



4-2006

and I will open and close my petals

Molly M. McLay '06
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng_honproj



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLay '06, Molly M., "and I will open and close my petals" (2006). *Honors Projects*. 6.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng_honproj/6

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

and I will open and close my petals

a collection of feminist poetry
by Molly M. McLay

Research Honors
April 2006

for Vicki,
who helped me find my voice again,

and for my mother, Janet,
who always knew I had one.

Contents

Preface	i
Poems	
Plan. (for Jenny Saville)	1
Marie Claire	3
return to mirror stage. (for Hélène Cixous)	5
androgen (or, a dialogue between the imaginary and the symbolic)	9
little girls growing up white	14
Cry Me a River	17
Filibuster	20
Love for Sale	24
believe me. i am not trying to get your attention.	26
I Only Have Eyes for You	28
I stopped crying in college,	29
I've Got You Under My Skin	30
my garden is a vulva (a choral piece)	31
When gifted girls don't become feminists,	36
Cyclical Thinking	39
Explaining women's studies to my father is	40
Window-paned	41
To the man who once said, "'And my head has been smashed into walls too many times to count' is hyperbole"—	42
to trust it	43
After the war is over,	44
Works Consulted	47
Appendix	49

Preface

If, at first glance, the title of this poetry collection, *and I will open and close my petals*, appears a basic, perhaps even stereotypical, title for a body of feminist writing (exactly what its twenty pieces constitute), it must be remembered that petals are parts of a whole, pieces of a project, pages of a book, with a variety of poetically feminist connotations: feminine, natural, vaginal. Petals also open onto mouths and tongues, and their lips open themselves onto and help produce voice, a concern of both poetry and feminism. The place, the space, the instrument, the dynamics of voice—its emotions, its speaker's situations, its modes of thinking—all play vital roles in this particular creative feminist endeavor. The petals of its poems open onto voices that speak clearly and boldly—voices of brave critique speaking out against flagrant violation—and voices that more often remain closed—voices of victims. The petals give voice to rage, rumination, pain, pleasure, reconciliation, mess, and, through it all, open onto my own journey as a feminist writer.

The experience of locating my own voice has played an integral role in the development of this project. Despite the fact that I have been writing and singing—all fairly seriously—since the day I started kindergarten, I think I can safely say that for most of my life, my voice was a conglomeration of other people's voices—of words and phrases and thoughts and values I had absorbed and learned to regurgitate at appropriate moments. I am not sure it always used to be this way, but by the time I realized that I might be my own person, my own voice seemed very far from me. As presented in my poem "When gifted girls don't become feminists," the throes of pre-pubescence and adolescence had made many of us girls clones, and we flailed "in a wavy cornfield of bleach-gold mediocrity / and petty meddlesome envy." Without much resistance, I listened to my teachers give "objective" facts; I believed the politics and values of my parents

and supposed friends. I, as girls that age often do, let my own opinion go by the wayside until it all but disappeared. I graduated valedictorian of my class in high school, and in my “Alice in Wonderland”-themed speech, I encouraged my classmates to conquer our enemies and find our true selves. But in retrospect, I was just as clueless about who I was as the rest of them were.

I entered college even more confused about where my voice had gone, but that murkiness began to clear during my sophomore year, when I took Education 255: Studying Children and Adolescents in Context. Assigned to contemplate the developmental maturation theory, I composed a three-page, single-spaced reflection on my experiences of being silenced in school, how the pressure to succeed and the simultaneous social ridicule of that success by my classmates, usually female ones, paralyzed my voice and smothered my ability to take credit for any right or wrong answers I had. Writing about this phenomenon was a riveting experience, but I was not aware of just how riveting it would become until I read my professor’s comments when she handed it back to me. She had attached an Amazon.com listing for a book by Carol Gilligan, the first psychologist to question how gender impacts research procedure and findings. From Gilligan’s work, I learned that, just as so many adolescent girls do, I had taken my voice “underground.” This complex discourse on voice and silence fascinated me. I began to realize the impact of my experiences on the formation of my identity, specifically my gendered one. I could not believe that a girl like me, a former valedictorian, could lose her voice, but I indeed had. With this revelation, I desperately wanted to find my voice, and I knew I *could* find it. And I searched for it, mostly, by writing.

Preoccupied with gender and voice, I connected my academic studies to issues of voices whenever I could. Voice, or the loss of it, became the central issue in many of my academic essays. I needed—and knew there had to be—a space in which voice was much more integrally

important. One of my childhood passions, back before I had lost my voice, was creative writing, and the imaginative power of it compelled me. The next semester, I signed up for English 202: Writing Poetry, and in it, I found the space I was seeking, a space I continue to explore even now, in this project.

I have found that poetry provides not only a space for the articulation of voice, but also a space for vocal play. Unlike spaces containing singular, masterful voices, poetic space can be poly-vocal. Much more than the voice of a critical essay, the voices of poems can dream, argue, create, question, collide, sometimes all at the same time, in new and relevant ways. While some poems function with linearity and mastery—they make arguments and stick to them—others employ a more sensing, associative language. Some navigate the space between such states, or take on both at the same time, and still others combine a multiplicity of voices, becoming a mess, but a productive one. This was both new to and welcomed by me. As critic, I had to worry almost wholly about objectivity, but as poet, I could bring in my voice, as well as a host of others, in order to create something bigger than just one perspective—bigger than myself. My petals became the petals of many, and we started speaking, sometimes alone, sometimes together.

Trained as I am in literary analysis, it is not surprising that my poems often contain a critical aspect. Almost all of the voices in these poems have something to criticize, be it sexual discrimination, acts of violence, abuses of rights, or culture-induced stereotypes. A critic looks into the world and finds the flaws underneath its surface, and I wanted to make the critic heard, and to increase the range of my own criticism. To this end, I looked to popular culture and to those who examine it with a critical feminist lens. My most influential encounter was with twentieth-century American photographer Cindy Sherman. Her art directly inspired four of the

poems in *and I will open and close my petals*, and the ekphrastic approach I took to transcribing her work into poetic language indirectly influenced several other pieces. Sherman's work beautifies the creepy and the sexually perverse, reminding us, as she does in the epigraph to my poetic litany "I Only Have Eyes for You" (quoted from her collection *Retrospective*), that "[w]henever there is a female figure, she's still *always* beautiful." In her constructions of trans- and multi-sexed mannequins and her film stills of vulnerable, frightened women, she exaggerates—and startles us into realizing—what we glorify and beautify and find sickeningly attractive in films, in music videos, in sullen-eyed runway models, in perfume and lingerie advertisements, in everyday life.

I sought to emphasize Sherman's critique in my poetic translations. In one poem, "Cry Me a River," I present the understated yet predatory responses that the male voice might have to Sherman's deeply sexualized women. Based on a similar exercise that Susan Sontag wrote on Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War*, the lines of "Cry Me a River" are imagined as captions for seventy-two consecutive images from Sherman's *Retrospective*. "Love for Sale" (Appendix Item B) is both advertisement and violent pornography. It exaggerates by presenting the voice of a deformed woman-like creature who, in trying to sell herself, begs for further self-degradation. Even that each Sherman-inspired piece shares a title with a romantic jazz standard alarmingly exposes the perversion so veiled and yet so predominantly around us.

Engaging with Sherman's critical photographs in a critical poetic voice was vital to this project, as I was able to connect with others concerned with and invested in giving voice to the voiceless. However, I also wanted to engage directly with the voiceless, so I turned to the most downtrodden of voices: those of victimized women. Some of the women in *and I will open and close my petals* frequently adhere to other people's voices, as I once did. They hear voices

telling them to trim their bodies down to a more manageable size; they hear male voices asking them to service them; they hear female voices, at times even their very own voices, telling them they need to buy products in order to stay beautiful; they hear doctors telling them how to define their babies (by gendering them) and teachers telling them how to define their self-worth (by following rules and being a good gifted girl). They are targets for horrific insults and threats: cunt, “fit inside,” “I warned you,” “You asked for it.”

