

## A DEEPER BEAUTY

Thin bodies on glossy magazine pages  
Impossibly air-brushed, improbably flawless.  
Modern culture in a nutshell,  
Channeling perfection while being deeply flawed.  
The models' faces are petulant, frowning  
Their expressions the only reality in the photos.  
They say models never enjoy their work;  
Who wants to be a soul-catcher, besides the devil?  
Yet they catch the souls of teenage girls  
Females at their most vulnerable,  
Trembling in the foyer of their lives.  
"Buy this shit," the advertisements shout.  
"You want to be beautiful and happy? Buy this shit NOW!"  
And off they go to buy the makeup  
The skin cleanser, the perfume  
The douche that kills helpful bacteria,  
Anything to camouflage their true essence.  
But there's a deeper beauty to womanhood  
In the lined face of Hillary Clinton  
Who, like her or not, has strength;  
In the noble plainness of Shirley Chisholm  
Who floated the idea of a black President  
Into the American ether;  
In the dark splendor of Buffy Sainte-Marie  
Songwriter, pacifist, activist,  
Who was blacklisted for helping her people;  
In the bald head of Sinead O'Connor  
Who defied Catholicism on network TV;  
In the unibrow intensity of Frida Kahlo  
Who channeled her pain into art  
And made her specific our universal;  
In the passion of Margaret Sanger  
Whose mother had 18 pregnancies and died young  
And whose lifelong crusade legalized birth control in America;  
In the determination of Malala Yousafzai  
Who was shot, but not killed,  
For advocating female education;  
In the candor of Jamie Lee Curtis  
Who posed for MORE magazine  
To prove she was real and not a photo op;  
In the passion and intellect of Emma Goldman  
Who believed in neither God nor government  
But did believe in dancing and revolution -

What a mind, what a force, what a woman!  
In the brilliance of that shape-shifter, Aretha Franklin  
Whose fans love her fat or thin  
Because she embodies respect;  
In the down-to-earth fire of Elizabeth Warren  
Our own give-'em-hell Lizzie, who kowtows to no one;  
In the odd bedfellows Anthony and Stanton  
One an ascetic, the other an appreciator,  
Who worked in tandem for a goal achieved after their deaths;  
In the charisma of Aung San Suu Kyi  
Under house arrest for 15 years,  
A symbol of courage to Myanmar and the world.  
These women put achievement ahead of appearance  
And look what they accomplished.  
Yes, the culture focuses on our looks,  
But we don't have to.  
We can pull down the stars to light a better earth,  
An earth where women work with men, not for them.  
Can you handle that?

### THREE GIRLS

Pat and Mary were my muses in junior high.  
They were very different: Pat dark-skinned, strong-willed,  
Parting the air before her as she walked;  
Mary light-skinned, ethereal,  
Sensed rather than seen from the corner of your eye  
As she high-heeled it to class.  
And then there was me: Sometimes graceful, sometimes awkward  
With curly brown hair and freckles,  
A Tacoma Frankie with a lonely heart.  
Puberty was hard for me (duh, really?).  
I often wanted to be someone else,  
Which made me like any other teenager.  
Who better than Pat or Mary:  
The dark skin to cover my white guilt  
Full lips to express my sensuality,  
Brown eyes to replace my recessive-gene blues.  
A Black Like Me, without leaving my hometown;  
A Black Like Me, but playing it safe.  
This started in eighth grade, along with my depressions.  
Before that I liked the way I looked,  
When I bothered to glance into the mirror at all.  
Then I turned 13, discovered fashion mags,

And it was all downhill from there.  
Pages of starved white girls glaring at me -  
Strange cultural artifacts!  
They weren't forced to smile, which was good -  
But why the haunted gaze? Was it a warning?  
"Don't look, don't look - it will suck the marrow from your soul,  
The bounce from your step, the gleam from your eye.  
(It did do all those things.)  
If you must look, look at these needle marks.  
Then drop this magazine and RUN LIKE HELL."  
I didn't run, alas; I kept turning pages.  
For a smart girl I was pretty dumb;  
I didn't connect my plunging self-esteem  
To my constant mirror checks.  
Was my hair okay?  
(It wasn't; it splayed around my head  
Like a hairdresser's nightmare.  
Part of my charm, but I didn't see it then.)  
How about my nylons - up to par?  
(They were more runs than nylon  
And bagged because I didn't hook the garters.  
It took me years to groom properly.)  
Was my makeup appropriate?  
(The eyeliner was too thick; otherwise not bad.)  
What I really thought, when I stared into the mirror,  
Was: Am I okay?  
And I would have been, if I hadn't stared into the mirror.  
I felt disembodied, a ghost floating through the hallways,  
A semblance of my prior self.  
By contrast, Pat was solid and real;  
Too solid, according to her.  
"Oh, Ful-ton! You weigh a ton!" she'd trill in Drama class,  
Running her hands over her healthy hips.  
But I thought she was beautiful  
With her full lips, curved round forehead  
Hair pulled back, then bursting out above in tangled splendor,  
Skirts stopping above the knee to show curvaceous legs.  
She had one thing I've never had:  
A J-Lo ass, years before J-Lo.  
Pat performed with Linda at the talent shows,  
Singing songs they'd written together.  
"My man, yes he's my man, my man,  
He made me love him little more, little more each day..."  
They sang it on the Gault stage, with choreographed footwork.  
I watched in the darkened auditorium,  
Mesmerized by the glamour and grit.

