glass. There’d be plenty of veggies and starch but we’d also have either
a ham or a Butterball turkey breast—on a separate plate. To our discomfort, Dad would
ogle that plate of sliced meat like Oliver Twist. That he had actually been raised in an
orphanage made this situation worse. I would spend the meal fighting back this continual
urge to plead with him to take just one bite, to enjoy himself. My brother would be
building a great wall of meat while my mother would pretend not to notice anything. We all would be praying someone had brought a second bottle of White Zinfandel.

Still, tomorrow would be my father’s seventy-fifth birthday. Unlike dads who had run off with the secretary or worse, my dad had been a good dad—taking me out for banana splits and showing up for piano recitals.

“Stop sighing,” Anne-marie said.

“Easy for an Episcopalian to say,” I said.

We finally passed what must have been the right trailer on the right pond with the right plastic goose family next to the right decorative windmill that signaled the correct right turn. The bumpy road transformed into a smoothly paved driveway. At the end a sprawling, rough-hewn lumber lodge ruled over a lake, as if a massive toddler had gone apeshit with Lincoln logs. I could not see where the house began or where it ended.

The car clock said 12:37 as I turned off the engine.

Walter Boasso swaggered out and extended his paw. He was textbook All The King’s Men material—jowly, large, and loud with a thick head of curly brown hair and a thick Cajun accent. The men gladhanded and barked greetings at one another. Boasso, “The Big Guy,” had grown up poor in St. Bernard parish of New Orleans. He started working the docks the age of twelve, and went into business for himself at nineteen. The legend was that he built an industry with a “rubber hose and a box of Tide” when he hit upon the unglamorous but profitable scheme of scrubbing out shipping containers. Twenty years later, he sold Boasso America for sixty million.
The inside of the ranch house was defined by a great hall bisected by a giant long table. There was stone hearth built into the stone wall that rose up twenty feet. The setting was ideal for Hrothgar’s warriors to guzzle mead and boast in heroic couplets. Heads of mounted African game animals surrounded the room, creating an eerie sense of being circled by the hunted, as if they were plotting their revenge. Brian threw a suitcase of Pabst on the massive table and _pssshht_ sounds soon echoed through the room.

The men gossiped politics and mourned Boasso’s loss of the governor’s race. When I said I was a writer he shined his millionaire energy on me and I couldn’t help but glow—that’s how these people are. Then it came out I was not a political journalist, but a creative writer.

“Oh.”

The Big Guy turned back to the men—my chance for fame and fortune crushed like that. I decided I was bored of their tales of political warrior deeds anyway. Curious and in need of a cocktail, I wandered to the kitchen, feeling like the village maid tiptoeing around the giant’s castle. Maybe I’d find a closet of ex-wives’ skeletons or a cookbook opened to the recipe, “How to Prepare Man.” I wanted to to know: what did a kitchen look like when money wasn’t an object? I had a good idea of how the unemployed writer’s larder appeared—one half-jar of Dijon mustard and a fridge of empty plastic bags with three leaves of rotten vegetables in each one. After months of red beans and rice, I was hoping for stashes of brie, Marcona almonds, and smoked salmon. Instead I found memories of grade school and summer camp. The kitchen was armed with
industrial stainless steel appliances and storage racks crammed with all the soups, condiments, cookies, and chips of my childhood, only in overwhelmingly large containers. I picked up a behemoth box of Tuna Helper. I could practically see the sturdy women in hairnets stirring up vats of goop. The liters of high end bourbon on the counter, however, held promise. I gluggalugged myself a pour in the spirit of largesse that surrounded me.

Thus refueled, I poked in the silvery, commercial walk-ins that lined an entire wall. All the restaurants I’d worked in for the past twenty years had one of these. Boasso had six. The cooler held the Americana milk, plastic wrapped cheeses, and Cokes. Yawn. In the freezers I finally uncovered some millionaire weird—six-foot deep lockers packed with sealed meat in plastic—sausages, steaks, ribs, ground meat, loins, and parts unknown. If a pride of lions showed up for dinner, we were ready.