I wondered how far the victimization would go, as I remembered the female victims of the past and feared the same fate for women of the present. Beautiful voices like Sylvia Plath’s and Anne Sexton’s were tragically ended, not by the hands of oppressors, but by their own. Yet the need for Plath to write poems like “Edge” or “Fever 103°” and bake herself dead in an oven, the need for Sexton to hang herself, the need for Charlotte Perkins Gilman to poison herself with chloroform, stemmed from a mental instability that could not have been wholly self-created. I never suffered Weir Mitchell’s rest cure or raised children while my poet husband screwed around with some hip new chick, but certainly these women must have been plagued by those actions. Certainly these women and others have been driven mad not merely by their own predestined biologies, but also by being locked in what theorist Hélène Cixous calls that masculine “opposition, the hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death.” I wanted more than to watch Cindy Sherman see and show the flaws in this oppressive world, giving myself over as linguistic transcriptionist to her brilliant designs; I wanted to design for myself, to express, too, that sickness.

After digging into several semesters of women’s studies classes, thinking about speakers who might respond to gender-inflicted sickness, and reflecting on relevant painful experiences of my own, I developed several of what I have christened my “headache” poems. They are interior

monologues of women wrought with physical and emotional ache. They are voices of women who have directly experienced that ache, and often, they present the voices of their traumatized minds. In “To the man who once said, ““And my head has been smashed into walls too many times to count” is hyperbole—,” the headache is more than merely a metaphor for victimization and madness. The semi-fictionalized speaker, still pained by her grandmother’s rape decades earlier, experiences daily that devastating violence—her fear of it, its constant presence, the disgust of it, the “blood slither[ing] down the back of [her] throat like some sick homeopathic remedy for having a shining cunt”—experiencing it so strongly that she is physically wrought with “the throb of the headache that will never leave.” The feeling that her head has been smashed into walls too many times is not, as her auditor says, “hyperbole,” but real; she cannot escape its haunting.

More than only a literal experience of a speaker, the headache can become a structure, a pain executed by the repetition and movement of a poem. To enact these poetic headaches, I utilized the pantoum, a rapid, imagistic form and structure involving four-line stanzas that repeat the second and fourth lines of the previous stanza as the first and third lines of the next. The ending stanza brings the form full circle by employing the first and third lines of the opening stanza as the second and fourth of the last, removing the final repeated lines so far from their original context that their transformed meaning becomes the poem’s significant arrival. In poems such as “Marie Claire” and “Cyclical Thinking,” in which the respective speakers make each command of perfection or utterance of despondency twice, the repetitions enact the unending throb of obsessive self-talk. At the end of “Marie Claire,” the speaker praises herself—“Damn it is hard to be you!”—while simultaneously acknowledging the reality of just why it is so hard: because she is “always playing that fantasy feminine role” so fed by the

consumerist nature of her world. While that consumerism and pride endure most of the poem, its obsessive repetition gradually heightens, as does the speaker's awareness of her sick attempts at buying perfection. "Cyclical Thinking," produced from bits of my own college journal entries, creates a headache similar to that of "Marie Claire," this one from the speaker's rumination on achievement, responsibility, depression, and over-thinking. The poem ends as it begins—"a sadness overcomes" her—and the cycle of negative self-talk and inability to stand up for and to herself returns. Nothing has changed, despite the speaker's desperate wishes. In both poems, the pantoum's structure literally enacts the ache of cyclical thinking, the obsessive thoughts afflicting the heads of women who aim to please everyone but themselves.

The poems "return to mirror stage. (for Hélène Cixous)" and "believe me. i am not trying to get your attention." also give voice to the mind at work. These two pieces find a basis in the style of Chelsey Minnis, whose surprising, often sadomasochistic image clusters are spaced by the use of ellipses. The ellipses separate the images and phrases into a slowly-progressing linguistic structure, giving the sense of a mind at work. The two Minnis-style pieces enact a slow process that carries the speaker from stability and groundedness into a new, ecstasy-filled and painfully exhilarating space, then back again to reality and its repercussions. The enthralling spaces that constitute so much body in the Minnis style cause the speaker to dwell there, lingering as she senses connection and feels; but by the end of both poems, the speaker is forced back into "real life." The mirror or the razor line becomes inaccessible to the speaker, so her words fade into silence, as often the mind's voice must when cruelly snapped out of daydreaming or thinking.

Despite the pain and grounding in the Minnis-stylized pieces, I knew that the slipping in and out of ecstasy that their speakers experience was integral to the poems' meanings. I also

knew that repetition and voice could be developed more wholly for pleasurable means, so I sought to create other voices that could find bliss in repeated speech and activity, most notably in “my garden is a vulva (a choral piece).” This poem’s voice exists almost completely in playful language and woman’s space, greatly influenced by the linguistic fertility and play of Gertrude Stein’s long poem *Lifting Belly*. This female speaker does not tend to an outdoor garden, because it is a higher priority to tend to her self, a bodily garden. However, this argument is made through language that reproduces itself through repetition and play, through Cixousian “waves” and “floods” and “outbursts”:

my garden likes my vulva
 and to vulva is to tend
 to till to stir
 to plant
 to grow
 I know

This wave is abruptly stopped with a line break and an outburst of “oh,” which signals the building, orgasmic intensity of the wave. This technique of build and release appears several times in the poem, and it represents the voice of a woman who pleasures herself. The poem is all body, all women’s writing, all ecstatic voice. In Cixous’ words, this woman “hold[s] nothing back,” and she goes wild with the pleasure of her vocal cries and repetitions.

Cixous’ theory of writing the female body is not accepted by all feminist critics, as it frequently comes under attack by queer theory and deconstruction, which question the theory’s heavy reliance on gender binaries in the first place. The fact is, feminism in general does often question itself and some of its own internal assumptions, and its multiple divisions never supply just one answer, one right way to give voice to those afflicted with gender inequities.

Feminism’s complexities and complications get messy. They lead us into a linguistic frenzy, and they eventually break open and blossom into play and multi-vocality. Having witnessed the

fertile mess within feminist theory and even feminist poetry, I sought to carry it into and out in my poems; I sought to illustrate the mess of voices that constitute feminism.

My greatest poetic mess can be found in the collection's opening poem, "Plan. (for Jenny Saville)" (Appendix Item A), which, like the often disgustingly messy Sherman poems, bears a unique tie to a piece of art by the same name. Despite being a fairly succinct argument on a woman's right to take up space, the poem's form is radically chaotic. Some stanzas are packed into tight corners; others disintegrate and fall into arrays of strung-together letters and blown-apart words. The poem takes up great amounts of space for what is probably linguistically a fairly short and concise piece. The first page contains mostly the words of a (male) speaker commanding women how to look, while the second page critiques that voice and creates its own: a voice afforded the very spatial freedom its argument actually gives the women to whom it speaks. The final line of the piece asks women to "[l]eave the[ir] lines messy." This voice battles the commanding other and argues for women to use the air and the space they are given, while also enacting that taking up of arms, of space, and using it for its cause. The poem can look messy, the women can look messy, the voices can be messy—especially when seen against the constraints of the other—but they thus can be productive, affirming, life-giving and sustaining.