Pat's ambition didn't stop at singing;  
She ran for May Queen in the ninth grade.  
The winner - surprise! - was blonde, blue-eyed Katy R.,  
Remarkable for her beauty and her silence.  
I can't remember her speaking to me, beyond hello,  
In three years at the same school.  
But whatever; maybe I wasn't her cup of tea.  
(In contrast, Pat and I jostled episodically,  
Little tiffs in or between class.  
"I'll fight you, Sarah," she threatened  
To which I responded with blue-collar brio:  
"I'll fight you too, Pat."  
Once she knew I wasn't afraid, the threats stopped.)  
After the May Queen crowning, someone asked her:  
"Aren't you happy for Katy?"  
And she retorted with her usual bluntness:  
"Why should I be happy? I didn't win May Queen!"  
I remember her getting a music award at ninth-grade graduation  
And crying onstage,  
Tears running down her rounded cheeks.  
Pat's spunk made her attractive.  
Maybe because her skin was darker than Mary's  
Her beauty less conventional,  
She had to try harder.  
Mary was more beautiful but had less character,  
Or simply hid it, as pretty girls will.  
She was in my sixth-grade class, the only black student.  
She often wore white - white brocade? white lace? -  
And was very quiet,  
Though I didn't then connect it to her lone status.  
She was cared for, obviously;  
The neatness, the cleanness, the nice clothes.  
Two years later, in junior high,  
She blossomed, got male attention  
And leaped feet first, without a backward glance,  
Into her Teen Age.  
Red-freckled nose, conked reddish hair  
Tall and slim, with jutting breasts and butt  
And a Mary smell of Afro pomade and perfume,  
Traipsing down the hallway like Malcolm's illegitimate daughter.  
Whoever designed her bra should have been knighted.  
Or maybe it was just her breasts  
Lush globes on her thin frame  
Burning through the fabric of her dress,  
Promising so much to the right boy.  
She wore a dress I've never forgotten:

Sleeveless, electric green on top;  
Short, purple, and pleated on the bottom.  
A swirl of green and purple,  
Long arms and legs, tapered waist;  
The girl was stylish.  
Once I saw the same dress at the Bon Marche.  
In the dressing room, with trembling fingers,  
I tried it on. Catastrophe!  
Without Mary's breasts, the top bagged;  
Without her long legs, there was no pizzazz.  
Just an average white girl in an ill-fitting dress  
Which I tore off and threw into the corner.  
(My beauty didn't bloom until the twelfth grade,  
When I figured out how to work with it.  
I curled my hair or wore it up,  
Applied my makeup better.  
Most of all, I unfurled;  
It was simply time for me to be pretty.  
Mom made a lot of my clothes:  
The long striped hippie dress with red-yarn trim  
The Red Riding hooded cloak,  
The brown suede culottes, which I wore with boots.  
"You look like a little PRINCESS!"  
My sister cried, when I put them on.)  
But anyway, back to Mary.  
She was like a black Monroe, or a Dandridge.  
I have no memories of her after the eighth grade;  
I don't know what happened to her.  
She flashed through my life, leaving beauty in her wake  
Like the path cut by moonlight through water,  
Just as elusive, just as ephemeral.  
Pat, however, went to my high school  
Where she became a cheerleader.  
I remember her in her orange-and-white outfit,  
Crossing the high-school street to the grocery store,  
Walking with the old determined stride.  
She was always striving - and still is, I have no doubt.  
If this poem were Nina's "Four Women"  
I would see Pat as Peaches, sassy and free,  
And Mary as Saffronia, with a hint of Sweet Thing.  
Perhaps, in her old age, Pat will be like Aunt Sarah;  
Strong-backed, able to take whatever life doles out.  
But then she was like that in junior high.  
I lived with "Four Women" in eighth grade,  
Listened to it daily for months.  
So the black beauty in my school

