The title of Kristin Vermilya’s essay—“Iron-Bound”—accurately previews its relation to the more unyielding and sometimes daunting aspects of family ties. This surely is not an essay designed for faint-hearted or sentimental readers. For an assignment challenging students to “braid” together “the story of a famous person or event—with something else (or several something elses)” in ways that carry forward the spirit of Susan Griffin’s experimental work in her essay “Our Secret,” Vermilya composes an evocatively layered essay involving three mother-daughter relationships. “Iron-Bound” skillfully juxtaposes personal narrative with imagined scenes from the life of social reformer and feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), select quotations from Gilman’s prose and poetry, and scientific detail about brain function. These interwoven threads of information draw readers, ever more intensely, into contemplating some of the harder truths that can abide in the complex needs, priorities, mysteries, and yearnings of parent-child relationships.

Though the subject of “Iron-Bound” is both serious and searing, the essay itself reflects its author’s personal determination to make her own writing more than a linear account of the pain, courage, and opportunities for hard-earned self-definition inherent in certain family relationships. This essay does not settle for merely describing instances of such things or taking a clearcut stand. Instead its composer seems bound and determined—iron-bound—to grapple with life’s challenges in ways that require readers’ creative engagement. “Iron-Bound” is not a conventionally thesis-driven essay aiming to advance a central proposition; it is an ambitious prose-collage, a visually expressive reading experience to which the precise positioning of elements on the page and their typography matter. The composition of Kristin Vermilya’s “Iron-Bound” urges readers to discern more
fully the art with which its elements are being brought together to create a challenging, troubling, resonant, and, ultimately, inspiring whole.

To read the full text of Kristin Vermilya’s essay, click here