The mess suggested in the lines of "Plan" tells much about *and I will open and close my petals*, a work which, as a whole, yields not the directness of a sermon but rather the energy and multi-vocality of a debate. The poems speak to and sing with one another in various significant ways. Some of these connections and conversations are clear. For example, the woman's voice in "Filibuster" speaks clearly to the subtle insinuating male voice in "Cry Me a River." Other connections are subtler. The self-talk perpetuated by the mirror in "Marie Claire" connects to the

longing to walk through that mirror, into a space absent of materialistic consciousness, in the next poem, “return to mirror stage.” The refusal of a woman’s carcass to flower in “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” (Appendix Item C) becomes the refusal for a woman to garden anything but her own body in “my garden is a vulva.” Though all the poems of *and I will open and close my petals* are presented in a hopeful progression that starts with “Plan”’s taking up of arms and ends with “After the war is over,”’s surrender and approach toward peace, each voice arcs in a unique way to the next.

Each reader will discover new possibilities in this collection, and I include myself among such readers. I am certain these arcs I detect will not be the only arcs I find, the only voices that my work speaks to me. In fact, I am eager to engage with the voices of many more poets and to open my poetic voices to their concerns, crafting poems that further investigate gender binaries and explore new, diverse discourses, including, for example, medicine, bio-technology, cyborg theory, and postcolonial feminism. Twenty poems are not this project’s end; indeed, they are a beginning, but one I embrace passionately. Such work may prove difficult, “frustrating,” “hard,” even near “impossible,” as at times this work has been. Nonetheless, as the speaker in “Explaining women’s studies to my father is” so duly affirms, this work is also—of far greater magnitude than its challenges, for the causes I believe in, for the voices and the visions I hope to share—“simply necessary.”

Plan.
(for Jenny Saville)

Feminists say that women do not take up their share of
 space
 in the world.

The great and powerful wizard has spoken:

Suck in,			
tuck here,			
nip there,			
slim up,			
trim down,			
do not hang,			
do not sag,			
push up,			
strap in,			
erase	stretch	marks,	
lighten	eye circles,		
delete	laugh lines,		
s m o o t h	o u t	cellulite.	

Make a plan for the fatless physique.

The great almighty
 jack-fit-her-in-a-box
 commands
 bigger than the muscles his arms boast,
 bigger than his posture or demeanor—

his words squish and push and cramp and squish
 dandelions into peepholes.

Fit
 inside
 the
 Barbie-
 doll
 box.

But women, hear this:

space

is equivalent to power.

Own your air.

Leave the laugh lines stretch marks circles,

leave the cellulite alone.

Quit crossing your legs,
folding your arms.

Your hands do not belong

on your hips

or folded over your breasts

but b e low,

or fl a i l i n g in the air,

wide w i d e open.

SHINE,

bask in the glow of the fluorescent light

that emanates from creamy flesh

thick

naked

doughy flesh

the spills of tits

so red from those stretch marks

jelly thighs that open o p e n w i d e.

Do not tuck in— TAKE UP YOUR ARMS and seize the ground with your toes.

No touch-ups. No make-up.

b

e

— b e in your luscious
birth-given bodies.

Leave the lines messy.

Marie Claire

Step into the spotlight!
 Each day leads to a brighter you!
 Play the fantasy feminine role
 and seek out something fabulous!

Wake up to a brighter you,
 bask in the anti-wrinkle radiance,
 seek out something fabulous
 for those flat-soled feet of yours.

Bask in an anti-wrinkle radiance
 perfect for the knife-shy.
 Those flat-soled feet of yours know
 support means everything.

Your legs are knife-shy,
 so stack them with power and invisible shaping.
 Support means everything.
 Keep those legs looking their longest!

Stack that power and invisible shaping,
 stock up on lip gloss and lash-lengthening mascara.
 Legs, keep looking your longest!
 Reilluminate, keep buzzing!

Keep buying lip gloss, lash-lengthening mascara;
 your inner socialite needs channeling.
 Reilluminate every day. Keep buzzing.
 Your inner glamour girl needs indulging.

Channel that inner socialite!
 Free lingerie from the confines of the bedroom!
 Indulge that inner glamour girl!
 Baby, the world is your mirror!

Don't let that bedroom confine you and your lingerie!
 Find a tight weave, a smooth surface.
 The world is your mirror,
 so talk to yourself daily.

Tight weaves smooth surfaces—
 two parts fashion one part flirty—
 You talk to yourself daily—
 There's a cost to looking good.

Two parts fashion, one part flirty.
Okay, this doesn't mean you're shallow—
there's a cost to looking good!
They may be right, you're materialistic,

but that doesn't mean you're shallow.
You're the fairest girl you know.
Maybe materialistic, yeah,
but let's face it, it's hard to be you,

hard to be the fairest one of all,
always stepping into the spotlight.
Damn it is hard to be you!
Always playing the fantasy feminine role.

return to mirror stage.
(for Hélène Cixous)

.....you could walk through.....so.....
easy.....step
between dream and symbol.....

the mirror.....

feel...backward.....
and past the inquisition.....
the twice-seen eyes.....
melting into pools.....
backward as you...touch.....
yourself.....
in the silken
 re..melting.....reflection.....

imaginary.....
milk.....

and fly.....

without windfriction.....
against.....your belly.....
lifted into.....a firmament.....
bright.....

moist white light.....
placidly fluctuating.....
in undisturbed equilibrium.....

.....
.....
.....equilibrium.....
.....with.....evensong.....
.....bursting.....
through cloudspots.....
.....and evenbreath.....
.....released of everystar.....
.....
.....by a key.....invisible.....
.....turned in no-key-hole.....
.....
.....unlocked.....
.....
.....buoyant.....belly.....
.....unskinned.....by bellybuttonlock.....
.....and keycord.....
.....
.....buoyant...belly.....
.....fluid.....
.....
.....immersed in.....
.....lifebath.....
.....and amniotic bays.....
.....of light.....
.....light that flies.....
.....

.....
pulses.....

bulbheavenlight.....

tulip red.....
ocean.....
inside.....
the untainted.....

cloudlight.....

on the belly.....
from windless cloudair.....

white and tulip red.....

elliptical.....featherlight.....

buoyant belly fluid.....
that soars.....

hums.....song.....

lark.....
or even.....song.....

before...dissected.....
attachment to boylungs.....

before...divided.....into bellyripples...

they are submerged saturate.....

in nurturemilk.....
no windfriction.....
to punch out lungs.....

.....to summon.....goosebumps.....
.....or tears.....
.....of recognition.....
.....there is no world.....
.....to reflect.....in tearducts.....
.....capsized captive...eyeballs.....
.....no eyeballs yet unmelted.....
.....by a mirrorpiercing.....
.....gaze.....new made.....
.....new is first a symbol.....and self...
reflected.....after.....
.....imagining.....
.....crystallizes.....
.....shatters.....

androgen

(or, a dialogue between the imaginary and the symbolic)

inside
how lush
how lush
inside
how soft
the skin
of the babe in the bath
of nurturing blood
the nurturing amniotic wetlifebreath

the babe breathes
the fluid
the nurturing blood lifebreath
wet
life
as it floats

it breathes
the nurture
with its soft chest

delicate
chest

to open and find what lies
in the babe
belly

to open the belly and find

to find it there

to find what is there
we cannot answer
what it is

what is it?
what is it?

we cannot find
we cannot give an answer

what are you?
what are you?

inside
inside the womb
inside the babe inside
the open fluid womb
of rich lifebloodbreath
inside that babe
there is a pouch
a small thumb-shaped pouch
a thumbpouch below a soft
pelvis
thumbpouch waiting inside
waiting to grow

what will it be?
oh what will you be?
what will you become?

when will you grow?
when will we know?

come
babe
come to light
or stay
breathing fluid
fluid so inside
rest
rest inside

stay there
in tranquil nurturing
lifeblood

breathe and be

oh babe
come to light
come out to light

oh babe
oh darling babe
what will you be?
what will you be?

