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For Want of a Better World

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For Want of a Better Word

Rachel Kiemele

The feedback I received on written assignments during my first year of graduate school can be effectively summed up in three letters: APA (American Psychological Association formatting standards). Instructions to avoid figurative language, conform to sixth edition standards, and develop a “more professional tone” left me disillusioned; dreams of future scholarship no longer appeared quite so inviting. Ultimately, the message I received throughout that first year was that the concept of voice has no place within academic writing. Training myself to smother that voice was a slow and painful process, and sitting down to write soon began to feel like preparing for battle. After a year and a half of late nights and too many pots of coffee to count, APA and I negotiated an uneasy truce. We can acknowledge each other in passing and commit to keeping up to date with annual revisions, and someday we might even be able to hold a cordial conversation. While the technical skills I have gained are undeniably valuable, APA does not feed my soul, and the writing I have spent so much time on this past year and a half has often left me wanting.

This submission to The Vermont Connection is a reclamation of the voice I left behind in choosing to pursue a graduate program in higher education and student affairs. The four poems that follow are part of a collection I have been working on for years and shared with few. Titled *Want*, I wrote these poems for myself; for the daughter I was, the scholar I am, and the woman I am still becoming. These poems center the experience of wanting as a sense of absence rather than a concrete desire to possess. Here, want is the feeling that something unidentified is missing. I used to say that I write poetry, but cannot claim to be a poet because my work, while good enough for personal reading, will never be something that translates into a livable wage. This explanation is wanting. The truth lies somewhere between the inability to find the right words and the value that doctrine places on fact over feeling and evidence over lived experience. I offer *Want* as evidence that “good enough” is something each of us has the ultimate privilege to define for ourselves. Thank you for sharing in my story.

Rachel Kiemele is a second-year graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at the University of Vermont. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English Creative Writing and a minor in Women's Studies from Colorado State University. As a new practitioner and returner to the academy, her chosen area of focus is student learning and leadership development with an intent to de-center Eurocentric leadership models. She dedicates this piece of scholarship to her partner, Melissa Carlson, for never allowing her to settle for anything less than the best words and reading the hundreds of revisions that came before she found the right ones.

I. a Daughter's first lesson

images lie
shatter into webs of glass
reflect a carefully woven psyche
a tapestry of half-truths
spun from desperation
desire and excuses-
threads stretched past the breaking point
cut upon a tongue
that knows no bounds
spinning twisted cat's cradles and
climbing Jacob's ladders
until nothing is left but
knots of rue.

what to do
except go back
begin in simple
stitches
unravel
row by row
twine fibers new
weave a patchwork life
learn to glimpse gold among
muddied grays and browns
stitch true
a back as square as its front
a mirror image
no flaws to
shatter
the illusion

II. What came later...

she couldn't surprise him
 He would not stop guessing
 every birthday
 every Christmas
 a hundred fallen faces
 a thousand disappointments
 there was that one time...
 nine months
 two hundred and seventy days
 give or take
 after the bells and whistles
 after the white hat and veil, the well-wishers and
 a ferry to a honeymoon suite
 on credit

she couldn't clean
 He would not help
 everything into the hamper
 bedsheets and bills
 cds and receipts
 hours' worth in minutes
 pink hibiscus blooming
 across clean white shoulders
 buttons racing on threaded
 legs to hide
 under the sofa
 laughing to see her search
 on hands and knees always one step
 too far
 behind to reach
 the spilled milk in time

she couldn't work
 He would not stop
 too busy paying for the house
 they designed from scratch
 built on His student loans
 her savings
 not a penny to be spared
 for college funds or retirement
 but always enough to spend

on the perfect gift
the perfect car
the don't-I-deserve it
vacation

sixteen years denying all
the things that came before
mopping spilled milk
five thousand eight hundred
and forty days
a lifetime
later
She left

III. Transparent

a pomegranate bleeds
left out upon the table
spreading a pool of scarlet
your head resting in my lap

i pluck the dark organs
from your fingers
each crystalline seed
a short-lived burst of sweet acidity,
we spit pomes into a Dixie
on the worn yellow linoleum

you laugh-
tell me my mouth is stained purple
and i shudder
at desire's audacity
to leave a stain i cannot see

IV. Knowing

girl child, open your mouth
taste the vowels of age, let
woman roll
across your budding tongue
suck bitter discs called pain until
they soften and wear
into growth
seed experience
let the rocking gait of new found
soon grounded
hips
become a rolling
oh such a rolling
as you never knew
never dreamed
existed
in your youth

there were hints of course
in the sour melancholy of a lemon drop
bitter musk of dark chocolate
and discarded cellophane that held
only half
a peppermint sweet
anyway
or sweeter

woman child, fall into your life
let it wrap and rock you in cacophony
swathe you in black licorice chains
so that your tongue may soften
all the consonantic discord
of bitter beatitude into something
you can pass on,
through the tips of your fingers
the tail-wind of your breath
to your own daughters
as they fall asleep clutching adolescent tears
and rise shedding grace and swaying sunshine
as they walk upon this crusted earth
built up
out of
your crumpled leavings