1995

Shedding skin

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Shedding skin

by

Kirse Adelaida Kelly

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
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A FAMILY.

Husband: redneck working man
Wife: liberal Democrat, law student
Boy: 4.0 jock
Girl: soprano II, runner
Dog: cocker spaniel, C.D., C.D.X.

Husband: drives the car
Wife: makes the picnic sandwiches
Boy: puts the bike carrier on the back of the car
Daughter: loads the dog box and the bike tire pump
Dog: jumps in the car

Husband: comes home late, drunk
Wife: screams and cries and slams the door
Boy: zooms off in 260z
Girl and Dog: hide in bedroom and turn up music

Husband: makes biscuits and gravy as apology
Wife: eats breakfast
Boy: wakes up late
Girl: washes dishes
Dog: eats leftovers

Husband: spends the night with another woman
Wife: changes the locks on all the doors
Boy: calls father a liar
Girl: tells her mother and father that she loves them
Dog: rolls over on his back and waves his legs in the air

11-13-94
STOLEN FLOWERS

I remember when I knocked over the vase--
daisies spilling everywhere as your
muscles tensed, filling in your white t-shirt,
your jaw stuck out and you roared, "Clumsy fool!
No man will ever want a clumsy fool like you!"
and kicked me so that I fell
on the floor, trying to pick up flowers
and dodge you at the same time.

I remember your insistence
that I learn to drive the big tractor
at age twelve. You had to fix
blocks of wood to the pedals so that I
could reach them. I was scared of falling off,
like Uncle--I saw a broken vase and
spilled flowers--but you ignored
my fear and told me that the oldest child
should make herself useful.

And I remember when I ran away
to Mrs. Nelson's house. You came and got me
and were taking your belt off even before
you got into the car. The red welts on my face and neck
could not be disguised--I stayed home from school,
wilted inside, and did my lessons alone.
I admired you so, Daddy, for always fixing
the broken vase or throwing it out
to buy a new one; I remember
when I was five, you sent me on the bus alone
to find my school and bring back my lessons
for the week. I was younger than all the others;
they all studied at school, while I studied at home;
I was the odd one, whose Daddy had pulled her up
by the roots and kept her in
a broken vase. I need to be
replanted. I need to see the sunlight again.

11-21-94
MY SOURCE

huge eyes
no mouth
no nose
Not a snake--
no waist
no stomach
Not a lizard--
enormous breasts
tight jeans
tiny shirt . . .
Today's image of woman
is not my image of woman.

thick calves
immobile thighs
Not a horse--
round, hard biceps
triceps to match
stomach as hard as rock
Not a man--
blond hair
a yellow bikini . . .
My image of woman--Cheryl,
from American Gladiators--
falls short. There must be
something more.
old jeans
soft, cotton shirt in bright colors
leather vest
Not a hunter--
dark hair pulled back
sunglasses
the person in charge
Not a general--
high cheekbones
soft skin
a woman who knows
what to do in any situation . . .
My image of woman
is my mother.

Spring 1995
I sat at the table, listening to other people's conversations, and smiling whenever I was smiled at. I had been having a good time at the Hispanic Adult Students' Spring Potluck until this point, when everyone sat in a group around a big table. Earlier, in a small group of women, I had been more comfortable. I talked to another woman, beside me, who didn't look Latina, and I wondered if she felt as left out as I did.

Then the Puerto Rican man beside her asked me, "Do you know anybody here?"

"No," I said, not thinking anything of the question until he continued, sharply, "How did you find out about this party?"

I had been expecting it all night, and I think I was almost relieved. ¿Qué piensas? What do you think, hombre? That I'm some white girl, who's come to crash your party? Ignoring his tone of voice, I answered, "I read about it in the newsletter--¿Qué Pasa, ISU?--I guess they send that out to all Latina students."

He nodded, trying to figure out his next question. "Where are you from?"

"Wyoming." I didn't want to give in but I couldn't help it; I answered the question he was unable to ask straight out. "I'm Chicana--my mother is Mexican."

He smiled then, happy to have it made clear for him. "Yes--that's what I was wondering about--your heritage."

I gave him a fake smile, thinking angrily, Why couldn't you just ask straight out about la herencia? I sighed inside, because, once again, I had needed to defend my heritage. The problem is that my mom, Cynthia Chávez Kelly, has
Marcus, would both have the same experience, losing their language and speaking only English.

This loss of the Spanish language, which her family spoke at home, led to my mother's insecurity about her own heritage. She wondered if she could still be a Mexican if she had lost her language—to her, looks and traditions were not enough. The fact that her parents saw themselves as Spanish Americans did not aid in Cynthia's reclamation of her heritage. The Chávez and Trujillo families came from generations of people who lived in Spanish American villages in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado and, instead of living with more common Mexican traditions, their traditions were rooted in the Catholic Church. Reynaldo Chávez, Cynthia's father, didn't eat an enchilada until he was twenty-six years old. All of these doubts about her heritage added up and were intensified when Cynthia's older brothers and sisters would make fun of her incorrect Spanish. She just wasn't sure what she was—Spanish? Indian? Mexican?

In fact, in the nineteenth century, most Mexicans identified with their Spanish heritage, because, at that time in America, it was not a good idea to be seen as an Indian. After all, every Mexican is part Native American. We descend from both Spanish and Indian blood and were originally considered by whites to be, "a race little fitted to civilize any country." This belief still exists in places and people today—my grandfather, Reynaldo, never acknowledged his Paiute heritage. This denial sent negative vibes to the Chávez children.

My mom grew up in a time when non-whites were beginning to take pride in themselves, however. Cynthia grew up listening to the speeches of Malcom X on the radio, as she curled up in the back seat of her brother Edward's
car, with her siblings all around her. She learned that things she had always taken for granted—the "No Mexicans or dogs allowed" signs, for example—were not right. Yet, this new pride was all seen and not heard, for in school, everyone had to look and act white; everyone needed to blend in and not be noticed. Nobody wanted to stick out.

My mom couldn't help but stick out, though. She was a smart person, as well as a Mexican, and people found these two features hard to reconcile. When one of her heroes, the heavyweight champion of the world—Cassius Marcellus Clay, soon to be known as Muhammad Ali—refused the draft as a conscientious objector, Cynthia wrote a letter to the Albuquerque Journal in support of him. She assumed that no one in her small town of Aztec, NM even read the Journal, but she was wrong. Many students insulted her in the hallways; the principal called her father, and her father yelled at her, saying, "You're trying to embarrass us!"

I, like my mom, couldn't help but stick out in school. I just wanted people to know. A good way for me to validate my heritage was to mention my brother, Carlos. On my first day with the high school running team, I worked his name into a conversation with Kalyn, who was to become a close friend. She looked askance and said, "What? Did you say your brother's name was Carlos? Are you Spanish?"

"Mexican," I corrected her, gently.

We jogged along, leaving long pauses in our conversation. Her next question was, "Are you from Mexico?" and I had to answer in the negative, feeling, once again, that I was lacking, somehow.

I once asked my mother about this fault—"Mom, are we from Mexico?"
"No," she responded, sounding insulted. "What are you talking about?"

She must have seen something in my face, because she continued in a softer tone, "We are from Colorado--southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Both the Chávez and the Trujillo families have been in that country for generations." Mexicans are not only descendants of the Aztec tribes in Mexico; they are descended from many different Native American tribes. Some, like my family, are the descendants of Paiute and Capote Ute tribes from north of the Rio Grande.

After all, today's southwestern states were actually a part of Mexico until 1848, when they were ceded to the United States after the Mexican War. The people who lived in the southwest were descendants of Spanish conquerors and Aztec and Inca "Indians," the majority of whom were soon pushed off their lands as the white settlers took over "New Mexico Territory." To survive, many of these people identified themselves as Spanish, a class slightly higher than that of the Indians. When the white settlers moved in, these "Spanish" people moved north, into Southern Colorado.

My mention of my ancestors' living in southern Colorado didn't always satisfy people, though. Kalyn asked, "Which of your parents is Mexican?"

"My mother..." People always knew that this pale-faced girl named Kirse Kelly was not a full-blooded Mexican. I was just a coyote, the degrading word used to describe half-breeds like me.

When I was in the ninth grade, I did a Biology report on the coyote. I did the report in order to research the animal that mi herencia proclaims me to be. My underlying reason, however, was so that during my presentation to the class, I could pronounce the word the way it was supposed to be pronounced: co' yo'
I pronounced it the way it was spelled. I figured that my Spanish pronunciation would show who I really was. Unfortunately, during the class, James Krumm, one of my classmates, decided to make fun of my pronunciation.

"What are you talking about?" he sneered, jabbing his friends, as they all sat in the back of the classroom. "What's a coy-oy-tay?"

His friends laughed. "Never heard of it," they said.

I hated James Krumm.

When I went home that night, I cried to my mother about James' comments during my presentation, and how he had made fun of me. I did not realize how angry she would get. She called both the teacher and James Krumm's mother, letting them know that she did not appreciate the way that they allowed these racist comments to go on.

I was very embarrassed. I wanted people to know I was Mexican—that was why I pronounced coyote with the Spanish pronunciation. But I knew James was just trying to be mean, not racist. Sadly enough, he probably hadn't even figured it out—he probably didn't even know I was Mexican. Having my mother get mad at the kid for racist remarks just made me fear that he'd make fun of me even more, for whatever else he'd think of in the future.

Even my close friends were not so receptive of my Mexican culture. I found that I could only take it so far. When I went with my best friend Renée to a conference for minority students who wanted to go to college, the reception was very cold. I walked up to the Mexican American table to pick up a pamphlet and began to ask questions—"What sort of scholarships should a minority student look for?" and the Mexican woman with black hair, dark eyebrows and brown skin, looked at me suspiciously.
"Who are you asking for?" she asked. "I can give you an 800-number for them to call when they have time."

I stared at her, feeling my face get very hot as my pulse began to race. "I'm asking for myself," I snapped. "I'm Mexican." Looking at her tight lips and watching her shrug gave me the idea that she still didn't believe me.

Afterward I complained about what had happened to Renée. She, of course, had had no problem--she is half Black, one-quarter Latina and one-quarter White, and has very dark skin. "... acting like I'm White!" I finished, angrily.

Renée had only one comment when I was through speaking. "But Kirse--you are White," she said. I looked down at my pale hands, clinched into fists, and was unable to respond.

My brother Carlos had a tough time with the idea of "being Mexican" versus "being White," too, but in some different ways than I did. From his name, if not his appearance, people knew that he was Mexican but, as a kid, he wanted to be just that--he wanted to play soccer, lean against the walls in the high school hallways, and crack jokes so his friends would laugh. He wasn't overly interested in being a Mexican. Unlike me, he did not try hard to prove his Chicanismo--he was, at times, even ashamed of his Mexican culture, because of what he had heard in high school hallways and read in library books. Throughout our childhood, my mother tried to counteract these negative images of Mexicans with what Carlos called, "Super-Mexican" images.

She permeated our lives with our Chicana heritage, which included the way our house was decorated, the way we celebrated Christmas, and our political affiliations. Our house was decorated in a combination Southwestern/Western
style; it included the R.C. Gorman painting of three Indian women which was on the living room wall—the middle woman looked like my Aunt Cordelia, the woman on the left, my mother and, on the right, my Aunt Bette—as well as the old wooden crucifix and the table made out of an old Catholic Church door in our sun room. There were Indian woven horse blankets on almost everything, and an old Church pew in the library. My mother also had countless collections: jewelry boxes, books, and giraffes, to name a few. At Christmas time, we would decorate all of these things, tying the giraffes' necks with red ribbons, decorating our trees with ojos—Indian God's Eyes—and eating Mexican food, like red and green chile, posole, and frijoles.

As a child, I remember sometimes celebrating Christmas with my grandparents and cousins. My grandfather, whom we called, "Pompa," made the most wonderful, hot red chile, and he would roast green chiles on the roaster. Then, as the "peppers" turned brown and black, my male cousins and my brother would dare each other to eat them. They would stand, a chile in one hand, a glass of water in the other, and watch each other eat—some would do it in the slow, methodical way, bite by bite, drink by drink, while others, like my brother, would do it all as fast as they could: gobble, swallow, drink—then a sprint to the water faucet for another big glass of cold water! Actually, Carlos has told me that his closest connection with his Mexican culture was the food. He said it was an important part of the culture, because it had historical roots... then he grinned and added that it tasted pretty good, too.

When I was growing up, we didn't eat much Mexican food other than my mother's, because in my hometown of Laramie, Wyoming, there are very few Mexicans. This small number led to the way that Cynthia was and often still is
seen as the "token Mexican." Other Mexicans call her if they have problems, because they see her as educated; she has been in the news and is politically active, and this makes them see her as one who can help. On the other hand, the white people with whom she works with in the ACLU and in the Wyoming Senate and House of Representatives see her as a person who can stand and answer for all of the Mexicans in Wyoming.

This was played out well when my family visited Washington, D.C., on our Bicentennial summer trip. My mother wanted to visit a Wyoming senator; the only one who was in was Cliff Hansen. Partly to show her affiliation—liberal democrat to the end—to this Republican, and partly because it was just her, my mother went all decked out: she had her hair done in long, Indian braids (dark brown, almost black hair in two long braids almost to her waist, each tied up in leather), and wore her t-shirt which stated, "VIVA LA RAZA" [Long live the (Mexican) race!] My Dad seemed to represent a part of the West, too. He sported a small, neatly shaved red beard and mustache, with long, reddish-blond hair in a Custer haircut that reached his shoulders. The senator was enchanted and eager to have his picture taken with this liberal woman and her husband, although my Mom never allowed the picture to be published. Her explanation to my dad was simple. "I'm not having my picture with some Republican published."