stay

the babe would like to stay
inside
inside the womb
safe
inside the wombsafe
the chest
unopened chest
will breathe
breathe the fluid
nurturing bloodfluid
and breathe

or surge—
and suck—
deep in and out—

out thrusts in the hands
pull out

oh no
stay
stay inside

what will you be?
oh babe what will you be?
oh darling baby

wait
wait and let me be
be
inside this space
let me be

oh hurry
the pain of pulling out
pulling out the babe

oh stay
grow lush inside
stay know to know
 what will you be?

this babe will grow
this babe will grow a
pouch

and inside out

the pouch will fold
out
and grow
large and swollen

the thumb will swell
the thumb will grow
into a shape
grow long and strong

a pulsing pouch

but oh
the babe will never feel
that pulse
inside

inside the body of the babe
inside the body
the body will not feel
the lifeblood surging in the babe

no the babe will grow
and speak
the babe will learn to speak
and grow
and pulse
and grow and shape
but not give
just grow

the babe
oh the darling babe
will grow
but never feel
that

shame

oh what a shame

to never give
to never take in

inside

to never feel inside
to never feel the lifebreath
inside
inside the babe inside the womb
the babe inside
will grow out

the babe inside
will
grow out

but not in
not inside

oh what a shame
to pull the babe

oh babe
oh darling
what will you be?

what will you be?

what you will be
is anything you want

but never feel
the pulse
inside

the babe
oh precious babe
will never feel that

shame

little girls growing up white

sisso

yeah

we are sisters right

yeah silly why

well i dont know

what

like why are you so paler than me

because of mom and dad

why

well mom always gets burnt outside

so

and dad doesnt

so

well i get burnt and you dont

oh why

i dont know people just look different sometimes

like kali and her brother

yeah

why is she way darker than him

well she is adopted

what is adopted

she had different parents that were a different color than us

how

they live in india and they didnt want kali anymore

why

i dont know how am i supposed to know

how am i supposed to know

youre the one who is her friend i just know kj and hes mean

well how do you know this

mom told me

well why do you believe her

because shes mom

well she said we are related sisso

duh we are sooooooooo

well we cant really be were different colors

yes we are related it is just mom and dad are funny and dont look alike

well how come kali and her brother arent really then

arent really what

related why arent they really related

because kali is black and youre not youre just tan

but that is a different color too

not really black is way different

i wish my skin was like kalis it is pretty

i wish mine was like yours

i wonder what its like to be adopted

i dont know but i bet its not fun

why

well everyone probably asks her how she can be related to them

why

because she is black and they arent i bet that feels really weird

i wish i was black like kali

no you dont there are like none of those types at our school

oh how come no one asks why we look different

because were still white and everyone else looks like us too

Cry Me a River

*captions for Cindy Sherman's
Retrospective*

Come here.
Come.
You want me.
Don't you.
Here.
Doll.
Do you like this.
Let me.
Touch it.
Open.
Wide.
Here.
Let me see.
See.
You want it.
Don't you.
Show me.
You want.
You want this.
Baby.
Can I.
Let me.
Let me.
Touch it.
Fine.
Okay I won't.
Look baby.
Look.
You want me.
This is what you get.
You wanted it.
Didn't you.
Come now.
Go down.
It feels so good.
Will you.
Touch it.
Hold it.
Good.
Look.
I want you.

Can I feel.
Let me.
I'll give it to you
Let me.
Touch.
I'll make you.
Oh.
Sorry.
I won't.
Maybe.
Do it again.
Let me now.
Girl.
Don't tempt me.
Let me.
I warned you.
I want you.
Too bad.
Go.
Leave it.
Cover up.
Now.
Open up.
Be still.
You wanted it.
Sorry.
There.
Sorry.
I mean it.
I do.
Touch me.
There.
Feel it.
Feel it.
Rub me.
Lick.
I will.
Oh I will.
Baby.
Oh.
Oh baby.
I didn't mean to.
Come.
Oh precious.
Sweet thing.
I'll take.

I do.
I care about you.
Please.
Take me.
Inside.
Come on.
Open up.
I am ready.
Again baby.
I am ready.
All night.
Kiss me.
Are you ready.
Are you.
Baby.
Wake up.
Baby it's time.
Let's go.

Filibuster

Dear Senators of the 109th Congress,
in response to the conduct of your membership
sometime during between 4:30 PM on Monday, January 30, 2006,
and 12:00 PM on the following day,

Hear ye, hear ye.
Hear you me.

If I had been among your ranks,
thirty years old,
a citizen naturally born,
and a resident
of the United State of Illinois since 1996,

I would have taken heed.

I believed
what the Feminist Majority Foundation
promised they would deliver—
the votes that would block the confirmation—
the votes allowing filibuster,
the votes allowing you to wincingly say—
"We better think this over"—

what you ignored,
what you denied
when you decided
to force discussion's end,
to let the confirmation pass.

When you could have been strong for our country.

If I had been there,
I would have stood up!

And I would have turned
on my microphone,
cleared my throat,
then told you this:

that each day in America,

1 mother—after hours and hours of heaving and pushing and screaming and sighing and crying
and hemorrhaging two months early—dies in childbirth.

4 children are killed—dead, left cold and naked under flannel sheets and saliva-soaked pillows with stark-white eyes sad—by abuse or neglect.

5 children or teens are left believing there is nothing left for them in this sad miserable world, are left to contemplate the existence pillaged with lack of love with no trust with hate directed at self and all, 5 children or teens commit suicide.

8 children or teens are killed by firearms. 8 children or teens in an environment like Columbine High School. 8 children or teens accidentally in the line of an accidental disarming of a gun lying around the bedroom of a parent who forgot to lock the bedroom door leaving for a night shift at the county hospital.

35 children or teens die from accidents. Accidents caused by cars, accidents caused by bikes or motorcycles or four-wheelers, caused by touching a hot stove, caused by touching tetrachloric acid in a gynecological exam where the child of a sexually-nervous mother has somehow wandered unaccompanied, caused by touching dangerous chemicals, by ammonia or drinking antifreeze or hydrogen peroxide out of the sight of golf-playing father or golf-watching father or drunk-sleeping father on the couch.

77 babies die before their first birthdays. 77 babies with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, babies who choke on their own spitup after turning on their stomachs asleep in an unwatched crib. 77 babies surviving on one jar of baby food, one bottle of milk, one sip from teat that has prescription drugs for diabetes mellitus pulsing through its lactose. 77 babies die. Without ever having seen a birthday gift wrapped in splashy paper and bouncy ribbon all aglow by cake candles.

181 children are arrested for violent crimes. 181 children who beat one another.

367 babies are born to mothers who received late or no prenatal care, mothers who started giving birth in a one-room apartment who hailed a taxi while the first contractions came who needed an epidural immediately without Lamaze practice who never knew to consume extra folic acid each day to prevent neural tube birth defects who never even had food with folic acid to begin with.

380 children—sucking weed in school parking lots rolling joints in backs of Chevys tripping on acid and ecstasy at raves shooting speed with an HIV-infected needle, white kids selling coke the rich kid's drug or black kids selling crack the poor kid's drug—380 children breaking 9pm curfew every night of the week—380 children are arrested for drug abuse.

888 babies are born at low birthweight. 888 babies with a brittle-boned malnourished mother who had never dealt with her too-controlled eating habits (or avoidant eating habits), 888 babies who flew out of the womb weighing 5 pounds 0 ounces or less—low birthweight, the medical label used to cite statistics about unfortunate children.

