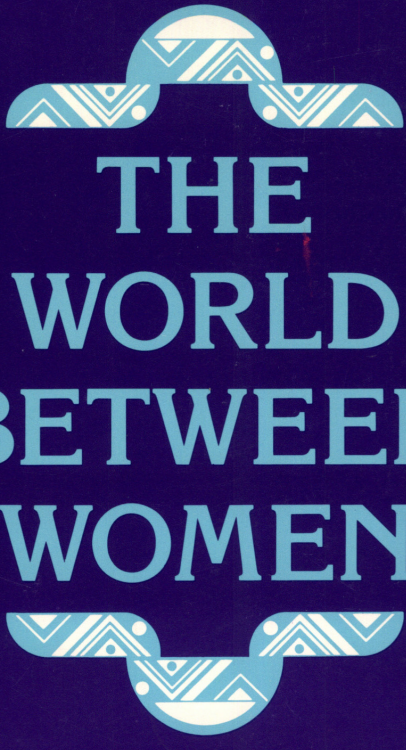

THE WORLD BETWEEN WOMEN

an anthology

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The World Between Women

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Contents

Introduction

This anthology was compiled out of a need to debunk cultural stereotypes which offer mere slivers of the relationships between women. These limited but popular portraits emphasize jealousy, competition, and manipulative behavior in a scramble to win the favors of gentlemen, power, affluence and lovers. A more accurate version of reality includes all the complexities of love as expressed in a familial setting between mothers, daughters, grandmothers, sisters and aunts, the strengthening compassion of female friends and the nurturing companionship of female lovers.

With this anthology we celebrate the qualitatively different ways women care for each other. Any group historically denied economic, political and social freedom and mobility develops a unique culture for personal survival. We celebrate the safety of this world, the bond of common struggle, wisdom and experience. We recognize how important it is to record accurate accounts of women's lives. While not thoroughly comprehensive, we have made an effort to assemble as many cultural origins of American women as possible.

In this anthology you will share thoughts about our mothers, the women we eat lunch with, our sisters, the women we get angry with, our friends, the women we make love with, the women we laugh with, our grandmothers and our daughters, in the world between women.

Julia Boyd

The Gospel According to Me

Yesterday during lunch Beth told me that I was her best friend. Then she politely wanted to know if she was my best friend. Now, it's beyond me why it is that this woman always chooses to get relevant when I'm trying to do justice to my stomach. Know'n Beth as well as I do, I knew she was expecting some tactful response on my part. But it's tough being polite when you're hungry, and my stomach had been throwing some large hints to my brain and everbody else's within earshot all day about its empty state of affairs. So as I bit into my grilled cheese sandwich, I told Beth that I'd have to give the matter of her being my best friend a lot of thought, because having a best friend, someone who was really ace, numero uno in your life deserved some heavy contemplation.

Thinking back on it, I guess I could have given Beth an answer during lunch. But how do you tell a white woman that it's still politically dangerous to have white folks for best friends, even if it is 1985. I mean now really! Mama always taught me that a dollar bill was a Black person's best friend, and so far as I know, Mama ain't lied to me yet. The gospel according to Mama plainly states that a dollar bill don't give you no lip, it keeps food in your stomach, clothes on your back, and a roof over your head, if you treat it right it multiplies and if you don't it disappears, but the bottom line is if you've got a dollar, you've got a friend for life. I know Beth wouldn't understand Mama's logic, because we come from two different worlds. It's not that I'm trying to discourage Beth, I really do like her. But having an ace partner means more to me than just sharing office space and having lunch together a couple times a week. I know that Beth made her comment sincerely. She wants me to notice that she's trying to bridge the gap, but what she doesn't understand is that it may take me longer to come over the water, because bridges have a way of not being stable when the winds blow too strong. As it is I've already got the neighbors talking because I've invited Beth to my apartment a couple of times. Wilda, my neighbor downstairs, almost broke her neck running up three flights of stairs to my place after Beth's first visit. It's not that Wilda's nosy you understand, it's just that she was concerned. Wilda knows that white folks driving 280Z's and wearing Klein jeans don't come around the projects very often and they never come in the building unless they're after something or somebody. I had one tough job on my hands explain-

ing to Wilda that Beth really was "okay" and that through Beth's volunteer work at the Womyn's Center she and I had gotten to be friends. Now, Wilda, who is a whole lot like Mama in her logical think'n feels it's her sworn duty to look out for me. And she will generally tell anyone including me, within earshot that she thinks I'm a little strange, but likeable in my own fashion. But the look she gave me out of the corner of her eye lets me know that now she really thinks I've lost all my street school'n. But like I said before, Wilda preaches from Mama's gospel and Mama's word states that you don't trust nobody two shades lighter than Black.

When I think about the pro's and con's of my friendship with Beth, both sides of the scale don't always equal out. Seventy-five percent of the time we get along pretty good. We believe in the same political causes, even if our personal reasons are miles apart. We share similar interests in books, movies, and music. And we share the belief that going after what you want in life "is the name of the game." However, the other twenty-five percent of the time is what divides us. Beth would like to believe that as womyn and activists we are equals. She professes confusion when I speak about my Blackness being more than just skin color and hairstyle, but a generational lifestyle that is rich in culture and values.

Beth wants to form a friendship and bond with my womyn-ness, the part of me which she can relate to as a white woman, and that bears a striking resemblance to her feminist ideals. What she fails to understand is that in only identifying with that part of me she denies my existence as a whole person. I don't know about Beth but I'm greedy; I want a whole friendship or none at all. Beth has the privilege to forget that she's white middle class, and I have the right to remember that I'm Black folk ethnic. Our relationship as friends may never equal best, but at least it's a start to something better, and that's the Gospel according to Me.

Kathy Carnahan

Does Harriet Want Tea?

Roz Spafford

Lady Luck

I often feel — more than often — shadowed by sisters. It is like having a dental filling tuned to the *Queen for a Day* show, the promises, the threats veiled by promises, the maudlin stories of hardship and hope. Their tinny voices whine, wearing as locusts, perpetually warning of heat, nagging as heliocopters, searching for the shipwrecked crew.

These are not my real sisters. My real sisters do not whine at me at all, but instead live lives out of *Women's Day* in states I always get stuck in playing *The Game of the States* — Wisconsin, for instance, which produces dairy products. They send me evening wraps crocheted from kits, shawls which look too much like baby blankets to wear anywhere I might go. Perhaps people have more generous imaginations in states like Wisconsin.

I cannot find an antonym to "shadow." If I could, it would explain how my sisters treat me. As it is, there are no verbs for it — "ignore" is too deliberate, too drenched in malice, and "disregard" is still somewhat uncharitable, though closer. They do not, in fact, regard me: they are as neutral as the colors they decorate their living rooms in: they send polaroids, in which couches, grey as mist, loom fuzzily in the foreground.

Their letters to me are so generic they might as well be dittoed, though they are not; they are handwritten in blue Bic pen on notepaper decorated with daisies, the kind that makes an envelope out of itself. I am so unreal to them, and they to me, that they are not really my sisters, in any way I can make sense out of the word: they are what my friend Julie calls the grey ladies.

The sisters who shadow me are not neutral. They are intimately critical, as only sisters can be. They imagine they are role models. I hear their voices in my ear, pointing out the errors in my ways, even when I cannot see them. If I could, by the throw of the dice, move them to some dairy-producing state, I would do it tomorrow.

Merrilee is the worst. If my father had had his way, I would have been called Merrilee, but my mother prevailed (for which I will be eternally grateful), noting correctly that kids would tease me by singing Merrilee we roll along. Merrilee's name is appropriately anomalous: she is not at all merry, nor does she roll anywhere, particularly not along. She clings to me, like a skirt full of static. At times her presence startles me, the way you can be startled by the

transparent shadow of your own nose.

It may be that we are too much alike, always trying to fit into the same space. We could, in fact, fit very well into the same space except for one crucial turn: in 1980, Merrilee married Robert. I, who might have married Robert, did not.

Merrilee is particularly relentless at parties. Parties are the only places left to meet anyone one hasn't already ruled out, and so I go to them, accompanied by Merrilee, my diaphragm in my coat pocket. Parties are also where whatever is the opposite of the banns can be heard. Someone shows up in an ironed shirt, pink from shaving twice in a day, looking nervous and hopeful; you remember you had heard they were fighting, but she was refusing to move. As I look across the hands and faces weaving like kelp beds, raised Budweiser bottles reflecting the light, Merrilee all but pinches me, reminding me that I could be cuddled under Robert's white comforter at this very moment, drinking hot brandy and reading Ross McDonald.

"But you didn't want to be tied down," she minces. "You thought Robert was prosaic, confining, confined. You think any of these specimens aren't confining?" She pulls out her red vinyl wallet, so crass it's classic and begins looking at pictures: a toddler with Robert's pinched nose, squinting endearingly at the camera flash. A baby in a high chair, with an old fashioned tie bib on, pursing his mouth for the approaching spoon of strained plums.

When you are still looking for your children, all the objects of babyhood seem like reproaches, constructed especially for you, as gauche and overt as pictures of puppies in a basket. I never stop being surprised at how susceptible I am to sentimentality: I was the pragmatist in the family.

I am hoping that the hostess does not have any of the following artifacts: plastic baby bathtub in either yellow or pink, pull toys that play music, anything by Fisher-Price. I am also hoping she does not introduce me to any of the newly eligibles, reeking of shaving lotion and nervous sweat.

Whenever I go to parties, I vow to join a dating service. I think about how orderly it might be, how reasonable. I would list my requirements — no whining, no talking early in the morning, no losing perspective when the chips are down — and some nice woman in sensible shoes would match me up with an attractive non-whiner with prospects. He would be interested in a relatively undamaged

legal assistant with a rich sense of the past. We would not have to stand around trying to ascertain each other's philosophy of life and chew marinated mushrooms at the same time, wondering as always whether you were supposed to take a new toothpick for each new mushroom you picked up, or to keep the same toothpick and use it like a fork. Such distractions make it difficult to maintain eye contact.

Then I decide that anyone who would go to a dating service could just as well be a mass murderer as a dedicated civil rights attorney, and I decide to try my luck again at parties, though the idea that I could meet or remeet someone at one of these affairs that I would, God forbid, marry and produce plastic bibs with sends me to the bathroom to examine my eyeliner and check my diaphragm for holes. Why not see a matchmaker, for God's sake? Why not have a billboard made of my face? Nothing could be more arbitrary than these covert glances, these brave attempts to keep onion dip off my cheek.

I think about how we used to squeal in semi-sexual excitement at pajama parties about the arranged marriages in romances we shoplifted from the TG & Y. We swore we would have run away if we had been those heroines. We named off the boys our parents would choose for us, howling and holding our stomachs. We didn't understand that, faced with three possibilities — being a governess, being someone's mistress and dying of syphilis, or marrying chubby Henry down the street — these ladies might well count themselves lucky with Henry.

These parties are really not so different. Chance masquerades as choice, which is what makes it all so confusing.

Merrilee reminds me that I didn't have to be here. I could have married Robert, as she did. I can imagine the life I would have had, which is precisely Merrilee's life: I would have kept my old job, which would have allowed me flexible hours; I would still be driving the yellow Subaru. We would still have Cherrie and Tom to dinner, since they would not have broken up: my defection from Robert inspired Sherrie (so she claims) who is now backpacking through Italy, where she will probably meet someone. I could tell you how most days of my life would have been with Robert, or Merrilee will.

Let me tell you why I didn't marry him. It was after he got mumps, and recovered, his fertility intact. It was after the two weeks of moaning and whimpering and paranoia that I saw what he would be like

at 70 — or sooner, in the face of a crisis, a lost job, a dead parent. I saw what he would be like, and I didn't want to be there. Somewhere out there, I thought, there is a man with backbone.

Merrilee inquires about the vertabrae of the assembled partiers, and I dismiss her. I only envy her life when I lose my nerve.

If Merrilee were alone I could manage. But by the time someone is my age — at least in this time and place — there are dozens of them hanging around, shadows of the lives we might have lived. She is driving the yellow Subaru across the Bay Bridge, sick with vertigo, which she knows is a symptom. No, she is waiting on the front porch for the sound of the truck, and the sweet voice of the dogs he takes hunting: there are no Subarus in this picture, nor plastic bibs, nor ovulation thermometers. They make love on the livingroom floor when they can't wait to get to the bedroom, though he'll take the time to hang the meat, she knows that much. No, she is not waiting for a truck, but driving one, an affectation in this cramped city, as Joel never ceases to point out. She suspects she embarrasses him in front of his environmentalist friends, who wince when she throws her Pepsi cans in the trash. As if in penance, she makes her own baby food as well as bread, rather crumbly, which he eats politely, preferring Orowheat but too rigidly correct to admit it.

All these lives, and their relatives cluster thickly around my life like communicants at a blackjack table. There are small variants: the color of the Subaru. The number and presence of children. The job. The city. A life is like sorting file cards the old way before computers did it: putting a pencil through the holes to fish out the characteristics you are looking for: teaching job, no, legal work. Husband/no husband. Sick/well. San Francisco/Los Angeles. Land on Boardwalk.

Romance novels are right about one thing: chance is political. Your life is more likely to be shaped by chance if you are a woman, and if you do not have money with which to cushion yourself against it or recover from what it does to you. Women marry a person and inherit a life. If you marry a man who went to work for the lumber company because his parents couldn't send him to college, then chances are you can expect to live with certain things: dirt. terror. sporadic checks. If you must work cleaning buildings for a company that does not provide medical coverage, your hip will probably not be set right. All this is chance: the wet step, the falling mop, the moment's inattention, the lifetime of pain. When he shows up with

the slipper, you will not be there to try it on.

If I thought about my life as a romance novel, followed the trail laid by eye contact at one of these parties, or made a point to talk to so-and-so's brother at the Neighborhood Watch meeting, and by those not quite random cues endeavored to establish a rapport, then a dinner date, then a joint checking account, all the little incidents which lead to this particular end would gain luminousity in hindsight, would become pebbles, not bread crumbs, a trail to trace a story around. But if there were no such end, the decision to go to the meeting rather than watch Star Trek would seem insignificant, not part of any constellation, not a dot to connect to any other.

When I feel particularly suffocated by randomness, I understand the sniper on the freeway overpass, shooting into cars, for once in his life the agent of something. I understand people who put cyanide in mouthwash. If chance is God — as in acts of God, as in losing your leg because a tree falls on it, or having all the members of your family die because of a spark on a dry roof — then the poisoner is God's messenger, finally important.

The sniper, the poisoner and Merrilee are symptomatic of the American lie: that everyone is an agent, makes their lives out of the available materials, Fisher-Price blocks or cardboard. I like to imagine that if I were from India or Japan or Africa, if I were even Catholic, I would not be paralyzed by lost alternatives. I like to think that other cultures make up better stories to explain the shape of things, stories that stick to your ribs, get you through most of a lifetime.

Had I been born in some of these places, I would know that malice, or profit, not the wheel of life, governs the world. I would know that apparently random bullets were driven by an intention — to keep me from asking for my land back, or where my husband had disappeared to. There I would wring love from whatever rags I was given, in the silence between explosions.

Here we think we are chosen, or we think that we choose. But chance — and culture — are our parents: we are accidents, creating accidents, and giving them names: love. Calling. Country.

"God never gives us more than we can handle," say the cheerful articles in Christian magazines, with their resolute anecdotes about people growing stronger in the service of the Lord after losing the use of one body part after another, and I can see how everything could fall into place if I could just see God dealing the cards.

A wobble in the wheel and Robert does not get mumps. I marry him and do not spend my life listening to Merrilee, whose possibilities I have pre-empted. Because he gets a promotion early, and we decide not to use birth control, because we make love on Wednesday, not on Friday, and I ovulate late, we give birth to Sarah, not Benjie or Fred, Sarah who is what she is because of what sperm made it up the treacherous landscape of my vagina. Sarah does not die a crib death or from cyanide in her formula; she is not disabled by a drunk driver on prom night. She goes to Santa Barbara, not Berkeley and therefore meets James, not Joseph. Together they get a grant to develop a new form of biological warfare, which escapes and therefore many women in South Texas where they are testing will have deformed children — which they decide God thinks they can handle, or so they say in a touching story in *Ladies' Home Journal.*

No, before they begin work on the NSF grant they decide to take a vacation in Mexico, where a bus runs them off a precipice in their rented car. Robert never recovers. I divide my life between going to work and trying to get him to eat. My sisters never write.

Ellen Farmer

Two Hitchhikers

I.

We are visitors on this red sprawling land.
The roads are hot metallic bands splayed out across the mesas
where gas stations are trading posts
and the clouds scud in shocking white pageants across
turquoise sky.

The Navajo women, young and old,
wear bright velour blouses on this cool October morning
and skirts of many layered colors which
swing musically with the merest shift of glance.

Their black hair is pulled into knots at the backs of their heads.
They use the Government Visitor Center restroom to change
their babies' diapers
as I do, our men waiting in cars or next to trucks outside.
They smile and lower their eyes just like me.
Their language sweeps past my ears.

I am from the country which lays siege to theirs,
oozing white guilt and tourist dollars,
desperate to give and not take,
unable to control the camera in my eyes which snaps away
at their privacy.

On the way to Canyon de Chelley,
standing alone beside the strip of road is a slender, wrinkled
woman in red velour and layered skirt of aqua blue.
Her earrings hang to her boyish breasts.
She is older than my mother, and she's wearing buckskin
boots,
her own skin a rich sienna.

She wants a ride, and we gather her into our car,
as if she were an urn of ancient ashes, holding our breaths,
surprised by her courage in the face of us — these white
strangers.

The ride is a silent sliding into her territory
wondering what threats her sons and nephews think of
spotting her in our car from their pickups as they charge by.

And really, she's just a farmer's wife like my own grandmother.
Maybe her husband died and her son's in the air force and her daughter
sends money from Tucson, where she's the bookkeeper for her husband's trucking business,
and they all know the tourists wouldn't dare
kidnap or harm her, though I'd love to keep her company long enough
to understand her stories,
to glean what she knows of corn and sheep and sunlight on canyon floors.

II.

Driving my son home from day care in 100 degree weather
after a morning at work,
I realize we are both looking forward to his wading pool
in the backyard.

At a red light we stop near a bus bench, and a salt and pepper-haired
woman, grooved with wrinkles, and nearly blind behind thick glasses
and cataracts, gets up from the bench and approaches our car.

"Could you take me home?" she looms through the windshield.
I am at once startled and curious, and my 18 month old
immediately begins to cry.
She does, after all, remind me of Hansel and Gretel's witch.

I ask where she's going. It's out of my way,
but it's so hot, and the bus isn't coming.
So I pull over to let her in, praying she's not crazy,
just as the bus arrives. She turns to get on it,

but it roars off without her, spouting exhaust,
so I'm taking her now, whether I want to or not.
She gets into my car.

After all, what kind of 75 year old woman
would mug a mother in broad daylight?
She probably chose to ask me for a ride
because the baby made her feel safe.

