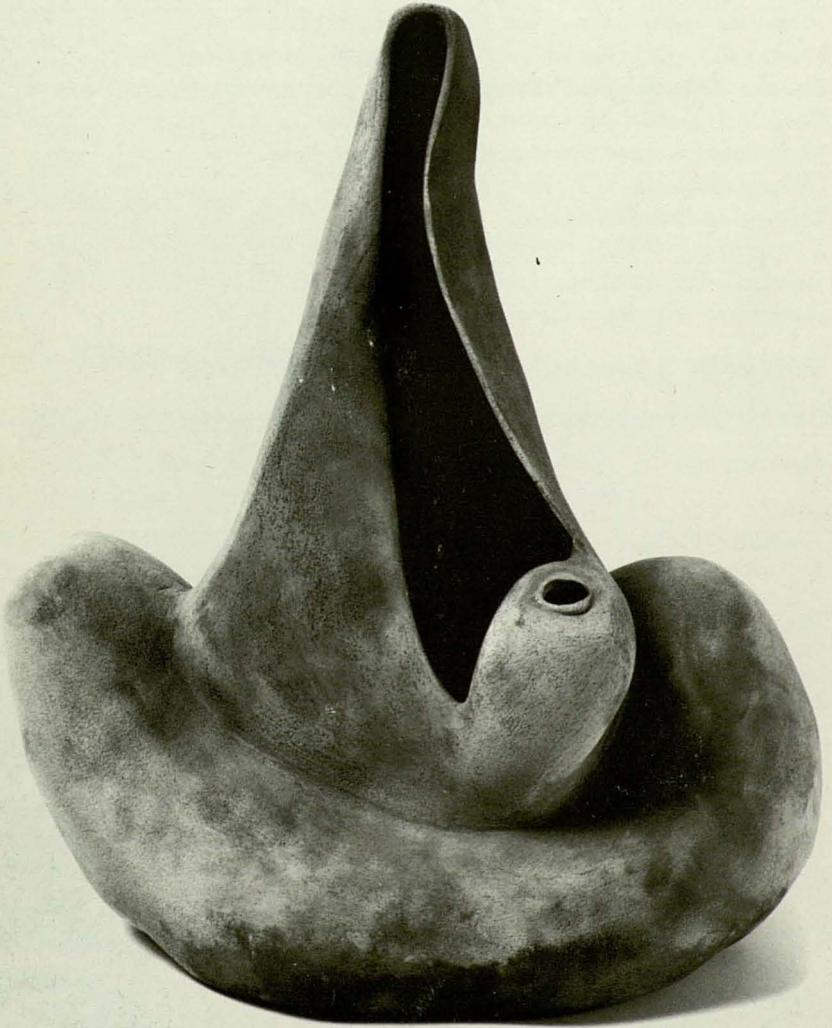


*Step*

SINISTER WISDOM 32





# SINISTER WISDOM 32 SUMMER 1987

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## **This issue is dedicated to Barbara Rosenblum**

**living and dying in San Francisco  
as are we all, wherever we are, but not with such  
consciousness, vitality, grace and joy**

I want to describe the evening of February 25, 1987, at Barbara and Sandy's apartment in San Francisco. Elana and I were visiting. Ann Hershey, a filmmaker and an old friend of mine, had been working with Barbara that afternoon making a video about Barbara's life, not historical so much as essential, who she is, "for whoever sees it," she said, "I hope you wish you'd known me." After dinner, we all watched the video together, two hours in which Barbara was herself, playful and serious, demonstrating her best magic tricks, talking about her favorite poems, playing her favorite music, showing photographs of herself, photographs she'd taken. Barbara is a sociologist, a professor, and she talked of her passion for education: "I wanted to be a teacher," she said, "not a professor: a teacher. Illiteracy is criminal."