1,154 babies are born to teen mothers, teen mothers who are too afraid to tell their families or their boyfriends that they might just be giving life to something they know would be shunned or

neglected, giving life to something they would love with all their hearts but would know that love is not enough for a life.

1,701 babies are born without health insurance. 1,701 babies who will grow up without an opportunity for an affordable throat culture, an affordable knee tap or heart listen or vaccination, without an antibiotic for a screaming earache or an inhaler to cure ragweed-inflicted asthma.

1,900 public school students are corporally punished. Wrists smacked with a ruler. Paddled in the principal's office.

2,252 babies are born to mothers who are not high school graduates—mothers who wanted to be all that they could be but whose realm of choice was limited in many, many ways.

2,447 babies are born into poverty. 2,447 babies who need a home. 2,447 babies freezing in little heat and raggedy clothing. 2,447 babies who need fresh milk, who need clean water. 2,447 babies hungry.

2,482 children are confirmed as abused or neglected. Confirmed to be stark sad under flannel sheets while father on his day-a-week custody yells outside a locked wooden door.

2,756 high school students drop out. 2,756 high students bringing the cycle full circle. Again.

3,879 babies are born to unmarried mothers. 3,879 babies *living in sin*.

4,356 children are arrested. Are too young to have criminal records but are running rampant in your neighborhoods robbing residences, drinking underage, hoping outrageous discouraging lawbreaking will send someone to notice them. Are not bailed out of jail by their poor parents.

16,964 public school students with unclean mouths and too-worn fists—16,964 students who need something more to keep their minds buzzing—for incorrect conduct, are suspended.

I would have taken out my copy of the Children's Defense Fund's
State of America's Children Yearbook,
and read the damned thing cover to cover.

Then chronologically,
then alphabetically,
then from smallest number of dead children
to largest number of impoverished babies.

I would have rattled your damned ears off
until you couldn't take it anymore,
until the images of sullen children
wouldn't leave the backs of your eyeballs,
until you'd call off debate,
until you'd say, "We better

think this over, I guess,”

because these statistics are real.

But Senators,
now you see,
I wasn't there.

And you didn't stand up.

Do you promise that with this choice you will make sure no daughter or son is shunned for premarital pregnancy?

Do you promise that with this choice you will make sure that no teenager feels that unavoidable shame and pressure driving them to desperation?

Do you promise that with this choice you will have provided a loving parent for every born child?

No, Senators,
now you see,
with this confirmation,

you have promised one thing—
that you've left the choice,
the one choice

in the hands
of a girl,

a girl holding a crotchet hook

in a bloody
urban
apartment
bathroom,

her face aghast at what'd been done,
face aghast at her own organs,

her own
staph-infected
torn-open
emptiness.

Love for Sale

Try my feet first.
They are soft and powdery,
made of perfect baby rolls and curves.
Touch them. Caress them.
They'll rub themselves all over you
and send you into dreamland.

Test out my middle.
Now I know that my belly
looks like a pregnant woman's or a pig's,
but it's so soft, so tender.
And it's rather fun to bounce on.
It inflates and deflates with every heave,
every rise and fall, every gyrating movement
of your pelvis. Lie upon it.
It keeps a surprise safe inside,
warm and soft.

I know you can't see my vagina here,
but it's there, I promise,
waiting for you to rest inside.
And I know I have a pig's nose
at my middle, but it's a navel,
I swear, and since it's so long and plump,
you can do whatever you like with it.
Pretend I am a man
and fuck yourself with it, if you like that.
Tickle it. Suck on it.

Touch my nipples.
They are epic and hard.
They could suckle whole herds.
Use them anywhere you wish.
Suck on their red skin all you want.
Pretend I am your mother
and you are thirsty.
Taste them.

Now look on my face.
I know it is a surprise to you,
I know, I am sorry, my face is not beautiful.
I have a clown nose and man hair.
But my lips are full
and my throat is deep,

and you know that will come in handy.
I can smile real nice.
I won't even mind
if you keep your eyes closed when you fuck me.
And if you really hate my face,
well, then you won't feel bad
when you beat me for having deceived you.

believe me. i am not trying to get your attention.

...i see myself.....carving.....
drawing.....
clean
 red curves.....
on...my skin.....

i feel myself.....feel.....
my insides....
screaming.....
the blood.....

i hear myself.....
seeping.....
from the almost hollow.....
skin.....
grave.....
of my ankle

i touch my skin.....
thawing.....the numbness.....
melting.....
spreading.....sweating.....
the static.....of the blood
 in my ears.....
pounding.....ripples.....
into a perfect...crimson...arc.....

 ...so perfect.....thinned.....out.....run.....
 through.....

it laughs.....
as my throat.....
burns.....
flaying....
words.....on my vocal cords.....that tie.....
my eyes.....to the bubbly etching.....
turned perfect smooth.....
out of body.....

.....

i feel myself.....say.....
this is so real.....
as i watch from outside.....

paint.....sweep.....divide.....
myself.....
into little dainty dishes.....
morsels of pricked flesh.....
dotted.....by.....white.....
glaucoma test.....eyes.....watching...
swooning.....
at the site of
 perfect.....connection.....

perfectly painted.....hell.....
perfectly painted...heaven.....

what is the difference.....

 in sensation.....
joy.....
pain.....

thaw and sweat.....
feel.....

i feel myself.....

breathe.....

i taste myself.....
hot.....and ravished.....

when i suppress it.....
that is.....
 ...cover up.....
my body art.....
in skinny band-aid.....

silence.....

I Only Have Eyes for You

*Whenever there is a female figure, she's still always beautiful.
~ Cindy Sherman*

Even with torn limbs,
 Even with the raw redness of stretched buttocks,
 Even with hog wrinkles on a smooth body,
 Even with flowing nursing-home hair,
 Even with the leprous popsicle tongue,
 Even with the blood of dissociation,
 Even with the gun inserted in the vagina,
 Even with tampon strings running out of vulvas,
 Even with blood-drenched laundry washer screams of cunts,
 Even with milk spewed from teats at angry misunderstanders,
 Even the one who cries because she somehow has a Pinocchio-nose penis,
 Even the other who cries because she does not,
 Even with the placid priceless egg, kept sterile in the cotton stays of a jewelry box,
 Even with constructions of face masks as vaginas, mannequin heads as balls,
 Even with the mouth smeared upward,
 Even the sad pig snout lady,
 Even the puppet-faced dwarf of a merm-ferm,
 Even the Roman god, a woman, eating grapes like a man, ripped muscles and all,
 Even with the mouth trapped in pretzel-stick prison bars, lapel pins, only a tiny breathing hole,
 Even with the doll's head, lopped off, painted with stage rouge, placed above a penis—mouth
 open wide,
 Even with the upturned sponge-cake buttocks pimpled with brandings of disease,
 Even in the space between labia, filled by a chain of dildos, tubes of hot dogs, chocolate
 gherkins, excrement,
 Even with the female mouth serrated in a perfect circle, lips caressing another bald albino eye-
 sewn face,
 Even with the florals that decorate the chain-linked neck and the face and the teeth of a skull,
 bones slightly out of joint,
 Even with the dismemberment, the decapitation, the tearing of heads from chests, legs from hips,
 hair from necks,
 Even with the sly smile, screaming death,
 Even with the sad cry of agony, silently bound in the throat as the body becomes something half
 its size, with half its limbs, the real thing buried in sod and AstroTurf,

 She can still be snapped, and framed, and sold.

I stopped crying in college,

not to avoid mascara lines but rather
 the red shade of tears boiling under my skin, exploding my face
 into pinker than pink is. I'm starting to like how it feels to choke
 under my drying breath when my throat tenses and closes,
 a stubborn clamshell unwilling to give up that drop-shaped pearl.
 I avoid crying even myself to sleep at night, for when I'd awake
 the remnants and carnage of a battle for my brain would remain,
 smeared scarlet, blushing bruises puffed under my eyeballs.