I've found, now, that I feel the same way my mother feels about many things. I don't appreciate Republicans, I see myself as a representative of the West, and I hold onto my Mexican heritage, even though I have doubts. My doubts, however, stem not only from lack of language, but from lack of visibility. While it was irritating to have to bring la raza—my Mexican background—
-into the conversation, leaving people with the belief that I was white hurt, because I was always trying to live up to my mother’s examples. For instance, to teach us more about our heritage, my mom would take my brother and me to meetings, such as the Chicano Student Coalition at the University of Wyoming. We also attended the political rallies and sometimes accompanied her to the State House and Senate in Cheyenne where she lobbied for the American Civil Liberties Union and Planned Parenthood.

When I went to college, I finally got a chance to play the part that my mother played. I attended Mount Holyoke College on a Latina Scholarship. I used to joke with friends that I made it into Mount Holyoke in order to help their numbers—I was Mexican and I was from Wyoming—very unique in New England. During my first year at college, everybody introduced themselves by their name and identity. We were all confirming who we were. When I attended a Conference for the Seven Sisters colleges, I, for the first time, was the token Mexican.

We sat in a circle, and the woman in charge introduced herself. "My name is Marion and I am a Black woman; I work with groups like you in order to give you strength in knowing who you are." She declared our circle a safe place, where nothing would be repeated or looked down upon, then asked us each to introduce and identify ourselves as to how we would like others to see us. Some women identified themselves as Black; some as Lesbians; I said, "My name is Kirse Kelly—pronounced Fierce Kirse—and I am a Chicana from Wyoming."
As the only Chicana at the conference, I was asked questions when it came to racial diversity, such as, "How do you, as a Chicana, relate to the English-Only bill?"

"I think it takes away part of my heritage," I responded.

"Do you speak Spanish?"


Throughout the latter years of my college career, I waffled between feelings of deficiency and confidence, especially when I was with Latinos. Thanksgiving, junior year, was a prime example. I went to Princeton University for a Chicano Thanksgiving for Seven Sisters students and Ivy Leaguers who had nowhere to go for the holiday. There, I met an amazing guy: Paul Arellano. In his red polo with his sunglasses on top of his head of curly dark hair, Paul was amazing because of his muscles, his aftershave, and the fact that he was the first Mexican I had ever kissed. When I was alone, going to sleep, I imagined that he liked me only for my light skin, and felt horrible.

The next day, I made sure to mention how my mother was Mexican and my brother's name was Carlos. Paul grinned. "Don't worry, Kirse--I know you're Chicana," he said.

"Huh?" I stared at him, embarrassed; then I gave in with, "How could you tell?"

"Your cheeks," he said. "And your lips." He grinned again, and gave me a kiss to emphasize his remarks.

It was a great five days, and at the end of the holiday, Paul and I promised to e-mail each other--which we did, for a week or two.
Even today, I find myself trying to sneak my brother's name and my mother's race--my race--into conversations, especially when it comes to association with Latinos. I still feel as if there is something I need to prove. Although I know that being Chicana shouldn't mean that I have to speak Spanish, turn brown in the sun, or have ancestors from Mexico, I still find myself embarrassed at these defects in my heritage.

Then I remember what my mother once told me as I worried and wondered about my heritage and the fact that nobody could see me as a Chicana. She said, "I don't speak Spanish. But do you think anyone would mistake me for not being Mexican? It's not in your language--it's not even in your looks--it's how well you relate to your Chicanismo. " I grew up knowing who I was; among my cousins, many of whom were coyotes, just like me. We didn't talk about who we were, we knew. Perhaps it showed in that food we ate--flour tortillas, or the cabrito that my grandfather cooked at Easter, or the enchilada casserole my mother made for special occasions. Or maybe it could be seen in the way we talked--my mother's sister, Cordelia, everybody's favorite aunt, had taught us all the bad words in Spanish and, as long as our grandparents weren't around, we would swear at each other, not knowing the gravity of our words. At the time, we didn't think about what other people could see; the inner knowledge was enough.

Now I stare at myself in the mirror. I see my brown eyes, my high cheekbones, my mother's lips--and I smile to myself. In my mind, I see enchilada casserole, which I made for my roommates for dinner; I see biscochito cookies I baked for Christmas; I see tortillas that I made, that were eaten before they were off the comal. As I begin to count the connections I have to my
culture, I realize that I am the one who has seen myself as deficient; I am the one who has felt that I was lacking. Suddenly, I know who I am—I see que soy Chicana.

This is why, as a graduate student at Iowa State University, I decided to go to the Hispanic Adult Students' Spring Potluck. Although I recognized no one, at the meal, one woman, Rosslyn, recognized me. Everyone was very friendly, and I was introduced to all of the women. “This is Kirse Kelly…” I was happy to see that at least one of them was as white as I am. They were all polite and we had nice, unimportant conversations about movies—a girl in eighth grade, who was the daughter of one of the students, started it off with, “Did you see Schindler’s List? I thought I was gonna cry…”

I felt very comfortable: I was in a group of friendly women, and we joked about how much we were eating. There were hot dogs in barbecue sauce, shrimp and rice casserole, and a delicious cherry pie with whipped topping. Although I had thought about making tortillas, I brought drinks instead. Nobody’d had the time to make Latino food.

As we finished eating, the eighth grader leaned tiredly on her mother, Rosa, who said, in her Puerto Rican accent, “Get offa me. Get offa me.” I grinned, remembering.

“That’s what my mother used to tell me,” I said.

Rosa grinned back, speaking in Spanish and I smiled and even laughed a little, muttering, “No entiendo…” I don’t understand. She didn’t hear me and I wondered, chagrined, Does she see a lack of recognition in my face?

Later, I was introduced to the men, and I sat at a table where everyone spoke rapid Spanish. I was able to catch a word here and there—”¿Otras cosas?”
Other things? "Este lunes, ¿no?" This Monday, right? Soon it was time to go. I thought of the fun time I'd had discussing movies, and I was happy to have stuck my toe in the water. I know who I am, and I figure that if I go to enough parties, people will recognize me, too: I'm Kirse, and soy Chicana.
PORQUE SOY CHICANA

Last Saturday night, all alone,
I mixed the flour, salt and water,
beat the masa, rolled the tortillas
and burnt them on the comal
*porque soy chicana*.

When I was ready to go out,
I stressed my high cheekbones with dark peach blush,
darkened my brows with black eye pencil, and
opened my brown eyes wider
*para demostrar que soy chicana*.

When speaking with Bill at the bar,
I knew he was saying it wrong
when he said, "Pinon"
instead of "Piñon"—and I laughed
*porque soy chicana*

As Mayra and I discussed our dogs
later that night, I rolled my R's,
pronounced my E's "eh", and
my I's "ee" as I said, "perrito"
*para demostrar que soy chicana*.

On Monday morning,
I went to my college classes
for my English major
paid for by my Latino Scholarship
*porque soy chicana*. 
I introduce myself in my new job:
"I'm Kirse Adelaida Kelly;" I mention in passing my (Chavez) family, stressing my roots
para demostrar que soy chicana.

When I went to sleep
I dreamed of Pompa, my grandfather, standing over a pot of his red-hot chile and I ate it and sniffled
porque soy chicana.

Today
I lay in the sun
Burning my pale pink skin to a Brownish red color
para demostrar que soy chicana.

3-18-95
Renee dusted off her light shorts, shook her black ponytail, and put her hands on her hips.

"Whew!" she grinned at me. "Geez, I was worried--I didn't think we'd make it all the way up this Massachusetts mountain!" She almost sneered.

"Yeah," I scoffed, taking her cue, just as I always had in grade school. "I was afraid there would be too much snow--"

"What are you talking about?" asked Renee's new Bostonian friend. "There's never snow on the mountain in May."

Renee and I, both Wyomingites to the end, explained, as politely as we could, that at the top of real mountains there was snow all year 'round; that you can't wear just shorts and a t-shirt to hike in real mountains; and that real mountains didn't have trails going all the way from the bottom to the top. You make your own trail on real mountains.

Renee and I had grown up in Wyoming together, and had been best friends since the second grade, when I, the new student, singled her out as someone like me: she was Black, I was Mexican; I figured we'd get along. Renee recalls our meeting in a different way: she says the teacher made us hold hands on the way to gym class. However it happened, we became best friends; we both ended up going to college in Massachusetts and getting together every now and then to do various things--like dancing, going to museums, and mountain climbing.
On that day, the sun was bright and there was a soft, cool breeze which seemed to blow us up the side of the mountain. Massachusetts in the spring is beautiful. The trees above us were lime-green with sunlight sparkling between the branches, and we wandered through old, half-rotted leaves which covered the ground, making noise and laughing like children.

We were at the top of that mountain in less than an hour, congratulating ourselves, when Renée and I began our tirade about real mountains. The two of us had been away from our state for too long a time, and we missed it.

Not long after, I was at home again, in the real mountains—there were not many leaves; instead, there were solid, huge, gray rocks, with a spattering of blueish sagebrush and yellowed grass in between. I was with my big brother, Carlos, at Veedavoo, Wyoming’s park full of huge rocks, only forty-five minutes away from my hometown of Laramie. Carlos and I climbed over and around the rocks, some easy to jump on and over, some huge and forbidding, which needed to be navigated.

When I was a child, Carlos and I didn’t spend much "quality" time together—that is, I was the pesky little sister who followed him around, and Carlos was the big brother who ignored me. Now, after my first year at college and Carlos’s second year, we saw nothing strange about doing activities together—there was, in fact, almost a need. We found out that we missed each other.

That’s not to say that we talked much, or expressed this need—instead, we spent much of the time silently competing, each trying to scramble up a bigger, higher rock. The rocks were created ages ago, when the mountains were formed.
by the folding of the earth's crust. The brown, yellow, gray and green rocks, with tufts of grass sticking out of the dirt in between them, are a good symbol for BIG Wyoming. Many seem to be piled one upon the other, as though a giant child had been gathering rocks one day and decided to dump them all in southeastern Wyoming.

Now, during our silent competition, I stuck my feet in the tiny nooks and crannies between rocks and grabbed onto pieces of grass growing out of dirt around them, scrambling higher, while Carlos, a six foot tall bodybuilder, reached his hands up to the top of the rocks and pulled himself over. When my brother finally won out in the end, he gave me his hand and pulled me up to his level, where we lay in the sun, staring at the huge, pale blue sky above us and the high plains spread out below us.

That same summer, I got a job in northwestern Wyoming--in the Absaroka Mountains, where, once again, there were trees, but this time there were no leaves. These were huge pines, all grouped behind and around the Guest Ranch where I worked. The first night I was there, a guest pulled out his guitar and played, while Boyd, one of the wranglers who led trail rides, sang. We sat in the main lodge, built of log walls and a floor of two by fours, all of which were painted with a clear, bright varnish. The floors were covered with round rag rugs, and the wooden chairs had soft cushions which looked like they had been placed there in Buffalo Bill's time and had never been removed.

The owner of the ranch, Bill Cody, was, in fact, a relative of the true William F. Cody; he was Buffalo Bill's great-grandson--on his mother's side.
Thus, in actuality, his real name was not "William F. Cody." He had had it changed—in order to keep the name in the family, his wife, Barbara Cody, said. (The rest of us didn't believe it. Barbara seemed to be the brains of the operation. We figured she had him change it for publicity reasons.) Be that as it may, Bill Cody did, indeed look like his great-grandfather. He had his beard cut in a triangle, just like Buffalo Bill, and his white hair flowed down to his shoulders. Buffalo Bill's great-grandson was not, however, an Indian-killer, nor was he a showman. Actually, for the time I was there, I seldom saw him—he stayed out of the way, spending most of his time on a stool in the bar, with a glass of vodka in his hand.

That particular night, Bill was nowhere to be seen. I sat in the living room and listened to the guest's guitar and Boyd's voice. The few guests who had stayed after dinner seemed entranced, as was I. Boyd could go strikingly low, and his Louisiana accent had a tendency to do something to my pectoral muscles. Looking at Boyd kept me enthralled. He had strawberry blond hair, tight jeans and a Levi shirt, and his boots had real Wyoming horseshit on them. Boyd was definitely a real cowboy.

Because I was already taken with Boyd and desperately wanted him to notice me, I kept joining in, singing softly, until Terry, the manager of the Ranch Resort, leaned toward me and said, "Kirse--d'ya wanna sing?" I nodded vigorously and, in a moment of silence, he announced, "Now Kirse is gonna sing a song." I paused for a moment, then burst out with,

The cold Wyoming wind blows outside my bedroom door
And my heart is sad and heavy like a bird that flies no more
But if I could read the trials of time I'd raise my eyes and see
That the storm will soon be over and the sun will shine on me.
People smiled and nodded, and I sat down in relief, trying not to look at Boyd for his reaction. Soon after my song, people stood up, ready to head for the sack. On his way out, Boyd stopped by my chair. "Ya have a good voice," he said.

"Thanks," I whispered, and tried not to stare as he left. From that moment on, Boyd was the main thought on my mind. I fell asleep imagining what I would say to him; I woke up wondering what he would be doing today. In bed at night, wrapped up in a pile of warm quilts, I thought about Boyd—his big, boyish grin, his ruddy face, his wide shoulders, his leather work gloves—I never missed a chance to be around him, especially when I was finished with my work in time to go on an evening ride.