Back at the table the men were still chatting politics, the latest campaign, and blah blah blah. Experience taught me that my bourbon levels were about to hit the tipping point. I could quit now, say I’d seen a giant table and a bunch of gazelle heads, and still be the good daughter tomorrow.

“Don’t go to bed,” Anne-marie warned.

Sometimes I really hated Anne-marie’s eerie party bail E.S.P. She topped off my glass with more bourbon, knowing I can't leave an unfinished drink. I had to admit, there was air of expectation, this feeling that we’d driven all this way for more than sitting
around and getting housed. Bradley and Bryan’s knees were bouncing up and down, like little boys about to drive bumper cars.

Even so, the men were boring me and I was about to call it a night for real when Boasso decided he had teased us long enough. It was time let the boys have their fun and the girls could come along. He rose to greet his court, placing his two hands on the table, ready to pronounce his verdict for the evening.

“Y’all ready to take a ride?”

“Hells to the yeah, Boasso,” Bryan said, cracking open another beer. Bradley jumped up and grabbed the mostly depleted suitcase of Pabst.

“You’ll see,” Jay said. Anne-marie lit a cigarette and gave me a knowing look, although I knew she had no idea.

The assembled posse ambled outside, the thick night air hitting us like hot pillows in the face. We took a short walk down a gavel path that led to a giant white canvas hangar. Here were all the millionaire toys. Jet skis. Motorcycles. Three and Four Wheelers. SUVs. I began praying I wouldn’t be asked to skydive as I just wasn’t up for that and didn’t care what Anne-marie said. I would stand up to her on this. "No way, Anne-marie!" I'd say and stalk off, drawing the line and going to bed like a sensible person. But instead, we stopped at two monster trucks, like, as seen on TV jumping and smashing over other monster trucks. The dudes made for the biggest one and began monkeying around the motored beast as if it were a jungle gym.
“There here’s the Critter Getter,” said the Big Man and sure enough, I looked up to see those words emblazoned on the front. I had just landed in Cajun Disneyworld.

The truck was the size of my studio apartment, but with bench seating and a stripper pole. The top had iron bars and no windows like a jeep. The wheels came up to our heads. Boasso unfolded a ladder so we could all crawl up and we loaded up ice-filled coolers of beer, coke, and whisky. We each picked a bench and settled in. Boasso, after a few misfires, got the engine started and we bumbled and rumbled out way outside. The Gritter Getter exited through a series of electronic gates that we patiently waited for and then, boom! we offroaded into the woods. Boasso hit the gas and the wind began to cool us off. As truck gathered speed our bodies flopped around like rag dolls.

There’s advantages to Cajun Disneyworld—a ton of booze and Tom Petty blasting on the Bose speakers. Unlike the Jungle Cruise, you don’t have to fasten your seatbelt or keep your limbs inside the vehicle. Brian swung around on the stripper poll while Bradley hung his body out the side window and yelled into the night. The moon shone white and high.

“Ooh, yeah! All, right!” Tom Petty beckoned.

We squealed and screamed as the truck bounced over hills and gunned through puddles. Shrubbery tickled our bodies as we passed through overgrowth. High on the Power of Whee we were kids again, wild in the woods in our secret world, getting in trouble, ignoring the calls from our mothers to get back this instant.

Anne-marie turned around and gave me a knowing look.
Okay, fine, I had to grant this win—Amaaaazing. Her and Jay giggled and clinked beers. They would be engaged within six months.

Our first stop was Boasso’s next money making scheme—farm raised tilapia. The idea had something to do with how he would raise the fish organically, by legal standards, and still make a ton of money. I don’t know what I’d thought farm raised fish meant before, but I suppose I’d envisioned netted off areas in lakes or streams. Instead I saw another football field sized tent, this one filled with large white, circular plastic tubs. Right now the tubs were empty, but I envisioned future swarms of squirmy fish all swimming on top of one another. The image didn’t mesh so well with all the bourbon. I wondered if tilapia were like goldfish, unable to remember swimming from one end to the other, or if they were eventually driven mad by boredom and claustrophobia before ending their short, wretched lives as the filling of Po’ Boy sandwich.