He keeps wailing but she quiets and befriends him. She tells
me
she's a volunteer at a day care center for handicapped children,
a retired newspaper columnist, a member of her temple.
As she chats, looking over her shoulder every few words
to charm the baby,
a delightful sense of humor braids itself through her stories,
the essential thread of a colorful life.

And I begin to wonder if when I grow old,
and they take away my driver's license
and the right to work for a living,
will I fade into my sofa cusions before a T.V. set,
afraid of humiliating myself by fainting on the sidewalk
some hot day,
or put a key in my pocket
and walk out the door, a rightful heir to life's little adventures
and the kindness of strangers.

At her apartment she implores us to come to temple:
"Jewish or not, it will do you good," she says.
The baby waves "bye bye," and I wish her well,
feeling strangely blessed.

Helen Mayer

The Stories Strangers Tell

are not always told in bars
but are sometimes told in ice cream parlors,
on buses and the corner of every street.

She sat next to me
Thanksgiving day
riding the bus through Berkeley.
It was a day filled with clouds
but not despair.
She told me childhood tales about back home
in Georgia
and how the persimmon pulp oozed through her toes
as she ran up the lane.

I told her of the two perfectly shaped persimmons
waiting on the window sill
Ripe and ready for tasting.

Maude Meehan

Mama Do Your Thing

I saw a woman on the avenue
I was appalled
that she would wear
a bright red mini majorette dress
white tasseled go-go boots
high styled
high piled
white wig
of laquered hair
And then
I saw
the laser beam
of her hard
disapproving stare
was fastened
on my poncho
and my pair of scruffy jeans

Naked
as nasty twins
on Judgment Day
and twice as mean
our thoughts
hung smugly in the air

Maude Meehan

At A Conference For Women

a few short years ago
the guest speaker, prim
in suburban matron drag
blue-white coiffure,
knit suit and Gucci bag
stepped to the podium.
Typecast, the perfect
corporation wife, who
with her opening sentence
changed my life.

I once had forty tits
and someone dragging
on each one.
I now have two,
they both belong to me,
and life is much more fun.

The rest of her remarks
remain a blur,
but I am down to three.
Blue-haired deceptive lady,
I'm almost running free.

Sherry Carrière

Legacy

I want to tell you of my great aunt Lucy who was a friend of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's. A pilot, she made love with the blue and clouds.

I want to tell you of Great Grandmother who had seven children and lived to hear four of them die. She wrote spidery poems to answer her tangled, purple sorrow.

I want to tell you of my mother who passes on the traditional stories of her mother's with a dancer's tongue, each sentence an arabesque that stretches my mind.

But there are no pilots, poets or storytellers in the women of my family. It is hard to even find out who my own mother is, has been, has had to become. I hate the way these women have had to work: unappreciated, unrecognized ghosts in their own kitchens. I hate the way they have survived: anger let in, health let out, denial, insanity and passivity. "Why didn't you ever fight back?," I demand of them. I hate the ways they have learned to hate themselves. I hate this hate in me. I taste my bitterness as though I have licked an ashtray on this cold morning. I do not want any part of this legacy, I scream at the fears that run through my blood like racehorses.

This is a cold mourning, as I stir oatmeal at 5:30 in the before pink light of my kitchen, waiting to wake a child. I gather their ghosts around me like a thick and warm bathrobe. Forgive my hatred, I beg, as I try to press them into my flesh. My song is empty if it is not their song too. The desire for flight is too old in my bones to be only mine.

Marcia Cohn Spiegel

The Good Little Girl

My Aunt Lottie died the other day. As we gathered to close the house and divide the memories, we found treasures — the souvenirs and reminders of other lives and times. There were pictures: of the shtetl from which my grandparents came, of the poverty of another life, of the ghetto to which they moved, and of the American children growing up, dressed in their finest. There were the certificates, the honors, the awards, the diplomas. As we sifted through the lives, I was reminded of the cost of each of the pictures, each of the honors, and of the struggle and sacrifice of my grandparents, my mother, my aunts and my uncles.

At the funeral they read "The Woman of Valor" (Proverbs 31). They always read the "Woman of Valor" when a Jewish woman dies. It speaks of the sacrifice, the struggle, the selflessness of the women of another age. It doesn't tell us how tired she must have been from the hard work, the lack of sleep, the sacrifices. It tells that she was praised, but it doesn't tell us how she felt about herself. Was her sacrifice its own reward, knowing that she made the lives of her husband and children better? Did she have any pleasure in her life? Did anyone do anything for *her?*

The "Woman of Valor" is a good woman. I thought about the other "good women," the women who had been "good little girls." In this day, when thin is considered beautiful, we learn that "good little girls" who seek their parents' attention and approval are frequently anorexic or bulemic. But in other days, when the image was buxom and plump, what did "good little girls" do for attention?

Projected back into the world of the immigrants, Jewish, Irish, Greek, Armenian, Mexican, Asian — I don't think it matters where they came from — I could picture the families: too large, too many children to feed, never enough money; life was a constant struggle for survival. While the parents worked, the older sisters became the mothers to the younger children; because everyone was struggling no one's struggle was seen as special, and no one was singled out for special merit.

The daughters stayed home to work or to care for the children. The younger ones got the education — the diplomas, the certificates, the awards. The older sisters anticipated the parents' wishes: they cooked, cleaned, shopped, set the table, waited for their rewards — in hugs of thanks and recognition. But the parents were too tired to

notice. They *expected* their daughters to behave this way. What need of special thanks or attention? So the older daughters waited — for the hugs and kisses that were showered on the younger children.

* * *

I guess that's how it was for Lottie and my mother. My mother remembers how she would make the beds, start the dinner cooking, get everything ready for her parents' return. She mothered her brothers, watched over them and did what she could to care for them. It's hard for me to realize how small the difference in ages was between the two sisters and their five brothers.

My mother doesn't remember her father or mother being physically affectionate with her. I find that so strange, because my memory of my grandparents is one of loving, touching, hugging, lap sitting. I remember the good smells of Passover seders or Shabbat dinners, and the joy of everyone being together at these special meals; my mother's memories of the seders and dinners of her childhood are so different. She remembers tired parents, bickering brothers, rushing and struggling to get ready. She remembers anger and fatigue.

She also remembers shame.

"What was the worst memory of your childhood?"

"That's easy. When we were learning to read, the teacher told us to bring in a daily paper — the *Trib* or *Examiner.* But we didn't get those papers. Only the *Jewish Daily Forward.* How could I ask my mother for money for a paper? There was no money. Didn't the teachers know? My brothers had it easy. Lottie and I helped them to be Americans. No one helped us. We had to do it all alone. I was so ashamed that my folks didn't speak English good. So ashamed that they didn't read an English paper."

Lottie and my mother went to Marshall High for two years, and got certificates. We found Lottie's certificate in the box of treasures, yellowed and dry after all these years. They both went to work as soon as the law would allow — secretaries, salesgirls. They loved pretty dresses. There is a faded snapshot from around 1920 of the two of them in beaded dresses.

"That one cost me $200," my mother told me with pride.

"How much did you make?"

"When I worked at Sears I think I took home $18 a week. That

was good money for a girl you know." How long did it take to earn that dress, I wonder, when most of the money went to the family?

The boys were lucky. They had the same struggle, but there was hope that the boys would become professionals, real Americans. So the boys got the education. They each spent some time in college. They worked too, but if the sisters hadn't been bringing in something every week it would have been impossible for the boys to make it. No one thought that the girls might have done it — Lottie was an entrepreneur, my mother was a keen investor and businesswoman. It wasn't a world where women like them assumed such roles. They did what was expected. They didn't make waves. "Then your parents would love you."

I've never asked my uncles how they felt about all this. I saw how they treated Lottie, and how they treat my mother now. They are generous with their time, caring and considerate of her needs. They used to take mother and Lottie out for dinner, have them as weekend guests frequently. They were with Lottie constantly during her last illness, and are protective of my mother now. Where did they learn their generosity and loving? From their parents or from Lottie and my mother?

Not all of the boys finished college. They married and went their separate ways. Lottie was always close to my grandparents. Lived with them for a long time even after she was married and had a daughter. Mother was always there for Shabbat. Summers were spent together at the cottage: my grandparents, Lottie's family, our family, and whoever of the boys was around.

I'm not sure when I first became aware of the tension. Anger and jealousy, unpleasant things for a child to hear about. Conversations I didn't want to listen to. Things were being measured, weighed, found wanting. Other people were taking what was due to my mother. What *was* due to my mother? Who owed it to her and why? Why did it make her so sad? Why did it seem so hopeless? She was never going to get whatever it was. I would put the pillow over my head so I didn't have to know it.

As we looked through the pictures on the last day of *shiva,* before closing up the house for good, my mother asked, "What are you doing with the refrigerator?"

"Selling it to the new tenant, I guess."

"That's my refrigerator. I gave it to the folks. It cost me $200."

"But that was over 20 years ago. It's probably not worth much now."

That was not the end of the conversation. There was a pained expression, pinched mouth, flashing eyes. The same tone I remember from those nights in the country.

"No one seems to respect what belongs to me. That's my refrigerator — and stove."

I'm so glad that my cousins were busy and couldn't hear this conversation. But now I was old enough to ask why. I wouldn't put the pillow over my head now. I must know what it's all about.

"What's the matter, mom? I'm sure you don't want that old stove and refrigerator. They can't be worth much, even for junk. It's about something else, isn't it? Do you want to tell me what's bothering you?"

"You wouldn't understand. You always had a mother and father who loved you and took care of you. You wouldn't know how it is to feel that everyone else was loved but you. No one ever noticed anything I did. No one cared. No one ever said 'Thank you' . . . *I* should have been the one to go to college. *I* was the smart one. But girls didn't go. Girls only worked and got married and had children. No one ever thanked *me*.

"They all loved Lottie. She was the pretty one. She was the one they did for. People always did for her. Look at this, Lottie got all of Ma's things, even the stove and refrigerator I bought for Ma and Pa when they moved in here. No one ever told *her* 'No'.

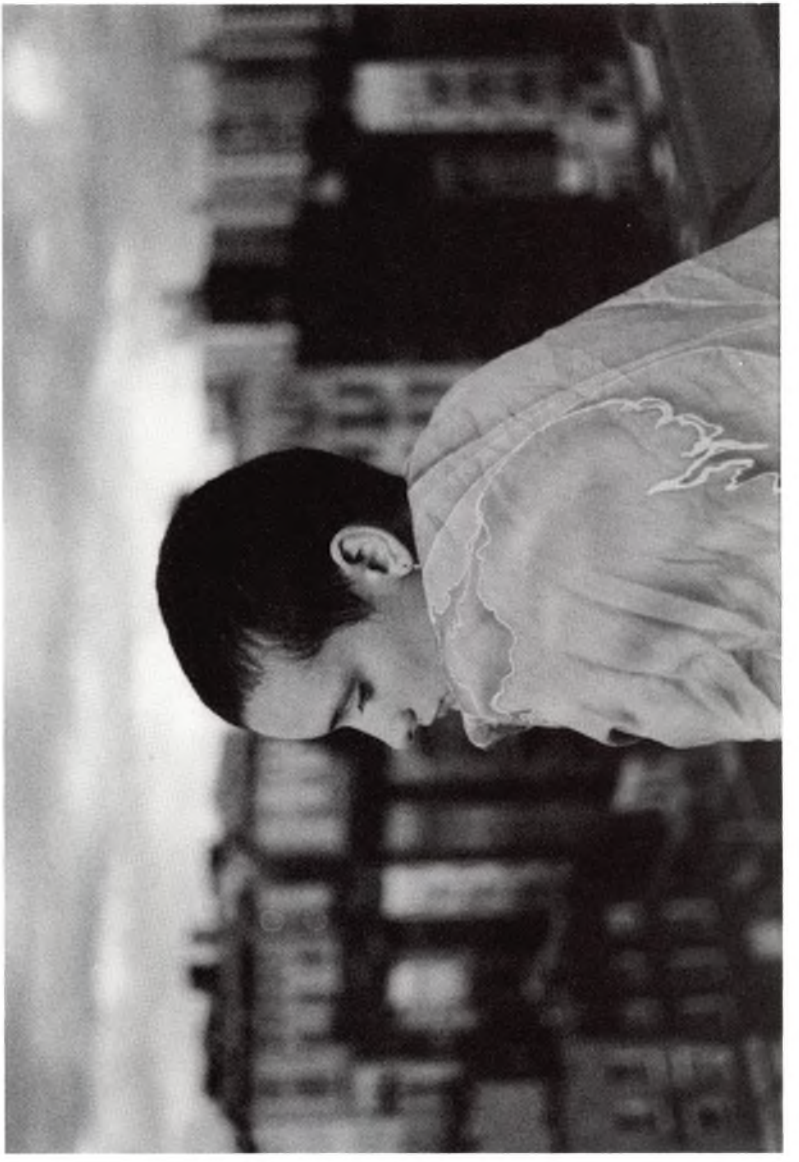
"I did everything I could. I was good, I never caused trouble. I didn't fight or stay out late. No one ever had to tell me what to do, I always knew what to do. I did it before I was asked. I did it before it needed to be done.

"But *she* got kissed, *she* got thanked. Back then the boys were always so cute. Everyone loved them. Each one was the sweetest baby, no wonder Ma adored them. But none of it was for me. I did everything I could, and after she died I never even knew if she loved me."

And so on that sad day my mother sat with a bag, collecting mementos of a past that lived inside her. We made stacks of pictures for each of the boys, their bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, and babies. We wondered about faded pictures from Russia and Poland, lost relatives, no one will ever identify. We divided up the

crocheted doilies, tablecloths and embroidered tea towels. We filled our boxes with special pots for Passover matzo balls and chicken soup, and mismatched silver from the days when Zayde collected scrap metal.

And my mother cried for a little girl who was never naughty and never knew if she was loved.



Estelle and Friend

Abby Bee

Brooklyn

I.

This house,
six walk-up apartments
bought with clothes of the pushcart,
steps worn in predictable places,
wooden bannisters
sticky in wet weather,
stairs pliable
to the footstep rhythm of many.
Like lasagne,
layer after aroma layer
floats through cracks
into the hallway,
baking chicken,
boiling cabbage,
lentil soup.

A truck
runs a coal chute to the basement
where Mr. Tom shovels it into the boiler.
Steam heat
fills pipes and silver radiators
that women knock on to signal:
knock knock,
come to the window
knock knock,
do you have to be so loud?
Coal is spilling off the ramp.
With soft coal
I draw pictures on the sidewalk,
sandstone stoop, and
sketch in wet cement AB 1959.

On the stoop
in flowered housedresses
and terrycloth slippers,
they cluster

some with tongues flapping,
others silent, observant
in the rush-hour greyness
of a growing sunset.

If there is one green coat
on sale
in all of Brooklyn
these women will find it,
without a phone.
What could be bad?

II. *Esther*

According to my mother
Esther is a classic.
Everyone's business is her business,
a yenta in her loungechair,
still with the big mouth.
"So, how do you like the new gate, Esther?"
"I like it."
"Doesn't it make you feel like you're in jail?"
"No, it's like my own private patio."
She is large,
healthy black hairs on her chin,
beige stockings fallen
in clumpy rolls
around her ankles,
her dog leashed
to the aluminum arm of the chair.

There's one living tree on the block.
From the window my mother watches her.
"Esther, don't let him make there,
take him on the side street."
"But he wants to go here,
it's nice fresh soil."

Anything you want to know

Esther has the latest,
a common clearing house,
the raw onions.
"Always with the big mouth,
always with the dirt," mother says.

III. *Mary*

She looks a fright
since her stroke
grey, pale, tortured,
blue eyes in perennial shock.
She rang the bell in fear
and muttered slowly
the phone, the phone.

Into her apartment
we walked on cracked linoleum.
Her bushy dog
sniffed our ankles
as we passed piles of clothing
stacked on cardboard boxes,
newspaper on the floor.

We moved her bed away from the wall,
wires loose,
we fixed the phone.
Filled with gratitude
she crossed her chest,
held out a crumpled dollar.
In her brown and gold bedroom,
we shook our heads, no, *don't be silly, Mary.*
Crossing her chest again, she mumbled
"I'll say a prayer for you . . .
I'll say a prayer for you."

IV. *Evelyn*

The rent was right

so you stayed when he left you
in the 1st floor apartment
facing the back.
On the stoop today:
permanent hawklike fixtures
waiting.
"Good Morning, Evelyn,
On your way to work?"

They watch her walk towards the station,
an "el" to the city.
"From a magazine cover she jumped today,
such a *tchotchkeleh*."*
"No, Esther, that's what they're all wearing now."
Mother notices too
how you manage to dress so well.
In front of the mailbox she told you,
"To keep a man you need to have patience."
"But how can you stand it?" you asked.
"See? She's just like you, always restless."

V. *On the Phone with Mother*

"Forty-five years they lived there.
What they did to that apartment!
So I said to her son,
if you have to take another little while,
go ahead, don't get ulcers over it."
"Is the piano still there?"
"No, that's been gone a long time."
"I'd go upstairs to play Pearl's piano, remember?"
"Pearl was a saint, such a sweet woman."
"How did she put up with Jules?"
"I told you, she was a saint,
such a round face with big smile
she'd come downstairs to bring you

* *tchotchkeleh — a loose woman, a plaything.*

silver dollars for Chanukah . . . yep,
it's hard to believe.
Such junk he's got there, the shoebows."
"Shoebows?"
"On the side he made and sold shoebows,
you should see the things they have in the basement.
That was after the coffeehouse,
when they had the dry cleaners."
"They were always so happy to see me"
"They loved you. You were like the daughter
they never had."

VI.

You can't fool me with your age, lady.
Lots of laughing went into those lines.

A wrinkled face,
a creviced face,
a riverbed of glories, tears,
weathered thick
a gnarly old tree
used to holding ground
used to being here
in the dignity of a grove,
a magnificent tired old face,
a face of character.
How dare anything
steal the telling.

Ingrid Reti

Reunion

Sister, stranger
blond hair encircling
time brushed face
fragile body
bent by living.
I look at you
you look at me.

Buried memories well up,
old wounds fester;
a steep wall
still rises between us.
Sights, sounds, voices
of long ago
hold us in their grip
refuse to let go.

We dare not reach out
embrace
sit side by side
forget time past.
We eat slowly
look at each other
smile politely
sister, stranger.

Joan McMillan

Mary Gilbert

my grandmother, 1906–1969

Even though I am without you
you are always with me, an ore
that richens in my veins over time.
Last night in a dream
light shone through your own veins,
silver. I confess I hardly knew you
when you died. Later, I touched your despair.

Alone, you raised a daughter
in the house of your East Boston in-laws,
one room to yourself, one bed
shared with the child who became my mother.

Now I place you there,
quart jars of brandied cherries and peaches in syrup
hidden in the closet
behind the winter clothes; ten pairs
of elbow-length gloves wrapped in thin blue tissue
at the back of a dresser drawer.

You left me a necklace of platinum, earrings of topaz, gifts
you might have sold, but kept as secrets
tucked in a shoebox.