All the riders followed Boyd in single file. I rode at the end of the line, where I could watch his back; I'd also watch the backs of the dudes, ready to pick up any strays. Riding in the Absaroka mountains, a bush, crushed beneath a horse's foot, bounced back up as soon as the line passed. The sky opened up before me and I was able to see for miles. When I rode around the bend which turned the small trail away from the side of the mountain—away from the edge that dropped into nothingness and wide open sky—I was suddenly back in the woods, surrounded by trees instead of open space, which had been littered only with occasional greenish-gray rocks and clumps of vegetation. Then I heard the Wyoming wind, blowing through the tops of the trees, softly, then picking up speed as the pines bent away. I loved to hear the breeze, rushing headlong through the forest—it reminded me of the people of northwestern Wyoming, southern Montana and western South Dakota who, in 1935, made their voices heard: they wanted to start their own state, to be called Absaroka, after the mountains we were riding in. Boyd, on the other hand, said that in Louisiana, at
least the wind stops sometimes. "In Wyoming," he said, "it doesn't know when to shut up—kinda like Wyoming singers." He gave me a little grin and my heart fluttered like the pines.

Then the group came out of the trees and onto the prairie again. In front of the mountains and closer to my eyes, there was sagebrush; almost colorless, with a hint of greenish-blue, its smell permeated the plains, making all who came near take notice. No other state has quite as much sagebrush as Wyoming and, with this in mind, I reached down from my horse to pick that smell as we passed. I put the sage to my nose and inhaled, smelling the mountains, the plains and the sky all at once. Then I threw it away to the wind.

The wind blew through the sage and grass, as well. The dried out, yellowing tufts of grass that appeared in clumps were pressed firmly downwind. Lawns don't exist on the Wyoming plains. There was just a clump here, a clump there, blown to the ground, where it lay, more comfortable for having something to lean against. As we rode over the grass and sage, I explained to the woman in front of me, in her Levi 501 jeans and fluorescent pink hiking boots, that she shouldn't let Sandy, the gelding she rode, eat the grass. We were getting left behind by the other riders. "Keep his head up," I advised.

Terry, the manager, had already explained this to the dudes before we left the ranch, but the woman was obviously deathly afraid of the horse getting angry with her. She pulled gently on the reins, then let them lie slack on his neck and moaned in desperate tones, "I can't get his head up!"

"Don't worry," I told her as I rode up to her side. "Get up, Sandy," I said, and gave him a slap on the rear. He looked up, saw that the other horses were ahead of us, and broke into a trot. "Hold him back," I called, but the woman and
Sandy ignored me. When Sandy caught up to the other horses, he returned to a walk, grabbing a mouthful of grass as he went along.

Then it was time to cross the Shoshone River, which is the biggest river in Wyoming. It is used in the irrigation of about 94,000 acres of arid land—because of the river, ranchers can grow hay for their cattle and horses. Along its edges, there was more vegetation, such as bushes and trees, all full of green leaves.

In actuality, what we crossed was not the river, but just a "crick," off of the river. The boys had such arguments over it: was it a crick or a creek? On our ride, the main complication in getting dudes across the crick was convincing their horses to get their feet wet. With a hard kick and a slap to show he meant business, Boyd convinced his horse to plunge in, shake its mane, and head across. That was all it took, for once one horse was in, the others followed, reverting to their herd instincts. After splashing across the crick, Boyd and I then had to work to keep the mounts at a walk. They knew that they were almost home, which meant food, water and friends, and the sooner they got there the better.

When we returned to the corrals, we helped the dudes to the ground, then tied their horses to hitching posts. "Thank you," said the woman who had ridden Sandy. "I was worried there for a moment! I thought he was going to run away with me on his back!"

I laughed. "Oh, he'd never do that," I consoled her. "He just wanted to catch up with his friends is all."

Boyd and I unsaddled the five horses and put them in various corrals; he left me and went to the boys' cabin, right beside the corrals, while I went to the girls', which was further down the mountain, closer to the main house. I looked
back just once, to see the sun as it set over the edge of the mountain—one last cry for attention. It turned the darker grays and greens of the mountainside a bright golden orange on its way. Then I left it, and went inside.

The Wyoming wind did more than make noise. It stole things—when Boyd came in one day from what had been a hard ride, it was all the wind’s fault. He had lost his hat and, upon recapture of the thing, he found that the hat band was gone. He complained bitterly at dinner about the dad-blasted wind, as the other wrangler who had been on the ride told a funny story about how Boyd had jumped off his horse and run down the ravine after his hat.

The next day, my day off, I set out to remedy Boyd’s problem. I spent a couple of hours searching through shops in the little tourist-town of Cody for the right hat band—something visible, yet conservative. His hat was black, and his previous hat band had been red. Most of the bands that I saw were wild or cheap—bright blue, with ends which hung off the back of the hat, or pink and yellow with frayed ends—not Boyd at all. Finally, I found it. It was leather, dark red and black, and it was attached to a hat with a small, belt-like clasp. It was also less than ten dollars, which made it fit all of my standards.

That night, I gave the hat band to Boyd. He gave a surprised, gentle smile, which seemed to light up his ruddy complexion and said, softly, "Why, thank you, Kirse," then immediately set upon the task of putting the band on his hat.

As I watched him taking such care with the hat band: taking out his knife to cut off the price tag (which I had scribbled on with a black marker), wiping the leather clean of any dust, then doing the same with his hat, I could see Boyd as
one of the young men who had come to Wyoming little more than a hundred years before, after hearing that Wyoming was the best territory for cattle growing. Then I remembered how Boyd didn’t really appreciate the state and planned to return to Louisiana as soon as the tourist season was over, and decided to simply concentrate on the real person before me.

That night, I stayed late at the boys’ cabin. They built a fire in a pit that they had dug in front of the cabin, and poked at it with sticks. Then, one by one, the boys went inside, while I sat in Boyd’s lap and watched the fire until it was reduced to orange coals hiding under gray ashes. I nestled into Boyd’s strong, warm arms and barely listened as he whispered to me. When he said, “I think your ear needs a little cleaning,” and proceeded to do so, I giggled.

My relationship with Boyd was short-lived, however. Not long after my night in his arms, he caught me up at the corrals and, putting my hands on my hips, asked, “Are you avoiding me?”

Boyd explained to me, in his gentle Louisiana accent, “This is not a good place for two people to have a relationship, honey—we spend way too much time together. I mean, we see each other every day.” He looked at me as though he knew I’d understand where he was coming from; I stared back in complete surprise. My hands dropped from my hips, and I stepped back a little.

“Why did you take me up to the boys’ cabin the other night, then?” I could no longer meet his eyes.

Boyd responded with conviction, “Everybody needs to be held sometimes.” At that point, our relationship ended—I never spoke to him again.
I began to concentrate more on my job, and, unfortunately, riding horses was not my main duty at the Guest Ranch. I was a "girl"—all females were girls—and in Wyoming, girls aren't wranglers. I was a maid. The only variation in my job occurred when the "Head-Maid" quit and I took over her job. I washed all of the sheets and towels, took clean changes to the various rooms, and helped the other girls clean rooms. To get the sheets and towels from one log cabin to another, I put them on the back of a handy golf cart and chugged to each place in turn.

That morning, I was going to the cabins of the guests who were already up and having breakfast before the morning ride. I smiled and nodded at the Randall family as they headed, groggy-eyed and with their hands stuck under their armpits to fend off the cold, to the main lodge for breakfast. Then I went into their rooms, stripped the beds and took the used towels, and headed to the laundry room for replacements.

*Chug, chug, chug.* It was a slow machine, that golf cart, but it carried more than I could, and it was the first vehicle I had ever driven. I was nineteen, but had never gotten a driver's license due to medical reasons. Driving, for me, was a good part of a bad job.

Over the gravel, down past the girls' cabin, behind the main lodge—the laundry room. I felt powerful and in charge as I drove up, parked and carried my load to the machines for clean linen. In a short time I was headed back to the Randall's cabin, driving with one hand supporting the sheets and towels, the other on the steering wheel.

I admit, I was driving on the edge of the ravine, with the crick off the Shoshone down below—but not on purpose. I glanced down at the crick and admired the way it always kept going. *This machine,* I thought. *This machine*
has to be refilled with gas to keep it going. The crick is always full and always going. Then we—the cart and I—were heading over the edge and I was bailing out, away from the crick, up the side of the ravine, turning around and backing up the hill as I watched the pretty little golf cart land with a boing! on its wheels in the middle of the water.

A second later, I heard running feet and looked up, thinking of Boyd—instead, I saw Justin, another one of the wranglers, at the top of the ravine, staring at me. He arrived in a cloud of dust, like a baseball player sliding into home plate. "Are you okay?" he breathed.

"Yes," I said, irritably, scooting back down the hill toward the cart and beginning to pick up linen that was no longer clean.

They made me stop, however, and told me to just sit. I sat at the top of the ravine, and watched them push the cart up the hill. It didn't take long and, once at the top, they turned it on to see if it still ran. It was fine—a little smashed on the rear fender, but what would you expect? It was just an old golf cart. In no time at all, I was back on it, headed back toward the laundry room for clean linen.

Not long after, Barbara Cody took me off the cart and chose a new head maid and, not long after that, I returned home to Laramie, to get ready to go back to college. Whenever I listened to country music on the radio, I thought of Boyd, the cowboy, the singer, and the man, and about how I hadn't even said good-bye. Then I'd turn the radio off and get to packing.

That summer, I was at home for only a week before I left for college. I had time, however, to do a little riding on the Laramie Plains—which included riding
English and doing jumps with a neighbor's horse, as well as riding on a Harley, with my arms wrapped around the waist of the driver, as I held on for dear life. Wyoming seen from a horse's back was very different from Wyoming seen from a motorcycle.

When riding English, I could hear the thud, thud of the hooves of Zeus, the half-Thoroughbred, as I cantered toward a jump. I could see, as I leaned forward, the Snowies across the highway. The sun shined above, but I had to wear a long-sleeved shirt because sunshine and warmth don't always go together in the thin, high plains air. There was also a wind that bit into my skin. It picked up anything on the ground, like a tumbleweed or a clump of sad, unstuck dirt and threw it across me, at me, in my hair, eyes, mouth.

I was practicing event jumps, riding around in circles, doing them over and over, when a tumbleweed appeared out of nowhere and hit Zeus right in the face. Zeus is a steady horse and although he blanched a bit, he didn't let a flying tumbleweed get him out of sorts; unfortunately, his stablemate, Corry got scared just watching it and began to kick the walls of the stable. Stupid Corry, standing inside the damn stable had to get out of sorts and, in turn, to get Zeus excited.

At the next jump, Zeus refused. He planted his hooves in the brown dust, locked his knees and leaned--a horse's way of saying, "No." I started to go over his head and grabbed onto his neck as I felt myself being jet-propelled through the air. My grabbing onto his neck made Zeus back away from the jump and, as he turned to run in a different direction, I slid off into a lovely blue sagebrush beside, then behind, him. My eyes and mouth were full of the dirt that he had kicked in my face and, as I sat up, a certain tumbleweed hit me in the head.
Wyoming seemed to go by much faster when I was on a motorcycle; it also seemed to be more out of control, which made the ride more exciting. I admit, I didn't really like him. He was okay, but he was kind of chubby and looked like the sad hound dog on the Saturday morning cartoons. He didn't have a Louisiana accent, or cowboy boots with real Wyoming horseshit on them—but he did have a really nice black leather jacket, and the Harley Davidson.

"Wow, that's cool," I told him. "I'd love to go for a ride on one of those."

Scott was a friend of a friend, and always came into the Yellow Sub, a Laramie Sandwich Shop, to talk. Since I had time to spare, seeing as how I'd be leaving town soon, I talked, too. "Have you ever gone off-road with your Harley?" I asked.

"Of course," he responded, sounding hurt that I would think of him as a city rider. Suddenly, he got it. "Do you wanna go for a ride?" he asked, cautiously. "Tomorrow?"

I paused, as though thinking it over—I couldn't speak too quickly—"Well--"

"I have an extra helmet," he said.

"Oh." I acted like he had taken care of my worst fears. "Okay, then—sure."

The next day, with him in front, steering, and me behind, holding on to his gut, we zoomed out of town on I-80, past the big stores, like Buttrey's grocery store, and the old Alco Department store; past the wired off pastures—two horses on the left, a dozen or so cows on the right, all with their faces stuck in tufts of
grass; past the red brick bone clinic, where I went when I twisted my knee at the ski lift.

We turned off at an angle, skidding on the dirt road. I gulped and forgot to breathe as I tried to shift my weight to compensate for gravity. We were speeding toward the rock quarry—"Lots of hills there." He looked back at me and grinned. I held on tighter, suddenly glad that I had something to grab on to, and sunk my teeth into my dry lips as I saw the first hill rise before us. At least Zeus had true horse sense. I wasn't sure what Scott had.

In the quarry, we headed up, then down even faster, swerving around rocks that were set in the middle of the road like orange cones in a driving test. I began to hold on to the motorcycle with my thighs, as tightly as I could—we left the ground for a split second, leaping up and over a hump of gravel, rocks and plain red dirt. Scott looked back at me and grinned, then swerved around a rock pile toward the next hill. He revved the engine, faster, faster—and I was suddenly ready to let go. The sky was tremendous, the hills seemed like launching pads, and I felt ready to fly away on Wyoming's wings.