Fell on a prepared eye.  
(Theresa, two years older  
Tall and thin, but darker than Mary,  
With hair straying out of her bun  
As she performed her cheerleader routine;  
Another girl I wanted to be.)  
Looking over these lines, I see I was never close  
To either Pat or Mary,  
Though they affected me deeply.  
The eternal observer, the eternal outsider.  
Well, that's why they call us artists, right?  
I think, now, it was a quest for integration:  
The black with the white,  
Saying no to racism, to the whole corrupt structure  
I sensed around me.  
Having no coherent voice then, I used my body  
And imagined myself as America:  
America different, America better, America equal,  
As, we pray, it soon will be.  
(This may have been Rachel Dolezal's motivation too,  
The woman who's prettier black than white.  
She shouldn't have lied – but I understand her.)  
In the meantime, the land is full of Pats and Marys:  
Teenaged, talented, full of life.  
Let's celebrate them, shall we?

## RIVER AND TREES AND CLOUDS AND SKY

There is a river in western Washington.  
On its banks are trees of all kinds -  
Tall trees, small trees, in-between trees.  
Some trees are wrapped in English ivy,  
Which is a parasitic plant.  
These trees appear to be covered  
With a thick, leafy coat.  
They look very comfortable,  
But they're actually being strangled.  
The ivy is defending itself,  
Keeping itself alive by killing the trees.  
I grieve for the trees in their slow death  
And hope that by some miracle, they can survive.  
There are trees with pale trunks,  
Ghostly in the fog.  
There are small squat trees

That seem to stoop toward the water  
As though to drink from the rippling green surface.  
In wintertime, the trees raise their bare branches to the sky,  
Like a wooden salute.  
"Come out, sun," they seem to plead,  
"And warm us with your rays."  
The sun rarely responds,  
And the sky remains gray with the threat of rain.  
Berry bushes hunch on the river bank,  
With their strange curved shapes,  
Next to splotches of yellow grass.  
People seem to prefer green grass,  
But yellow grass has a mournful, stark beauty.  
The river flows beneath the cloudy sky.  
River and trees and clouds and sky,  
River and trees and clouds and sky.  
In springtime the trees carry blossoms,  
Mostly white or yellow.  
On rainy days, the blossoms look incongruous.  
On sunny days, they are only beautiful.  
The trees look tentative,  
As though hoping for summer  
While not being sure it will come.  
There are green metal bridges  
Which span the river at intervals.  
They accentuate the river's beauty,  
One of the rare instances  
When man's intervention works.  
The river flowed before there were people.  
If the people vanish -  
In a meteor strike, or a nuclear war -  
The river will still flow.  
It flows into Puget Sound,  
Which flows into the ocean,  
Which nourishes the world.  
The river is a vein,  
One of earth's many veins.  
Some part of it knows its importance  
So it ripples on proudly,  
Ignoring the humans who pollute it,  
Who try to stop the river's flow  
As they try to stop every good thing.  
The river knows that earth will destroy the human race  
Before it lets the human race destroy it.  
So it moves with careless grace, as if to say  
"Stop your foolishness in time,

Or don't stop, and see what happens.  
I can't be bothered with you."  
The river is wise, like the earth.  
Jackson Browne said it best:  
"Oh, people, look around you; the signs are everywhere."  
Don't force nature to defend itself.  
Respect life, all life.  
It's the only way that works.

## AN ENORMOUS COMFORT

When I can trust no one,  
The flowers turn their faces to me  
And nod hello.  
When all about me wish me ill,  
The tree spirits send me greetings.  
When my every move is watched,  
The bushes let me go my way without comment.  
The mountain is huge in the distance;  
It sends me good will.  
The moon has looked down on generations before me,  
And will look down on generations after.  
It has seen all the misery in the world  
And has caused none of it.  
The sun brings life and makes the crops grow,  
And does not hurt me.  
The sky watches over the earth  
Like a changeable mother.  
It lightens, darkens, lightens again.  
Clouds form in the sky, breaking apart,  
Moving together again.  
They make me laugh with delight.  
The rocks have a nobility, a silent dignity,  
Such a relief after listening to the babble of fools.  
The dirt between my toes is honest.  
It is what it is, no more and no less.  
It is only when you are surrounded by enemies  
That you can truly appreciate nature's impersonality.  
The flowers, the trees, the mountain -  
To them I am not a danger.  
I am just another human,  
And this comforts me enormously.