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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.

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*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