When I returned to school that year, I went through complete culture shock: I'd spent the summer in the outdoor, wide-open spaces of big Wyoming and, suddenly, I was in tiny Massachusetts, a place covered with buildings and trees, where small ponds were called "lakes" and cricks were called "rivers." I kept my radio tuned to a country station and wrote in my journal daily about how much I missed my state and Bill Cody's Ranch Resort. Any negative parts
of my summer experience were forgotten as I dwelled on what was better about Wyoming when it was compared to Massachusetts.

Some women who lived in my dorm noticed me, somehow, and one day, Aimee, a slim woman with long black hair and a large smile, came up to me and introduced herself. "You said at the dorm meeting that you were from Wyoming," she said. "Do you like country music?" When I answered in the affirmative, she asked, "Do you like to line-dance? My friend, Pat, and I are going line-dancing this Thursday, if you'd like to come along."

I said that I didn't know how to line dance, but I'd sure like to give it a try, and she told me that we'd go early, so we could take the free lessons, as well.

On Thursday, I got to wear my jeans, cowboy boots and cowboy hat again. Putting them on was a wonderful feeling—I felt that I looked like my true self. At the country bar, we tried to act casual as we went in. Another reason for going early was the fact that none of us were over the age of twenty-one yet. Aimee said that they never checked I.D.s early. We had to go down dirty concrete stairs to get to the door, where there was no bouncer on duty yet. Inside, there was a wooden dance floor, surrounded by tables on three sides and a bar on the fourth. Because we had all left our coats outside in the car (we didn't want them to smell like smoke), we headed straight for the dance floor, and stayed there all night, except for the times when there was two-person dancing, something we, without partners, didn't participate in.

For line-dancing, however, we all stood in the middle of the dance floor and the instructor taught us the "Reggae Cowboy," done to the song of the same title, sung by the Bellamy Brothers. We all placed our hands on our hips, and
followed the steps of the instructor, steps which were repeated over and over until the song was done. Then we were taught another dance, which we did to the Patty Loveless song, "Hurt Me Bad In a Real Good Way." As I danced, sweated, and stomped, I looked at Aimee, and grinned. The music boomed around me:

I would have never found you if he had wanted to stay
Oh, he hurt me bad in a real good way.

I could feel my hurt for my state seeping away—I had found a small part of Massachusetts that reminded me of home, and I was relieved. We danced until the bar closed, then returned to the dorm, where I dreamed of cowboys, line-dancing and wide open spaces.
WILD HORSE RACE

He twists and turns,
kicking his heels high in the air,
feeling the pain
that shot through him
from one end to the other.
As the man pressed the cattle prod
deep
into his flesh
he came out of the chute bucking.
Wouldn't you?

The man is thrown to the ground
and the mustang
runs in the opposite direction,
just glad to be free of the weight
that had jolted around on his back and
jabbed his shoulders.
Now he just wants to catch up
with the rest of the herd, racing
for their lives in the middle of the arena;
he gallops around the ring in endless circles
until he stops, exhausted, hearing
a ringing in his ears, and thinking only
of the corral and the hay--
he just wants to relax.
Wouldn't you?

She was prodded
By friends and family
To compete
"Run," they said, "Run faster."
So she ran,
breathing harder,
running faster,
feeling the pain in her gut
squeezing tighter, harder
as she ran in circles around the track
until the end of the race
where she sprinted,
gasping for breath
her stomach ready to explode.
She crossed the finish line, then stopped
walking, leaning on someone, relieved--
she just wanted to relax.
Wouldn't you?
CANTERING

Black leather boots
that haven't been worn in months;
gray riding breeches,
torn and resewn in the knee;
brown leather chaps—
cheating for better traction
on a horse's back—and a
black velvet riding helmet.
All bring back memories of preparation.

Everyday when I finished riding
I would work on the new room:
painting white walls, putting up
yellow curtains, folding tiny socks.

Weightless leather English saddle
feels like home.
Horse sides
warm my thighs, and
cantering slowly, right lead,
brings back my rhythm.
Jumping a double grid:
first trot, then six strides—
four, five, six, push!—
takes me back to that first delivery.

My husband held my hand, wiped
the sweat away and told me, "Imagine
you are cantering! Take a deep breath and
push! Forward! Heels down!"
I cantered on
in slow motion:
heels down,
hips forward and back;
head up--
look between the horse's ears.
Look into my husband's eyes.
I cantered and a life began.

12-1-94
A REASON TO SMILE

1
The horse smiled;
the dog did, too—
she was coming
to feed today.
She patted the dog,
massaged the horse,
gave them breakfast and
sang softly as she
cleaned the barn.
The horse left mucous
on her shirt and
the dog slobbered
on her shoe
in appreciation.
When she asked for a ride
the horse obliged her, trotting, cantering and
stopping whenever she asked;
the dog ran beside them and
sat by the fence with
his tongue lolling out
when he was tired.

2
The horse shook her head;
the dog gave a whine—
it was his turn to feed.
He gave a kick at the dog and
hit the horse with his rake,
grunting and groaning
as he mucked out the stalls.
The horse cowered
on one side of the stall;
the dog hid under the feed bin;
he spit tobacco onto the floor.
When he asked for a ride
the horse gave a buck, then
wanted to gallop,
twisting and kicking
as the dog barked loudly.
Then the horse threw him off, and
as he rolled on the ground,
the dog snarled and bit his leg.

3
The horse smiled;
the dog did, too—
she was coming
to feed today.

3-1-95
EQUINE FLAME

The sun would rise like the first notes of a song. To tell him I was there, I'd bang the door; for my lover whose heart was wild and strong.

His big solid chest would warm me in the dawn from the inside out and back to the core as the sun would rise like the first notes of a song.

When I needed an ear, he was never gone—he'd stand and listen—it was not too hard for my lover whose heart was wild and strong.

On Sundays, we'd jump and run swiftly along the edge of the woods; we'd gallop and soar as the sun would rise like the first notes of a song.

I'd massage his wide back and sing our song and brushing his wild mane was never a chore. I'd do it for my lover whose heart was wild and strong.

We'd sleep—he'd stand above me until the dawn, when he'd ask for my apple, or at least the whole core, as the sun would rise like the first notes of a song for me and my lover whose heart was wild and strong.

3-18-95
SOLITARY CULTIVATION

I pretend to be asleep,
barely breathing
as you plant
your fingers in my hair.
I am finally in your arms but I
must not scare you away.

I lie with my eyes closed,
my head in your lap
listening to your stomach's motor
while I feel you rake
your huge hand, large, slim fingers
in my hair, starting at the scalp and
plowing through,
mowing along my shoulder,
priming my breast,
to my hip
before you begin the next row.

I want to touch you,
to meet you halfway—I start
to move, to turn my face towards yours
then stop
as your hand darts away.
I hold my breath
until you begin again.

I want to be awake
in your arms
To sow our field together
in the spring's bright light.

11-13-94
LOVING ME

I raise my eyebrow and
in the mirror, the opposite of me
raises her own--same
black color, same brow
that peters out
before my eye ends--but
the wrong eyebrow. I raise
my right, she raises
her left.

My reflection is like you, my beau, when,
standing beside me, you smile
with those snapping blue eyes
and that great big grin
that mouths the words,
"I love you," to the mirror--but
looking at the wrong image.

You don't smile at me; you smile
right over my head at your own
tall reflection--you are about to drown
in yourself and all I can remember
about saving you is a line from my first-aid class:
"I know CPR. Can I help?"
I think of my reflection, like you,
not acting in the way I had hoped, and,
as your reflection engulfs you, I realize
I've seen everything backwards.

3-18-95
JEALOUS?

Not me
I'm just your
good friend
What do I care
what you do
with your time
how you live
your life
whether you speak
to me
or not
Care?
Not me
I sit and
say nothing
Drink my rum
I can think
of nothing
to say
As I watch you
tangled
in her
As she whispers
and giggles
the Bite--
Jealous?
Not me
I hear
you grunt
and see
your manly look
Notice you?
Not me
I must
not interfere
I must
shut up and
stay away
Ignore
those hands
that were once
in my own
Jealous?
Not me

11-13-94
SIMPLE DECISION

Which to choose?
That would be a question,
if my girlfriend, Wendy,
didn't have so much money and
if Harper—my ex—
wasn't such an introvert.

I mean, look at Wendy! My woman
hasn't stopped talking
since our arrival at this bar.
She tosses her curls,
pulls on the sleeves of her tight sweater,
exposing white wrists and a gold watchband,
then rubs her hand up and down my back,
leans against me
and talks loudly about how she and I fell
for each other—"It was love at first sight,"
she croons. All this talk
makes it hard for me to think.

Harper is not really my ex-anything—
we're just close friends. I notice
that she has barely said
two words. I wouldn't mind if she spoke
to me, but she refuses.
Harper's always been that way
around strangers.
I haven't been back to this place for six months
and she's still the same.
I glance at her out of the corner of my eye
as I look around the place—nothing to look at,
except Harper. We go way back—me and
Hell-raising Harper. She leans against the wall,
supported by her shoulder,
her tan arms ending in hands
stuck deep in the pockets of faded blue jeans;
she smiles and nods as
Wendy drones on.

Harper is holding her raincoat between her legs
(Wendy braved the rain so she wouldn't be stuck with a coat)
and every so often disengages a hand from her pocket
to sip her drink: water, or
"A polar bear" as she called it—
always has to get a crack in.
She may not talk much, but when she does
she hits you. Always makes me laugh.
Now dark-eyed, red-headed Harper
is looking anywhere but at me.
I know she wants to look at me.
I wouldn't mind talking to her.
She still wants me, even though she says nothing.

I show Harper my new t-shirt, which says,
"Mine's bigger than yours" and has a picture of my
adopted state, Texas.
Harper smiles, laughs
and walks away soon after, to talk to
some guy she knows; at least
I hope she knows him.
Or has she turned to
Picking up men in bars?
Wendy begs for a dance
and I turn to her, almost surprised
to see her here, with me. I suddenly remember
that Wendy gets pissed if she thinks I look
at any woman too long.
Now, I want to tell her, "Stop
hanging on me," but I don't.

As Harper comes back
Wendy turns to her and asks,
"Why do you hang out with him?"
Finally—Harper speaks.
She looks up at me
Then back at Wendy and responds,
"I don't."

Suddenly, Harper is grinning—grinning
her old Hell-raising Harper grin
and Wendy is smiling back
in recognition. "Are you ready to leave?"
Harper and Wendy's eyes meet
in some understanding and they turn away.
Harper grins at a man,
Wendy laughs at the bouncer
and suddenly, they are gone.
The door slams
and they are gone.

12-6-94
"All you ever do is use me," said the stove to the kettle. "I heat you up—get you boiling—then you cool down, leave me behind, like burnt-out coals."

"You're the user," responded the kettle. "Giving me heat so that I'm positively steaming—then I leave for just a second, and when I return, you've lost the fire."

"I admit," said the stove with passion, "that whenever you go—I turn straight from high heat to off in a matter of seconds."

"And I," said the kettle, in admission of guilt, "am whistling and steaming until we part."
The decision was made, almost at once: "I will overheat for you!" cried the stove. "And I will boil and steam until the water evaporates," responded the kettle.

And they did.

3-95
STOP THE PAIN, I WANT TO GET OFF

He says he wants to help me—
he wants to fire my gun.
I'd like that feeling, too, but
he doesn't know how it's done.

He oils and probes every part
of my body, to make me feel good;
he can't find a clue to the trigger—
I'm a rifle that's misunderstood.

Though he can't discharge me,
he has no problem with loading.
He begs for leave to do it again—
his ramrod is iron-stiff and goading.

He's a macho kinda guy
who won't ask for directions.
I know how to fire my gun,
but he's stuck on his erections.

I wish he'd read the instructions
on how to make me shoot.
I'm getting tired of the pain;
my gun is jamming from misuse.

March 1995
TO SATISFY DESIRES

I want a man
Sitting on a motorcycle
With a hot, fast engine
That vibrates between my legs.

Or a man
Perched beneath a catamaran sail
Stretched out, taut,
That rises and falls.

Or a man
With his legs wrapped around a stallion,
Mounting with energetic passion
That canters to my rhythm.

Or a man
Astride a jetski
Sliding through my waves
That gets me wet.

Or a man
Holding a lollipop
Sweet to taste
That is hard in my mouth.

Or a man
Wait--
All I really need is a motorcycle
or a catamaran
or a stallion
or a jetski
or a lollipop.
LYNN'S CAR WASH

"Can I have a $3 wash?" she asks.
"Whoa," he puffs his hairy chest
out of his unbuttoned shirt,
sucks in his rather large gut
in his tight jeans
and smiles.
"Sure thing, little lady.
Just head your car on over there--
I'll turn it on for you."
She ignores his raised eyebrows
and drives to the entrance:
Vroom.

"I'm givin' you
the $6 wash.
No, no--it's on me."
More smiles
as he dreams of a wet car.
"Just ease it on forward, darlin'."
He breathes harder:
Puttputtputt.

She rolls down her window.
"Is something wrong?"
"No, no--" he gives her a
yellow-toothed grin. "It's just
this handle.
I can't get it up. But
that happens sometimes
to an old geezer like me."
She rolls up her window, glad it is tinted, and puts her foot on the gas, imagining a faster speed: Wham!

He sees his sprayer head toward her car hears the water and wax on her windows feels the fresh sensation and a burst of relief: Whoosh!

She drives off without looking back. He stands in his dirty office, remembering her breath on the lightly tinted windows.