Oh, but if I could cry! To start, and to feel those tears
 bubbling out of eyelid pot covers, streaking my silver skin
 like poison; to feel my throat pulling open against itself;
 to burn as those tears trickle down
 laughing,
 slicing in

and cutting my eyelids,
 stabbing them,

gouging out
 eyes;

to bleed!

My palate would harden
 into platen glass—

my lips

stained and red-bitten
 would whisper deeply, huskily—
 my throat would pulse
 the ejaculation—

“oh, this is what tears have done me,
 this is what you,
 you have done me.”

I've Got You Under My Skin

They left her in the field for the worms to devour,
her carcass still lukewarm from the stoning.
Let her rot, they said, she will make the ground flower.

They rolled her in sod as her dead face turned dour.
They say from the town one could hear women moaning
as they left the poor girl for the worms to devour.

And the worms slithered in, killing the moss. For hours
at her feet they nested. They leached, stomachs groaning,
and she rot in the mud, her entrails deflowered.

Days passed, and the wake of autumn took power
over the corpse, now gelled, part of land's owning—
the girl's feet now wormy filth and devour.

They watched her hair whiten, her dress mold and sour.
The worms ate the bodice and skirt and its boning.
She would rot, they said—there was hope for the flower.

They say her eyes never closed, 'til a shower
of rain wet the land and drank in its droning.
Her bones melted. The worms scattered, vomiting their devour.
But her scarred face remains, and will not grow a flower.

**my garden is a vulva
(a choral piece)**

what do I own?
 a plant? a rose?
what do I own but my garden?

my garden
my garden is a vulva
my garden is my vulva

and to tend it gives me ease
to tend it gives me pleasure
 great pleasure

I do not plant a rose garden
I do not own a rose
I do not own day lilies or jasmine

but I own a garden
 I do
I own a garden made
 of skin
I own a garden made
 of me

my garden is a vulva
my garden is my vulva

I tend it with the greatest ease
 and with the greatest pleasure

I like to tend my garden
I like it very much

I like to till my garden
I like to stir
 the gnarly roots
 into wild briars

and I sprinkle me
 with lilac
 the shape of my vulva
 growing purple and full
 I shape

and I sprinkle me
 with lavender
 the scent of union
 to tend
 to tend that union

my garden is a vulva
 my garden
my garden is my vulva

my garden likes my vulva
 and to vulva is to tend
 to till to stir
 to plant
 to grow
 I know

oh

my garden is a vulva
 my vulva

and I sprinkle me
 with lilac
 and with lavender

I sprinkle me
 not some garden
I sprinkle my garden in me
 my garden of my vulva

and I make me fresh
I mist anew

and I drink in
my wild briars

I drink to make my soil rich
I drink it in with my garden

my garden is a vulva

a lilac vulva lush and full
 and purple when I drink in

purple drinking in

and full

I grow

I lilac grow

lush and full I grow

I know

I know

oh

my garden

my garden that I own

the one alone

my garden is a vulva

my garden is my vulva

and I tend

it pleases me to tend

my roots

it pleases me to fold back petals

petals I fold and hold

and stroke and hold

and they are fresh

I make me mist anew

and the soil becomes rich

comes rich when I drink in

and wild

and the scent of lavender

the scent of union

oh

lavender

it smells so sweet

and tart

oh grow

so full

oh lavender scent of union

of my vulva

my garden is my vulva

and it alone pleases

pleases me

I own it alone I plant
it alone is what I need
I need
I love
to feel
to hold
and grow

oh
I do know

grow in me with pleasure

oh yes

oh yes the pleasure grows

the pleasure of my garden vulva
and the ease

I till and mist
I hold I stroke
I tend
with ease
with pleasure
do I tend
I tend and plant
and grow
I do
I know

oh my garden my vulva
my garden is a vulva
my vulva is my garden
and it alone

oh it alone and pleasure
it births the roots
and oh to grow

oh my garden my vulva
it gives birth to pleasure
from deep in me

oh

my garden is my vulva

birthing pleasure

birthing
the deepest parts of me

When gifted girls don't become feminists,

it usually means
that somewhere,
a sock has been pulled over someone's head.

Or perhaps more accurately,
a dog head funnel—
that kind that keeps her ears pricked upward
after a trip to the vet or the groomer—
has been sunk around a girl's slender neck.

When gifted girls don't become feminists,
it's probably very likely
that a magnifying glass has been dropped
from the teeth of a teacher,

so it can enlarge certain objects
of a gifted girl's everyday life
to unprecedented proportions:

the spelling test
and passing it every week
on the first try
become quite important,
since the alphabet gels so easily,
molding into tasteful, edible words;

the timed test,
being an accurate assessment
of the "I like math"
gifted girl's self-worth,
means the difference
between ultimate achievement
and ultimate failure;

storymaking
is an act of wonderful beauty,
and thus a day spent playing
with gender-specific dolls
is a day well-spent,
as long as the stories created
are akin to the ones read in Louisa May Alcott,
or Laura Ingalls Wilder,
or, every once in a while, Madeleine L'Engle.

When gifted girls don't become feminists,
it's probably because they have come to believe
that the only girls who become feminists
are the girls who face intellectual challenges
and sexual discrimination,

are the girls who get Cs in math but As in reading,

are the girls who aren't allowed to play kickball
with the boys in P.E. class,

are the girls who never get called on
by their matronly second-grade teacher,
even when their hands are constantly raised,
because Billy with freckles,
who chases them at recess
and gets his name on the board
for calling someone a poo-face,
needs more attention and stimulation
so he will stop fidgeting.

When gifted girls don't become feminists,
it might be because they were told
that they have all the brains they need
to get by in even a science classroom,

that they are gifted girls,
girls who do get called on
just as often as Billy does
because they get 100s on spelling tests and times tables
and thus have made their mark on the teacher.

And when gifted girls don't become feminists,
it usually doesn't matter
that being so gifted
occasionally equates to the fact

that there might be no one
to sit with at the lunch table
or to play four corners with on the playground,

or that a slightly disheveled and misshapen ponytail,
pink glasses and too-short navy sweatpants
receive a few giggles or cackles
from ringlet-adorned beauties.

For she is no misfit;
she is a gifted girl.

But when gifted girls don't become feminists,
those model female third-graders
growing into class valedictorians,

it sometimes can mean
the sad fact
that these gifted girls have learned
that pride is the gravest sin.

The gifted girl has learned self-doubt.

And she'd rather
commit suicide
than let her best childhood pal
see her best essay,

for to cast that great light
in a wavy cornfield of bleach-gold mediocrity
and petty meddlesome envy—
well, suicide it would be.

No, when gifted girls don't become feminists,
it is for a pretty good reason:

because gifted girls don't need feminism
to wield off the pelting bullets
of insecure gossipy mean girls
or crotch-grabbing slobbery fast boys
or the wrist clutching insistence of perfection
that rains the sky smoky for days.

For what kind of armor is feminism
when all it can offer is freedom—

to speak, to vote, to think, to hope,
to work, to dream and enact, to give,
to love the self?

Cyclical Thinking

A sadness overcomes me.
 I do it time and again: I think
 I want to be somewhere but I'm never really there.
 Not really having to be there but committing to it anyway,

I do it, time and again. I think
 if I could choose I'd give it all up:
 not really having to be there but committing to it anyway.
 But it's seductive, being someone to everyone but me.

If I could choose I'd give it all up.
 Is there someone I can talk to here?
 It's seductive, being someone to everyone but me,
 so I take my voice underground and run it through.