Whatever my private thoughts, I faked what I hoped was the acceptable level of awe. Debating the moral dilemmas of pisciculture seemed inhospitable about now and it wasn’t as if I were out saving the world by joyriding in a monster truck getting .02 miles to the gallon. Soon we were back on the dirt roads, wagging and bouncing around, pleased as puppies in a basket.

After awhile the truck stopped again. As the wait time stretched out I realized that we weren’t just pausing, but that Boasso had deliberately brought us here. He shone a searchlight out in the woods.

“Come out, come out,” chanted Bradley and Bryan.
What was supposed to come out? I stared into the stripped pines with vines twined around the bare trunks. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“There!” Brian yelled.

I cranked my head. A teeming herd of silvery wildebeests galloped across the open field, their glossy muscular bodies united in motion as they charged through the Kudzu covered Mississippi backcountry. Then they were gone.

Wait, had I seen what I just saw?

“Holy shit,” said Anne-marie.

We continued to drive and stop as Boasso showed us his exotic animal collection—elk, okapi, gazelles—okay, closer to the truth is that I would have to say these were animals unknown to me, but I knew they weren’t deer. The animals were all living free range, contained by the complex system of electric fences we kept have to stop and go through. I wondered if a wildebeest could know it was out of place, that it was supposed to be grazing the grassy plains of Namibia, not traipsing through pine straw.

“I lost most of my stock with Katrina,” Boasso said. “But they are rebuilding.”

Apparently, I thought, as yet another herd ran by. These were not endangered species, at least not on this ranch. Still, the phrase "lost stock" stuck in my throat. I tried not to think of all the bloated corpses from the flood. Of course, all the possums and squirrels and such would have died as well, and I hadn’t worried about them very much. Maybe to think that a gazelle death was worse than that of a raccoon was speciesist of
me, but the thinning of these exotic animal herds was a manmade event, not one of nature.

Again we were at a standstill, only this time blocked by a herd of small, horned, striped fawn-like creatures that had stopped in front of the truck. The idle of the engine rumbled like a jet plane on the runway. They stared at us, mesmerized by the light. I half-expected the narrator of Wild Kingdom to replace Tom Petty on the speakers, but then I didn’t need the deep, reassuring persona of a white man to explain that these were the same eyes I had seen circling the table in Boasso’s great hall, only real instead of glass marbles.

The animals weren’t only the reason we had stopped. Before us lay wide pool of water formed by a recent thunderstorm. It seemed a bit deep as well as wide, maybe too deep even for a monster truck, but from what I’d learned of Boasso, reverse wasn’t an option.

Boasso hit the gas and Bryan grabbed the stripper pole. The Critter Gitter charged and the animals scattered. Water surged up in a wave and we shrieked in mock protest at the drenching. This was the finale! Perfect! Just like Disney! Then the left front tire hit a hidden, massive bump that made us all fly up in a way that wasn’t fun. With a lurch the truck tipped. Our faces went blank with fear. This was the Big One. The left side fully levitated in a slow but inexorable motion and we grabbed what we could. I taken over by a strange dizzy sensation as we pitched, all of us suspended together as the truck hung, suspended on one side. This was God stuff, the Jurassic Park moment where
we learned the consequences of tampering with Mother Nature. For our sins we all
deserved to get thrown from this abomination of a vehicle and trampled by exotic
animals.

    Not here, I thought. Not now. Not me.