12-1-94
I plugged in my computer, turned it on, then listened to the whirring as it booted up—hmmmmmmbzzzzzz. Without warning, total silence. I was pulled from my chair in slow motion, and I stood, staring at the orifice of the doorway. I heard nothing as I shuffled in that direction; somehow I knew that the big brown door with a long window that now loomed before me needed to be shut. Even as I pulled it toward me, I had the feeling of having lost the use of four of my five senses. All I could do was see. I saw the floor—my face was on the floor, yellow floor, with brown and white spots.

Then I could feel it—my cheek pressed against the floor. I could feel the little crumbs of dirt that were never swept and, as I curled my legs toward my stomach and my arms on my chest, I felt warmth. A comfortable, safe place to lie down. I closed my eyes and was out.

Temporal lobe epilepsy, or TLE, originates from a scar on the epileptic's brain. My own scar was probably caused at birth. I, of course, do not recall, but my birth has been described to me many times. My mother had labor pains a month before I was expected, in the early morning, when my father was not home. Her father-in-law, my Grampa Kelly, drove her to the hospital in Chicago, scared out of his wits—he gripped the steering wheel, turned tight corners, and the brakes squealed. My mother felt as though the world was aflame with lights, all swirling around her head.

At the hospital, she was told that everything was all right, but faces kept fading in and out of her consciousness while all she could think was Where's
Carlos? My brother, fifteen months old at the time, was with Grampa Kelly in the waiting room, but she had no way of knowing that.

"It's a girl!" called the nurse.

"But—but—she's so white," my mom said, shocked. "What's wrong?"

"Not enough blood," the doctor said, and they took me away. My mother kept thinking, A white rag. She looks like a little white rag . . .

When my mother saw me again, I was in an incubator. Blood had been pumped into me through the veins in my head and the doctor was quite confident in my chances of survival. My mother's new thought was, Red rag.

The blood transfusions through my head caused a small, rectangular scar in my brain's right temporal lobe. Other cells around the scar, or dead brain cells, lost their ability to function properly and now produce occasional discharges of electricity which can cause a seizure.

When I was in seventh grade, I didn't even know I had epilepsy. I was in the school musical, took the upper level math class, and played for the school's basketball team. I liked the music and math teachers, but I hated the basketball coach. She was always screaming, always asking for more than I could give.

One day, at a home game, I was playing point guard and we had the ball, for once. The center passed to me, I took a shot, and it bounced off the edge the basket, right into the hands of the other team. They sprinted down the court—but, suddenly, everything seemed to be happening in slow motion to me. People were yelling words, words that bounced off my head and echoed. My team's yellow uniforms seemed bright, almost blinding to me as I stood and stared at everybody running to the other end of the court.
The next thing I knew, I was shaking my head—they had scored and everyone was headed back toward me. I heard my coach scream, "Wake up, Kirsten! Get in the game!"

When the ball was passed to me, I passed it back and the other player scored—Yes! We all headed to the other end of the court.

That night, the coach called my mom. When she got off, my mom asked me how I was feeling. "Coach Brooks said she thought you were going to faint today."

"I'm fine," I said.

Doctor Pavlovich, my pediatrician, told my mom that what happened on the court sounded like some sort of seizure disorder. The idea of a seizure disorder was such a shock to my mother that she was sure that Dr. Pavlovich must be wrong. The only seizures she had heard of were grand mal seizures, where a person falls down and has convulsions. I had certainly never done that.

At the Ivinson Memorial Hospital, I sat in a hard little yellow chair, listening to Dr. Pavlovich talk to my mother. He had a white coat and glasses, and perfectly placed brown hair. I knew him well. Soon he came over and handed me a paper sack. "Hi, Kirse," he said, as friendly as could be. I had always liked him. Whenever I went for my annual back-to-school checkup, he gave me sugarless gum. It lost taste quickly, but he usually handed out four or five pieces, which made the taste last longer.

"What we want you to do is hyperventilate. A lot of times, hyperventilation can cause a seizure in people with this disorder. So we want to see if that's what happens with you."
I nodded. "Just go ahead and breathe into the sack." I did as I was told, deciding to look down at the floor instead of at all of the people around me. Breathe, breathe, breathe . . . The paper sack fell from my hands and everyone was far away. I could see my mother's tiny face—it seemed as though I was looking through a telescope backwards. Then I woke up, groggily, wondering where I was. I looked at the leather I was laying on and recognized it—a doctor's table. I was here—for tests. I sat up, slowly.

Later, my mom told me what I could not remember. After dropping the sack, I sat in the chair, smacking my lips together and squeezing my hands open and shut. An epileptic seizure.

Epilepsy was considered by many Ancient Greek physicians as curable until it became "chronic." At that point, the patient would be considered cursed with "the falling sickness" for life. These doctors saw prevention as the best cure, and when an epileptic felt a seizure coming on, whatever appendages vibrated—for example, my hands—would be tied up tightly, with the idea that the disease could be chased away for a day. Other remedies included bloodletting or phlebotomy. There were also elixirs, such as vinegar, the lichen of horses or mules, or even crushed human bones! Some even recommended that human blood or menstrual blood be swallowed by the epileptic.

Luckily, Dr. Pavlovich prescription was much easier to take and easier to get down than those in Ancient Greece. He prescribed Tegretol pills. The only problem was that he didn't know how much to give me—we had to experiment, and the side-effects from that experimentation were almost as bad as the seizures. After I had been taking the pills for a few weeks and the seizures were still not
controlled, Pavlovich suggested I take more—three pills three times a day instead of two and a half pills three times a day.

Soon after, I was walking down the hallway at school to my English class, when I began to feel dizzy. Something was wrong—everything in my sight was moving up and down and I was seeing double. I closed one eye and saw normally again, but my head hurt. In class, I ducked my head and closed my eyes, trying to remain unnoticed. Every time I opened my eyes, the room, the chalkboard, the teacher, the walls—all moved up and down, and I felt sick. Finally, when the room began to spin, I raised my hand, asked politely to leave, and made it to the bathroom just in time to throw up.

These side-effects came and went with the dosage fluctuations, until I finally got set on five pills per day, which seemed to control most of the seizures—and that was the best we could do.

The side-effects of Tegretol were not all that I had to live with. Temporal lobe epilepsy has some side-effects of its own. One is called hypergraphia, or the tendency to write anything, all the time, often of a philosophical nature. Lewis Carroll, another temporal lobe epileptic, exhibited this trait. He experienced seizures in which he had the feeling of falling down a hole, or things getting bigger and smaller, just like his character, Alice. And he ended up writing about these experiences, just as I do.

My writing has piled up over the years—from my journals, which I've kept off and on since childhood, to my newspaper, “The Summer Opinion,” which I published when I was in fourth grade, to essays and stories I write today—
demonstrating hypergraphia. Sometimes I write about my seizures. I wrote the following in my journal on October 10, 1995:

I had a seizure today in the bookstore. It was kinda scary 'cause I didn’t know anybody to ask what happened. I came out of it & was getting up off the floor. Did I fall down or lie down? I’ve never fallen down before. This old man, whom I assume was the manager, came & asked me if I was okay & I said yes.

I was carrying these 3-ring binders that I had chosen before the seizure, but then I couldn’t remember what else I needed. I walked around, trying to remember--I couldn’t remember--then I walked past the paper clip aisle & remembered that I needed some. I grabbed them & then did everything quickly--had to get outta there!

From the bookstore, I went home and fell on my bed, exhausted. When I woke up, I recorded it in my journal.

Another side-effect of TLE is “stickiness,” or “viscosity,” that is, being clingy and dependent on others and prolonging conversations. Van Gogh, who was also considered to have TLE, typified this trait in his relationship with his friend Gauguin, with whom he lived in Arles, France. Although he enjoyed the time that they spent alone together, painting and talking, van Gogh was often jealous of his friend’s relations with other people. He followed Gauguin, trying to keep tabs on who his friend was with, and he often interrupted Gauguin’s associations with others, vying for attention.

I, too, had a love-hate relationship with my best friend, Renée. I usually called her every night of the week to tell her about what had happened to me in school, but one week I decided against it. I sat on my bed, thinking of how,
actually, she never called me--I always did the calling. It was a one-sided relationship. I crossed my arms and thought, She's got to call me this time!

I waited throughout the week, thinking of how she wasn't speaking to me--she wasn't calling me, so she must have taken me off her list of friends. I ignored the fact that we'd been friends for eight years. Since second grade, we'd known each other--and I was always the one who called, I thought.

At the end of the week, I finally picked up the phone and dialed the number I knew by heart--2-3197--and asked Renée what she was doing for Friday night. "Oh yeah, we're going to go to the basketball game, and then to Country Kitchen for ice cream. We're meeting at . . ." Renée chattered on. I was ready to cry in relief as I spoke to her, but Renée had no inkling of my feelings. These emotions, controlled in my temporal lobe, pushed me closer to and farther away from my friend in a tumultuous, painful way.

Although it had some negative sides, there was actually always a part of epilepsy that I thought was kind of cool. It made me different, and I liked being unique--I liked to be noticed, and I also liked talking about myself. Having a seizure gave me a chance at both. I liked having good stories to tell.

One good story, which gives me a chance to make fun of my Republican senator, has to do with a time when I was in Washington, D.C. It was during the summer between my sophomore and junior years in college, and I was spending some time visiting an old friend and roommate. I would have been glad to simply visit, but my mother insisted that I visit one of Wyoming's senators, Alan Simpson, and even gave me something to discuss with him: the
Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA. "That's something you have firsthand experience with," she told me over the phone.

"I'm not disabled!" I told her, in a surprised voice.

"Tell him about your epilepsy," she said.

So, armed with a pamphlet about the ADA, I went to visit Senator Simpson, or Big Al, as he was known in Wyoming. Both he and his secretary seemed glad to see me. His secretary had just graduated from the University of Wyoming, and was so happy to be in D.C.!

Senator Simpson was a politician through and through. He tried to be a personable, fun-loving type of guy, but just didn't quite cut it. With his almost-bald head, his slumped shoulders, and his warped, painted-on smile, he had the look of having been in Washington too long. I stuck my hand in my pocket to touch the pin which said, 'I'm Pro-Choice and I Vote!' Then we talked.

I spoke of the ADA, and how I'd like for him to vote for it, and how I had epilepsy-- "Oh-ho," Senator Simpson laughed. "So we'll have to stick a spoon in your mouth, huh?"

I gave a sick little grin and told him, "No, actually, I don't have grand mal seizures. Mine are called petit mal, and a lot of times, people don't even notice them because I just stand there . . ."

Senator Simpson was still laughing at his own joke. When he was finished laughing, we had our picture taken in his office, with his arm around me, and he sent me on my way.

Big Al is an example of one of those people who just didn't understand. His automatic reaction reminded me of some of the earliest reactions to epilepsy.
When people in Ancient Greece saw an epileptic, they immediately thought of the person as impure, often equated with the person's sexual life. The early Romans saw an epileptic fit as a bad omen. The Greeks and Romans didn't really understand anymore than Simpson did.

There are many people in my life who didn't understand. One example was Jean, one of my supervisors for the job I had during the summer I spent in Alaska, working for my Dad's employer, Alyeska Oil. We spent an entire day sorting old trunks full of stuff from the oil spill that had occurred in Prince William Sound. We were piling a lot of computer keyboards in one trunk, modems in another—when I had a seizure. Jean had never seen a seizure before. She told me later that I stood in the middle of the floor, and talked to her very slowly, and told her I was having a seizure. Just a normal seizure to me, but something new, exciting and frightening for Jean. I came out of it in an ambulance going to the emergency first aid. Jean was with me, telling me that I was okay.

I was extremely bothered by Jean's reaction. I felt almost as though she had taken advantage of me when I had no control. The ambulance workers had told me to lay on a stretcher and had put me in the ambulance, something I was not able to refuse during a seizure. Jean wanted me to go home. "Well, I'm okay, now," I said, sitting up from the stretcher.

"We'll see how you feel after lunch." She seemed disappointed.

That night, my Dad suggested I tell her that I didn't need her to call an ambulance every time I had a seizure; when I carried out his suggestion, Jean told me vehemently, "Kirse, I will always call an ambulance if you have a seizure. We can't afford accidents like that—"
At that point, I stopped listening. Epilepsy wasn’t an accident to me.

I have since learned, however, that accidents can happen. My epilepsy can scare me. I remember mud. Mud. As I struggled to a sitting position and came out of my seizure, that was my first realization: I was lying in the mud, and it was stuck to my legs, my arms, my clothes, in little splotches. I shook my head, looking around me, waiting for things to come into focus. I was on a street, somewhere where there were no cars and—there was my bike! I must have been riding my bike! But to where?

I jumped up and immediately sank down again as I felt the blood rush to my head and my legs wobble beneath me. On all fours, with my head bent toward the ground, I crawled toward my bike, hoping against hope that nobody would come along and ask me what I was doing. Part of me scoffed, thinking, After all, it’s just a seizure, while another part of me screamed—I don’t even know where I am! How did I get here?

I stood up, more slowly this time, and picked up my bike. Suddenly, it hit me—I had been going to work—to that place—I’d know it when I saw it. I turned toward what looked like the main street and rode toward it, standing on my pedals and pumping hard to leave the mud behind. As I stopped at the main street, I looked to the left, then the right, and saw what I was looking for—the dorm—that’s where I worked—what was it called?