I confess I hardly knew you
but I place you
near the window of that room, walls blank
and tight as the face of one with a thousand stories
who refuses to speak.

It is early spring, and I think you smile,
lean close as you can to the cold glass,
brush dust from the sill,
watch the backyard drift from snow into flowers.

Ellen Bass

On Sara's return from Minnesota

She is changing, my daughter
the way light changes at dusk
so quickly, different, moment
by moment: the mountains
dusky amethyst, the tree trunks and
branches burning copper, the kind of light
that stabs you, grabs
your breath, then throws it back
sudden, with a sharp gasp. That breath
when the thick heat of day shifts
cool. And when you look
the trees are dun again
and clouds have begun to shine
with a wash of tropical flowers, the sun
sliding fast now, gone
then released into a wide blaze of orange
pink, magenta, flamingo
saturating the sky. She is changing
my daughter, so quickly
I must sit on a rock in the forest
and watch.

Abby Bee

Gypsy Ray

Maia

Digging Into History

A fitful wind howls down the mountain
riffles the palm fronds the frantic ivy
My head whirls with scraps of a story
my arms and legs lie far from me
in a bed of shadows under a redwood
your hands nearby digging into history
geology of your mother's invasions her
blind use of you Proofs of this turn up
in the soil the roots fossils locked in stone
You are free of her
except when she knocks at the wall of your throat
threatening to stop your voice

My mother is mute shocked into silence
dead infant in her arms clenched fist
that never opened She stumbles in grief or panic
through the rooms of my house
All but one the wide wide window
where I sit at my desk scratching out
poems loveletters essays on
free will refusing to be bound by her fate

You and I are orphans we have known this
since that night on the hill we fell
into each other's arms straining toward
the present sisters scribbling pain
page after page gratitude recognition
You gauged my shallow breath a held-back scream
I rubbed your knees where you had fallen
time and again my hands erasing
your mother's hands the damage

Yet the old aches return
your teeth your knees my lungs
Why is this?

The wind laughs behind our backs as if
we had wished for poems to heal us As if

Maia

we could chant and dance this craziness
out of its skin leaving it
intact on a twig mayfly's jacket
a brief fierce break
shaking the stars to their roots and then
the drone of daylight
loud as ever in our ears

I shout your name you shift
into a deer again a hawk a snake
afraid of my scent You can't feel me
silent alongside you invisible hands tied
while you cry out in your sleep raging
at the daily erosion of vision
smoggy bandage over your eyes

I am surrounded by tokens of our journey
wear your earring wrap myself in your shirt
rub your cloudy crystal for instruction
read your month-old letters seven times

You look for signs

Your lover kisses both your breasts
My lover warms me with his breath
You think of me when your hands touch wood
I think of you when I take up my pen or
rub a peach against my cheek

What will become of us?

Maia

Give Me The Moon

When I was little and we did poorly
her hands were quick and clever stitched together
grainsacks into skirts for me
She watched the moon
following its orbit day and night
When it wasn't visible
her eyes turned inward
tracking its journey under the earth

Now that I'm grown she's
lost in her costly dresses
she's lost the moon entirely
wrists asleep in her lap
watching the TV screen cartoons
annihilating each other

Sometimes I sit in my chair like she does
rolling my eyes at the emptiness
watching the sky through windowglass
refusing to breathe till I have to
rubbing my knees and elbows
uncoiling the future the shriveling
of old age the way an orange
puckers turns blue caves in
a gaudy drawn-out death

NO No make it quick
and clean for me give me the silver
dagger of the moon's glance
through that one blue window
striking my eyes my breast
pulling my hands and feet
into the fields the orangegroves
still feeding their roots
in underground water

Give me the moon her tender
and terrible faces

Maia

give me a stone a stone
to smash through glass
the screen the glass between
my mother and the roots
my mother and the moon my mother
and me

Joan McMillan

For An Alcoholic Parent

Another woman grows inside my mother,
gripping her skull
as dark vines grip a splintering trellis,
filling it with huge bright blooms,
a person
foreign to me, as alien
as the small secret body of that one child
which flowed from her in miscarriage fifteen summers ago.
Mother's skin
expands to hold the new self, veins
press to the surface, show their lavender tracings
as at a time of giving birth
when each filament of a woman's blood
strains closest towards the light.
Now all language
walks a crooked step between us.
Words ignite, we cannot avoid them.
She turns from me in a dress of flame.
What's left of love
starts a long slow blister, scalds a map of silence on my tongue.

Mary Hower

For My Mother

I.
When I was a daughter in your house
I would clean and clean it
to ease your burden.

Your way of cleaning meant
throwing the scattered mess in a box
you'd put in the basement
ten minutes before company
"to get to later."
When I cleaned
I would imagine
the President was coming,
and when he arrived home from a tour of Viet Nam,
he'd swing by to inspect the beds,
check for hospital corners.
He would swear the windows were open,
they were that clean. He would admire the closets
for shoes set in straight lines against the baseboard.
Then his white glove test performed on window sills,
on the fancy rungs of the dining room chairs.

In the kitchen the President would see
that I'd set the table correctly,
the apple pottery placed against blue placemats
for contrast, as they did in your Betty Crocker cookbook.
He would inspect the oven
making sure I'd scraped away
the carbon maps of your cookery.

And then you would rise, late from bed,
and I was your good girl then,
I was your little helper.

*

Later, I thought about killing you.

But first I would search the house
for something you could leave behind,
something I could use
or hock. I would start at the jewelry box,
rummage through the first tier,
the turquoise pop beads I pulled apart as a baby,
the rhinestone necklaces that glittered
from your working girl days.

But what could I use these for?
Each bead, each stone had absorbed
words from your throat, those warnings:
don't do what I did, don't throw your life away
having children.

No. Not these.

Then the expensive jewelry of the bottom tier
given by father in compensation.
Every Christmas you would hold up the stones
with a weak smile,
and the light would fall through them
for the last time
before you hushed them away in their cotton swaddlings.

No. With your curses, they'd turn worthless,
would become paste gems in a pawnshop.

*

They took the baby,
the first one, my brother,
back to the nursery,
and the doctor left you.
You were alone then
and still a bit drugged,
but you got up
and sleepwalked
over to the window.

But the way you tell it:
"all I remember is looking down,
eleven stories,
I just kept looking down."

Four years later,
and three of us then,
"The psychiatrist gave me Valium,
said my problem was three kids in three years.

I knew I had too many
but what could I do?
I never went back to him."

II. Voices in the Garden

Today, I noticed the daisies drying out
in the July sun, how some formed a bud without blossoming
and went to seed prematurely. It's too hot for their petals.
It's got nothing to do with giving up.

Six years ago this month,
I walked twenty blocks to the clinic
in the black sundress you gave me.
The black drew the sun into my dress.
Mourning clothes, I thought.
The clinic was disguised as an old house,
and I went in; the women whispering inside
said no anaesthesia would be available,
and so I accepted the pump pumping
relentlessly as punishment
until wave after wave of placenta and embryo
washed, no, tugged out of me
until I felt turned inside out like a ratty sweater.

It's invisible that trail
the summer daisies' seeds
blow in the wind.
I feel the messages in the seeds

make their way to my ears, saying
what grows is not always good, saying
forgive yourself.

*

In the garden this spring
I heard your voice
telling me to dig faster, work harder, straighten out
the carrots that grew later like crooked, accusing fingers,
blaming when the lettuces failed
to make it beyond the snail stage, your voice
chiding when beans planted too close to zucchinis
had to be ripped up,
the roots frayed endings of my nerves,
stems seemed necks I tightened my grip on.

With every shovelful of dirt I'd sifted
I was surprised to find
only the usual roots of weeds,
chips of bottle glass from a long ago yard party.
Everytime my shovel bit down,
I expected to hit bone shard,
a mass grave of little murders, buried angers.

Like your mother, you taught me to give myself
small punishments, no candy during Lent,
save the money instead in the mite boxes bulging
with the promise of a pagan baby.

You pointed out my great aunt. At seventy, never married,
she still nursed her ailing mother, "lived like a saint."
In the damp garden, the smell of dried roses I crush in
my hand
brings me back to her, her large square room
where the cold penetrated the thick soles of my oxfords
and the black trunk was a coffin she'd lay in at night.
The toilet seat in her bathroom
was chilled, a special penance

in winter when the icicles hung from her rafters,
and you said you wanted me to be like her.

*

In Ohio, tornadoes speed across the fields some springs;
once they wrenched the tin roof from our tool shed.
That seems confirmation to me now,
that anger is as natural
as the uprooted beans continuing to live in my compost heap.

But then father stood on the porch
watching so falling branches didn't dent his car
while we crouched in the cave basement,
lit candles, prayed a rosary
in fear of the angry gods—the anger in you, mother,
that you will always run from.

Here in California, unvarying sun,
but I sit awake these nights, my rage fighting the sleep
that would bring peace and forgetting.
Mother, I won't use your rituals any more,
won't appease your angry gods.
Even in the night sky's milky light
I hear their demands. And rising to fulfill them
would only nurse this hurt,
drive it deeper.

Sara Halprin

Coast to Coast

1.

Let's get back to the basics, she said
several times towards the end, knowing
then that the real bottom line was breath,
breathing,
in and out
breathing
"Gently, keeping breathing mom, don't
panic," I said, and my sister,
"Just breathe, in and out, stay
cool, calm and collected."
She repeated that, grasping
at the line—
"cool, calm and collected," then
lay quietly for a while.

2.

I went out on the dock.
The light on the water fit like a skin,
rippled here and there by mullet jumping—
a satin skin, thick, smooth, like the
skin on chocolate pudding Mom made for us kids.
The light out there on the dock so intense
it was a kind of darkness.
Down at the other end of the bayou
an enormous bird flapped its ragged wings,
the mullet jumped
and the minnows swam thickly under the smooth
water's skin.

3.

My mother's face, wrinkled
as it was, was also
like a baby's. She
opened her nearly blind eyes, looking
out at the trees and the
water, and said with fervour,

"It is so very beautiful." She said,
"You must remind me to open my
eyes more often. Oh, it is so
beautiful." I don't remember her
ever remarking on a view
before.

4.

The last time I saw her,
my mother said,
"As a child you had such a
command of language, I was
in awe of you — afraid I
wasn't good enough for you,
but now I have found
my Self,
things are different
between us.
We have come
to a balance," she said.

5.

We had a few minutes before
my sister drove me to the airport.
My mother, shedding light,
decided to tell a joke,
the kind she used to call
"off-color." When
she got to the punch
line I had no
words I was speechless.
Mom looked at me,
head cocked to one side,
said, "You didn't get it."

6.

In those days before
my mother died

I could not think
clearly. I felt
a part of me was dying.
I stumbled through that
time, dying
my distant mother's death until
one hard morning,
on a hillside looking over
the ocean, leaning
against a tree
whose bark rippled through my tears,
I decided to live my own life.

7.

The day my mother died
I was far away
driving down the California coast to
Pacific Grove. I stopped at the beach and
slept for nearly an hour,
woke, feeling comforted.
I always have felt comforted by the sound of surf.
I was driving again,
down the Pacific coast, when she
died, in Florida, when she
died, in my sister's house in Florida, when she
died. My sister said she just
stopped breathing. My sister said she
died peacefully.

8.

After my mother died
I grieved for all
death in the world,
all suffering,
all places where death walks daily,
all who die not in their beds,
not peacefully, like my mother.
I learned to grieve, as
when my son was born

Sara Halprin

I learned to love,
and then loved
all children.

9.

I was in California,
sleeping on the autumn beach,
sleeping in the November sun.
In Nicaragua, in El
Salvador, in Lebanon,
South Africa, in
a small town in Florida and
everywhere, shortly after I awoke
there were other awakenings.
Others found comfort in something,
if only the way
it just goes on.

Sherry Carrière

Summer Rain

She is not the same since the stroke,
forgets how alone she is,
she leaves the stove and oven on,
waits for her dead husband to turn them off.
"Don't meet me at the station, I can take a cab,"
I tell her over the phone but I know she will be there,
even if it takes her all day to remember which bus will
make the fifteen minute drive.

I arrive at four-thirty, and see her first,
a tiny white bird,
she pecks through the colored seeds of passengers,
hungry for the granddaughter she has not seen for three years.
She grabs the arm of a young woman with hair shorter
than mine,
tugs on her insistently,
"Lynn, Lynn," she cries.
The woman pulls away from her brusquely
and mutters at her in French:
"Maudite vieillarde!"
She backs away stunned,
clutches her handbag against her chest,
she armours herself against further assault.

"Nana," I say gently touching her elbow,
"you didn't need to come."
She looks at me without recognition,
puts her cold wet palm against my cheek and hair
and points to the empty hall where the other woman was.
"But I thought . . . ," she whispers
as I guide her and my suitcase
toward the taxi line.
I am at home in Montreal,
can switch easily between French and English,
Taxi driver and Grandmother.
He wants to know what California is *really* like,
She cannot stop telling me about the mistake
she made in the station.

I stay for ten days. I take her to church,
to doctors,
to bank,
to restaurants
and to the museums she took me to as a child.
"You were here with me?" she asks, puzzled,
"Yes, yes," I reply, "and we ate raisins under that yellow tree."
She does not remember.

I wake with an itchy red rash across my chin
on the day I have to leave
and the sky is storm and gray, August.
A light rain falls as we drive in silence
along the shore of the St. Lawrence to the station.
"The skies are crying because you are leaving," she says
with a small pink smile.

Weeks later, I receive two frail sentences
on the back of an old greeting card:
"Such a shame about the sores on your face."
and
"The rains haven't stopped."

Martha Keaner

Generations

Winter and Spring 1958:

A correct June wedding is planned. The ritual is the central figure in the production, directed by the bride's mother, with a cast of hundreds.

The virgin bride is driven around the city by her grandmother's chauffeur, leaving her lists at bridal registries. She does not have time to write her final exams. The invitations are engraved and sent out the approved six weeks before the wedding, each in its two vellum envelopes. The caterers, florists, bartenders, canopy people, minister and choir are arranged. The linen-draped tables are filling with silver trays, bonbon dishes and icebuckets, teak salad bowl sets, and monogrammed damask napkins.

The groom has somewhat upset the tone of the occasion by insisting on blazer and flannels rather than a cutaway. Easy for him! He will give the best man and each of the ushers matching striped ties.

On the day, the bridesmaids complain that their dresses are fat-making. The bride has always known that her dress makes her look like a walking white barn.

On the way to the church, the bride and her stepfather have an intense discussion about the best way to hand-wash wool socks. The bride worries that she will trip going down the aisle towards the stranger in his blazer.

At the reception, some of the bride's friends become a little rowdy after a while. The lips of the newlyweds' parents grow thin, and the couple is encouraged to change into its respective going-away clothes, toss the bouquet, and be limousined away. They will spend the night at the Ritz, where they will drink a lot of champagne before the moment of truth.

Summer 1986:

Her daughter has come to visit her. It's the last time they'll be together before Clare and Steve get married. Martha has let go of needing to role-play Mother-of-the-Bride, and they're having fun driving the van along the coast in the sun, brainstorming Steve and Clare's wedding.

They're going to get married in their house, that they've been fixing up since they moved in two years ago. The cat will be okay in the attic, and the rabbit in the basement. Vegetable season will be over, so people can walk in the garden.

They have thought about a justice-of-the-peace, but they don't want to go to city hall. They know a Unitarian minister who isn't pious. They'll ask her to marry them.

Martha says she'll get a fancy gown. Clare guffaws and says,

"If you do something crazy like that, I'll get crazy and change my name to Steve's!"

"Okay, okay, I'll get some designer jeans. What are you and Steve going to wear?"

"Oh, I'll make myself an outrageous costume, and Steve'll wear whatever he's comfortable with — probably a new shirt from Goodwill."

"Clare, what do you want for wedding presents?"

"We have just about everything we need. Most of our friends don't have much money. We're collecting juice jars, and we're going to ask everyone to bring flowers. We have our friends in our hearts—we won't need objects to remember their being there."

As they drive along, Martha finds herself humming Bom bom babom bom bom ba. They laugh together.

Koré Hayes Archer

Lavender & Silver

"We're all preoccupied with the ends, but the means are everything. *It is the doing-of-it that transforms the world."*
— Patricia Sun

1. Everyday Magic

I do in-home health care, so I have a lot of contact with elderly women. There's this one old lady, she's 94 years old, that I've been taking care of for the last six months, three shifts a week. She's had a stroke, and the left side of her body is paralyzed. She needs assistance with meals, meds, dressing and ambulation. I walk with her when she needs to use the toilet or, on days when there's no sign of breeze, to the back porch to sit in the sun.

Here's how we walk together: I plant my feet wide apart, my left foot set so as to brace her rubbery left leg, and my right leg planted alongside the edge of the chair, so I can come in close for the lift. I take a deep breath and hold it as I tuck my two hands into the crotches of her arms and heave her weight up and forward to rest on the tripod of her cane, her sturdy right leg, and our two left legs. She is not a small woman; every now and then, in mid-lift, her body will suddenly feel like dead-weight, too much for me. Then I feel the force of my determination, my mental exertion, as I close my eyes, push through the moment of doubt, push the soles of my feet into the floor, and *will* the stand-up to happen. And it does. Then I let out my breath, as she balances forward on her cane, and I pivot to stand behind her, still holding her up by her underarms.

Then we walk. Heavy on our right legs and the cane, as I kick her rag-doll left leg forward. Then we lurch to the left, just long enough to lift the two right legs forward. We pitch and roll from side to side, following an irregular rhythm, like an old fishing boat in the harbor. In this odd duet, our bodies come together in careful synchronization, pressed warmly against each other for safety, her shapeless butt against my belly, my right breast squashed into her spine, our two breaths audible.

It's a demanding, precarious workout for both of us. My first weeks with her I'd break out in a sweat halfway to the bathroom; now that I'm lifting weights at the gym, it's gotten a whole lot easier. It gets easier and harder on different days, depending on how alert she is,

whether or not she's in pain, and how cooperative she's feeling that day.

Of course, this improvised walk flies in the face of standard medical procedure; it's hard on my back, especially the raising and lowering, and risky for her as well. A walker or wheelchair would've been much wiser solutions. But she has adamantly refused those options, and so this questionable dance is what gets us from here to there. At first, I was uneasy about what could happen if one of us tripped on the edge of a rug, or skidded on the tiled floor. But after a certain number of frightening staggers and near-spills, I began to see that whatever the amount of strength needed to pull her back into safe balance, it would always be there for me. Always. I can feel it now, a given fact: I will not let her fall, no matter what. And this still amazes me.

So our time with each other is very physical, very intimate. Our sense of co-balancing is fine-tuned. To balance that much weight between two moving people demands and develops certain abilities. Trust. Timing. Inner listening. These are some of the qualities I'm acquiring in this role with her, gifts from the Crone.

* * * *

Perhaps because English is not her native language, we have a lot of silence between us. The TV is on all day, and that gives us something visual to comment on, but most of the time our thoughts influence each other without spoken contact.