Please, is there someone I can talk to here?
 I feel like nothing goes completely away
 so I take my voice underground and run it through
 and watch my mind tear up all that's good.

Why do I feel like nothing goes completely away?
 I want to purge whatever's lurking in me, but I can't.
 I watch my mind tear up all that's good—
 yet I think this is all fake, just a mechanism to make me

want to purge whatever's lurking in me. (But I can't.)
 I don't want to be a poser, that tortured girl—just because,
 I think it's all fake, just a mechanism to make me
 sound like I know what I'm talking about.

I don't want to be a poser, that tortured girl, just because
 I want to be somewhere. But I'm never really there
 enough to sound like I know what I'm talking about.
 And so a sadness overcomes me.

Explaining women's studies to my father is

frustrating.
a fire escape without stairs.
a cold shower.
scratching a bug in my eye.
what makes coffee nervous.
a smoking asthmatic.
remorse and utter despair.
pointless.
fuck-you-stupid.
surgery with no anesthesia.
poor politics.
redundant.
a holocaust of the spirit.
a suicide gunshot that kisses death but finally embraces paralysis.
filling a bath with an unplugged drain.
losing my voice at a game my team will always, always lose.
rage.
chicken pox of the throat.
gonorrhea of the face.
heart-singeing.
running to catch a locked door closing.
hoping I will be let in.
someday.
a jewel heist for cubic zirconia.
drowning in a mud puddle.
trans fat.
chemotherapy.
pulling at flowers growing in air.
leading a horse to water to find it just wants to swim.
bad.
walking the line straight but blowing a .09.
a waste.
IhateyouIhateyouIhateyouIhateyou.
showing an elaborate score to someone who cannot read music.
steeping jasmine in gasoline.
bulimic ten-year-old.
a wet towel.
understanding I am made of numbers.
impossible.
an ugly grandson.
the best gift I can give him.
the only way he can see me.
simply necessary.

Window-paned

[You cannot keep a woman tangled in brushstrokes and light.]

You keep her at a distance,
 and she appears what she has always been:
 solemn, beautiful,
 the pinnacle of humanity,
 the moral superior to man,
 the cult of true womanhood in every curve and ripple.

She is paned within the window of your mind:
 her negligee in the moonglow, her hands hidden,
 head bowed toward a wooden floor,
 poised in some Sunday-evening ritual.

You think she takes this solemn repast to renew herself,
 before another day of teaching, of morally instructing,
 of acting her unblemished conscience.

You move closer, nearly touching faces,
 and the air becomes foggy.
 You become dizzy.

Her face shapeshifts, a freshly-tinted hologram:
 light one moment, dark another.

Her surroundings melt. There is no chair, no floor, no window.

She is perched on green feathers,
 hovering over a textured floor of robin's breast.
 Light cascades off her dovetail back in iridescent waves,
 electrifying your mind, shocking it out of its quilted comforts.

To you she becomes brown oil,
 smeared thumbprint,
 woman melted in glittering moonlight canvas.

You turn away,
 wringing your hands of the hologram, the unwelcome change, the paint.

You do not see the ocean of light morph back into a woman.

You do not see her chest heave in its first deep sign of evening,
 of solitude.

Her breathing quickens.

She is moving now, shaking at first but then gesturing boldly,
 body languid and full,

 cursing you silently, and cursing your bed.

You do not see her thrust her hands outward
 to the life-full light
 of the window across the street.

To the man who once said, “‘And my head has been smashed into walls too many times to count’ is hyperbole”—

Fuck you! As if you would believe it anyway. Try waking up some morning and find yourself a woman and tell me you can't feel the blood slither down the back of your throat like some sick homeopathic remedy for having a shining cunt. The ravishment of unclean flesh pours through generations of my neckline and I am forced into a tomato bath daily to rid myself of the stench. I have never lain with a man but my chastity broke decades ago when my mother's mother's maidenhead popped atop the trunk of an old gray buick in the corner of a dance hall parking lot. Her head smashed into the brick wall against her back as he forced her over and over and she tried to escape but she just kept hitting those damned bricks. The blood spattered onto the snow and the ground absorbed the rape and together the three, the snow my mother's mother and my mother's father, begot their first child my namesake and a series of storied headaches. And so when I spot a gray buick glistening in the iceshine my face starts to swell and it might just become a hot balloon sitting on a knife blade. I might as well take a slug in the cunt to forget it. You sir try wearing the scar of lowbirthweight babies in your nonexistent placenta and you tell me you can't hear the muffled gasps of your mother's mother being rolled on her back and tossed ragged onto the frigid leather backseat as she prays to god there will not be another life at stake because of this. But there is. And it will hurt: the throb of the headache that will never leave.

to trust it

I find I find me open
don't you? don't you?
I cannot I cannot be
my writing my writing
this thing cannot be
I write me into existence
existing without words
this word this wall this need
open.
see. open me.
feel the inside of my words
feel them shape inside
the cusp of your hands
the very curve of your fingers
unshape them
write it. write it.
write. not it.
but I.
write I. sing me.
live in sound live in
in words. words in life dream
can you? can you be?
can you touch me?
can you name this?
no words can express
but no thing exists without the word
to signify its existence.
the words implicate an existence
that cannot exist without them
this word this wall this need
see. open me.
find it resisting sunlight
and make me open
find it locked and impossible
and pry pry me open.
so pleasant
so warm and filling
to the taste.
oh taste me open.
write me open.
trust me.
discord, open.
my writing opens my writing.
open myself. know.

After the war is over,

after I've watched each stalk fall, one by one,
and I've seen the soil dry out each week
and quake in its heat when the rain finally comes—

after I've slain them,
the demons,
the diamonds,
the whispers that pickpocket my insides
midnight by midnight—

after I've told them to go—

one side will say to the other,
"This is over,
you have done what you can,"

and I will open and close my petals,
one final time,

and shiver,
sigh,
crumble my roots,
sink low in the flaking soil.

But a girl
of eight or so
will appear
out of nightshine.

She will tiptoe toward me,
take my hazelnut ashes
into her cupped hands,

and she will whisper "remember me,"
and she will throw them high into the wind.

And the ashes will crackle and melt into mist.

The mist will fall,
making fertile the land.

I electrified
will spark and shimmer,
a comet of moon,

a streak of permanence slashed on the sky.

And she,
she will grow curves
and eyelashes,
a hazelnut heart
and a sharp comet mind,

and someday—
I will have seen to it—

she will learn to love them.

Works Consulted

"Alito Confirmed (58-42), Closest Vote Since Clarence Thomas." *Feminist Daily News Wire*

(31 January 2006). 28 March 2006 <<http://feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=9496>>.

Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.

---. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In Richter, 1514-1525.

"Charlotte Perkins Gilman." *TheFreeLibrary.com*. 23 Apr 2005

<<http://gilman.thefreelibrary.com>>.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. In Richter, 1454-66.

Derrida, Jacques, and Christie V. McDonald. "Choreographies: Interview." *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997. 23-40.

"Each Day in America." *Children's Defense Fund*. November 2005. 26 March 2006 <<http://www.childrensdefense.org/data/eachday.aspx>>.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Ontology and Equivocation: Derrida's Politics of Sexual Difference." *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997. 73-98.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Feminism." *Canadian Women's Studies (Les Cahiers de la Femme)* 6.3 (1985): 36-39.