I pumped up the hill toward it and barely stopped at the light, as one thought filled my mind. I could have been killed—riding without a bike helmet—I could have a seizure at any time—my head! My breath came in gasps as I
realized how lucky I had been. Getting off my bike at the dorm, I looked at my legs, all muddy and scratched up, and began to shake.

I went down to my boss, still shaking, croaking, "I just had a seizure and a bike accident. I'm going to the infirmary." She asked no questions, just nodded and told me to go, so I went outside, got on my bike, still with no bike helmet—the irony was not lost on me—and rode to the doctor's office.

On the way there, I thought I'd get a good look at where I'd fallen—but I had no idea where it had happened. I knew it was a side road, and rode along first one, then another, expecting to find a big splotch in the mud where I'd fallen, but saw nothing.

Once at the infirmary, I could contain myself no longer. They asked me what was wrong, wanted me to wait, and I started to sob. "Had a bike accident... seizure... no bike helmet... don't even remember where it was!"

Sobbing always gets results; unfortunately, there was really nothing the doctor could do other than take my Tegretol level and suggest, as she had before, that I see a neurologist to see about switching medications or something. I left feeling calmer, simply because time had passed, but with no satisfaction.

I often returned to the two side roads where my accident might have occurred, looking for splotches in the mud, but never found any. I was never certain where the accident took place. After that day, I always wore my bike helmet.

Having a seizure helped to convince me to wear my bike helmet. It has helped me in other ways, too, such as fulfilling a daydream, if only for a few seconds, when I had a crush on my friend Steve, later that summer. He and I
went to a casino, with his father and a business associate. The first thing I noticed in the casino were all of the little slot machines which surrounded the entire room. At the nearest machine, a lady in black running tights and a hot pink sweatshirt stood mesmerized, her eyes glued to the machine as she put in her tokens and yanked on the handle.

I looked up at my friend, Steve, then at his father, waiting for one of them to make a decision. "We-ell . . ." Steve's father glanced over at the blackjack table. "I think we'll head over--" There was no fade-out, no blurred vision, no warning. It was just one moment, in the bright, loud casino, where lights shined and money slapped against more money; the next moment, outside in the parking lot, I was holding Steve's hand and following him one step behind, like a child being led by her older brother.

Even as I came out of the seizure and felt capable of walking on my own, I did not consider letting go of Steve's hand. His hand was big and my own disappeared in it, felt warm and secure in it; besides, as we reached his dad's car, I reflected that this would probably be the only time I'd ever get to hold Steve's hand, since he had a girlfriend and everything.

He unlocked the car and held the door open for me. "Are you okay?" he asked. I nodded. "Do you want to put your seat back?" He didn't wait for an answer, but leaned it slowly and gently back so that I could close my eyes.

When I woke up a few minutes later, he was playing with the stereo. I sat up and he quickly leaned toward me, then away, as he saw that I was aware of what was going on around me. "What happened?" I asked.

"My dad and Randy headed over to the blackjack table and you were just standing there—I just brought you out here . . ." He didn't know what to say.
"Well, I'm fine now. Let's go back."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded and we headed back in, me supporting myself, my hands at my sides, but I could still recall my hand, lost in that huge one that offered protection.

Epilepsy continues for me. One morning, in the shower, I let the hot water run down my back, relieving all the pain and soreness I'd just subjected it to from Side Laterals and Upward Presses with dumbbells. I sighed and relaxed; I didn't ever want to get out.

Then I was on the floor of the bathroom, wrapped in my towel, leaning against the shower door. I must have turned the water off, for all I could hear was a slow dripping from the faucet; I must have dried myself, too, because there was no puddle on the floor.

I leaned closer to the floor in slow-motion, as I put the towel around my wet hair, then crawled out of the bathroom on my hands and knees. Everything was snapping at me in flashes: there was the mirror, with its four bright lights—flash! No time between pictures. The next view I had was of the window, with its shade beating back and forth in the wind. Flash! My bed was coming at me, my blanket, warm, around me, the ceiling was above, my pillow was soft . . . I closed my eyes.

When I awakened, I lay in my bed, looking at all the little bumps on my ceiling. Why am I still in bed? I knew I had something that needed to be remembered . . . My towel was on my head, I had no clothes on—Oh yeah, I thought. I took a shower. But when did I get out—oh. Must've been a seizure.
With that realization, I yanked the towel off my head and threw it to the floor, then closed my eyes and drifted away.

When I wake up from a seizure now, it's nothing new. I like to imagine that I have drifted on clouds that people like Lewis Carroll or van Gogh have drifted on. Romanticism gives epilepsy a certain charm that I enjoy--each time I come out of a seizure, I am able to confirm, once again, who I am and why I am here.
EPILEPTIC AWAKENING

Stop
Where
Go
Drop
Rain
Splatter
Puddle
Frame
Stop
Trees
Grass
Leaves
Knees
Where
Spokes
Handlebars
Chain
Broken
Go
Mud
Dirt
Gravel
Head
Drop
Grass
Chain
Puddle
Gravel
Stop
Frame
Head
Back
Knees
Stop
Please
Go
Now.

11-13-94
There is a huge sculpture of a nude man hung above the door and I do not gaze upward. I don't want to look like a pervert. I stand in the middle of the large entryway, which has what seems like a ten foot ceiling; people scurry by and around me, and I feel very small. I head toward the desk with the word, "Registration" above it. As I wait in line, I speculate on what this is going to be like. After all, I've had an average of a seizure a week since January--and that's only the three months that I've been recording them. Heck, I just had one on Thursday, when I was lifting weights. I curled up against the wall until it was over, then finished my weight routine and went to the locker room for a shower. I wonder--will they find out that I can have surgery--that they can just cut out part of my brain and my seizures will be gone? Will they give me new pills? Will they make me have a seizure for them?

"Can I help you?"

I step toward the woman at Window 1, who has interrupted my speculations. "Um, I have an appointment at 9:30 and I have a card that says I can go up to the eighth floor, but I left it at home--and I'm from Ames, Iowa, so I can't go back and get it--all I have is this card that says to come at 8:15, and it has my name spelled wrong . . . ."

The woman has seen hundreds of people like me. She takes control--looks at the card and explains, "Oh, yes, this is a 92-number. Those numbers are never permanent; you probably have a new number now." She types in the old
number, then pauses. "Your first name is Kirse--K-I-R-S-E? . . . What's your middle name?"


"You live at 800 Piñon Drive, number 201?"

"Yes."

"Your mother, Cynthia, in Wyoming, is your closest relative?"

"Yes."

After confirming all of this vital information, she pulls out a small envelope and has the computer print my name and my new number, 4 492 078. After scrawling some numbers on the envelope, she looks at me and points to the numbers she has printed as she speaks. "Your appointment is at 9:30. Go to the East 8 Desk—the elevators are over there." With a final gesture, she dismisses me and I am, once again, on my own.

_Mayo Building, Desk E8_

I step out of the elevator, which has quickly and silently zoomed me up to the eighth floor—nothing like the elevators in the building where I work. Looking around me, I see that I am in a small hallway, with elevators facing each other and walls to my left and right, with large, wooden letters telling patients where to go. I head to the right—"East 8 Desk."

As I enter the a huge waiting room, I mutter, to myself, "I can't believe how impersonal this place is," then shut up in surprise at the sound of my voice. The place is so big and I am so small that no one hears me. I have nothing to do but stand in line again. When I hand my envelope with my registration number
to the blond woman in white sweats (I checked—they are sweats), she hands me a form to fill out.

I turn to face the waiting room again, and note that the vinyl chairs (though the more expensive style) in rows, full of silent people do not seem too inviting. I sit down anyway. The first thing I notice about the form is that it asks me for my religion. I have no idea why they would want to know my religion. Actually, I'm not very religious—a Christmas-and-sometimes-Easter-Catholic—but I think it's none of their business, all the same, and leave the line blank. Then I must speculate on what diseases I've had shots for in the past 10 years. I have an idea that I've already filled out this form—but that was at home, with my mom on the other end of the phone. Only she knows the answers to all of these vital questions about me; I've never paid attention. The only thing I am certain of is the first day of my last menstrual cycle—I record that in my calendar every month, so all I need to do is look it up.

On page two, they ask what I have—"seizures," "migraines," or "other"—and to describe them. I circle "seizures" and write, "I am told that I smack my lips and clinch my hands open and closed; they last thirty seconds or so, and when I come out of them, I remember nothing that occurred." (I shrug as I write down the duration—I haven't had anybody around to time them for me since I left home after high school.) I also add that since the beginning of the year all but one of my seizures have occurred during exercise.

The form also asks for the name of the medicine I take and if it causes any side-effects. I circle Tegretol and write, "I need lots of sleep," figuring the doctor will know that Tegretol makes people lethargic.
The last thing the form asks is how I see my health. I think proudly of my body-building, bike riding, and running and write, "Healthy!" with a vigorous stroke.

After turning in this form, I sit down to wait again, thinking that at least this place is more organized than Iowa State University's Health Center. The little voice in the back of my mind tells me to give the poor, over-worked people at the Health Center a break, but I ignore it.

Mayo Building, Dr. Britton's office

My name is called and I am led to an office which has a desk with a green-and-pink-flowered couch beside it, but no windows. As the door closes behind me, I see that somebody's coat is hung on the back of it; I remove my own coat and sit down on the couch.

Almost immediately, the door is opened and a young man walks briskly in. He wears a gray suit with a paisley tie, and holds out his hand to me. As I stand up to shake it, he says, "Hello, Kirse, I'm Dr. Britton. How are you today?"

"Pretty good," I smile, feeling quite comfortable with the fellow, although he does look very young.

He quickly and easily gets me to tell him my life story--I'm from Wyoming, in graduate school at ISU, working on a Master's in Creative Writing, I've had temporal lobe epilepsy since I was at least in seventh grade--oh yes, the epilepsy. That's why I'm here. I explain that I may have had seizures before that time; I simply didn't know what they were until then. I give an example of my seizures, and explain that I've never actually remembered what goes on; instead,
I depend on what others have told me. I tell him that they happen when I exercise. "And why are you here?" he asks.

"Well--I wanted to find out if they could be controlled more. With a different medicine, with surgery--or maybe I could stop exercising, but of course I wouldn't want to do that..." My voice peters off and I swallow and lick my lips as I look down, not having much else to say. I'm here to get fixed. I'm tired of seizures. At least, I think I am.

Dr. Britton nods his slightly chubby head, straightens his glasses, puts his hands on his desk, and says, "Okay--well, why don't we just try some things here to test your memory--that is, how your temporal lobes are doing. I'm going to tell you some numbers, and you repeat them back to me. Okay?" I nod, and he continues. "Four, twelve, seventeen, six."

I repeat, "Four, twelve, seventeen, six," as he pulls out an instrument with a light on the end and stares into my eyes.

"Seven, fifteen, thirty-six, two."

He waves his hand in front of my eyes and I blink as I state, "Seven, fifteen, thirty-six, two."

"Okay. Now I'm going to give you four words to remember. Just repeat them for me: dog, sandwich, airplane, Johnson."

"Dog, sandwich, airplane, Johnson."

"Now, follow my hand with your eyes." He moves his hand from side to side and I follow it for as long as it is in my line of vision. "What were those words again?"

I repeat, dutifully, "Dog, sandwich, airplane, Johnson."
"Good. Now, tell me how many fingers I am holding up." He holds up three fingers in front of my face. Then he moves them off to my left side, and I continue repeating whatever number he holds up until they are out of my sight. He does the same thing off to my right—and I can't see them. I can tell that he is waving his hand on my right side, but I cannot tell anything about the number of fingers he is holding up.

I shake my head in wonderment. "I don't know." He tries again, but I am still blind. As I try to understand this handicap in my eyesight that I have never noticed before, Dr. Britton makes no comment; he simply continues his testing.

Next, he holds out his hands, palm up, and has me press my fists down upon them, telling me to keep him from pushing my fists up. I do my best, thinking that I haven't been lifting weights for nothing. The strange thing is that my left arm seems to be having an easier time than my right. As I speculate as to whether he is pushing harder on that side, he interrupts my thoughts with, "What were those words again?"

"Dog, sandwich, airplane, Johnson."

"All right, now read this for me." He hands me a laminated piece of cardboard with a story on it, which I read with all of the dramatics that I had planned to use on Broadway someday.

"You wish to know all about my Grandfather. Well, he is nearly 93 years old, yet he still thinks as swiftly as ever . . ." I immediately think of my Grampa Kelly, who, in his 90s, continued to write me feisty notes about how I should both eat better and get closer to my religion. The story ends, "We have often urged him to walk more and smoke less, but he always answers, 'Banana oil!'"
make Grandfather's voice low and scratchy, from deep in my throat, and the story ends with, "Grandfather likes to be modern in his language."

Looking up at Dr. Britton, I see a surprised look on his face. He smiles and says, "Well, that is certainly one of the more dramatic readings I've heard." Then he explains that he must look at the MRI--the magnetic pictures of my brain—that I have brought with me, and that he'll be back in a moment.

While he is out of the room, I have time to speculate--I can't believe I never noticed that problem in my eyesight. I wave my hand back and forth in front of my face. Then I think of my strength—it's always seemed strange to me that my left arm is stronger, since I am right handed . . . I also wonder what those dumb memory games are--anyone can remember four names or numbers that are asked within a few minutes of each other! I have trouble on Tuesday remembering the names of people I saw Monday. Then again, I've never had a problem with remembering songs, or lines from a play. I figure that he must not have learned much.