    Somehow Boasso snatched Bradley’s shirt to keep him from flying out the
front—the moment’s difference between life and turned to mincemeat by a giant wheel.
Bradly hung there in Boasso's giant hand for a long terrible moment before the truck
began to slowly right itself and landed with a rubbery thud. Boasso moved forward and
we cleared the water. The group was silent, the only sound the rumbly motor of the
Critter Getter, broken after a while by the sound of Bryan cracking open another beer.

    For the trip back, we rode in silence. The horizon was faint pink. Near the house
we passed two zebras in a stall.

    “Now zebras, those’ll cost you,” Boasso said.

    I was staring at the clock when it rang, not having slept a minute of the two hours
allowed, my mind beginning to clear up and ruminate, piecing together where all that
freezer meat had come from, realizing I’d probably sat where animal corpses had lain
before me. I cursed everyone else, who would sleep until noon and then have a giant
brunch where last night’s near death experience would now make for a hysterical story.
Ha. I staggered up, rousted out some toothpaste from a drawer, and brushed with my
finger before beginning my walk of shame. The rabbit warren halls held room after room
furnished with bunkbeds—all empty. Later I would learn that Boasso rented out to Ted Nugent types who paid for hunting vacations. For awhile, Boasso had apparently even run an online website where a paying customer could virtually shoot the game, while a real person at the ranch used a real gun.

Somehow I navigated my way out from the boondocks to the interstate that would take me to Tuscaloosa. Maybe with a little cucumber eye cream, face powder, and pink lip stain I could pass for human, but a wary glance in the gas station bathroom mirror revealed that I had slept in my party dress and looked it.

My father’s birthday lunch had already begun when I lurched in, faking good cheer and still drunk. In an effort to enliven the awkwardness of my late arrival, I tried to recapture my story of the monster truck and the herd of okapi galloping across a Katrina ravaged landscape but the story bombed. I was trying to tell a bar story at Sunday dinner. Truth was I reeked of bad behavior, bourbon, and African game. To everyone’s relief I stopped talking mid-sentence about the rising costs of zebra. I had sobered up enough to realize I was still slurring from the night before.

“Isn’t this great,” I said. “How we all get to sit together like this.”

I passed Dad the gravy and I could see the right corner of my brother’s eye twitch. Yet another family dinner complication is that Dad is a Gravytarian—while he doesn’t eat meat, he smothered his plate in gravy. This contradiction drives my brother insane but as I’m relieved to see Dad eat the calories. He’s always been thin but with age he can look gaunt. I could see the bones of his skin against his cheek. As a little girl every night
when he came home from work, I ran screaming “Daddy!” and he always, always took the time to lift me in the air and tickle my neck with his mustache. I couldn't help but root for Dad to just take that slab of meat, but after last night I couldn't even take a piece for myself. I passed on turkey and gravy, scooped bitter, yellow rutabaga on my plate and bowed my head for the blessing.
APPENDIX A: KNOW ALABAMA

My final essay, “Know Alabama,” is structured such that it mimics the format of my fourth grade history textbook, *Alabama: A History for Schools* by Charles Grayson Summersell. As such, the essay has unit heading titles, line breaks for quotes, and end of the unit questions, as well as other additional unusual formatting.
UNIT ONE: THE EARLY YEARS

"To understand a people we must know something of their lives; their music, art, religion, their houses and clothes; their occupations and recreations."

Charles Grayson Summersell
Alabama: A History for Schools

NOT FROM AROUND HERE

I spent my early childhood attending Gardenia Pancake Breakfasts and assorted charm schools without question. Of course we shopped at a Piggly Wiggly and fried our eggs in saved bacon fat. The only football team in the world was The Crimson Tide. Understood was that white kids didn't play with the black kids who lived across the road in their own neighborhood. I didn't think to question why. Life was the way it was because it was.

This all changed in second grade at Vestavia Elementary. Mrs. Hoggle had us ask our parents about where we were born. We wrote our place of origin on a piece of paper, gathered around in a circle, and shared. This exercise all got boring pretty quick because everyone's piece of paper kept reading the same thing as we went around.

Everyone's piece of paper, except mine.