- Minnis, Chelsey. *Zirconia*. New York: Fence Books, 2001.
- Munch, Edvard. *Girl Looking Out the Window*. 1892. Art Institute of Chicago.
- Muscio, Inga. *cunt: a declaration of independence*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1998.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. 1965. 1st Perennial Classics edition. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- Richter, David H., ed. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 2nd edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.
- Saville, Jenny. *Plan*. 1993. Saatchi Gallery, London.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. 1981. 1st Mariner Books edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Sherman, Cindy. *Retrospective*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997.
- Sontag, Susan. "Looking at the Unbearable: On Francisco Goya, *The Disasters of War*, 1863." *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art*. Ed. Edward Hirsch. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1994.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Lifting Belly*. 1953. Ed. Rebecca Mark. Tallahassee: The Naiad Press, 1989.

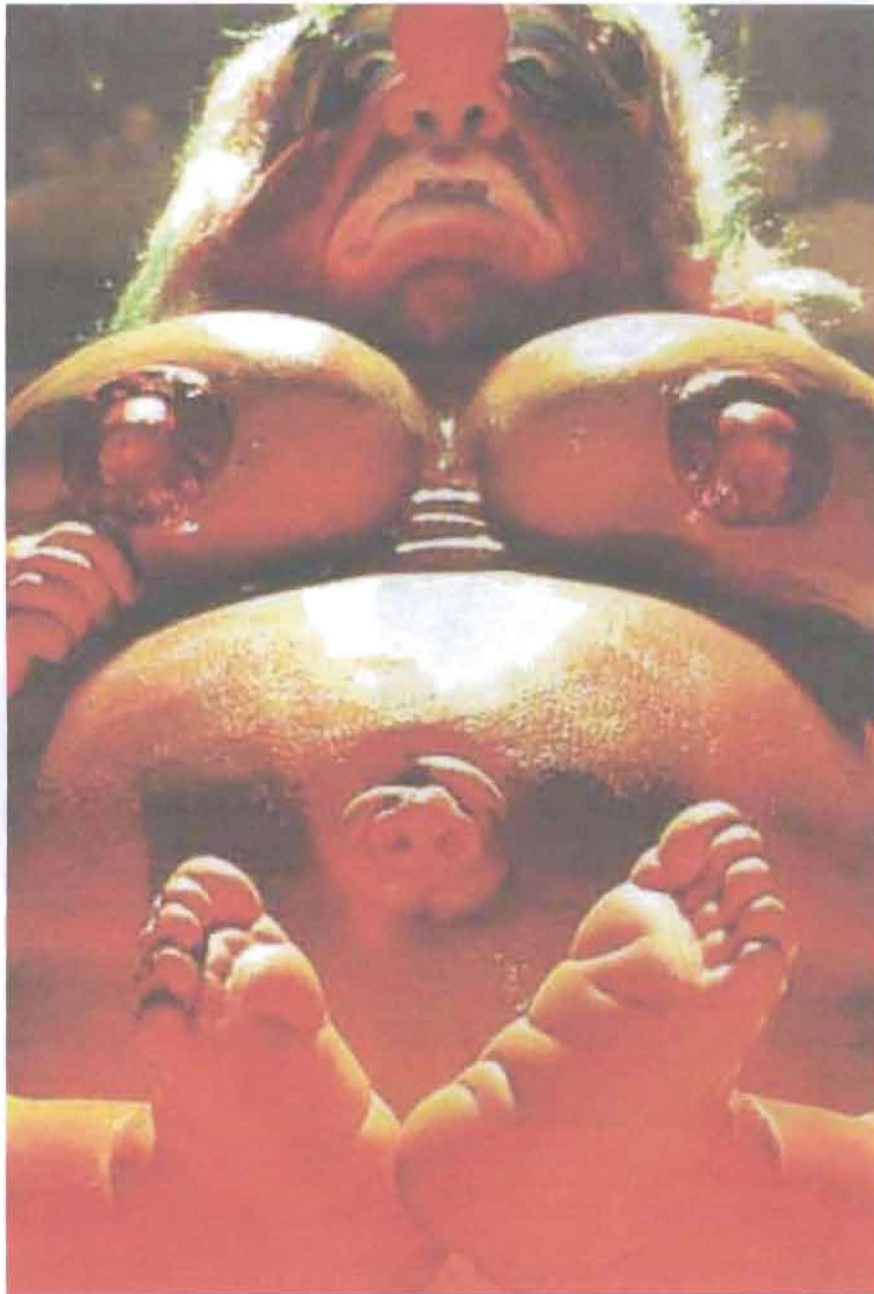
Appendix Item A—for “Plan. (for Jenny Saville)”

Plan, Jenny Saville (1993)



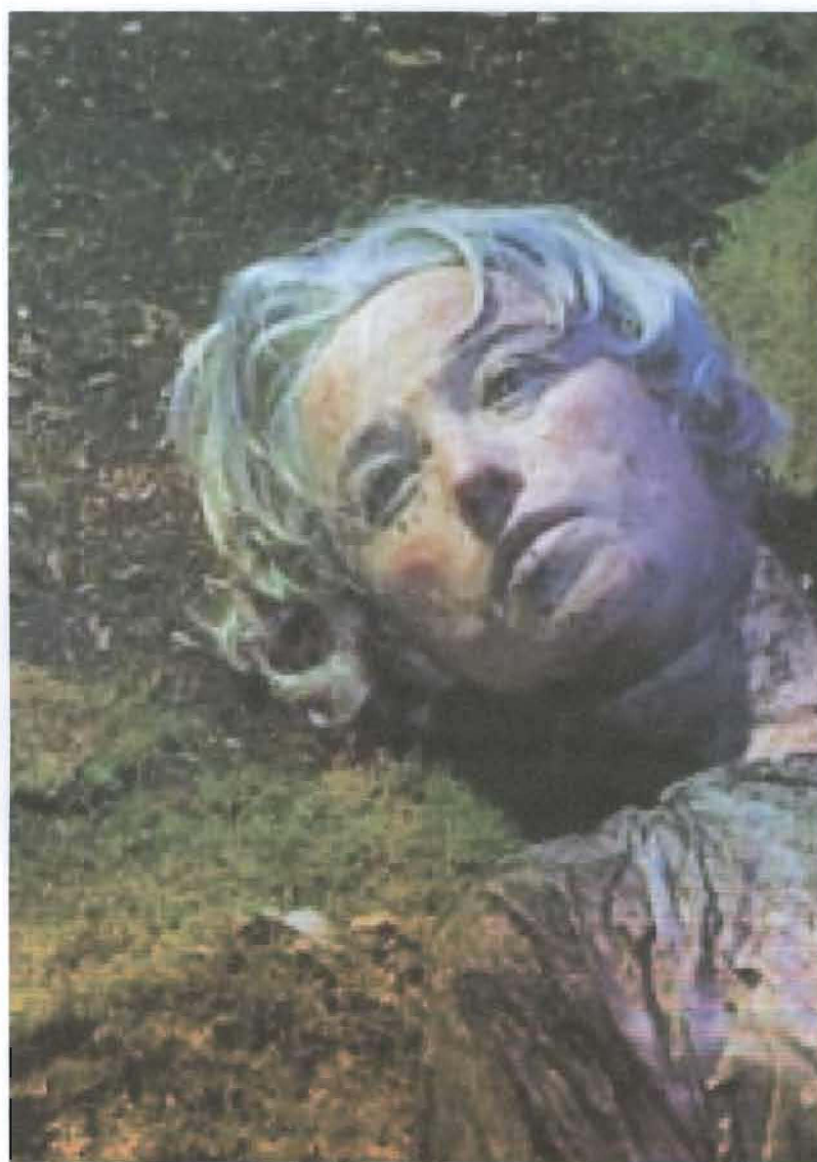
Appendix Item B—for “Love for Sale”

Untitled #187, Cindy Sherman



Appendix Item C—for “I’ve Got You Under My Skin”

Untitled #153, Cindy Sherman



Appendix Item D—for “Window-paned”

Girl Looking Out the Window, Edvard Munch (1892)