True to his word, Dr. Britton is back in a moment, and I become the person with a surprised look on my face as he tells me, "Now, I'm not sure about your temporal lobes—but I can see from the MRI that you had at some time, probably before you were born, a stroke the left side of your occipital lobe. That would explain why you have problems with your right peripheral vision and why you seem to be just a little weaker on your right side than your left. Have you ever noticed that before?"

I shake my head. "I haven't noticed the vision thing before now." I try to repeat his test quickly once again. I stare straight ahead, then move my hands
slowly away from my face. The left hand comes into vision, but the right hand is invisible. I grit my teeth in irritation, then look at Dr. Britton, who has been politely silent. "I have noticed the right arm thing, though--I lift weights, and it is always harder on my right side--I think." I make sure to qualify my statement--who knows what the next test will reveal.

Dr. Britton nods, then leans back in his chair. "Now, there are a few things you can do. You could, as you say, stop exercising--but I don't know that you'd even want to do that, and that would probably not completely stop your seizures, anyway." He seems to be thinking aloud. "The other thing you could do is try to add a different drug to the Tegretol that you are already taking. A new drug called Lemotrigine, or Neurontin, just came out--although it can cause dizziness and sedation--but I guess you get that from Tegretol already."

"Yes," I interrupt, wanting to stop his train of thought for a moment. "It took awhile for us to figure out my Tegretol dose, because it was either too low, so that I had seizures, or too high, so that I'd start to see double and finally throw up just to get the Tegretol out of my system. I've had times where I haven't eaten anything and I just throw up the pink Tegretol pills."

Dr. Britton nods again, then continues where he left off. "Now, people who use the new drug have about a 20 percent chance of their seizures being corrected. The other choice you have is surgery. We can remove whatever part of the brain that causes the seizures if it is not an important part. For instance, if the seizure activity comes from one of the temporal lobes, we could remove it, because those are not a very important part of the brain."
Ha! Suddenly I am thinking that this fellow is in science. *Creativity comes from the temporal lobes—but then, you don't care too much about creativity, do ya, Doc?*

"If the seizures are coming from the left side of the occipital lobe, removing part of that might mess up your sight more—but then, it is already impaired—"

*I didn't even know it was impaired until today, dammit!* I squeeze my eyes tightly shut.

I move forward in my chair; I feel the need to interrupt again. "Now—can these operations—do they often cause more seizures to occur?"

He looks at me steadily. "We wouldn't do it if it commonly caused more seizures."

I think about the reading I have done, and wonder if he's just a neurological surgeon who wants another brain to play with. "Well, what can we do now—today—to find out whether I have an option for surgery or not?" I ask. "I came here with my friend, and we're going back tonight, so I need to know what can be done now."

I think Dr. Britton likes people who cut through the hogwash and get to the point. "Well, today we can do an MRI—we have a special machine that can focus on particular parts of your brain, especially the hippocampi in the temporal lobes, so that we can see if that is where the seizures are coming from. We can also do an EEG tomorrow morning—if we did it tomorrow at 8 o'clock, we'd need four hours to get the results, so I could see you again tomorrow afternoon."

He looks at me expectantly, waiting for an answer, and I look at my notes, thinking about the classes I have tomorrow and whether they are more or less
important than this--"There's a bus that leaves tomorrow night at eight," I say.
"I could do it."

"All right. I'll have my secretary set you up." He leads me out to the front
desk and turns me over to the secretary. "I'll see you tomorrow." I nod, and our
session is over.

*Mayo Building, Desk E8*

The blond nurse in white sweats explains to me that I will need to go to
the Charlton Building, Desk 1N, at 12:15 to have my MRI done. I glance at my
watch and see that I have almost two hours to wait. The nurse continues,
ignoring my glance, telling me that tomorrow morning, at 8 o'clock, I will need
to go to Desk S2 in the Plummer Building, where I will get my EEG done.

Before that, however, I must get some blood samples done. This means
that I must not eat after 10 o'clock this evening. She hands me a pamphlet that I
recognize—the pamphlet on not eating before my appointment. I read it last
night and haven't eaten yet today.

"Does that mean I can eat now?" I ask.

"You haven't eaten yet?"

"No."

She quickly changes plans and tells me that I should go over to the Hilton
Building, Desk C1 now, and have my blood taken at 11:30. I get the idea that she
is always very punctual.
Once again, I am waiting. I got here by following the signs in this underground hallway they call The Subway—but I thought subways had trains and you had to pay to get on them. This subway is simply a carpeted, lighted hallway—almost like a hallway one might find in an expensive hotel—that connects all of these buildings in the Mayo Clinic together. Here, at the blood desk, I try not to think about what I would like to have for lunch, or where I could get food as soon as I have my blood taken.

"Kursee?"

I stand up, not even complaining that the nurse has mispronounced my name. I have been through this blood-level stuff a hundred times before: sit in the chair, roll up the sleeve, have rubber tied around my upper-left arm—"Poke." The nurse interrupts my recollections of earlier troph levels taken. As my blood fills the little bottles, she looks closely at my face, then away. "Okay?" I nod, thinking, Jesus, I’ve had this done a million times before, man! I’m not gonna faint now at the sight of a little blood! and soon, without a blink, I am back in the subway.
I gulp. We're planning on heading back to Ames after I'm done here today. "Well--they--um."

"What?" Tracy is very straightforward--a lot like Dr. Britton, really. I cut to the chase.

"They want me to stay until tomorrow. I could take a bus back tomorrow night--but--do you think--?"

"Kirse, I'm sure you could stay here--there's no problem." Tracy answers the question I can't ask.

I then tell her about the MRI, and how I've been told that it will take 45 minutes. We agree that I'll call her when it's done.

The MRI, or magnetic resonance imaging, is, as the pamphlet says, "a technique for making pictures of organs inside your body to help doctors with your medical evaluation." When my name is called, the woman pronounces my name wrong, but immediately asks me for the correct pronunciation. She leads me to a changing room, where I am told to strip to my underwear and put on the clothing that is in the room.

I find a white robe with a string in the middle to tie its flaps together, and a blue robe which can be wrapped around me and tied on the outside with a belt. There are also two blue things--I wonder if I should put them on my head to cover my hair, then opt for covering my feet, instead. As the technician makes no comment when I walk out, I assume that I have made the right choice.

The pamphlet also says that the MRI machine is a large magnet with a central opening. To me, it looks like the machine in the movie, The Empire

*Strikes Back*, where Han Solo was turned into a bronze statue. I lie down and prepare to be bronzed.

The technician covers me with a soft white blanket, then pushes me inside the tube that is the MRI machine. "Okay, this first one will last one minute."

"Okay."

The machine is activated and I immediately hear a large roar, like the roar of a car engine. Then there is a tap-tap-tap on the ceiling of the machine. Roar. Tap-tap-tap. Roar. Tap-tap-tap.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine."

"This next one will be three minutes."

We continue on up to eight minutes, and I begin to see the car whose engine is roaring. It is Freddy, my dad's yellow jeep that he drove in off-road races when I was a kid. And the tap-tap-tap has become part of a childhood record—*The Three Little Pigs*. The Big Bad Wolf says, "Well, if I can't blow the house down, I'll climb up on the roof, and slide down the chimney! And I'll catch the three little pigs..." Tap-tap-tap. I hear his footsteps on the roof. He's just about to get me, to slide down the chimney--

Then it's over. I am sent back to the changing room to put my corduroys and my sweater back on, then dismissed until tomorrow.

**The Subway**

As I head back to the Mayo Building, I see a line of pay phones. I stop and first call the bus lines to confirm that there is a bus that leaves for Ames
tomorrow night at eight, and that I can get a ticket anytime. I write down the address, then call Tracy and tell her that I am ready to be picked up. She tells me that she'll meet me in front of Mayo and I say, "Okay. I'll be waiting under the naked guy."

After I hang up, I start to giggle to myself at my final comment. I'm almost hysterical--today I've found out that my seizures are not coming from my temporal lobes (what will I do with my thesis, which focuses on that very fact?), that surgery might be an option (but it might not) and that not eating anything until after two in the afternoon makes me light-headed. I stand under the naked guy and will Tracy to hurry.

*In Tracy's Car*

Tracy does me the favor of stopping by Burger King on our way back to the house, before she leaves for Ames. "I was wondering about that," she tells me when I mention that I am starving--it's almost two in the afternoon and I haven't eaten since last night.

I begin to eat the French fries as I tell her about my morning, then I ask about her morning. She was at Mayo for a job interview. She tells me that the job sounds better than she had anticipated, and that she'd like to have it. It has to do with planning lectures and so on in order to keep the doctors at Mayo Clinic educated, and she would be the head of a team of seven... Her voice disappears, then I wake up.

"I must have had a seizure."

Tracy glances at me, then grins. "I just thought I was getting really boring."
Wednesday, March 29, 1995

The Subway

Eric, Tracy's fiancé, has driven me here and I'm on my way to get my electrical brain activity recorded. Then I wake up, and I'm in some waiting room, but I have no idea where I am. Another seizure. I must be in some waiting room, but it's not Desk S2, which is where I belong. I glance at my watch and see that it's 7:35, which means that I've got twenty-five minutes before the EEG. I get up and stumble back out into the subway. I don't have time to be irritated or anything else about having a seizure—I'm too busy looking for signs to tell me where to go.

Plummer Building, Desk S2

Here in the waiting room, I fall asleep—nice. Then I hear the call for "Kurse?" and jump out of my seat, moving forward on flimsy legs.

A very short woman, with blondish hair cropped around her ears, introduces herself as Charlene Hurston and asks me how to pronounce my name. I tell her, then inform her that I have just had a seizure.

"Should I take my pills?" I ask. I seem to remember something about Dr. Britton saying not to take my pills this morning—then again, I could be wrong.

"Oh, you haven't taken your pills yet?" Charlene goes directly for a cup of water, and I take the Tegretol. Then she begins to glue electrical wires, each ending in a little gold plate, onto my head. "Now, where are you from?"

"I'm from Laramie, Wyoming, but I've been going to school at Iowa State, in Ames," I answer.
"Oh—and how long have you had epilepsy?"

"Well, it was first diagnosed when I was twelve or so, but my mom thinks I probably had the seizures before that, and they just didn't know what they were. She says I was kind of spacy as a kid."

As I answer her questions, she makes red "x"-marks on my head, then dips a gold plate into glue and sticks it on the mark. I watch her closely. There are brown wires at the front of my head, on either side. Further back, at where I figure my temporal lobes would be, are red and orange wires and, even further back, probably on my occipital lobe, are green wires.

When she is finished, she tells me to relax—I lean back and she lifts the foot of my chair up, so that I am laying in a comfortable position.

"The first thing I want you to do," she announces, "is multiplication. Just answer these problems for me. Take your time, and don't worry if you get the right answer or not. Two times six."

"Twelve."

"Eight times twelve."

I have no idea, and must think to myself: Eight times two equals sixteen; eighty plus sixteen . . . "Ninety-six."

"Thirteen times five."

"Sixty-five." Thirteen is my lucky number.

Once again, I wonder at the importance of number games, but my thoughts are interrupted. "Okay, the next thing we're gonna do is breathe in and out—pant—quickly." I can't figure out why she doesn't just tell me to hyperventilate, but decide not to ask. I breathe like a singer, from my stomach, in-out, in-out, in-out—and soon I have cotton mouth, just like I used to get in
choir if I sang when I had a sore throat. I need a drink of water. Then she tells me to stop panting and just relax, so I forget the water for the moment. Instead, I think of how I really need to go to the bathroom. Bad. I know I shouldn't concentrate on this. But I have to go.

"Okay," she begins, but I interrupt.

"Do you think I could go to the bathroom?"

I am disconnected and I carry all of my wires with me, then sit on the toilet and examine the wires seemingly coming out of my head.

When I return, I lay back down in the lazy-boy recliner, and stare into the flashing lights which she puts above me. Suddenly, it hits me—I definitely should not have taken my pills. I won't have a seizure and they won't find out a goddam thing from this stupid test.

When she stops to tell me the bad news—that she can't seem to induce a seizure—I suggest that we do more hyperventilation. "Okay—let's try it for five minutes this time, instead of three."

Still no seizure, still cotton mouth, still have to pee.

I take care of the latter two problems in the bathroom, then return to find the EEG room empty. I hook myself back up to the computer, then look at the lines as I do different things—when I blink, the top lines shoot up and the bottom lines shoot down. When I yawn, the lines become much darker, and more pronounced. I am about to stick my tongue out when Charlene enters.

She has decided that since my seizures usually happen during exercise, maybe I should exercise. She brings a little step-ladder into the room, as well as a woman to hold it, and I turn the thing into a stair-stepping machine. After eight
minutes, when she laughs, "Well, we certainly got her heart rate up," she tells me to stop and the test is over. No seizure, no new information.

*Mayo Patient and Health Education Center*

I have four hours to waste before I see Dr. Britton again, so I decide to go to the closest thing to a library at the Mayo Clinic. There is a nice old lady in glasses sitting at a desk; she looks up and smiles as I walk into the small room. One wall is lined with medical dictionaries or encyclopedias, I'm not sure which; I walk to one of the empty tables to set my duffel bag and briefcase down, then go to the pamphlet counter. There I find two pamphlets on epilepsy.

The first is entitled, "Epilepsy: Questions and answers." I sit down at my table and begin to read. The earlier questions are nothing new—"What is epilepsy? Epilepsy is a physical condition caused by sudden, brief changes in how the brain works. When brain cells are not working properly, a person's consciousness, movements or actions may be altered for a short time"(1). No kidding. I find myself almost irritated at the definition. This is me, dammit. Don't tell me how my brain works. Don't tell me that I've been "altered" for a short time. I'm me, all of the time. I'm just me.