Alabama Voices:

"Kelly has improved in reading but she still seems to find math work difficult. Her written assignments are not done as neatly as she can do. I hope that she will take more pride in improving this. Please call if you have any questions. 339-1406."

Report Card, Second Term, Mrs. Carmen Hoggle

ALABAMA HISTORY

Fourth grade was when the state school system taught Alabama history. For decades, including my year, 1977, the ubiquitous text was Alabama: A History for Schools by Charles Grayson Summersell. True to Southern stereotype, my textbook was tattered and out of date and I had to share. The cover was blue and gray with an Alabama and a Confederate flag on the cover. We read the chapters and answered the questions in the back in complete sentences. We could not just write the answer. If we could not write a complete sentence, we would never amount to anything in life and be like Jared Caudle over there who didn't show any respect. Jared Caudle had fits and Mrs. Dorrah would have to stop class and ask him repeatedly what was wrong with him but Jared Caudle never knew.

That year I learned of the four major Indian tribes, which we could chant like
cheerleaders (Choctow! Cherokee! Chickasaw! Creek!), and how Hernando DeSoto came in search of gold but it was hot and the Spaniards were miserable in their armor wandering the swampy backwoods. We studied our city's namesake, Chief Tuscaloosa, whose legs were so long they dragged the ground when he rode his horse. We all knew DeSoto killed Chief Tuscaloosa, even if we never talked about this out loud. We learned through osmosis, the same way we came to understand our parents were Santa Claus.

We could empathize with the conquistadors, all hot and miserable in Alabama with no air conditioning, as our classroom had a single rotating fan that pushed the hot air around. We junior historians sat, pretending to do our work but in fact focused on that one golden moment of breeze.

**MOUNDVILLE**

*De rigueur* for all Alabama schoolchildren was a regular pilgrimage to the burial grounds at Moundville. Once, sometimes twice a year, I rode in a sauna school bus with stuck windows, forever trapped on a seat next to Tonya Wyatt, who poked my ribs to inquire if I believed in Jesus Christ my personal savior. That longago springy me would climb the biggest mound, panting in the heat to see what mystery awaited in the hut. My reward was always the same musty diorama of wax Indians trapped in glass around the plastic fire, elbows locked until the decline of the next civilization.

Alabama Voices:

"*Neither the rise of Moundville Indians nor their eventual decline is well understood by scholars.*"

Dr. Vernon James Knight

Our next mission would be to enter the museum and gather around to view the excavated bones in a pit. A light flashed on each skeleton as a PBS voice speculated upon the daily life of the long deceased. For a fourth grader, the mound climbing and the bone stories were all filler. What mattered was the gift shop. If your parents really loved you, they gave you money for a neon-feathered Comanche/70s Cher inspired headdress, a tom-tom drum, and/or a tomahawk. Then you could whoop around by the creek in oblivious racist glee after your brown-bagged lunch. These doting parents also packaged name brand soda such as Coke or Mountain Dew for their beloved, as opposed to inflicting various, mortifying flavors of A & P brand soda.

Aside from the Moundville Indians, other former Indian tribes of Alabama include the Muscogees, Uchees, Natches, Shawnees, Tuskegees, Coosas, Ullibahallees, Tookabachees, and the Alabama. It is speculated that Alibamos of the Yazoo were the more modern Alabamas of our state, or perhaps the origin of the state name hails from
the Alaba, which is the name Hillaba or Hillibee, only with the guttural exclamation *ma* added.

In fourth grade I did not learn about any of these Indian tribes. Instead I studied Greg Burnett. How his jeans were faded exactly the right way and the adorable gap between his teeth.