Again and again I rise to move her through the same exact routines, and we say the same exact things, with minute variations, each time:

"You gotcha me?"
"I gotcha, Grandma!"
"I no zlitt-a?"
"Nope, I won't let you slip, I gotcha." And:

"Ok, all aready!"
"Ok, Grandma, here I come!"
"You take me and check me."
"Ok, I'm gonna lift you now, and check you . . . Ok, nice and clean now, Grandma, you can take the stick and go."
"Ok, I take-a the stick and go now. You gotcha me?"

The repetition becomes hypnotic as the shift wears on; our words to each other take on a chantlike quality, like the call and response of a gospel choir. Two birds in their separate treetops. Tapping something deep, in the saying of these simple words, deeper than the words themselves. But of course — anything you do over and over again with the same person like that becomes a ceremony. It has that ritual quality, alters awareness.

And so the unconscious comes alive in our speaking and touching again and again in the same way during these humble routines. The walk becomes a sacred walk; our spoken reassurances to each other become the lyrics of a sacred song.

2. Injustice

Of course, don't get me wrong, this work that I do also includes nightmarish stretches that drag on forever! Sometimes I arrive unprepared to be there fully — overworked, or weary in spirit; then the little mobile home or apartment becomes an airless dungeon. Stifled by the force of habit here, the old ladies' insatiable pickiness, their meaningless, repetitive ramblings, I become frantic with the need for change. I feel at times as if I'm worthless, becoming a nobody. This place is some kind of a vacuum, sucking the life out of me! Then all I can care about is the hour of my release, the moment when at last I'm restored to my own rhythms, nurturing spontaneity, curiousity, and self-esteem, seeking challenge! Then I despise this confinement, this unending, regimented monotony, wanting only to be on the other side of that picture window, in the fresh, clear air, having an adventure! Breathing, moving, free!

At times like this I look at these old ladies, hunched over in front of their color TV's, surrounded by crocheted bric-a-brac and vials of pills and portraits of the husbands they've outlived, and I rage and despair that this could have happened to them — this terrible isolation, this neglectedness, the atrophy of joy, their dependencies, their ongoing dread of almost everything out there, the obsession with details that obscures the wisdom of their years and barricades them from heart-to-heart communication. I know this cannot be the end they had in mind! How could this have happened? I feel anxious for my own future, then: this is a vision of the old age I DON'T want for myself! How can I protect myself from this scenario?

Periodically, these questions run through my mind, and over time.

my contact with these elders begins to give me an opposite way to claim the ripening of my womanhood. My distress at the tonelessness of their last years fuels my determination not to end up this way. To maintain my community, my interdependence, so that I can yield up my beloved privacy to the caring hands of my dearest friends when my turn comes. To cultivate my fearlessness and openmindedness and listening skills, my physical and emotional resilience, my passion. To allow change, to stretch and grow, to *engage* with the world, while I'm here!

Little by little, I'm coming to accept that it's not appropriate to judge these lives, or possible to rescue them. The power that is mine is to design and alter my own seniority. And so I continue to develop the negative of this snapshot: the old lady slumped over in front of the TV set.

3. That Lifegiving Current

What I *can* do for the ladies I work for is to love them as they are. To stop projecting some idealized Wise Woman on them and honor them simply for their longevity, for having survived whatever they have survived, and for the courage that it must take to be female and old. I can see them and honor them and be there for them just as they are.

Here is a memory from one of my first caregiving experiences: I was working for an old woman who was dying of emphysema. This is a slow and terrible way to die, and near the end there was a time when she was in great discomfort — feeling her body really beginning to give way, and still fighting it. Parts of her were dead already — the feet swollen and discolored, the hands too cold — and still her mind, clinging to the lie, refused to follow.

A young woman from Hospice came to counsel her, and did something that shook me. As I watched, dumbfounded, this young woman climbed into the bed, put her arms around the old lady, and just held her. Immediately the older woman quieted and took the comfort offered. Watching, I realized how truly professional that gesture was.

* * * *

What stopped me from being unselfconsciously present for that dying woman in the way that I could have been? For one thing,

homophobia — our learned hesitation about touching other women. Homophobia impaired my capacity to address in my work the needs of the spirit, as well as the obvious physical needs; it was a factor in my holding back my warmth from the old lady who lay gazing at Death, afraid and wanting help. It has been part of my coming out as a Lesbian to become sensitized to this specific habit of closedness in myself and others; likewise, it is part of my coming out as a thinking, feeling adult human to out-grow zombie-like interactions and claim my full presence. To disregard the artificial taboo against openness and return to the compassionate instinct I knew in my mother's arms. To reactivate that lifegiving current that flows from the heart and through the hands.

Because the homes of the elderly ladies I work for are closed worlds, womblike, insulated from any hint of competition for profit or prestige, they are mini-matriarchies, and fertile ground for this way of being. Though my observations of other healing professionals, my connections with the Lesbian community, with country folk and deaf folk, and with people from close-knit families have helped restore the simple human kindness in me, it has been here with the Crone that it has flowered and taken root.

Something else hindered my effectiveness as a spirit-toucher with elder women: my mother-awe, my fear of being authoritative with a client old enough to be my mother. I have a tendency, in these jobs, to assume a child-like demeanor, as if something in our relating triggers a deja-vu of my girlhood. Appropriate, yes, to defer to the Old One's wishes; and yet, it is part of caring for her in her wholeness to take charge at those times when her mind is feeble and she is at a loss. So I must become skillful at taking and relinquishing command, in fluid response to the actual needs of the moment.

Another barrier to knowing the Crone as she is? Weak guts. Squeamishness about close-up contact with illness and old age. I am intent on banishing any phobias about touching oldness; my commitment is to move beyond any fascination or disgust at the very real sights and smells and textures of her. To go about the inevitable clean-up chores, the necessary unveiling of her secrets, matter-of-factly. To focus on caring for, caring *about* what's there in front of me. In this way I affirm the old lady's dignity, and enlarge my own perception.

4. What She Whispered

I've traded shifts, and so I'm here overnight for the first time. She's had her Restoril, her teeth are soaking in their plastic cup, the lights have been turned out, all but the seashell night-light in the bathroom. There is no bed for me here — the CNA who normally works this shift says she usually stays awake reading in the bathroom, but I'm already feeling drowsy, and that idea seems harsh to me, like an overnight in a Greyhound bus terminal.

I find myself curling up on the floor by the old woman's bed, her lavender robe around me for a blanket. I can tell from her breathing that she's still awake, probably from the phantom pains in her left leg. I have placed myself so that she can see me from where she lies, propped up at a slant in the adjustable hospital bed. Lying here in the faint odor of lotion and old skin, I feel devoted, like a dog, and I realize once again that in so many ways this old woman is more to me than the client whose checks pay my rent. She is employer and family at once to me; there's an emotional bond, motherly-daughterly warmth weaving around and through the professional relationship of caregiver and shut-in.

So I lie here on the linty, moonstreaked rug, wrapped in my old lady's scent, relaxed yet ready in case she calls. (And she will, I know, from the log we all keep: she'll need the bedpan at least twice and may call for a pain pill or a massage if her muscles spasm up. She may soil the bed, or think it's morning and try to get up.)

I lie here cherishing my chance to rest, and ready to attend her when she calls. This is not like the wakefulness of a mother for her child, for their love is in the blood. It's economic necessity that brings me here, and in the having-to-be-here, something else has taken root. Lying here, I suddenly realize what this position reminds me of: all at once I recognize my membership in that timeless and forgotten sisterhood composed of all the family serving-maids, all the generations of women who've curled up by their lady's bed, intimate strangers to the one whose wealth feeds them.

As cut-off as I've felt here alone with the old woman, their invisible presence comforts me now. The aggravations and the emptiness and the strange growing tenderness I've felt here are my password into that ancient, worldwide tradition of women who've waited on the Crone: women locked in familiar patterns day after day, knowledgeable of her stubbornnesses and secret ways; women bond-

ed to her by this complex, symbiotic blend of loyalty and resentment; struggling with and at times against her; women becoming, perhaps in spite of themselves, her ally, her confidante, her adopted relative, even, and all the while maintaining their unequal status with her. Handmaidens sharing with their mistress in close quarters the endless tedium, the accusations and spats, the mutual dependency, the unspoken cruelties and the unexpected openings of the heart that're part of the day-to-day intimacies of household life.

As I lie here in stillness I let our names, the old lady's and mine, the sound of our two voices, this place and time, blur with the others. From the gathering multitude of unseen faces and unknown tongues emerges this whisper:

"I'm wakeful tonight, not restless, but lying here with moonlight for a blanket, the dim light on me like something I could listen to, a lullabye even, and I'm remembering feelings from when I was a girl, and how I saw her then. Mama, only ten years her elder, was already bent and slow and veiny, aged by the work and, of course, her homesickness . . . But she *— !! A woman in her prime then, whose prime kept on unfolding for years. And there's still something about her, it's her stature, I think. Thought I've seen her lose much — her looks, her health, her understanding, I've never in all my life, even now, seen her lose that elegance. It's that elegance I serve. In her. In myself.*

"The delicate rasp of her breathing embraces me, as does the moonlight. A sound as familiar as my own body's sounds. What would this room be like without her breath? (And, of course, where would I go, what would become of me then? Since I would have no say in this thing, I prefer not to dwell on it.) I embrace instead what surrounds me: the window-shaped moonlight splayed out on the tiles . . . her breathing . . . my straw pallet, long-softened by the scent and the shape of me, set here on the floor next to the fire, large bedstead with its embroidreed linen and open canopy of heavy lace where she lies snoring.

"Later tonight she'll call me, the voice in my dreams I wake up to, and I'll stagger, fighting back the slumber just long enough to haul the clay jar, lift her down to a squat, wipe her clean again, then hoist her back up and under the bedclothes with the right words, the answers her questions call for, the refrain between us as predictable

and as countless as the cries of the birds who come every morning to fight for breadcrumbs on the parapet. These familiar phrases that pass between us as reassuring and inevitable as the swooping shapes the swallows leave in the metallic air when I come to empty the night's slops and stand there breathing in the light, feeling the coming clarity, observing the freedom of flight."

5. Sorceress and Apprentice

There is a place and a time where all the elders are called Grandmother and the newcomers are called Daughter. And this is the exchange: the young ones care and the older ones teach. Teach what? Steadfastness. How to dwell in the void. How to in-listen. How to nurture a life-giver whose life is peaking. To begin a clairvoyance of their own life's peaking. Teach how? By touch. In the receiving of touch. By silences. By rambling, fussy, intolerable monologues. By inverting and making subtle their potency they manage to transmit it, woman-to-woman.

And the Daughter? She takes the Grandmother's weight against her body, is depended upon. She begins to tap what has been hidden in herself. She comes close to the odors from the Old One's openings and crevices; brushes decay from the dentures, changes once again the stained sheets, caresses dried-up limbs with a steaming cloth. And in her elder's aura, in this sheltered, set-apart place where progress happens in a different way, where upward growth has stopped, she receives her inheritance.

Gypsy Ray

Sherri Paris

Breathing

for Karen

"Asthma is the symptom of
those, usually women, who feel
at once smothered and threatened."
— Freud

I. Nights
you sit up suddenly
bleached gray by an indifferent slice
of the moon
you reach for your plastic inhaler
you reach
a hand, your long stretched throat
You breathe
and fall back
chest heaving like a meadow
grazed by bulldozers

I grip your hand
It is all over so soon.

Later your slow body turns, dreaming
you pull me to your side
So often in sleep you comfort me
somehow aware that I do not rest
do not breathe deeply, evenly
and yet
at least I breathe

II. You have asthma
My mother had it.
A friend once told me that to love a woman
is to risk being compared in a poem
to her mother
You have risked this for me
You have risked

Your home
half-across the continent
The love of your child
huddled in a sleeping bag on the the floor of my room
her face turned away from us
toward the wall.

You have risked your acceptable fiancé
who still calls to leave you
pleasant messages on my answering machine.
I listen.

III. Once, my mother held my ear
to her breast
I could hear her jagged, terrible breathing
I knew her wheeze as intimately
as I knew the curve of her cheek
The simplest act of life
inhale, exhale
was a struggle for her
My father leaned back easily
told jokes about her bad cooking
worshipped her; called her babe
and while he spoke
I watched her choke politely
cover her mouth with a hand

She, too awoke at night
She rose like you
to inhale a mist
the odor prednisone
to clear her lungs
by pumping her heart
speeding her tired body on

Sleepless, she raced in a parody of life
dusting mirror-like surfaces
scrubbing the dishes over and over
freezing foods in foil packets

and labeling them with precise detail
meatloaf and onions in tomato sauce
lasagne and cheese with mushroom bits
chicken soup and fourteen different vegetables, all named
all named. She named things in darkness
and woke us within moments of dawn
blasting her vacuum through the halls
in search of a streak of dust
or perhaps companionship.
Heavy-eyed, we shuffled to life
and she comforted us
with raisin-studded cereals
made of sugar and refined wheat
Later she drove us to school
dentists or lessons in modern dance
perhaps recalling that she herself
once had a destination

IV. I feel safe in the curve of your arm
facing the homely walls of my room
paintings I own by an undistinguished artist
one masterpiece by a child who loves me
labeled "princess feeding carrot to an alligator."

You lie beside me
damp and drowsy
after the extraordinary event
of two women in love
sleeping side-by-side.

I know you, the shape and depth of you
I can feel your heart in my own throat
You are home to me.

But still, you rise in the night to remind me
that although all is remembered
nothing is permanent

Bettiane Shoshone Sien

Marsha: 1962

Marsha has been around for years. We've always said:

"Hi."

"How you doing?"

"That's nice."

"Terry going out for Little League?"

"Good. Good. See you at the game."

Not much more. I thought I'd heard that she'd moved here from Chicago. It must've been quite a while ago. My boy and her son Terry have always been in school together.

1962 was the summer I moved out from Roge. The step before the divorce. I was bored, you see; that's what I thought the problem was. I was thirty-three years old and didn't know how to do anything. Oh yeah, well, I painted a little, just portraits of my boys. And gardens. I grew big gardens of flowers. And cooking, I was a great cook. That and reading. I did read a lot. We needed the money bad so I cleaned house for the lady down the street. Basically, I was just a housewife.

Roge gave me the separation without much fuss. Maybe he didn't take me seriously, because later he fought like the dickens.

The main photograph in the house that I shared with Roge was one from our wedding. I was twenty. The picture made me want to gag. My mother had had it blown up huge for our tenth wedding anniversary present. What could I say: "Mother, that picture makes me want to gag?" So there it hung, that dumb grin on my face staring at me twenty-four hours a day. I found myself talking to that nitwit during the months before the separation. Sammy, my little boy caught me once: "Mommy, why don't you like that pretty girl?"

That very picture is the one my mother pointed at in shocked silence, before the predictable gush of tears when I told her: "I'm leaving Roge." While my mother was pointing and being really dramatic, Roge was saying, "There, there, it is only a trial separation," and sending me the evil eye, like how can I hurt this poor old lady! I mean, Roge never even liked my mother!

My mother had a snit over Rodney, my own brother, letting me use his place while he was gone for the summer. I think she was mostly pissed that he knew before she did.

"And what about the boys?"

I felt like answering that they probably would see Roge more now

than they did when we lived together!

"Look," I told my mother, "I don't want to bad-mouth Roge, but that doesn't mean I want to live with him, either!"

Anyhow, maybe it was the scandal of Youngstown that summer, and I just didn't know it. Marsha seemed to take on a whole new dimension after I moved into Rodney's place and got it all decked out for me and the boys.

It was the Little League's Annual Kickoff Potluck. There I was with the boys. There was Marsha and she comes over and we start:

"Team should be great this year."

"Yeah, looks like."

"Nice weather for playing."

"Good dip you made," I tell her.

"No, really I don't cook. I hate it. Picked that up at Piggly Wiggly's," she says.

Blah, blah, blah . . . we go on to other routine conversations with other mothers. I've known all these other women since I was a kid. Nothing new to say. Feel like I've been sleeping for twenty years.

Nobody is saying anything to me about Roge and my separation. The way they are being silent about it is so loud I feel embarrassed. The thing is, I know they can't figure out why I would leave. Roge is an okay guy. He isn't exciting, but he doesn't cheat (well, really he does, but I don't know about it then), or beat up on me, which is a lot more than most of these wives can claim. And then there is the boys. Well, it must all seem unexplainable. Roge doesn't make any money, but nobody would fault a guy for that in Youngstown. I mean, he tries.

But then Marsha is back to talk to me, and this time she talks the whole time until it is ten o'clock and time to go, and I realize that I've never really noticed Marsha like I do tonight. Everything about her seems fascinating. She does all these glamorous things. Like, she is divorced, and really comes from Chicago. And she is a Real Estate agent. Real Estate seems so interesting. She talks my head off. I stand there and nod. She is pushing up her glasses and gesturing away with her hands as she talks. I watch her hands. Then Sammy is pulling on me. He says he is tired, and can't we go home now. I want to wring his little neck. I find myself blushing and staring into her eyes. My big boy Neal comes up, and says he is tired also, and can't we go. I am stuttering goodbyes and wondering what is wrong with me.

The boys are quiet on the way home. They had better not give me a hard time about going to bed, I think. I am not concentrating on driving. I am thinking about Marsha. About how well she talks, how sophisticated she is.

When the boys are in bed, and it is quiet, I drink one of Rodney's leftover beers. The coolness of the beer I like. Suddenly, I realize: My God! I am sitting around thinking about Marsha! I think: "I must just be lonely, I barely know her. But Marsha? What I've been thinking!"

I get into a big argument with myself:

"I just want to be her friend!"

"Get off of it, you were thinking about her in more than a friendly way!"

"Now, what does that mean?"

"You blushed when you realized that she realized that you were looking into her eyes!"

And then I think: "One beer and I get carried away! Marsha happens to be a well-heeled woman. Educated. She took an interest in *me.* Why shouldn't I have a new friend like her?"

I went to bed. I dreamt that I was painting a portrait of Marsha. She was nude — it was all on the up and up, though; she had her glasses on, and pushed them up on her nose the whole dream, while talking away about Real Estate. I was trying to paint her, but the way her hands moved distracted me. Then, the boys came home, and Roge came in and said: "Oh, hi Marsha" and "Honey, what is for dinner?" I woke up.

In the kitchen I am remembering the dream and wishing that in the dream she had reached out and pushed my hair back . . .

"Mom! Hey, Mom!" Neal shouts into my face. Oh yes, I remember, the boys need breakfast. Did I take out these eggs? I start to break them open into the frying pan —

"Mommy, you said French toast! You said we could have French toast! Not fried!" The six-year-old looks like he's going to cry as he yells at me.

I make them French toast and send them off to school. Two minutes later the door opens. It is Neal looking all sweet.

"Mommy," he says, "this week at Rodney's has been fun and everything, but you know, you've been kind of out of it. I was thinking maybe you feel a little down about Dad leaving us. Well, what

I want to tell you is that I would be willing to call him and tell him to come and get us."