The next thing that bugs me is the statement, "Some seizures look like sleepwalking." I grit my teeth, thinking, *I do not!* Then I read on. "Complex partial seizures (also called psychomotor seizures) are a type of seizure in which the extra brain activity does not affect the whole brain. . . . When a complex partial seizure is occurring, the person looks as if he is in a trance and goes through a series of movements over which he has no control. . . . Although seizures last for only a minute or two, full awareness may not return for some
time afterwards. Confusion and irritability may follow, and the person will not remember what happened or what he did while the seizure was going on" (4). I stop there. I find myself feeling irritable. This sounds a lot like my own seizures--but, for some reason, I don't want to give in. I think to myself, Great, the sexist idiots only used, "he." In other words, I don't exist. This doesn't happen to me. I drop the pamphlet on the table and switch to the other.

This pamphlet is entitled, "Epilepsy: You and your treatment." I decide to skip all of the definitions and get to the point: Surgery. "Brain surgery can be a successful way of treating epilepsy if the patient has seizures that start in only one part of the brain" (12). That's me. I just read it in the last pamphlet. "Surgery for epilepsy is a delicate, complicated operation. It must be performed by a skilled, experienced surgical team" (13). The pamphlet even provides a drawing of the skilled, experienced medical team working on someone--although the patient cannot be seen at all. I wonder if that would be me--invisible, with people with knives leaning over me. I shake my head and read the rest, which is very positive: "Sometimes the patient is awake during the operation. This is possible because the brain does not feel pain. Having the patient awake helps the doctors make sure that important parts of the brain are not damaged" (13). Of course. I'd be awake--how exciting!

I put my jacket back on, because suddenly I feel very cold. Then I drop the pamphlets into my briefcase, pick up my duffel bag, and head out the door, looking for something else to do before my appointment with Dr. Britton. I have only three hours left.
Mayo Building, Dr. Britton's Office

I walk into the office and sit down; Dr. Britton, sitting at his desk, wastes no time.

"It looks like it’s coming from the left side of your occipital lobe," he says.

I nod. I wouldn't mind so much, but I've just finished an essay for my thesis that is focused on how I am the way I am--I write, I'm clingy, I'm emotional--because I have seizures occurring in my left temporal lobe. I can't help but ask, "Oh, it's not from one of my temporal lobes?"

"Well, it doesn't look like it. You see, in each of your temporal lobes you have a hippocampus and, usually, if the seizures are coming from one of these lobes, one of your hippocampi would be smaller than the other. From your MRI, it looks like they are both pretty normal."

Dr. Britton shows me my MRI. My temporal lobes are almost identical, but the left side of my occipital lobe has more white space--dead tissue, he says, where I had a stroke. The lower part of that side of the lobe is now filled with water.

I nod again, then matter-of-factly (it's no big deal) ask what the options are.

"Like I said before, there is surgery, but there is also medicine."

"What happens during surgery--how long does it take?" I ask.

"Well, because we were unable to get anything on your EEG, we would have to first take you off of your medicine, (I knew I shouldn't have taken those pills beforehand!) then wait for you to have a seizure. We would either use an EEG or, if necessary, electrode surgery, where the electrodes are placed directly on the brain. Now, I don't think it would take too long to get you to have a seizure, if you have been having one a week with medicine. It would probably take a
week to a week and a half to get the information we'd need for the surgery. Then there would be the surgery, and about four or five days recovery time—about three weeks or so altogether."

"And what happens—would you have to cut all my hair off?" I don't toss my head of waist-length brunette hair, but I have an urge to do so.

He nods, stating calmly, "We'd need to cut all the hair off on your left side, (I wouldn't just want my hair cut off on one side . . .) but it can be kept and made into a wig. Then we'd cut a hole in your skull and pull it back, to get at the dead tissue in your occipital lobe. Sometimes, when your skull heals, it leaves a ridge where there was a surgery, but otherwise, you often can't tell."

Then Dr. Britton adds, almost casually, "It often depends on the patient whether or not it is worth it—whether or not we think surgery will change a patient's seizures."

"Is it worth it for me?" I ask quickly.

"Well, right now, it doesn't look like a definite, clear shot for you, simply because we haven't yet confirmed where the seizures are coming from—even though I can certainly see where this is something you would want to change"—suddenly, Dr. Britton is slow and sympathetic. "You probably can't drive, and there are probably some jobs you haven't been able to get just because people don't understand."

"Yes," I agree. "I don't know if I mentioned it to you, but I started this whole thing—this seeing neurologists thing—because I wanted to get into the Peace Corps and they wouldn't accept me unless I was seizure free."
Dr. Britton clears his throat and continues, "As I mentioned earlier, pills work for only twenty percent of the people who try them. However, if you are one of those twenty percent . . ." He stops, letting me finish the idea on my own.

"The thing is," I pause, unsure of how to explain my next point. "Um, I have insurance now, that will end, I think, in just a few months, at the end of June. Then when I get a new policy I will have to wait again for a year before I see another neurologist, so that it is not seen as a pre-existing condition." I feel silly, because I don't even know that I like the idea of surgery--but money is money, dammit.

"I don't necessarily think that is a strong enough reason . . . although I can certainly empathize with what you are saying . . ."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. This is getting irritating, so I change the subject. "What medicine would you prescribe?" I ask.

"Well, probably Gabapentin, generically called Neurontin, because that is a medicine we can get up to high levels quickly to see if it will make a difference for you. Then we can have a follow-up in June, and, if we decide to do so, we can have surgery in August--how long does your insurance plan last?"

I sit up straighter. "I'm not sure. I think until the end of June--but I also need to look into a plan to make it last longer--"

"That would be a big factor--we probably couldn't do anything before August, anyway--"

"I'll find out," I promise; then, after Dr. Britton writes me a prescription for Neurontin, I stand up and we shake hands.

I take the elevator down to the first floor and walk out under the naked guy, ignoring him for once, wondering only what it would be like to not have
seizures--is this what I want? People going into my brain and cutting part of it out? Is it worth it for me?

On a Jefferson Bus

I curl up in my bus seat and try to get some sleep. I am listening to Mary-Chapin Carpenter--

She packs his suitcase; she sits and waits.  
With no expression upon her face.  
When she was 36, she met him at the door  
She said, "I'm sorry, I don't love you anymore."

As I drift off, I think, Is that what I'll be saying to my brain? I wake up with a jolt. I always thought of this song as one of strength for women--I promise, brain, I love you! I grin to myself at my childish gut reaction. Then I begin to wonder. Will cutting into my head--will that change me? The pamphlet said that expert surgeons are needed--well, just how expert does one have to be--how would I be able to check someone's credentials? How can I know that they wouldn't cut too far, and suddenly I'd be blind, or something?

And I think to myself that I actually like the way I am. I like my health, I like my imagination, I like my inability to cook, I like my sweet tooth, I like my seizures. Maybe I don't want them taken away from me, after all. I don't know.

As the bus rumbles to a stop, I look to the bus driver for explanation. I have chosen the front seat, right near the door and the driver--the same seat that my mother always chose for me when I would take the bus to visit my Grandmother. The next song on my tape begins--

I am woman, hear me roar
In numbers too big to ignore
And I know too much to go back and pretend . . .
That's me. I won't pretend. I'll just admit it--I'm scared stiff about the whole idea—the whole idea of losing... losing my difference. The driver gives me a nod and the bus climbs the ramp to the highway.
BUS BONDING

A young man on the bus--
I don't even know him--but
he has nice eyebrows
that arch just so
and he's talking to a girl.
I know what that guy wants--
he gives a nice smile,
touches her arm and
tells his lies
to that poor girl, who is smiling,
stars sparkling in her eyes.

I am about to stand up
and tell him that I know
what he wants--I know
what he's after--I won't allow
him to harm one of my own.
But he frowns and shakes his head
at the girl and gets off the bus
at the very next stop.
The girl stares after her lost love,
Stars falling from her eyes
And running down her cheeks.
I smile at her, relieved for her sake,
and she musters a smile back.

3-2-95
"There's nothing worse
Than a lonely rose,"
her man proclaimed. "Don't worry--
I'll be back soon." And
he gave her his own rose
to put with hers
before driving away.

She sat on the stone steps
of the old library,
thinking of how she used to
come here on the weekends,
climb the steps that used to
be higher and go to the
Children's section--where she was
never lonely--to read Judy Blume
as she daydreamed about
being a woman.

Now she held two roses,
each accompanied by the other,
and wondered what it was
that had made her so eager
to be a woman--for her, being
a woman had meant only
being attached to another rose.
"One rose
is enough for me," she murmured,
giving his rose to a passing, aged lady
whose head was wrapped in a brown scarf.
Then she stood up from the steps, ready to leave her sanctuary with her one open rose in her heart.

11-21-94
COUNTING HORSES

I sit in the manager's chair
in the manager's office
doing the manager's job
hoping that none of the people
under me will recognize
my sex and my lack
of experience.

At night I count horses
instead of sheep--
counting horses jumping fences
2'6" high; a diagonal and
an in-and-out with
two strides between.
I can handle horses.

First is tall Twist,
who could step over the fences
but jumps smoothly, working with me,
his dark dun coat shining in the sunlight,
his long white eyelashes
fluttering as he leaps and I soar.
We're on our way up.

Noodles is the Quarter Horse mare,
as steady as the constant wind--
she could do it all herself,
without my directions.
Every rider gets second place or better
with her perfect form and timing.
I don't know if I will measure up.
Next comes Jigger,
the excited bay, shaking his mane
and jumping early; he doesn't wait
for my signal, but instead leaves me
behind his movement as he lands.
He could be my downfall—I could mess up.

Then there's Skeeters,
afraid of the wind, afraid
of me; almost too short for the fences.
He refuses my direction—stops—and I fly
over the fence without him
as he turns away without a backward glance.

I wake up in a sweat
as I see the old man
who has discovered my presence
and doesn't like it. He turns away
with disapproval, refusing to work
for the young woman who is new
on the scene (he could do her job better).
I fly over the fence without him,
then stand up and continue my work,
letting him retire.
I can handle horses.

12-6-94
SKINNING A CAT

She stepped into the elevator, gave him a smile and chirped, "Can you hit 'three' for me?"

"You can do it," he snarled, showing his ivory teeth as he shook his head and backed into the corner.

"You're right, I can," she answered, hitting the button. "So how are you doing today?" Her rosy cheeks and lovely smile made her face as cheerful as could be.

"Uh--pretty good." He stuck out his chin, shoved his hands deep into his pockets, then looked at the lights above her head.

"Well, that's nice—you look like you're doing pretty good."

He shifted from one foot to the other, shaking his head and looking away—"How are you?" he asked, glancing quickly at her face, then back to the lights.

"I'm doing okay," she acknowledged, as
the bell rang on her floor.  
"You have a nice day, now," she smiled, and left him where he stood, staring at the lights in the elevator.

Suddenly he leapt to the door of the elevator, crying, "Uh—you have a nice day, too," as he desperately tried to reverse his snarl.

She turned back with a smile—"Why, thank you," she said, and left him there, desnarled, until the elevator doors closed and the snarl returned to his lips.

3-1-95
UNDER THE INFLUENCE

1.
I ride fast,
pedaling hard as
my thighs tense and relax.
A drop of sweat rolls past my eye;
my hands ignore the brakes
as my mouth opens wide.

2.
I jump high,
leaning forward above
the horse's neck,
holding onto wet horse hide
with my calves in tight--
heels down,
holding my breath and
seeing the world move fast, faster
around and below me.

3.
I stand on the edge
of a catamaran as it starts to fly a hull,
skimming across smooth water.
I lean back toward the lake
and open my arms wide,
playing a game of balance
on the balls of my feet as I
get high, higher--
then slam down into the water,
feeling the spray all over.
4.
I move my hips
in time to the music,
ignoring everything
but the rhythm;
feeling the incessant stroke
of the bass guitar in my own pulse.
I close my eyes
and never stop.

11-13-94
WOMAN'S NATURE

A waterfall,
crashing loudly over rocks,
slamming its way into the river--
it never subsides.

A rock
on a mountain,
solid and still--
too big to move,
too small to be a mountain,
only the lizards beneath
know its secrets.

A tree
fallen to the ground
that lays alone, to be
climbed over or around;
it now provides shelter
for ants.

A flower
smashed under the neighbor's foot
that sees the sun and raises its head
to bloom again.
A woman who gets up each day,
brushes her teeth and
faces the world, saying,
"I know who I am, I
love who I am--I am
a waterfall
a rock
a tree
a flower."

3-18-95
SHEDDING SKIN

First it was the creamy look.
"Stay out of the sun," he said.
Mary Anne tried to keep her skin white
as a dove and smooth as a baby harp seal.

Then florid cheeks were in--
"Put your face in the freezer
for fifteen minutes in the morning,
for flaming cheeks and porous skin."

Soft doe tans came next:
"Spend some time in the sun--get a little color!"
Mary Anne would lay out in the sun in a hot pink bikini
for hours to gain that leathery look.

When the creamy look came back
into style, Mary Anne was rudely awakened
from a nap in the sun. "Come inside--you're looking
as red as an Irish setter bitch in heat."

Mary Anne replied coldly: "My first dog
was an Irish setter bitch." The next day she chose
to lay on the beach, covered in mud, enjoying
the cool, comfortable, toad-in-the-mud look.