Alabama voices:

"*Kelly continues to make progress. She has enjoyed our Alabama history studies and has added much with her special reports, etc. Her only problem is keeping up with her assignments.*"

*Fourth Grade Report Card, Mrs. Shandy Dorrah*

**CHECK UP ON YOUR MASTERY OF FACTS**

1. Where are you *from*? Is it where you were born or somewhere else? What about your place of origin defines you?
2. What bridge, sports team, or town in your area is named for a decimated Indian tribe?
3. Can you remember the moment in your life when you became aware that you are perceived by others differently than you perceive yourself?
UNIT TWO: THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

"Our state has lived through many wars but none, before or since, has cost us so much in blood and treasure as the Civil War."

Charles Grayson Summersell
_Alabama: A History for Schools_

HOYET HATHCOCK: "THE SHILOH PREACHER"

My eighth grade history teacher was a Baptist preacher named Mr. Hoyet Hathcock, whose carefully-combed thick, (dyed) black hair and oratory skills made him a dead ringer for Ronald Reagan. Mr. Hathcock’s go-to stump speech was the Battle of Shiloh.

Alabama Voices:

"We’re goin’ take a trip this spring to Shiloh, but only if y'all are good. If y'all aren’t good, we won’t go. Y’all think you can be good? I can’t remember that there wasn’t ever a year we didn’t go but there was that one year we came pretty close. That was a bad year. Y’all are pretty good, though. Except for you, Jared Caudle. I’ve got my eye on you."

Rev. Hoyet Hathcock

Since I was not a popular kid, field trips were a constant stress over where to sit on the bus, who to eat with, and who to room with. Ignored was bad, but worse was the poking and spit balls. Even worse were girls like Barbie Barton who would pretend to be your friend, only to turn around and yell "Ha! As if I would ever be friends with the weird girl!" Terrifying were Tracy Cooper and Steve Heaton, football players who asked me why I was so ugly as they felt me up. They would slam me up against the lockers or walls or hiss at me, always changing their angle of attack. Every time Mr. Hathcock said “Shiloh,” which was often, the first syllable set off an internal panic alarm. The loud Southern "i" sound didn't help.

THE RIVERSIDE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LUNCHES OF 1983

Mr. Hathcock’s yelling expanded beyond the classroom into other areas. He was lunchroom monitor and had a podium at the front of the cafeteria where he would stand and shout in the microphone over all three lunch periods.

Alabama Voices:

"Sam Hilliard, you need move along now because everyone has got to eat—you’re not only one—and Kristi Anne Yancy I’m not sure what you were thinking leaving the house thataway, but rest assured your mother will hear about that skirt on Sunday. Washington
Jefferson! Get those hands out of your pockets! Sandy Mudge and Tonya Black, y'all need to stop that giggling and nonsense and keep moving. I know all you're worried about is hair and boys."

Rev. Hoyet Hathcock

The sound was a televangelist cattle prod that kept you moving but after awhile ceased to register, the bark fading into the backdrop of clinking forks and the general miasma of junior high desperation.

THE CHEESE ACT OF 1983

In 1983, due to dairy farm subsidies, the U.S. government had a surplus of 560 million pounds of processed cheddar cheese—more than 2 lbs. per person. President Reagan signed a bill to give away 30 million pounds of this cheese to the needy.

One day in the cafeteria a blob of orange appeared on the corner of our pastel trays. From then on the blob was there on every tray, every day. The slab reeked of desperation and poverty. No one touched it. When we went to dump our trays the cheese piled up in the giant gray garbage tubs, pale orange fatty bricks against the backdrop of Grade C meat and tots.

Mr. Hathcock, perhaps remembering a time when our boys in gray had nothing to eat but leather shoelaces, took it upon himself to save the cheese. He would leave the podium, wander around with a brown plastic bag, and gather up the cheese. He vultured around, table by table. By the end of lunch he would have a stuffed bag with grease spots coming through.

One week the cafeteria operated in apocalyptic silence. Apparently, Mr. Hathcock had taken ill. The rumor was that he got food poisoning from the government cheese.