I'm floored. I don't know whether to whack the kid or hug him. Finally, I get some words out.

"Neal," I say, "things are changing. It may not seem that way to you, but I'm doing fine. I don't know what is going to happen next, but I know I don't want to be with your Dad."

I look him in the eye, so he knows I mean business. "He is still your Dad, but Neal, I left him. *I* left *him.* I'm not going back."

Then we have a kind of embarrassed hug. I don't know what the kid is thinking. As Neal goes back out the door, I feel an incredible sense of relief. This boy is the first one who really knows. The marriage is over.

I start to think: What am I going to do now? Well, I suppose I could become a Realtor. I wondered what you had to do to be that.

My mother interrupts with her daily phone call, a conversation filled with guilt.

"How are the boys *sleeping?* How are you *sleeping?* I *suppose* you take good care of *Rodney's* garden!?"

I make the mistake of mentioning that maybe I should become a Real Estate agent.

"What?! Have you really gone crazy?" she says. "You? You hate Real Estate agents! Remember that one that practically sold Roge and your place out from under you right after Sammy was born? Kicking a family out like that! All these years you've lived in crummy apartment after apartment — who do you think makes a killing on those places? What are you talking about, anyhow? Roge is never going to let you work!"

"But Mom, I work!" I protest.

"All right, but Honey, housecleaning isn't really a job. Roge would have a fit, take his last little bit of pride away. You know he's done his best by you, can't help it if the plant lays him off. Shame on you — a Real Estate agent!"

I let my mother go. I guess she is right, I don't really like Real Estate agents. But Marsha I like, and I begin to wonder what she does all day. Next time I see Marsha I will not do all that silly blushing, I'll just express a professional interest. I'll say: "So, Marsha, tell me, what does a job like yours entail?"

I wonder where she is right now. I remember that the house over

on 19th and Sweeney has a sign in front of it for her company. I really need the exercise, so I'll stroll over slowly. Maybe she will be showing it, and we can just say hi.

I stroll past. Yep, there is the sign. I go slowly. The place is locked up. There is no car in front. What kind of car does she drive? I can't remember — does she have a car? Of course she has a car! A fancy Real Estate woman, she probably has a real nice car.

I stroll past again. No one there. Walk five blocks further, then stroll back again. The woman next door peeks her head out, says "Are you interested in the house?"

"Oh God, no," I tell her, "just curious." Then we recognize each other. We were both in band together in high school, so we chat.

I walk home. What was I thinking? That she sits at that one house all day? What would I have said, anyhow? "Oh, hi." How satisfying.

I bake cookies for the boys. Make a special dinner and watch a bake-along show while I cook. Roge calls just before I go to pick up the boys. I want to say: "Roge, if there ever was a chance of us getting back together, this phone call routine would wreck it for sure."

He always says, "Honey, if you are interested . . . " the hint being that he is available to come over for dinner if I want him to.

When I pick up the boys it hits me. Who picks up Terry, Marsha's boy? Maybe she does, and I've just never noticed her. Maybe she will be there tonight. Maybe I'll just go up to her and say, "Oh, hi, been thinking about you!" No, I won't say that. I could say, "Listen, I've got this great idea for the mothers of the Little League to raise money. I know you don't like to cook, so why don't you and your kids come over . . . "

But this is crazy. I don't have any idea how to raise money. If I did, I would do it for myself! Why am I thinking about this woman? I command myself to stop. I get the kids. Marsha is nowhere in sight. I blurt out to Neal: "Who picks up Terry?"

"Huh?" he says, "What are you talking about?"

"Terry," I demand. "Who picks him up after school?"

"Beats me, I don't know!" Neal gives me his boy-are-you-weird look. "Oh yeah, I think he rides his bike."

All night I am determined not to think of *her.* I pay attention to my kids. I watch "I Love Lucy" and "Lassie" and "My Three Sons" with them. I supervise Neal's homework. I tuck them into bed.

I don't think about Marsha the entire next day, except briefly when I flip through the phone book for the plumber, and happen to get the page with her agency on it. I jot down the number just in case.

That night is Neal's first game of the season. Marsha has attended every Little League game I've ever gone to. She has to be there. I smile as I drive to the game.

I pick up Sammy and take him to the game with me. I bring Neal his uniform. He changes and hangs out with his team. Sammy plays with the other little kids hanging around. Marsha is already here. I see her talking with Terry. I feel sick, Marsha is just another lady. She must be about forty years old. She has a seventeen-year-old besides Terry. She is chubby. I can hear my mother saying: "I think she isn't really even very pretty." Why do I care? I don't know where to sit, I hang onto my purse, then she sees me. She's all casual, but much friendlier than last week. I think: because we had such a good talk. God, was it just last week?

She says, "Here, I even saved a place for you. I have to admit I was looking forward to seeing you . . . " And she's off and talking. I'm sitting and watching and thinking of all the things I thought I would say if I saw her again, and I don't say any of them, and this is how we spend the whole game.

Then the game is over, and Roge is there. I realize Roge has been there the whole time, and now he is standing next to me just like a husband. I try to stand a little further away. He just moves in closer, totally unaware that I wish he would evaporate. And Neal is all upset because they have lost.

"Oh, you lost?" I ask.

Everyone is leaving. Marsha and I linger and linger. Roge lingers. I know Roge wants to talk to me. I want to talk to Marsha. I'm not sure why Marsha is lingering. It becomes a waiting contest. I make up my mind I am going to do it. Suddenly, Roge is taking me by the elbow, all husbandly, and Marsha is saying, "Well, this was really nice." Roge is waving goodbye. I'm fighting back tears.

Roge is saying, "Honey, let's take the boys out for a pizza. I told them we would, just like old times. Come on, they are waiting for you."

I turn sharply on him. "No, Roge! Not like old times!"

I fire across the parking lot, across the field after Marsha, catching up to her by her car.

"Where's Terry?" I gasp stupidly.

She turns around, surprised to see me. "Well, he rides his bike."

"Oh, that's right. I want to talk to you." I get it out, startling myself. "I mean, I want more, I want to ask you . . . to get together. I mean, if I called you, would you talk to me? Would you say yes if I asked you to dinner? Can I have your number? Can I give you mine, would you call me if I did? I don't know what I mean!"

My face is scarlet.

The whole thing comes out and lays there quietly between us. She is calm and says: "Here is my phone number." And hands me her Real Estate card with her home phone number scribbled in. I am breathing again.

She looks me right in the eye. "If you don't call me, I'm going to call you. What is your number?"

I have her number. I have magic. What am I going to say if she does call? I hope she calls me first. I put the number in my underwear drawer for safe keeping.

She doesn't call on Friday. Saturday she doesn't call, either. Sunday at five o'clock I force myself. She answers: "Oh yeah, I was going to call you." (Why didn't you, I want to scream!) And she blabs away. Finally, I ask: "When can we get together?"

"Well, when are you available?"

"Me? I'm available all the time, any time, I'm just a housewife."

We arrange to get together for drinks at my house — well Rodney's apartment — Wednesday night after the boys are asleep. Her boys are big enough to take care of themselves, she says.

Wednesday night. That will take forever, I think. I do my housekeeping job on Monday, be a great Mom to my boys, field calls from Roge and my mother. I get reports from Roge's buddy Jay at Lucky's, where he is a checkout clerk, that Roge has been out drinking at the bowling alley every night for the last two weeks, and aren't I being a little rough on the poor guy, all this while he is carrying out my groceries. I'm dreaming of Marsha and wishing I didn't know everyone in Youngstown. Or that they didn't know me.

Wednesday night comes, and I let the boys take the TV into their room if they promise me not to come out and not to yell for me, and really go to sleep. They promise.

I shower and try to figure out what to wear. I'm going crazy. What am I doing? I change my outfit twice. There is nothing in the house

to clean. I feel too sick to cook. She finally arrives, bringing in a pitcher of some mixed drink I've never heard of. I'm relieved. Would she have thought me uncouth if I had offered her one of Rodney's beers? Lemonade, as I'd planned?

We sit in the little living room, and she tells me everything else I don't know about Real Estate. All the good deals she has made this year. I nod, and ask her questions.

"My goodness, I never realized one could do so well in Real Estate in Youngstown," I comment.

"Oh yes," she replies, "with the University and all."

We are on the couch because it is the most comfortable piece of furniture in the room. She has her shoes off, and she asks if I mind if she puts her feet up, and I say no, and then she puts her feet in my lap. It all feels real cozy, and we keep talking like I've never talked before to anyone, except that she does most of the talking, and I mostly nod. Still, I feel how much more interesting she is than Roge. Somehow I get my feet up, and the pitcher of mixed drink is gone. We talk about her divorce, and I make her describe Chicago to me. She says maybe sometime she and I could take a drive there, just us girls. Suddenly, she stands up and says, "Well, this has been swell," and is gone.

I can't believe she is gone. The clock reads way past midnight. Have I been dreaming? I clean up. I feel a little stunned. I change into my pajamas. I get into bed. I get back out of bed, go to my drawer, and get out her number. I dial it fast before I lose my nerve. It rings a few times at her house. Oh my God, I think, she might not be back yet. I don't want to wake up her sons.

"Hello?"

What to say? "Uh, it's me," I get out.

"Oh." She doesn't sound too surprised.

"Why did you leave like that?" I ask.

"I don't know. I was tired."

"I didn't want you to go. I wasn't ready. We were having so much fun."

"Well, then let's get together again," she say. I wonder how she stays so casual.

We agree to go for pizza after the Little League game that week. Roge calls the very next day, as usual. He suggests we go to the game together. He says he is miserable.

I say, "Roge, I know you are not miserable, you're at the bowling alley every night."

"Only because I miss you so much, Honey," he says.

"Roge," I tell him, "I have other plans." Other plans for the game, I tell him. I want to say, other plans for my life, too!

So Roge says, real tough, that he is going to take the boys afterward.

"Good," I tell him. "Please keep them all night." He is staying with his mother.

"Fine, I will," he says. I wonder what the hell I'm doing.

The night of the game finally comes. Marsha sits on one side of me, Roge on the other. They exchange light chatter across me. I feel like screaming. Roge continually slaps my leg when Neal makes a good catch or gets a hit. Nudges me. I can't look at Marsha. Though she talks to me, she seems more interested in the game than she did last week. I look at her sideways when she is absorbed in the game. She is taller than me. Her skin I wish I could touch, it has no olive in it like my own. Fine blond hairs on her tanned arm. She turns all of a sudden, dark eyes contrasting with the blond hair.

"Did you see that?" she says, all excited; then she is quiet, and we just look at each other until I have to turn away. I feel caught.

"Yeah," Roge is saying, "that Melvin thinks he is the god-damn coach!" I glare at Roge: if I were a witch, you would be a fly right now!

Then the game is over. Neal is in a tizz again over losing. Roge is telling him how well he played. Neal is telling his Dad to Fuck Off. I say goodbye to them all. Roge says, maybe later. I say no. Marsha takes my elbow and then says grandly: "We're going to dine together!"

"Well, talk some sense into her head," Roge says.

We all laugh. I kiss the boys. Sammy looks at me like he can't believe I'm doing this to him.

Marsha orders the pizza, says: "I hope you like olives." Gives me a glass of wine. I nibble on a crust. She gobbles down her food. Her hand seems to brush my wrist, my elbow, my shoulder. Is this my imagination? Her foot brushes my ankle ever so slightly. I shift away. Is she doing this because she is just a friendly person, or what? I argue with myself the whole meal. I find myself talking to her, and she listens to me. This has been me talking for the last hour, and she is not bored.

We come back to Rodney's house, and sit on the sofa. She doesn't ask, can she put her feet up, just does it. My feet are up, too; she holds them onto the couch, her arm curled around them tenderly. We talk, we can't stop.

I am so tired, my eyes keep shutting. I want us to fall asleep like this. I am afraid she will see that I am tired and want to go. She says she should go, but lingers and lingers. Neither of us moves from the couch. She says: "I'm going to go." She still doesn't move. We are not talking. An enormous silence lingers in the room with us. She sits up and looks at me. She says: " . . . " and like a fire alarm, the phone suddenly rings. We both jump! I grab it.

"What?" I shout into the phone.

It is Roge. "The kids wanted to say goodnight to you," he tells me.

"Goddammit," I yell, "they should be in bed! It is too late for this!" I hang up. I feel sorry for Roge.

She is standing right behind me. It is hard to turn around. She is quite close. I can feel her breath on my back. I turn to her, but don't look at her face. Somehow, we get from this awkward movement into a hug, an embrace which I get stuck in, because then I will have to look at her, so I stay in it and stay in it. We are really holding onto each other.

A little panic goes off somewhere, but it's not like I am doing anything, I argue with myself, and then we are both kissing. We are stuck here hugging and kissing. I know we will have to look at each other, and what will we say then, and what will we do? No, I think, stay in this embrace, here it is safe. And then she stands back from me, and I see she does not have her glasses on, and she looks me right in the eye, and says: "You tell me — do you want me to stay, or do you want me to go?"

She doesn't let my eyes go, no words come out of my shy mouth, all I can think of is to reach out. I take her hand, and we go into Rodney's bedroom and lay down on the bed in the dark.

As I lay there, I think: I don't know what to do, what did I think I wanted? I think of her, how she looks in the light, and I think: I don't want this. But we aren't doing anything, anyway, so I think: Good, maybe we'll just go to sleep. And we lay there a long time, and she isn't talking, and I realize her breathing sounds like she is asleep. And I feel awfully disappointed, so I squirm a little, to try to wake her up, but she sounds even more asleep. I reach over and

touch her. I mean to touch her shoulder, but my hand falls on her breast, instead, and then I'm too embarrassed to move it off quickly, because I don't want to wake her up, so I leave my hand there for a moment, and then I realize how good her breast feels, and how if I just move my hand lightly, just the fingertips, she probably won't wake up anyhow, and that feels good, but she still seems asleep, so I think it probably won't matter if I follow the curve of her breast down onto her tummy. It's a nice tummy, all soft . . . probably she has stretch marks, I know mine make my tummy soft . . . and her tummy feels so full and smooth, I realize that I'm not really sleepy, and that if I lay on my side, I might be able to watch her face as she sleeps, because I've never seen a woman sleeping, and then when I roll onto my side, I look into her face and see that her eyes are wide open.

Elise Ficarra

Gossip

Tante Lucette
and her good friend Mumu
have shared the same bed
every night
for six years ever since
Oncle Rolo
hit his head and died

The family talks.
Tante Madeleine
looks like she's eaten
something rotten
"C'est pas normal, ca!"
she whispers: it isn't
natural.

Maman
tells me
she isn't worried
if they're lovers
she's worried
if they're
not.

Judith Barrington

Sagebrush After Rain

On a small headland we turned, looked to the west:
the tip of the lake slid into the V of the hills
like spread thighs, and a bold swatch of orange
stained the pale evening sky, shimmered upside-down
in the black mirror. We scrambled up a dead tree
to flat seats among antlers, soft in our hands.

Perched on this weathered bleacher, smooth as driftwood
we watched the colours deepen and did not speak —
nothing to say under arcs of red and lavender,
the sky one huge exotic fruit splayed open,
but I knew I must speak or be lost so I turned and asked:
"What's the name of that stone — like black polished marble?"

You could not help me remember that word I'd lost
as I sat in the tree wrapped in the flaming night
watching the light show play across heaven's belly
and thinking how once I would have presumed its glow
was a sign that this moment was ours and ours alone —
a celestial son et lumiere birthed by our passion.

I just hadn't known how much there was to know —
not just the easy part, brilliant from the start,
but the dull grey knowing, the sharp and jagged edges
scraping my skin as I walked right into them
over and over, seeming to grind my skin
as I tried to smooth you out with my own bruised flesh.

What we have now, I thought, is much too clear
to bathe in the sudden brilliance of this sunset —
a show more suited to prologue than to play.
The decision to love, not just to want to love,
is still too new for the glare of rosy spotlights,
still too quiet for this formidable fanfare.

For two days after we left the lake, my mind
kept flashing on that ornate wooden loveseat.
Now and then I saw the lake's glint at dusk

and the word, elusive, slipped away again
till suddenly, in the musk of sagebrush after rain:
"Obsidian" I cried, and you smiled, "that's right."

Margaret Nash

What I miss most is
the moment before the
kiss .
when I close my eyes and
see your lips
a tongue's-length away
when I feel your breath
softly curling around
my teeth
when I can already taste
the salt on your skin
and still you come
closer
What I miss most is
the moment before

Paula Steinhart

Ann Creely

Letter to a Friend

turning the typewriter
ideas forming
outside a red sunset
over the city stucco
inside my words sift down
gleaming like embers
touching the flammable paper
medium between us
friends in distant cities

I have this crazy thought
of paving that desert road
from here to Denver
poems end to end
the quick sun burning along the curve of earth
and all the words
flying out to you
birds from the fire

Zana

Andreae Downs

Letter

Andreae and I lived in the same dorm at college. I had finally chosen to identify myself as a lesbian, and I talked incessantly about this decision and women's politics in general. We became lovers the night before she left for winter break and over the holiday exchanged long, passionate, and politically fervent letters. We weren't lovers long, but the correspondence has been going on for years. When I got this letter, I was teaching two sections of a writing course focusing on nuclear issues; Andreae was (and is) studying at Göttingen, West Germany. My students and I had been following events at Chernobyl, but this letter made the extent and significance of the disaster clear in a new way for all of us.

— Sarah-Hope Parmeter

Göttingen 9 May 1986
West Germany

My darling Sarah,

Just wanted to tell you that despite recent events, I'm still living, even on the continent of terrorist attacks and counter-attacks, where nuclear power plants blow up and endanger the lives of people in Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, Germany and even California. (Actually, I could write you from Pennsylvania and the above would still hold.) I have been in Berlin the last week, lovely weather, though lots of dust, which I'm told is reason to stay home. But more on that later. Berlin is a fantastic city, full of contrasts of the wildest sorts . . . from the very rich tourists on the Kurfurstendamm to the very poor Turkish immigrants who live in the newly gentrified areas, or rather, those areas which have not yet been gentrified, deprived of their neighborhoods, their small industry, their cheap rents, and, in the process, of their primitive heating and run-down buildings.

It was a beautiful week in Berlin. Since Wednesday Berlin the island and Berlin 'the capital of the GDR' have had sun, 80 degree weather, balmy evenings. The trees have burst into bloom, if not tender green leaf, the daffodils have given way to late tulips, blooming cherries and dogwood. Along the canal in Kreuzberg (into which Rosa Luxembourg's body was thrown some 60 years ago) people with green hair and leather bikinis sun themselves or paint slogans or flowers on the wall (the one erected 25 years ago between East and West Berlin). (I wonder what the East German soldiers watching from the other side must think.) Even the police who since LaBelle guard the Amerika Haus 24 hours a day seem to enjoy the sun.

