

IT'S MY BODY

“There was a time when Barbie couldn’t even bend her knees,” I tell my nieces Kerri and Katie who sit before me on a living room floor in blue and pink collar America. They are strapping their Rock-n-Roll Barbies into tiny leatherette pants and big black guitars with jagged lightning hips. Katie hands me her doll because she needs help with the teeny buttons that snake the back of Barbie’s off-the-shoulder blouse. “My first Barbie couldn’t even twist her waist.” I am talking like a person who has lived long enough to see significant change. My nieces have their backs to the TV which seems always on, wherever I am. And behind their blond innocent heads, Jessica Hahn makes a cameo appearance on an MTV video. She rolls like a sexy pinball, then tries to claw herself out of a concave cage. “It’s my body,” I recently heard her say on a morning talk show. She started by defending her nude poses in *Playboy*. “It’s my body,” she repeated like a Chatty Cathy doll with a skipping record stuck in her back. “It’s my body,” she began to answer her interviewer’s every inquiry—where she grew up, if she still went to church.

"It's my body?"
The words stayed the same,
but as more accusations came, her inflections
changed. Jessica looked beyond the studio set
where someone seemed to be cueing her
that message. My lover was laughing.
"How about a little conviction there, Jessica?"
he said to the TV. Then, trying to coax
more conversation, he addressed me: "Look,
honey, she doesn't even seem to know if it's her body
or not." He was right,
but he knew as he brought it up,
it was the wrong thing to say.
I'd had too much coffee.
I found myself energetically defending Jessica,
blaming her disorientation
as a response to our misogynous society—
the dislocation all women feel
from their physical selves.
And then came the theories I'd been reading,
He left for work kind of agreeing
but also complaining that I'd made him exhausted.
And now my sister is blaming me for the same thing
because I am pointing out to Katie that she is mistaken
to think only boys should get dirty
and only girls should wear earrings.
"People should be able to do whatever they want."
I lecture her about my friend who wears a hard hat
when she goes to her job and works
with electricity, just like her daddy.
Katie fiddles with her shoelaces

and asks for juice. My sister says,
"Give the kid a break. She's only in kindergarten."
Older Kerri is concentrating, trying
to get a big comb for humans
through her doll's Mousse synthetic hair.
Because untangling the snails needs so much force,
suddenly, accidentally, Barbie's head pops off,
and a smaller one, a faceless socket,
emerges from her neck. For an instant
we all—two sets of sisters, our ages
twenty years apart—share a small epiphany
about Matrei: this brainwashed piece of plastic cerebrum
is underneath who Barbie is. But soon
Kerri's face is all panic, like she will be punished.
The rears begin in the corners of her eyes.
I make a fast rescue attempt,
spearing Barbie's molded head
back on her body, her malleable features distorting
under my thumb. Although a grown doll,
the soft spot at the top of her skull
still hasn't closed. Under the pressure
of my touch, her face is squashed, someone
posing in a fun house mirror.
But the instant I let go, she snaps back
into a polite smile, her small perfect nose
erect and ready to make everything
right: Barbie is America's—
half victim, half little pink soldier.