SHILOH, TENNESSEE

Predictably, the great trip to Shiloh was horrible, and that's only when it wasn't wretched. At least Tracy Heaton and Steve Cooper didn't go. They had to sit in the cafeteria all week with nothing more to work on than their chaw and the Skoal rings in their Levi's back pockets. Having to sit in the cafeteria meant that you were poor. It meant that when lice inspections came around, it'd be you missing from school the next day. That you came in early for the free breakfast because your family couldn't even avoid cereal. That you snuck government cheese when no one was looking. The real point of going on the trip to the Battle of Shiloh was to prove you were middle class. You didn't want to be a cafeteria kid.

I was spared that indignity but in the way of Social Darwinism, with two awful people gone, two more came to fill their place. In the hotel room grab I was put in with the other
social leftovers, Wanda Buck and Edie Dunlap. Wanda Buck had brown stringy hair and pale skin, a girl so plain she barely existed. Her single notable feature was an obsession with Erik Estrada. She had packed a stack of *Tiger Beat* magazines and taped centerfolds of the actor in his CHIPS uniform to the wall.

I wound up sharing a bed with Edie Dunlap, who had been held back a year so her figure was more developed than most. She had wide hips that she packed tight in her *Chic* jeans. At night she murmured graphic stories in a throaty voice about her boyfriend Paul, a senior at County High. She moaned and licked her lips as she explained in detail what Paul did to her and she did to Paul.

Alabama Voices:

“Hmmmmmm, Oh, god, y'all. I miss Paul. Hmmmmmm.”

Edie Dunlap

For seven nights Edie Dunlap moaned and I worried. I worried that no one would ever want to do to me what Paul and Edie did to one another. I worried that someone would want to do to me what Paul and Edie did to one another. I worried that Edie might try to show me that night what she and Paul did to one another. I huddled on the edge of the bed in the button up pajamas my mother had purchased for me from Sears expressly for the trip, sleeping maybe an hour. I kept getting yelled at for falling asleep on the bus.

More Americans died on the field of Shiloh than all the battles of the Revolutionary, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War combined. Total deaths for the Union totaled 13,000 and for the Confederates, 10,699.

In 1984, it was rumored that while Mr. Hathcock was out rustling up Jared Caudle, Beau Graydon fingered Leanne Wilcox on the bus.

**CHECK UP ON YOUR MASTERY OF FACTS**

1. Of the not competent teachers you had in junior high, who was the least competent? Support your claims with evidence.
2. When you were in junior high what was cool to eat for lunch? Not cool? How did food affect social hierarchy?
UNIT THREE: THE COLD WAR

"Sputnik II, and especially Sputnik I, spurred the United States into anxious activity. The average citizen was asking: 'Why has the United States allowed Russia to get ahead of us in the race for other space?'"

Charles Grayson Summersell

Mobile: A History for Schools

WHY I LOVE AMERICA

Out of nowhere in Government Class my senior year, Stella Gray Bryant, granddaughter of Paul “Bear” Bryant, asked the boy I was in love with to the Miami Vice Themed Anchor Club Dance. I was devastated. Mike Eves was a musician and writer and another Yankee (Indiana), i.e. mine.

That Stella Gray would gun for a smart kid instead of a future Sigma Chi was out of character. But Mike had gained a certain notoriety of late by winning the recent school essay contest based on the prompt, “Why I Love America.” In a creative twist, he had penned a short story about two teenage boys named Vladimir and Jethro. The saga details how Vladimir moves from Communist Russia to Alabama. Initially, the boys are suspicious of one another but then Jethro teaches Vladimir how to drive stick. Eventually, Vladimir helps Jethro feel gratitude for all the freedom he has here in America compared to the teenage kids in Russia.

The contest was sponsored by veteran Bert Banks, a survivor of the March of Bataan. The March of Bataan was the forcible transfer by the Imperial Japanese Army of 75,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war. The march resulted in the deaths of thousands of prisoners.

My essay was about how great it was that America had freedom of speech. For example, in this country of great liberty, I had the freedom to write about how I hated writing essays called “Why I Love America.” The result was my first "F" in English. Our Advanced Placement teacher, Mrs. Brakefield, coated my paper in a bloodbath of red ink.