The latest catastrophe, to which, like all such events, Berlin holds a special and intense relationship, does not make itself too visible yet. One has to start visiting people before one notices that Berlin has been enjoying especially high radiation since two weeks ago Wednesday. No one really knows how to react, least of all the politicians. The Health Minister claims that it's harmless, while the Greens accuse him of trying to ignore a genuinely dangerous situation. ('One can't stick one's head in the sand anymore,' commented one man in Lower Saxony, 'Even the sand is radioactive.') On my way back west, the West German police stopped the train to check it with a geiger counter. This did not make me feel more secure.

Especially the grass sets the geiger counters ticking. It is hard to imagine that this year's spring grass, so invitingly green and untrodden, should be dangerous. My cousin has just bought 40 litres of condensed milk from before Chernobyl, since radioactivity is supposed to concentrate on its way from grass to udder. She doesn't know how long it will last — either the milk or the radioactivity.

In southern Germany, authorities have closed down playgrounds, as the sandboxes are 'glowing'. No one has measured the sandboxes in Berlin yet. In New Kölln the Turkish children play in the streets, in the grass, in the sandboxes. They have no other places to go.

Panic is the general feeling. I refuse to, though the more I think about Chernobyl the angrier I become. I am trying to work out practical measures I can take, if just to keep from freezing. I talked with my cousin of the condensed milk. Her mother is not sowing this year. Vegetables which are watered by the rain are especially bad. How long, I ask my cousin, before the rainwater joins the drinking water? The radioactive Polish milk which was stopped at the West German border will not be thrown out (where would one throw it?), but is heated up and sealed in air-tight containers. There it will stay fresh until it reaches a safe level of radioactivity. I wonder how long they will keep it.

I am troubled at the moment most by the herbs and lettuce I planted at Easter. The shoots are just coming up, light green and two-leaved. I have been watering them through the dry days with rain water, which I collect in a barrel. Should I dump out the barrel? Should I tear out my lettuce and thyme and plant marigolds? I don't know how great a difference it will make, if I eat radioactive parsley this week or next month. Perhaps the Iodine-whatever will have

disintegrated and the lettuce which is watered with tap water next month will be less dangerous than the lettuce grown outside this month. Despite my paper-reading, my questions of physics students, I don't know.

The East Germans are planting wheat and lettuce in the fields. I imagine they will eat it too. Is it right to try to protect myself when everyone else is damned to exposure? Is it even possible?

I am afraid that the measures being taken — milk being heated, spinach being plowed under — are merely public panic-stilling measures. The Berliners who walk under an umbrella to keep the slightest raindrops off strike me as slightly pathetic (where will they put the umbrella after their walk? What will they bathe in?). I suspect the Greens have the right idea when they continue to go outside but call for the shut-down of all nuclear power plants. In Göttingen last week, as I was sunning in Berlin, there were two demonstrations calling for the halt of atomic power plants. Tonight I heard about another, mostly because it came to violence.

I have a hard time writing down what I know about this disaster, much less imagining practical measures I might take. I don't want to admit the seriousness of it, even when I'm living in it. Since it can't be sensed, radiation is easy to ignore. On the other hand, I am angry that so many, not just people but animals, plants, perhaps children I could have had, are affected so deeply by the stupidity of a few. My choices will have to be not whether I eat lettuce or not, but do I work publicly or privately to prevent the next disaster? Where are the organizations, or do I have to start one? Where does this fit on my priority list? How do I work it into my daily schedule?

I wanted to start by writing to you. If you want to share this, be my guest. I didn't think this would be so hard to do, but I find I am fighting with apathy and tears. Enough, I have at least three other reports or letters to write (not on Chernobyl), and the weekend is short. I embrace you and wish you strength. I do not wish you were here, but I wish I could talk with you.

Lots of Love,
Andreae

16, June 1986

M'dear —

Since the 9th of last month, things have calmed down here considerably. The Iodine-whatever has supposedly disintegrated. We're left with the long-term stuff, which I'm told was just as bad in the sixties as it is now. Small comfort, eh? We all drink fresh milk again, especially since older condensed milk can't be bought anymore. Besides, it's in the water. My neighbor, the atomic physicist, mows his lawn again regularly, and his baby plays in the grass. He measured my garden for me and said my herbs were safe to eat. I still tore out the lettuce and planted new. Maybe it is better so? Meat and milk are still being checked on the eastern border, but it doesn't make the headlines anymore. In the news still are the huge anti-nuke demonstrations, but mostly because they are increasingly violent. The Conservative government is discussing how to defuse the demos. I have a certain amount of sympathy for the hopelessness expressed in a violent demo, though I do not think the violence is particularly effective. I am sure that it must be possible to shut down the reactors without it.

Sarah-Hope Parmeter

Correspondence

I.

I try to find a way of saying,
a way to draw you back into this home
so you live here, pulling on
my robe in the mornings, scooping up
the cat, your fingers scratching
the soft, boneless spot
at the back of his ear, your hands
certain, as if this peace
were natural for us.

You have always found a way
of reaching me, my isolation
within these pages
broken by your face: the fourth-floor
flat in London, every weekend
of my wet-bladed summer
in Salinas, the house of my family
and this home I try
to place you in.

II.

Your even, regular letters
lie buried here, their thin lips
pressed shut like yours.
From Scotland you let slip
a poem, awkward and terrifying; for months
I hounded you, wanted to know
What happened? What did they do?
without a reply.

More than a year later
you tell me carefully, *I was*
frightened, not raped, but by then
I cannot forget the words you used,
the knife, fork, napkin — even the napkin's

stitched edges cutting — as if you
were a table, crowded, those men's legs
sliding under you, the pace
of it wrenching me forward every time against
solid blocks of air.

III.

As I name the objects
of this house, its textures, I try
to draw you home. I want to forget
that night now, want to believe
that it could never happen, that words
are what you need from me. The word
for *wood* or *window* enough, Andreae, the gift
I can't offer you given
these other names.

April Sinclair

A Woman's Touch

She turned over on her back and lay still for a minute in her cotton nightgown. Then she said to me, "Put your head on my chest." I was lying next to her, and I immediately felt like a little girl again.

Making the journey to her chest was like climbing a mountain for some reason. There in the dark, I squished my head between her good-sized breasts, thankful for the padding.

I wrapped my arms around her soft, plump middle, and I began to tremble. It was like this 30-year-old white woman with straight shoulder length auburn hair and rosy cheeks had suddenly been transformed into my quite black, handsome grandmother who had passed away over ten years ago. I was a child of ten again, and my favorite place in the world was grandma's lap. Her sagging breasts were my pillow, and her cotton skirts over soft flesh were my cushion. Grandma was the only person in the world who had physically nurtured me beyond babyhood.

I was also very close to my maternal grandmother, but I couldn't get into her lap, at least not at ten. And Mama, despite our great talking friendship, never hugged or held me or anything like that. And whenever she saw me in Grandma's lap she made comments like, "It's a disgrace for a big girl like you to be up in somebody's lap" or "It's a wonder you don't break your poor grandmother." Actually I was a skinny child, and Grandma was a stout, strong woman with some meat on her bones.

As for my father, it was such a taboo for him to touch me in any affectionate way that it was hard for me to imagine being really close to a man even now at 25. Oh, I'd had a few involvements, and many dates, but somehow I'd never experienced the deep intimacy that I believed was possible.

"Baby it's going to be all right, everything going to be all right," Lisa cooed. I felt a sense of security that was foreign to me. If Mama could see me now, wrapped up in a white woman's arms with my head on her chest, being talked to like a baby, I didn't know what she would think or do. But I didn't care, I was getting what I needed and I had to trust Lisa, my new friend. I could have head tripped but instead I chose to enjoy it.

We wrapped our legs around each other and hugged through our nightgowns. I massaged Lisa's lower back under her pushed up gown. It was bare; she wasn't wearing any panties. I didn't explore

further. I was wearing panties, not because I liked sleeping in them, but because I'd thought it might be too sexy not to.

I was so glad that I'd accepted Lisa's offer to nurture me.

"You sound tired, really drained. Let's face it Roberta, you've been putting a lot out and you haven't been getting too much in."

"O.K., don't get graphic," I teased.

"You need some nurturing. Roberta, I will hold you," Lisa said loudly.

"Tonight, just like that?" I laughed nervously, surprised that I could possibly get what I wanted and also a little afraid of the realization.

"Look," Lisa broke in, "it's O.K."

"O.K." I couldn't believe it, it was *O.K. It could happen. "O.K.," I said again.*

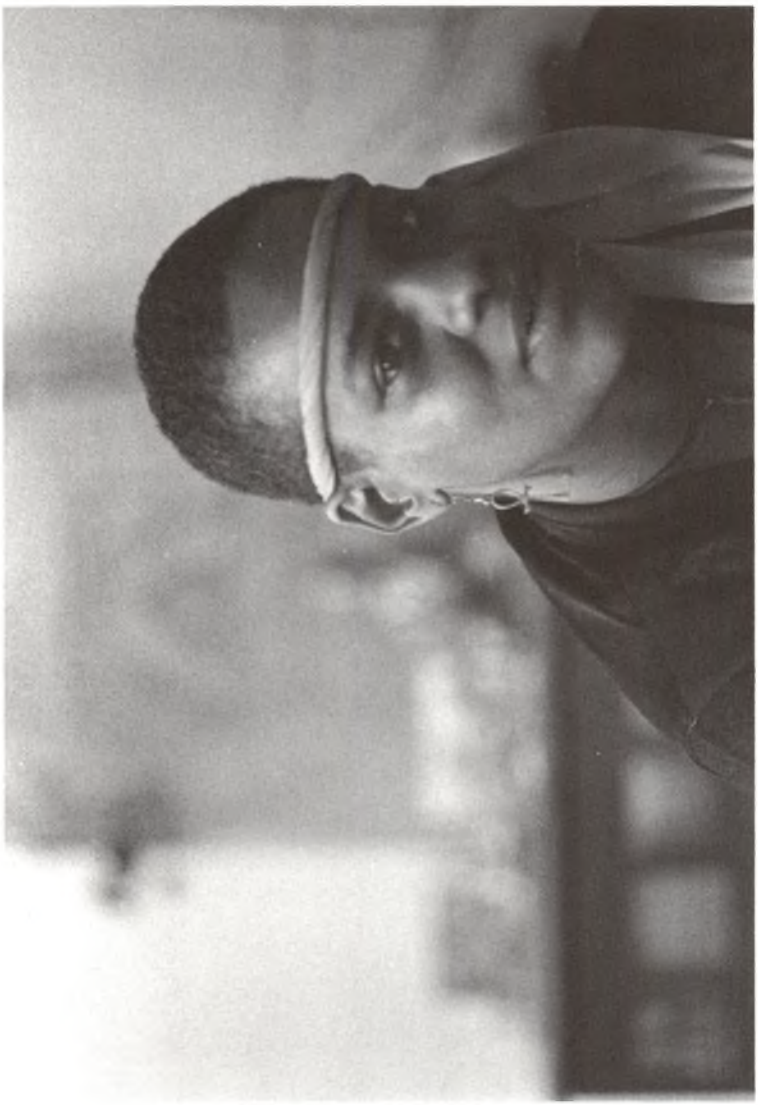
"Alright, now what do you need, about 40 minutes to get over here?" Lisa asked obviously allowing me extra time.

"No, I'll be there in 20 minutes," I mumbled remembering that it was only a 15 minute drive that I would be making in 10.

"Good," she laughed. "I'll be waiting for you. And Roberta, I love you."

"Thanks," I said.

I kissed Lisa's neck, and she kissed me on the cheek. We hugged, holding each other close against the firm mattress. When our bare legs touched, I felt wonderful and warm. I kissed Lisa's forehead gently and settled into a peaceful, blissful sleep with her arm around me.



Jane Ellen Rubin

Alice

We met the first day of high school. We really didn't belong to the same crowds, but our paths frequently crossed. I coveted her boyfriend. She envied my circle of pseudo-bohemians. She wore high heels and stockings. I wore black turtleneck sweaters. We went to each other's sweet sixteen parties, and to different colleges. One Spring, we both fell hopelessly in love with hopelessly impossible men. We sat out under a tree in her backyard and consoled each other that while our own relationship was doomed, the other's would work out. Neither of them did. During graduate school, we were 1000 miles apart. She flew down to visit me at Christmas, and I flew up at Easter for her wedding. She had a baby, and named her with my middle name. After her divorce, she and her infant daughter spent many nights in my apartment, when hers had no heat.

Over the years, we have variously lived around the corner from each other, and hundreds of miles apart. We have never been out of touch. When we go out to dinner, we usually split the check, but the underlying rule has been — whoever has the money pays. We have never kept track, or tried to keep it even, but I think that one of us must owe the other a dollar.

There's a green coffee urn that moves between our houses with every party. I don't know which of us owns it. Her daughter does her homework on my old desk, and my computer sits on her old kitchen table. We really don't enjoy too many of the same things. She likes to camp and hike and ski. I like to watch television and play bridge. She goes to bed much earlier than I do, so I can't call her at 10 or 11 at night to talk. But, I could call her at 3 o'clock in the morning to cry, and it would be okay.

We both do like Chinese food and movies and driving in the country. We're both now forty. We're friends.

Susan Reddington

Excerpt from *False Alarms,* a novel

Amelia, certain that she was being watched, opened her eyes. Dharma's nose was a half an inch from her own. Amelia ducked under the covers as Dharma's tongue darted out to lick her. "Dharma, no," she said in a muffled voice from beneath the blankets. "I'm not ready to wake up yet. Go away."

Linda and Amelia had left right after work for their Christmas holiday at the Cape. They arrived after midnight, cold and exhausted. Dharma, Linda's golden retriever, had slept most of the way in the back seat nestled between the suitcases. She was awake and ready to go. Thinking that Amelia wanted to play hide and seek, Dharma jumped up on to the bed. Her front feet pawed at the blankets and her long nose tried to burrow under the covers. Her tail waved madly in the air. Amelia started to giggle. Helpless, she let go of the blankets and Dharma's pink tongue broke through and started to lick Amelia's face from forehead to chin.

"Dharma. No. Down." Linda stood in the doorway still wearing her night clothes. Dharma obediently jumped off of the bed and circled Linda excitedly. The dog's hot breath looked like smoke in the cold room. Linda picked up Amelia's robe and slippers from the chair and laid them on the bed. "Here, if you can bear the cold for a moment, I have breakfast almost ready — hot tea, eggs, and bacon. We can sit in front of the fire."

"Great." Amelia's stomach shouted out for food. "Just give me a minute."

"Come on Dharma," Linda turned to go, "I'll let you out." Dharma followed Linda into the hall.

Amelia propped herself up on a pillow and looked around the room. Last night it had been dark and she had been too tired to inspect it properly. The room was furnished simply. Twin beds, oak dresser, night stand and chair. The wooden floors were covered with hand braided rag rugs and still life watercolors of flowers and fruits decorated the oak panelled walls. She could hear the heavy roar of the winter surf outside the shuttered windows. Amelia shivered. She took a deep breath and threw off the covers. She quickly put on her heavy terry robe and warm fleece-lined moccasins. She ran down the cold dark hallway.

Amelia stopped in wonder as she entered the living room. It was beautiful. In front of her through the large glass windows she could

see ocean waves glinting green and white in the bright December sun. On her left were French doors which opened onto an enclosed sun porch which revealed more sun, sky, and sea. On her right was a massive stone fireplace. In front of the fireplace, facing each other, were two over-stuffed blue chintz-covered love seats. A small table covered with a canary yellow tablecloth had been placed close to the fire. It was set with blue china plates and cups. Two white wicker chairs stood at each end of the table.

Amelia smelled bacon frying. Her mouth watered. She saw Linda in the kitchen busy with breakfast. "Can I help?"

Linda waved her spatula. "No, I'm almost done; just waiting for the toast. Sit down. I'll serve you in a minute."

Amelia sat at the table and looked out of the window. She could see a narrow ribbon of beach and then dunes which backed up to the house. The thick grass on the dunes blew in the blustery December wind like waves on the ocean. Dunes, beach, ocean, sky — she was struck by its harsh beauty, the space and solitude.

Linda arrived with the breakfast tray. They ate in silence. Both sought comfort in the food and the warmth of the fire. Finally satisfied, Amelia removed her moccasins and curled her toes near the fire. She sipped her tea and then asked Linda about the winter beach. "Is it like this all of the time?"

"No." We're lucky that it's sunny today. It can get gray and lonely. Storms are unpredictable. Ships have been lost, sailors killed. The waves have flooded the beach up to the dunes. When I was a child the roar of the wind at night and the hollow boom of the waves frightened me." Linda suddenly looked smaller, more childlike, and vulnerable.

Amelia realized how much she had relied on Linda's strength over the past year since Peter, her husband, had walked out. Amelia felt a chill go up her spine, "It frightened me last night."

"Don't worry," Linda sounded her dependable, substantial self again, "If it storms we can close the shutters and light a fire. We'll be safe. The water never comes up this far."

"What is it like in the summer?" Amelia wanted to wipe away that last crumb of fear.

Linda stared out at the shore as if to summon summer. Her green eyes got a faraway look. Her voice softened. "Ah. There is no harshness. We have high warm gusty breezes from the west. I still remember the smells of the sand, ocean, and sun. The hot sand has

a sharp stony smell. My grandmother used to call them the dune days of summer. That's because the dunes reflect the heat. I'd lie in them and watch the sandpipers through the tall grasses. The grasses are straw green in the summer with plumes waving on the top. They turn orange in the sunset. The upper beach runs back to the dunes. In the summer it's not covered by the tides."

Linda sounded almost poetic. Her voice soothed Amelia. She wished that it was summer right now. Her divorce would be a thing of the past and by summer she hoped that she would know what to do with her life. "Tell me more. How far can you walk out at low tide?"

"As a child I thought that you could walk out until you met the sky and sea at the horizon. I thought that you could look down to China from there." Linda brushed back her long auburn hair and took a sip of her tea.

"Did you ever try?" Amelia remembered trying to dig to China once in her backyard. Her mother yelled at her to stop and she did.

"No." Linda looked regretful. "My mother would only let me walk out until our red and yellow striped beach umbrella turned into a black dot. She was worried about high tide coming in and cutting me off from the shore."

Amelia guessed that all mothers were alike. Again her thoughts turned to summer. "I'll bet that you were a little beach berry — brown all over." She imagined a small wiry Linda running along the beach like a pony with her hair flying out behind her.

Linda laughed. "Not with my skin. At the beginning of every summer, I would get sunburned. Then I'd peel and eventually freckle. I envy you your complexion."

"Me?" Amelia looked surprised. "I always wanted to look like Snow White. At age thirty-one, I think that I've finally learned to accept my boring brown hair, brown skin, and brown eyes."

"Hazel eyes," Linda gently corrected her. "Well, I wanted brown skin. I always played an Indian in cowboy games with my classmates. When I stayed in the sun too long my grandma used to warn me that one day my freckles would melt together and I would be permanently brown all over. I secretly hoped so."

"Your grandma sounds jolly." Amelia didn't remember her grandmother. When she was a child she would stare at the oval framed picture of a young elegant woman over the fireplace and imagine

what she was like. The woman's mouth was soft and sad. She didn't look at all jolly. Amelia envied Linda her grandmother. "Did she also stay here during the summer?"

