

# The Disappearing Midwestern Girlhood: an Ethnography

Courtney Kersten

*It may be in the cultural particularities of people—in their oddities—that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be genetically human are found.*

—Clifford Geertz

*[T]here are no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses.*

—Raymond Williams

1. Father's garage: a buck suspended by its back feet, legs pushed apart as though it were giving birth to the ceiling, blood dripping into a pool on the floor, where the baby should be. Smells like licking an iron slab covered in pine needles. Cruel with sweet stings.

2. Google Search:            baby born in  
                                      baby born in sac  
                                      baby born in caul  
                                      baby born in walmart

3. Taxidermy badger on the record player: stick my nose in your fur. Dirt, concrete, a dark, dank hairy shed. Dad found you on the highway in Minnesota, stuffed you in Chisago City, and brought you across the border to Wisconsin. Illegal property with a snarl. Thrilling—your plastic eyes stir up a covert eroticism in me.

4. Badger joke:

A husband and wife are driving home and run over a badger, they get out and find the badger still breathing but shivering from the cold. The husband suggests, "Honey, put

it between your legs to warm it up.”

“But it’s all wet and it stinks!” replies the wife.

“Well, hold its nose!” says the husband.

5. Box of maxi pads under my mother’s sink: picking a pink package out, fingers pretending to be tweezers; I am a bathroom anthropologist. Womanhood smells like the wax-mold version of my grandmother’s lavender deodorized armpits. Womanhood stinks.

6. You have completed the Harrower-Erickson Multiple Choice Rorschach Test.

Your score is 10 of 10, meaning you selected answers that are commonly given by individuals with some psychological disturbance. Harrower-Erickson (1945) used four or more poor answers as the criteria for a cognitively disturbed individual.

The majority (78.7%) did not meet Harrower-Erickson’s cutoff for psychological disturbance.

7. Grandma Della’s attic: Mom and me going through her old things. Find a shoebox of old newspaper clippings about Jeffrey Dahmer. Dozens of them. Give the box to Mom and she burns it in a fire later that night. In Della’s obituary draft, my mother would delete: ~~was certifiably nuts, selfish, and cold~~ before writing “born in Chippewa Falls.”

8. Around the 20th week of gestation, a female fetus has developed a reproductive system, including six to seven million eggs in her ovaries. The egg that created you was formed inside of your mother’s fetus while she was inside your grandmother’s womb.

The matrilineal line looks like a nested Russian doll.

9. Hot tub at the hotel: sitting on my mother’s lap, she juggles a beer in a lime green coozie in one hand and me in the other. Bury my face in her neck and watch a dirty Kleenex undulate closer across the foam towards us. I close my eyes to chlorine, spicy perfume, sticky flesh.

10. Twenty years later, I lay in my bed, clad in the lilac silk pajamas she left me, things too expensive for me to ever buy, some of the things that were unofficially willed to me by the toss of a hand, *you can have all of my clothes*. I imagine her arm around me, my six-year-old lips pressed to her neck, and wonder what

kind of woman she would want me to be.

11. Girls' Bathroom: find my snow pants in the trash. Gotta rescue them from everybody's farts and that bleachy stink and mysterious funks from mysterious places. Sitting on the pot, stick my hand up the left leg and flap it around. Don't realize I could be hurt that someone put my pants in the trash.

12. Sometimes I imagine my mother around me like an aura, a protective barrier, a filter. I imagine her as a battle suit, an impenetrable fog, a layer of cosmic Saran Wrap. I imagine her smoothing back my hair and putting on a pair of 3-D glasses over my eyes and leaving me with a wink. And as she walks away, I understand everything.

**Courtney Kersten's** work can be seen in *DIAGRAM*, *River Teeth*, *The Masters Review*, *Sweet*, *The Sonora Review*, and elsewhere. A native Wisconsinite, she's lived in Riga, Latvia by way of a Fulbright Fellowship and currently studies in the University of Idaho's MFA in Creative Writing program.