Dear K.O.P., for the first dozen years of my life
I never looked at myself. I believed mirrors
bore no true social significance partly because
they hung on walls. Convinced, then,
in the last thin quarter of the century,
that I was a colorless American boy, without detail
perhaps I should confess my very first brush with love
involved a white girl and empty dryer box.
I smelled, if I recall, the scent of damp cardboard,
which was a scent not altogether unlike my father’s
olive green Army-issue boot socks, and so it was
that as I and my little cob-webbed nymph
(as I have thought of her ever since) attempted
to make a singular glistening smile, I thought again
and again that my father was walking barefoot
nearby with a boot in each fist. I felt
the ominous pre-tingling a soldier feels
when he waits in a trench at the start of a great war
though that was not a year of war, if you recall,
but a year of myriad insignificant misdemeanors
and dumb disputes. I thought too, that the girl
had dropped down into my arms from a nest
of the July, late afternoon darkness blooming
in the upper corner of the box because her hair
danced and dangled across my brown wobbling head
like something made in the belly of a spider,
and I half wondered then when I would learn
what magic it was that gave some creatures the power
to spit a thread almost thinner than light. I decided
I'd ask my father later when I sat on his chest full of sprawling powder-white women, and removed his boots and then his socks, but of course I didn’t, having been struck dumb by something (the color or length of his toes, the tiny grid pattern the socks left on his ankles?). It doesn’t matter what, since any boy who spends an afternoon with a girl in a box is prone to forget his questions. I too had a bizarre über-hunger for companionship as a boy and have gone on having it, as I presume you have, ever since. When I pressed my palm against the girl’s back, I felt first the impression of her skin inside the white blouse, and then the bones of her spine and I thought of the tiny, tiny spines in all the animals inside and around the box when we found it there at the edge of the park. The stray dogs had spines shaped like my father’s belt, the squirrels and field mice had spines shaped like the smallest limbs of the saplings; I thought briefly of grasshopper and ant spines before considering the spinelessness of the earthworms uncoiling in the mud beneath the box. Mostly I learned what I know of myself by holding my tongue still and I’m wondering how it was with you? Anyone can go back to Fayetteville, where the summers were clear as water, and I’m assuming you too sat at half open windows and listened to the world? Perhaps I shouldn’t say yet what it was you and I were waiting for, Cousin, but I’ll say it never arrived.
RSVP

Dear Michael, I have never had to look in mirrors. Or rather everything I look into (magazines, screens, walls, doors, glass) is a kind of mirror. Everywhere I look I see my face. Thank you for sending the autographed photograph. And thank you too for the sequined glove! Your hand must be so small and naked now without it. The interior reminds me vaguely of fresh wood, or maybe the inside of a cardboard dryer box circa 1975, the year I kissed a black boy named Clarence or Terrance or Tyrone. He was a skinny moth-boy as shy as you. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I’d let that black boy stay inside my mouth . . .

Dear K.O.P., this is not a letter from one of the white girls you met backstage in Columbus or Lincoln, but from me—your friend, pretending to be a white girl in the hope that this time, you might reply. O to be in the head of a pretty white girl! It’s nearly impossible even for a black boy raised late in the era of integrated cafeterias, MTV and soap operas. By now your experiment must be nearing its sad inevitable conclusion as well . . . Are you asking yourself: Am I the beginning of beauty or am I the end? I’m fairly sure that’s not something white girls ask themselves,
though it’s something everyone thinks
about them. Africans, Asians, Martians, Apes—
they love them some white girls and you
have to wonder: is it all the PR (from Helen
of Troy to Mary Christ to your Elizabeth Taylor)?

**PS thank you for the egg-sized diamonds.**
**PS thank you for the cashmere panties.**
**PS thanks you for the box of 12th-century BCE
Mayan chocolates. PS thank you**
for the Ming chamber pot. Yours, Beth.

What’s the deal with you and Elizabeth?
What’s the deal with you and Diana,
the Butch Diva, for that matter?
Once you could have had anyone.
I can still remember your hyper-glow socks
and fly tuxedo. Sometimes my thoughts drift
to Billie Jean, that condemned anonymous woman . . .
What ever happened to her and that baby?
(Dear Michael, finally the cameras look in
another direction. Our child grows
in a big nosed quiet. He sang to himself
in the womb like you. I tell him
he has a bevy of uneles who once loved
synchronized dancing, who live now
somewhere nose to nose in a crowded mansion:
Baby, I don’t believe in music anymore.-)

What’s a brother got to do to get an answer,
Brother? If, by chance, this is the first of my letters
you are reading (I’ve written dozens
over the years), let me say again
that I understand a man’s hunger for company.
When I moved North and phoned home
to tell my momma I’d fallen in love,
she asked me if the girl was white and I snapped,
“No Ma, she looks like you!”
That’s got to be one of the most outrageous questions my mother has ever asked me (or maybe the most reasonable). Take love where you find it; water is the color of what it holds and all that. What’s your mother think of your hair and lipstick? Of all the girls’ noses pressed at your limo window in 1982, which did she most adore?