"Yes, it was her house. She came here when she was a child too. That's how come she knew so much. She was jolly — and gentle too. She was fair, like me, but hated freckles. All summer she wore long-sleeeved cotton blouses and old fashioned long skirts and a large straw hat to shade her face. I never saw her in a bathing suit. She never swam, but she took me on long walks. She pointed out the song sparrows nesting in the dunes. We'd lay on our stomachs and watch the locusts. I'd have to help her up and she'd trip over her skirts and then laugh. We flew kites together. When they crashed we would bury them in the sand and then she'd make me another. She was good with her hands. We had a regular kite burial ground by the end of the summer. I picked goldenrod for her and she'd say, 'how beautiful,' and hide her sneezes. My mother would put them in a vase over the fireplace until my dad would sniff and cough loudly and make her throw them out. Every fourth of July grandma would have a man from town come out and set off fireworks. They would shoot up over the ocean and fall like colored diamonds out of the sky — red, blue, white."

Amelia caught her breath. She said in a soft voice. "It must have been beautiful."

"It was scary too," said Linda, "but grandma always warned me before the firecrackers went off so that I could hold my ears. On other nights we would just sit on the porch. The darkness and the ebb tide would quiet the wind. The sky would be clear and she would point out the constellations — Orion, Big Bear, Little Dipper. She'd watch as I tried to catch the fireflies. When I caught one, though, she'd always make me set it free. She said that fireflies were a blessing like the stars. They light the way for all of the creatures who move about in the night."

"I like your grandmother." Amelia now better understood Linda's strength and certainty. Maybe if she had had a grandmother whose example she could have followed, she wouldn't have rushed into marriage so young. She wouldn't have had to rely on Peter to explain life and sustain her. Linda had always been single and Amelia knew that she relished her aloneness. "Why haven't you mentioned her until now?"

Linda frowned. "She's been dead a long time."

"When did she die?" Amelia thought that she might cry. She had grown suddenly close to this woman whom she'd never met. She imagined her making cookies and hot cocoa with marshmallows and hugging Linda for no reason, just because she loved her. Amelia's mother was too busy to bake cookies or make cocoa and she moved too fast to hug. Looking back, Amelia was certain that if either of her grandmothers had been alive, they would have had more time and moved a bit slower.

Linda looked out at the ocean as if to gather up her emotions. "The summer that I was six, she was sick. She would lie on the chaise lounge wrapped in blankets. I wore my bathing suit. She would watch me play in the sand. I would make sand pies for her and bring them up from the beach to her in my pail. She would take my shovel and pretend to eat them. She'd smack her lips and say 'mmmm' and then she'd slip me a dime to buy ice cream. I didn't know until I was older that even if my pies had been real, she couldn't have eaten them." Linda lowered her head, her voice barely audible. "She had stomach cancer. One day at the end of the summer she stopped my playing and called to me from the porch. I ran expectantly to her thinking she'd give me a dime for ice cream. But instead she sat me down next to her." Linda looked up at Amelia and brushed away the tears forming at the edge of her eyes. "Remember when you were upset after Peter left and I told you that it was just a false alarm and that you would get through it and be OK?"

Amelia nodded, "And I did get through it." Then she thought of the divorce hearing in the spring. "Well, almost, but now at least my head is above water. You were right."

"Well, it was my grandmother who explained to me about false alarms. She told me that she was going to die and that meant that the person I knew as my grandma wouldn't be with me any more. But it wouldn't be because she didn't love me. Her body was sick and it was time for her to leave it. She said that I would feel sad, and that feeling sad for a while was OK. She told me that my sadness would pass. I would wake up one morning and feel like playing again. That was OK too. I shouldn't feel guilty. I should play. She would be watching and it would make her happy." Linda tried to smile, but Amelia sensed that she was close to tears again. "She told me that there would be other times in my life that I'd feel sad — life was

alarming, but they'd all be false alarms. I'd get through it. She reminded me of the nights we had sat on the porch watching the fireflies. She said that her spirit would be there, like the firefly, to light my way. I remember that she looked up at the sun for a moment, then she gave me a big hug. She felt all bone. There was hardly any flesh left. I was trying not to cry. She then gave me a dime and I ran off for ice cream." Tears fell onto Linda's napkin. "She died that fall after we went back to our home in Connecticut. My mother said the night she died that I woke up screaming her name." Linda put her hands over her eyes. Her body shook as she sobbed.

Amelia got up from the table and led Linda over to the couch. "Sit down. It's all right. Cry it out. You've kept it inside too long." Amelia placed her hand on Linda's back as if to draw out the hurt. After a few minutes, Linda stopped crying. Amelia poured her another cup of tea. "Here, drink this. It will calm you."

Linda drank the hot tea. Her breathing slowly returned to normal. She said in a low voice, "I just realized that she is the only person who has ever loved me. Why did she have to die so soon? I needed that love growing up." Linda put down her tea cup and looked fiercely at Amelia. "Damn, damn her for dying." Then she looked contrite. "Sorry, I didn't mean that."

Amelia tried to comfort Linda. "Don't be sorry. I would curse you if you up and died on me. Your parents would too. We love you. It's normal to feel anger when someone you love dies."

Linda frowned and said bitterly, "Not my parents. Their love is all mixed up. When dad was sober, he showed his love. Mom, she loved me, but given a choice would support father over me, even when he drank. My parents have always placed conditions on their love which I've always refused to accept. Right now, according to their plan for my life, I should be married to a lawyer or doctor, living in the suburbs, with two children, a dog and a station wagon." Dharma heard the word "dog" and came over and rested her head on Linda's knee. She wagged her tail. Linda patted her on the head. "Sometimes I think that only Dharma and my grandmother have loved me unconditionally."

Amelia remembered the solace she felt looking at her own grandmother's picture over the fireplace. "Do you have a photo of your grandmother?"

Linda thought for a moment, "Yes, there is an old photo album

in a trunk in the attic."

Amelia put her hand on Linda's shoulder, "Why don't you pick a photo of her and just look at it for a while and be with her."

"I'd like that," Linda started to get up. "But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll clean up and rest for a while in front of the fire. I'm still tired from the drive up last night. Take your time. Later I can always get dressed and play ball with Dharma." At the word "ball", Dharma's ears perked up and she ran across the room to retrieve her ball. She came back to Amelia and dropped the ball on Amelia's lap. She wagged her tail hopefully. Amelia smiled, "I think that I'll reverse the order: I'll dress, play ball with Dharma, clean up, then rest."

Linda patted Dharma on the head, "I guess that even Dharma's love has conditions." She hugged Amelia, "Thank you for listening."

Amelia had just put a log on the fire when she heard Linda in the hallway. She was thinking of her grandmother that she had never known. She now felt closer to that elegant young woman in the photo. Perhaps she was watching over her. She hoped so. Dharma, worn out from playing looked up from her place in front of the fire. Linda appeared in the living room with a large cardboard box in her arms. On top of the box was a photo album. "Look what I found. Christmas decorations. I know before we left we agreed to celebrate Christmas simply — no tree or special food, but I thought that we could make an exception and have a tree. It would look nice over by the window. We could string popcorn and cranberry." Linda opened the box. "We even have a star." Linda held up a crystal star. The light from the window shone through it and reflected rainbows on the wall.

Linda's excitement was contagious. Amelia was thinking about food again. "What the hell, let's have a turkey too. I'm sure they have them at the grocery store that we passed driving here. But what will we do about a tree?"

"My grandmother always had a live tree. After Christmas we'd plant it outside and for days we'd stand at the window and watch the birds eat the popcorn off it. She'd tell me their names. That's why there are so many fir trees around the house. Linda walked to the window and looked out not saying anything. She then turned away. "There's a nursery in town. We can drive over there this afternoon."

"If we leave it in its pot, maybe next year we could decorate it again. Amelia suddenly felt shy, "That's if we are here again next year."

"If we want to be, we will," Linda walked over and sat next to Amelia on the couch and took the photo album and placed it on her lap. "Do you want to see pictures of me growing up? I was rather an ugly duckling — all arms and legs."

"Of course, but I know you weren't ugly." Amelia loved old pictures. They helped her put people in perspective and make them more real. She was eager to hear more stories about Linda growing up.

"By the time we get to my senior prom, we will probably have both fallen asleep." Linda opened the album and pointed "There I was at two weeks old. That's my grandma holding me. I was a beautiful baby, wasn't I?" Linda asked half joking, half wanting affirmation.

Amelia saw a large strong-looking woman squinting in the bright sun, very carefully holding a small infant. She was looking down at the child with a fiercely protective, yet gentle look. "Yes, and your grandmother thought so too."

Linda was silent for a minute, and then turned the page of the album. She smiled. "And here I am at the beach . . . "

Brenda Bankhead

Dust

"It was the power and splendor of the thing that held me," Marie Richards said to me, her face transformed.

I could look past that ecstatic face to the roses and gardenias in her back yard, to the rows of vegetables neatly green and tended beyond them but I did not. This old woman's face, dark and bright, held me, held my eyes watching the muscles play across her brown and scarred skin.

"I could not move until it touched the ground," she said. "I could not move. It was very strange. It was like I was in a vacuum, too. The hairs on my arms and legs and head stood on end! I felt electrified like . . . like I could just reach out and touch God! Like I could just reach out and touch that tornado if I wanted to, just reach out and fly! if I wanted to. Just take off and soar above ground. But then it did touch the ground and there was an explosion of dust and I ran."

Marie's eyes seemed to refocus from far away. She looked at me.

"You been to Oklahoma, lately?"

I shook my head.

"I haven't been back myself for years and years," she said. "Too painful. And too hot."

She turned her head away from me toward the door open off the porch where we were sitting. The scars on her cheek were crescent-shaped and raised. They seemed to glisten in the sun.

"Now I live in Los Angeles. City of Angels and City of Fools. But at least the weather is good." Her head was still turned away from me toward the door. Now she called out.

"Sister! You need any help in there?"

"Not as long as you don't bother me." A southern voice drifted out to us.

Marie Richards snorted. I watched her and tried to imagine her as a young girl and could not. But I knew that this woman had once, as a girl in Oklahoma, been picked up by a tornado and lived to tell it. It had carried her for several miles then deposited her in a roadside ditch. Rescuers had found her bruised and unconscious. It was a story that my sisters and I had heard so often as children that it had become a fairy tale to us. It was a story that I, with a mother just dead, had come to hear, needed to hear again.

"You going back to the university this fall?," she asked me.

"I think so."

"Well, don't think too hard about it. Finish it. Get your education before you get anything else, you hear me?"

I nodded.

"You're still the quiet one, aren't you? Well, there's nothing wrong with that."

"It's the quiet ones you have to look out for."

We both turned to face Sister, a spare, light-skinned woman in a brown dress. I knew she had another name but I had never heard it spoken.

"It's the quiet ones with the really wild imaginations!," she laughed as she set the trays before us. "You must dream a lot?"

"I don't remember most of my dreams," I said.

"Oh, you should try!" Marie frowned. "Dreams are very important, especially for young women like you."

I bit into the warm bread and its odor seemed to form a sphere around us.

"Did you dream about the tornado before it came?," I asked.

Marie choked, swallowed and bellowed a laugh that shook her body.

"Caught me!," she said, "I don't remember."

"Tell me about the tornado, then," I said. "What do you remember the most?"

"That black wall of clouds extending that whirling funnel to the ground." She did not hesitate. "I actually stopped and gaped. And I had grown up in tornado country, I had seen the ruins of houses and the crops destroyed. But I wasn't afraid, I wasn't afraid, at least in the beginning. I felt exhilarated by it! It was a revelation. There were forces on this earth beyond my wildest dreams and I felt expanded by that knowledge. It was only when that dark liquid seemed to jump suddenly toward me that I knew I was in danger, knew that I was a human being and this thing could kill me, so I ran. I ran to the Johnson's house and broke in and hid in the bathroom, clung to the toilet. I had heard this was the safest place to be, see? With all the pipes and heavy fixtures. It seemed like I was in there for hours, clinging to that toilet and hearing that tornado from what seemed like far away. It sounded like a train whistle except it was sort of muffled. It was a lonely sound."

Sister and I held our breaths.

"And then suddenly I was in the middle of that sound and it hurt

my ears and then the roof and windows seemed to explode and the air was violent with glass and wood!"

"It's a miracle you weren't sheared alive!," Sister exclaimed.

"That tornado lifted me up, I was not even able to scream, it lifted me up and for an instant I saw the whirling center of it. I saw objects but to this day I cannot remember what they were, they are a blur in my memory. Then the next thing I knew I was in the hospital bed, bruised black and blue but alive. But more important I was a witness. A witness to the forces of nature."

Marie turned to me suddenly.

"I know what you're thinking," she smiled. "Go on, ask me."

"All that glass and wood flying around, was that how you got the scars on your face?"

"No," Marie said, exchanging glances with Sister. "That was something else."

She fingered the raised keloids on her skin.

"That was something entirely different, although I always let you children think that's what it was, but you're a woman now and I can tell you. That tornado prepared me for what was to come."

"It was an omen," Sister said.

"It was much more than that Sister, much more. Not a day has gone by that I have not thought of that tornado. It has sustained me." She smiled slowly to herself. "Although it caused me a bit of trouble in the beginning, especially with my brothers."

"You were a bit full of yourself, Marie."

Another raucous laugh.

"Maybe. Maybe. But I was a child and I was full of a childish pride, and I had been given a hero's welcome back home."

"Or a saint's."

"Anyway, Jim and Booker were mostly just jealous. And they should of been. Cause it was me who had been tested, not them, but me — a girl."

This time Sister joined in the laughter.

"That just about killed them. The last thing they could stand was a girl being uppity."

"And having something to be uppity about. They never got over it. Never!"

"You act as if you're scared or something!," she mimicked. "It wasn't God that touched you, girl, but a stupid windstorm!" Marie

unfolded her face, "but it was a Godly thing for me, see? And I just couldn't take any ribbing about it. Even many, many years later. My brothers knew that so when they wanted to get me going they'd start in about my tornado. One of the worst fights I ever had with my older brother, Jim, was about that tornado."

Sister stood up. The sun was beginning to set, throwing a red glow over all of us, the china dishes, the white flowers by the side of the porch.

"You warm enough, Marie? Want a blanket?"

"I'm fine, Sister. I'm fine."

"That was a bad year."

Marie nodded.

"That year, that year . . . that day, wasn't it, Sister?"

"No, it was more than a day. It was a long time."

"See," Marie said to me, "We'd had some trouble with the white boys around that time."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"Mayhem." Sister said and stared at her plate.

"See, there'd been talk about colored folks trying to vote and Papa was one of the ones talking."

"Papa used to drive this wagon in and around town collecting odds and ends, junk and things like that."

"Mostly junk," Marie said.

"No, no, you're wrong there," Sister said. "That was a lean year but we never went hungry now, did we?"

"That's cause we lived on a farm. Well, not really but close enough."

Sister clicked her tongue and moved to a rocking chair beside Marie.

"Well, I don't remember being without shoes or clothes either."

Marie was silent for a moment.

"Well, anyway, Papa was one of the ones doing the talking and it got too hard for him to drive back and forth to town because the white people had singled him out. They took to throwing stones at his wagon, breaking the rims of his wheels. So Papa had to quit doing that and take to doing odd jobs for colored folks and the white folks that would have him. And it was hard on him. He had that Cherokee blood and he was proud. It was hard on him, so he was hard on Mama and they were hard on us children. It was a bad time for us. So one day in the yard I remember Jim coming up to me

asking me to iron one of his shirts for him. He was real particular with his looks and I guess he was going out that night. But I was tired because I had to look after my brothers and sisters and help Mama around the house, besides doing my regular chores with Papa. So I told Jim no and I told him why and I told him to go iron his own shirt. He got mad and said I thought I was too much, thought I couldn't be touched because of that stupid windstorm years ago. Then he gave me a hard whack on the behind. And I just lit into him. I took a flying leap and landed right on him. Knocked him down! We started pounding at each other with our fists and feet and legs, butting heads, anything to try to kill each other, right there in the middle of the yard. Animals squawking and squealing, running out of our way, wings flapping. The other children were all around us too, some yelling at us to stop, others egging us on. I don't know how long this went on. I wasn't aware of time anymore, just the taste of dirt and blood in my mouth and the urge to tear Jim's hair out of his head! We were half-naked trying to rip each other apart! Then I heard Mama screaming. And in my mind's eye I saw Papa come out with his mouth still half-full of food and his long legs spread wide. Papa came out and picked me up, my whole body, and threw me to the side. Papa was a big man. Jim got up and acted like he was going to jump me this time and Papa decked him. Slammed him right in the jaw. And Mama was still screaming."

Sister began to rock in her chair now, her eyes fixed, strange and intense, on the storyteller's face.

"I can still hear her screaming to this day," Marie continued softer than before. Then she stopped and reached for her coffee cup. She began to sip it, looking out over the cup's rim at the sun setting in the smog of the city. Nothing broke the silence except for Sister's rocking chair grinding on the floorboards of the porch. The air around us had changed. I felt its coolness as I breathed it in and waited for Marie to continue. I knew she was not finished although I could not know the end to this story. When she began to speak again her voice had a huskiness that had not been there before.

"But I was still as mad as anything," she said. "So I jumped up and ran down the dirt road behind our house, kicking up dust all the way down to this patch of trees I liked to call my own. You should have seen me. Covered from head to toe with that old Oklahoma dust . . ."

"Oklahoma dirt's the worst in the world. Won't come out." Sister whispered, still rocking. "Just never comes out."

". . . my hair sticking all every which way, the edges all nappy and sweaty, in those days we used to wear them thick black lace-up boots . . ." Marie paused. Sister stopped rocking and became still.

"So, I stood there a long time, kicking up dust with them old boots, my head bent low . . . until I heard the flap of wings."

Sister took a sudden breath.

"And I watched this bird escape from the patch of trees I was in, and fly across that country road. It was then that I looked up . . ."

"Too late, too late!" Sister exhaled.

". . . then that I saw this mass of movement down that road . . ."

Sister made a convulsive movement and grabbed her sister's hand. In the same moment, Marie locked my eyes with her own and placed her other hand, birdlike and urgent, on my thigh.

"It was then that I saw the boys approaching," she said.

Judith Barrington

Graffiti

Warm rain light in my face and
dogs running circles on moleskin sand
around small, skimming birds.

I think of children and lovers
writing their secrets in gnarled bark,
furrowed sand, grey stone of a city bridge —

I know that urge to tell the world
and make it smile:
I've left my share of messages.

Warm rain light in my face
as I stumble on three jagged swastikas,
gouged deep above the tideline,

wordless symbols whose meaning
oozes from angry cuts:
my boots stamp and scrub in vain.

People dressed like joggers
innocently pound the beach;
an old hooded woman squats on a log,

and I think of my lover, back by the fire,
the words of this message
encoded in her genes.