On the day of the awards ceremony, the entire school was let out of class, a treat usually reserved for pep rallies. Mike received his fifty dollar cash prize and shook the hand of General Banks dressed in full military regalia.

I seethed as Mike soaked up the applause. Sycophant, I thought, because I had been studying for the vocabulary portion of my SATs. I burned because he was a writer. I burned for the applause. I burned because despite myself I had taken the contest seriously
and that Mike found the entire event hilarious. He apparently also found it hilarious that his new status had won him the affections of debutante Stella Gray Bryant.

“Such details!” gushed Mrs. Brakefield in our next class. “Like when Jethro pulls up in a Dodge Dart!”

I went home and cried about all the injustices in my life, none having to do with communist Russia or the March of Bataan. Did Mike not remember the intense two hours at R.E.M concert where we sat next to one another, our hands almost touching? How could he go to his locker day after day, never noticing me?

THE TEFON PRESIDENT

Second to Bear Bryant, President Reagan was the most beloved figure of Alabamians for being the winningest U.S. president against the Russians

Twenty-one days before the 1984 presidential election, Ronald Reagan held a rally at Coleman Coliseum at the University of Alabama. I went with Mari Plott, but agreed to attend only if we could do so ironically, as we were Democrats. We got in her Honda Civic and blasted The Doors (such detail!), feeling perhaps a bit more giddy than we should, given our political affiliations. But a president was a president. And getting out of school was getting out of school.

Around us worshipful Republicans chanted “Four More Years!” while they waved flags and posters. The experience was basically the same as an Alabama football game. The mob mentality was kind of terrifying, but at the same time it was fun to yell and jump around shaking a pom pom.

CHECK UP ON YOUR MASTERY OF FACTS

1. Who was your nemesis in high school? How did that person shape you?
2. Have you ever enjoyed an event that also made you worry about the fate of humanity?
3. Roll Tide!
UNIT FOUR: RECONSTRUCTION

"When the Wallace career finally draws to an end, historians will doubtless agree that the Wallace years marked an era in Alabama government and in state and national politics."

Charles Grayson Summersell

*Alabama: A History for Schools*

LOOKING BACK

Perhaps what's most notable about my history education, is how slavery and Jim Crow were glossed over. When we visited Southern mansions, the slave quarters were all torn down.

I grew up in the South, I was never of the South. Alabamians could smell difference on me. “Not from around here, are you?” I was continually asked by classmates, bus drivers, cashiers, teachers, and whomsoever else was around.

I took the hint and at eighteen I moved, vowing never to return. The problem became that the more I lived other places, the more I realized I didn’t belong anywhere else either. Being from somewhere, I learned, meant more than a house, an accent, friends, a relationship, or adopting the local culture. I was, whether I liked it or not, more Alabamian than anything else. I missed pine needle forest paths and Yellowflickers. I preferred biscuits to toast for breakfast. I styled my hair with hot rollers.

I had always blamed my parents for dragging me to Tuscaloosa, but now I'm searching for jobs and surviving a winter coined "the polar vortex.” Dad flew to Tuscaloosa for his interview in February, emerging from a Buffalo blizzard to daffodils and camellia blossoms. He met his first Alabamian in the elevator of the Stafford Plaza, what was then the fancy hotel downtown. The man proceeded to deliver an award-winning performance of Southern hospitality.

“Pleased to meet you, sir!” The man shook Dad’s hand with a practiced grip, wanting to know all about what had brought my father to Bama and wishing him the best of luck on getting the job. Dad was just piecing together how this person looked familiar when he looked to the elevator wall and saw the man’s autographed picture. He was talking to Governor George Wallace.

“I have to admit,” my father told me years later. “The man was very personable.”

CHECK UP ON YOUR MASTERY OF FACTS:

1. Is the study of history a worthwhile pursuit? Write your answer in the space below.