Warm rain light in my face
as I wonder who would and why
and *did I lock the door before I left?*

Sarah-Hope Parmeter

Home

The calm
metal of my voice will not reach
you: it does not matter. You will
continue to hear me, I will always
be beside you.
— Salvadore Allende,
the day of his assassination
11 September, 1973

I.

In the film, airplanes cut
across the top of the palace;
I think it must be brown,
but there is no
color. I think of the Zocalo:

Mexico City, a brown square
I stood in more than ten years
ago, colored the way I imagine
this palace, the sharp point
of a cathedral shadow slicing
me in two from behind.
The sky then was windy, large-pored
like the grey sky in this colorless
film, but empty of planes.

These planes swallow
buildings from the top
down. Somewhere in there, Allende
is speaking, his mouth slapped
shut by bricks, the harsh
cries of guns, crumpled
skeletons of radio towers.
Chile rides his tongue
like a lover; his lips
name her features.

II.

You know his words, the ones
that come to you each September.
Every time we sit, with each drink
at the hot start of that month
you recite them so they become rocks
clogging the mouths of your listeners.

I am watching
home: the sky, buildings,
arms you talk about, that place
you left ten years ago and show me
now in slick books
over weekend coffee.

I read the Spanish for you, my lips
carefully following the sounds
of words as I list altitudes,
population statistics, local
color, unsure of what I say.

This is the only time I speak
your language.

At night while I tell you the names
of mountains you will lie
flattened, trying to imagine
I am someone out of your past,
one of your lovers from the radio
station, the smith who saved scrap
metal to mould horses for you, your mother,
your mother's voice saying anything.

Irene Reti

Love Beyond the Convalescent Hospital

I. *The Nest*

You came to me
nauseous and shaken
from a previous lover.
You doubted your morality.
You doubted everything.
You asked me to be your witch,
your healer.
You said I understood everything.

I came to you
timid and scared
of my own passion.
Your careful hands
finally aroused fire.
Now it is you who fear
what you helped inspire.

We built a nest
though we never lived together.
I was your moral badge,
your band aid, your salvation.
You my strong and reliable
protection.

II. *The Savior*

Out of banal Los Angeles
out of a family
where tears and hugs were absent,
out of an urban vacuum
I came north to this
lush wet seacoast,
bartering compulsive compassion
for simple kindness, for *kin.*

I think myself a savior.

All my lovers have told me I am
one of few who understands.
I have watched them weep,
loved them for their torment,
romanticized their tears.
They have worshipped my open ears
my soft smiles, healing hands
on knotted brows.

I need to be needed.
I have believed this is
all I have to offer.
My first college roommate
the first woman I ever loved
kept cyanide in her closet.
I thought I could save her.
All my lovers
have been lonely, artistic
self-critical and brilliant,
all my lovers
especially you.

I talked incessantly of letting go but
never let go of my need
to nurture you.
You on the couch
weak head in my lap, weeping
so many nights.
This we mistook for intimacy.

I kept applying salve
long after your wounds were healed.
No matter how far you ran
no matter what the intervals between visits
you could never escape.

This is a poem about co-alcoholism without alcohol
addiction without drugs.
You were afraid of this,

writing, a bare two months
before you left me,
"I love you so damn much;
the peril of addiction is so close."
You are allergic to dependence.
I can't blame you
for throwing a bomb at the nest.

"You love me too much."
"You are always looking at me,"
you said, and I never
understood.
I looked at you
the way nurses
search the faces of dying patients.
But this is not Emergecare
or the convalescent hospital.

I am no longer
the tender, scared young woman
you fell in love with.
You are no longer
shell-shocked and desperate.
I cannot understand everything,
make it all better.
I am no tribal healer
no totemic figure
only an ordinary woman.

III. *Suspension*

This is a poem
about two women
who were afraid of each other's strength
who held each other
back.

This is a poem

for two fine women
who forgave each other
and still could not go on,
who loved
enough to leave well enough alone.
Two sober women
who would pay any price for freedom
even sacred pleasure.

You say you are
kicking me out of your life.
Yours is the hostility of cornered cats,
the cold desperation of one
heaving drink into dust.
Listen,
everything we do or say is suspect.
Do not trust me too much
and watch yourself.
Our entire friendship
is suspended silt.

And if the particles ever settle, sorting
passion from poison
addiction from affection
drug from desire
will I then look at you
through an unfiltered glass—
you with all your ferocious judgments
sharp edges, pointy teeth
arrogant glaze, gray underneath
and like you anyway?
Will you let me scratch your head again
without thinking of me as a tamer?

You cry
and I love you
by not comforting you
by what I do not say.

Stone butch
you once called yourself
and I will not love you
by eroding stone
will not be lichen or deadly moss
deviously colonizing cracks.
No I give you back
your pride, your shield
your reserve
all of it.
I will only come honestly,
invited.

I send no more messages in the mail.
I will not wait on your step
hoping for a tidbit.
I will not be waiting at all.

When the dust settles
what will remain?
What happens to love
when the needing stops?
What would two hermits
say over cups of tea,
how would they touch?

IV. *Hands*

What happens to love
when we admit
we can not save each other?
What does it mean to love women then?

Listen,
I am not a kind woman
though I may be kin and
these are not healing hands.
These are hands

burned by fire
fierce and sober hands,
mortal flesh, no more.
Cautious hands
afraid of grabbing,
promising rescue.
These are not healing hands
these are hands that would strangle executives
were they not so well-trained
hands that would smash cash registers
and undam rivers
were they not tamed.

Listen
I am a lesbian
and I am tired
of walking the battlefield
bandaging women's wounds
while bullets keep falling.
I cannot make them stop
by stroking your forehead.

I came north
to this wooded coast
this community of women.
I know there's a war on but
I came here to live

I was not looking
for a convalescent hospital or
a nest,
a place to rest.
I came to work not
to nurse
to die.

Listen
I am a woman.
Compulsive nurturance

is a woman's drug,
the illusion of power
addictive and deadly.
All they allow us—
a fix
that doesn't fix anything.

I am a woman
looking
for love
beyond the convalescent hospital.
I do not know how to walk or talk.
I do not trust myself and
I don't know how to stop the war.
I love you
by going away
by what I do not say.

Adrienne Rich

Yom Kippur 1984

I drew solitude over me, on the long shore.
— Robinson Jeffers, "Prelude"

For whoever does not afflict his soul throughout this day,
shall be cut off from his people.
— Leviticus 23:29

What is a Jew in solitude?
What would it mean not to feel lonely or afraid
far from your own or those you have called your own?
What is a woman in solitude: a queer woman or man?
In the empty street, on the empty beach, in the desert
what in this world as it is can solitude mean?

The glassy, concrete octagon suspended from the cliffs
with its electric gate, its perfected privacy
is not what I mean
the pick-up with a gun parked at a turn-out in Utah or the
Golan Heights
is not what I mean
the poet's tower facing the western ocean, acres of forest
planted to the east, the woman reading in the cabin,
her attack dog suddenly risen
is not what I mean

Three thousand miles from what I once called home
I open a book searching for some lines I remember
about flowers, something to bind me to this coast as lilacs
in the dooryard once
bound me back there — yes, lupines on a burnt mountainside,
something that bloomed and faded and was written down
in the poet's book, forever:
Opening the poet's book
I find the hatred in the poet's heart: . . . *the hateful-eyed*
and human-bodied are all about me: you that love multitude
may have them

Robinson Jeffers, multitude

is the blur flung by distinct forms against these landward
valleys
and the farms that run down to the sea; the lupines
are multitude, and the torched poppies, the grey Pacific
unrolling its scrolls of surf,
and the separate persons, stooped
over sewing machines in denim dust, bent under the shattering
skies of harvest
who sleep by shifts in never-empty beds have their various dreams
Hands that pick, pack, steam, stitch, strip, stuff, shell, scrape,
scour, belong to a brain like no other
Must I argue the love of multitude in the blur or defend
a solitude of barbed-wire and searchlights, the survivalist's
final solution, have I a choice?

To wander far from your own or those you have called your own
to hear strangeness calling you from far away
and walk in that direction, long and far, not calculating risk
to go to meet the Stranger without fear or weapon, protection
nowhere on your mind?
(the Jew on the icy, rutted road on Christmas Eve prays
for another Jew)
the woman in the ungainly twisting shadows of the street: *Make
those be a woman's footsteps;* (as if she could
believe in a woman's god)

Find someone like yourself. Find others.
Agree you will never desert each other.
Understand that any rift among you
means power to those who want to do you in.
Close to the center, safety; toward the edges, danger.
But I have a nightmare to tell: I am trying to say
that to be with my people is my dearest wish
but that I also love strangers
that I crave separateness
I hear myself stuttering these words
to my worst friends and my best enemies
who watch for my mistakes in grammar
my mistakes in love.

This is the day of atonement; but do my people forgive me?
If a cloud knew loneliness and fear, I would be that cloud.

To love the Stranger, to love solitude—am I writing merely
about privilege
about drifting from the center, drawn to edges,
a privilege we can't afford in the world that is,
who are hated as being of our kind: faggot kicked into the icy
river, woman dragged from her stalled car
into the mist-struck mountains, used and hacked to death
young scholar shot at the university gates on a summer evening
walk, his prizes and studies nothing, nothing
availing his Blackness
Jew deluded that she's escaped the tribe, the laws of her exclusion,
the men too holy to touch her hand; Jew who has turned
her back
on *midrash* and *mitzvah* (yet wears the *chai* on a thong between her
breasts) hiking alone
found with a swastika carved in her back at the foot of the cliffs
(did she die as queer or as Jew?)

Solitude, O taboo, endangered species
on the mist-struck spur of the mountain, I want a gun to defend you
In the desert, on the deserted street, I want what I can't have:
your elder sister, Justice, her great peasant's hand outspread
her eye, half-hooded, sharp and true
And I ask myself, have I thrown courage away?
have I traded off something I don't name?
To what extreme will I go to meet the extremist?
What will I do to defend my want or anyone's want to search
for her spirit-vision
far from the protection of those she has called her own?
Will I find O solitude
your plumes, your breasts, your hair
against my face, as in childhood, your voice like the mockingbird's
singing *Yes, you are loved, why else this song?*
in the old places, anywhere?

What is a Jew in solitude?

Adrienne Rich

What is a woman in solitude, a queer woman or man?
When the winter flood-tides wrench the tower from the rock,
crumble the prophet's headland, and the farms
slide into the sea
when leviathan is endangered and Jonah becomes revenger
when center and edges are crushed together, the extremities
crushed together on which the world was founded
our souls crash together, Arab and Jew, howling our
loneliness within the tribes
when the refugee child and the exile's child re-open the
blasted and forbidden city
when we who refuse to be women and men as women
and men are
chartered, tell our stories of solitude spent in multitude
in that world as it may be, newborn and haunted, what will
solitude mean?

Rebirthing

Contributors' Notes

Koré Hayes Archer, descendant of Yankee bookworms, migrated to the West Coast in her 33rd year, and currently makes her home in Santa Cruz. She is a mother, a sign language interpreter, a maskmaker and a thesbian; a lover of roses and wheat, of caves, libraries, and mountain nights. Her manuscript, "Lavender & Silver" owes a part of its existence to the encouraging words of two sister-writers: Patrice Wynne and Shoshone Sien; and it is dedicated to the memory of her mother's mother, Mary—a singer, healer and gentlewoman.

Judith Barrington has lived for ten years in Portland, Oregon, where she moved from England. She is author of *Trying to be an Honest Woman*, poetry, and is a freelance writer on women's issues, published in regional and national newspapers and magazines. She taught Women's Studies at Portland State University for four years, and in 1984 she founded "The Flight of the Mind," an annual summer writing workshop for women, held in Oregon's Cascade Mountains.

Abby Bee writes and plays with her cameras/guitars whenever possible. But she's been so busy editing this anthology, publishing her first collection of poetry—*Nauseous in Paradise* and chanting *thank goodness for dry farming,* that she is going tomatoes.

Julia A. Boyd is a Womanist (to borrow a term from Alice Walker), a title and class that Black Womyn acquire at birth, as opposed to feminist—a title that womyn choose to adopt only after they've become acquainted with the reality of struggle and oppression related to daily survival. She is the second oldest of nine children, the first daughter of two loving and supportive parents and the proud mother of Michael B. Jr. I proudly dedicate this story to Momi for her strength, wisdom and gospel.

Kathy Carnahan, a.k.a. Gladys Migilihan, lives and works in Santa Cruz. She has been doing lithography for the last two years, finding inspiration from her life, her politics, and her dreams.

Sherry Carrière grew up in a small island town in Québec known for its short pine trees. In order to survive each day with the five boys I shared my daycare with, I wrote poems and placed them in the trees with the hope that the birds would carry them to other girls. I've since lived in Calgary, Toronto, Brussels, Oxford and L.A., and I like to think the birds are still carrying my poems. My home is presently in Santa Cruz, CA, where I continue to nurture and be healed by the landscapes and the people inside and around me.

Ann Creely is a hope/despair monger in the process of becoming unsplit. I am a dabbler in present-moment consciousness, a cynic in recovery.

Ellen Farmer writes something akin to poetry, edits and produces university publications, and facilitates women's writing groups in Santa Cruz. At this moment, she is ripe with her second child and, as always, stuck in a mutually despicable relationship with her manx cat.

Elise Ficarra was born in 1958, raised on hot asphalt, peach trees and mosquito bites. She has been living since 1979 in the land of lesbians, ocean fog and fleas.

Sara Halprin, formerly Barbara Halpern Martineau, formerly Barbara Joan Saks, called Bonnie as a child, named Barbara Joan Sukofsky at birth, daughter of Florence, daughter of Rebecca, daughter of Sarah, mother of Noah, is an independent video consultant, producer, film maker, and poet, living in Santa Cruz.

Mary Hower lives in Albany, California and teaches Composition and Creative Writing. She is a former poetry editor of the *California Quarterly*.

Martha Keaner: I am a Forty-Nine year old trying to decide what to be when I . . . Writing is a pain and a joy. I wash a lot of windows between paragraphs.

Joan McMillan: After graduating from the University of San Diego in 1981, I moved to Santa Cruz and began writing poetry seriously. My poems have appeared in *Poetry Northwest Magazine,* the *Porter Gulch Review,* and are forthcoming in *Touching Fire.* I live in Felton, California with my husband Dan and my two children, Christopher and Stephanie.

Maia: I'm forty-one, a single-mother, working as editor, attendant and masseuse to support my writing, artistic and ceremonial lives. I've been writing since early childhood; grew up in suburbs of L.A. when it was orange groves and open fields where my muses—blackbirds, stones, stars, weeds, seeds, the moon . . . taught me how to see. Wrote my first poem at twelve and thought of myself primarily as a poet until 1985 when I began a col-

lection of short stories; now I am deeply committed to exploring all of fiction's possibilities.

Helen Mayer: I am a 29 year old feminist writer. I have lived in California most of my life and am basically lazy by nature. I write to know myself and my world better.

Maude Meehan: Writer, reader, editor, activist, wife, mother, grandmother, lover, student and teacher—depending on date, time, weather, locale, and situation.

Margaret Nash: Orignally from a small town in Ohio, I'm now living in downtown Washington, D.C. I like being in the middle of a city, but sure do miss bicycling on quiet country roads. My published works include several poems and articles, a video script, a one-act play and a book on infant care. I've just completed my first full-length play and am looking forward to seeing it produced.

Sherri Paris: I have lived mostly in Santa Cruz for the past 12 years. Currently, I teach writing at UCSC and the University of San Francisco (USF) and facilitate a group for rape survivors through the Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women and W.A.R.

Sarah-Hope Parmeter is the kind of woman who likes to read the bios first when she buys a new book, but hates to write her own.

Susan Reddington: What was it? . . . Damn! I forgot to get a job. When I'm not obsessively revising my novel, I do polarity therapy, crystal healing, take long walks on the beach with my dogs and just sit in the back yard and feel blessed.

Ingrid Reti teaches creative writing workshops in San Luis Obispo, CA and is a literature instructor at California Polytechnic State University Extended Education. Her first volume of poetry *Ephemera* was published by Tabula Rasa Press in October 1986. Her poetry has appeared in *New Directions for Women, Broomstick* and *Women's Press.*

Irene Reti: I am a first generation american red-headed Jewish dyke. I founded HerBooks out of a passionate desire to strengthen lesbian and feminist culture. HerBooks runs through my blood and dreams, spreads across my bedroom floor and flies out of my closet into the world.

Adrienne Rich is a lesbian-feminist writer and teacher. She lives in Santa Cruz and is an active member of New Jewish Agenda.

Jane Ellen Rubin: I live in Brooklyn Heights, New York, and am a lower upper-level bureaucrat. I write both prose and poetry and several of my poems will appear in *Voices at Serendipity,* an anthology of poetry by women to be published in January, 1987.

Shoshone is a writer mama and friend. She lives in Santa Cruz with her daughter Isis and her loyal beloved typewriter. She fantasizes about winning the lottery and publishing a book of short stories called *Green Tomato Pie.* She is grateful for the lifeline created of trust and love extended by Koré and Julie B.

April Sinclair writes because she needs people to feel with and because she can't sing. Ms. Sinclair publishes her short stories in literary magazines. She has completed a film script and is writing her first novel. She is a Chicago native and now resides in Oakland, California.

Although **Roz Spafford** teaches writing at UC Santa Cruz, and is a columnist for the Santa Cruz *Sun,* she could just as easily have stayed in Kingman, Arizona, where she grew up, gone to work for the Liquinox plant and married a cowboy. Her sister, who will never own a beige couch, always writes.

Marcia Cohn Spiegel is co-editor (with Deborah Kresmsdorf) of *Women Speak to God: The Poems and Prayers of Jewish Women* (San Diego Woman's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1986-7). Founder of the Creative Jewish Women's Alliance, a founder and past president of Women Writers West, she conducts workshops exploring family history and relationships to reconcile ourselves with our past so that we can feel better about ourselves in the present.

Zana: i'm 39, disabled, a jew and a lesbian separatist. i live on land with other lesbians in arizona. dreaming and creating community based on womon-values is the most exciting thing i've ever done in my life!

Having Tea With My Grandmother

THE WORLD BETWEEN WOMEN
an anthology

edited by
abby bee
irene reti
sarah-hope parmeter

. . . Over the years we have variously lived around the corner from each other, and hundreds of miles apart. We have never been out of touch. When we go out to dinner, we usually split the check, but the underlying rule has been — whoever has the money pays. We have never kept track, or tried to keep it even, but I think that one of us must owe the other a dollar.

There's a green coffee urn that moves between our houses with every party. I don't know which of us owns it. Her daughter does her homework on my old desk, and my computer sits on her old kitchen table. We really don't enjoy too many of the same things. She likes to camp and hike and ski. I like to watch television and play bridge. She goes to bed much earlier than I do, so I can't call her at 10 or 11 at night to talk. But, I could call her at 3 o'clock in the morning to cry, and it would be okay . . .

— from *Alice*
by Jane Ellen Rubin

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