In the last segment of the video, Sandy, Barbara's lover and companion of many years, joined her. They talked about their love for each other, about Barbara's diagnosis, and read aloud from their jointly-created "Reverberations" (in *Dina*). My memory does not distinguish clearly between what was said on the video and what happened that evening. I remember Barbara saying when she gets afraid at night, Sandy reads to her; or they play a musical game in which one picks a category and then each in turn comes up with appropriate songs. (I think the video ends as Barbara picks "cities" and they immediately launch into "I'll take Manhattan," "Chicago, Chicago," etc.) I remember Sandy describing with obvious delight Barbara's avid curiosity and intellectual energy directed at anything new; Barbara saying, "I'll miss her—because we talk so much"; Sandy saying how lucky she was for the time: "Barbara could have been taken from me in an accident, suddenly." I want to record and honor this powerful, delicious bonding; the deep evident love.

I also want to describe the moment, in the video, when Barbara was playing records her Jewish leftist father had played for her when she was a child: Paul Robeson singing

*I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night  
alive as you and me,*

the spirit of Joe Hill, union leader; Paul Robeson, Black leftist and great singer; David Rosenblum, who brought Barbara up on Robeson's voice

*takes more than guns to kill a man*

*says Joe, I didn't die*

and Barbara in the video, head high, back against the stereo, repeating

*I didn't die*

Her spirit joined theirs, magnificent and alive, in the place where generations join generations and peoples connect across death and other barriers through what is best in them, their passion for freedom, justice, beauty and learning.

## For Barbara Rosenblum, a teacher

## The Fortune Teller

I just sort of fell into it, telling fortunes. I remember when I was a kid, whenever we had Halloween carnivals, I was always the one with the booth covered in stars and question marks, hands showing maps of the future, and I'd just start to make things up as I went along, you know, and the other kids loved it, sitting there, nodding, eyes wide, fastening on every word. Myself, I didn't take it that seriously, it didn't seem to matter what I said as long as the words kept flowing and the heads kept nodding. What a way to make a living. That's what I do now, those same children, or others just like them, grown up and willing to pay for it, show up at my door, sit with me near a candle and I say what comes to me, what comes like birds or rain. To tell you the truth I don't know where any of it comes from, I don't know any more now than I did then in that little booth, it's like stealing to take their money. But they do seem grateful for the glimpses I give them, to them the words and pictures make sense somehow, so I guess it's all right then, isn't it?

Some nights I can't sleep and, well, just to amuse myself I try to see something for me, Hannah, something inside my own life hidden from me. Mostly I don't see anything at all, no ghosts, no trumpets, not even a shimmering in corners or a ragged cloud. No, but I do hear voices, lots of different voices, they come and go. It always starts up with a little whispering, so low I think it's my own breath. I stop breathing and listen, to see if it's still there. If I lie quietly for a long time the whispering sometimes stays and breaks apart into phrases going up and down like music, like conversation through the walls, only the pure hum of it, not a word understood. I can get some idea of whether I want to go on by then. Once you've seen it, there's no protection from the future. I know it seems like an odd thing to say, but believe me I know what I'm talking about.

A knife, a hammer, one of the voices was saying. That frightened me. Somebody planning a murder. My heart jumped when I heard that and I sat up stiff in bed twisting at the covers like my kid sister, Connie, used to do when she'd pull herself up out of a bad dream, panting beside me. We always slept together when we were little and I had to tell her a story before she could sleep or else she'd beg and make a scene. So pretty soon it was just expected and maybe after awhile I needed to do it for myself, too. She didn't seem to care or notice if it was the same story every night, I was the one who cared about that, I tried to vary them, making up my own, stealing them from everywhere . . . but some nights when I was just too exhausted from school or work or the fights between Mama and her boyfriend, I repeated myself, telling the one I'd told the night before. When I got to the end I'd say "The End," Connie would

sigh, turn on her side and fall just like that asleep. I envied her that . . . I think I still miss her, the pressure of her bones against my back, the little wind of her breath cool on my neck. She's dead now. Killed herself. I don't want to think about it . . . She made her choices carefully, even that one. The note she left me was written in a beautiful hand on pale expensive paper with vague jagged lines somehow pressed into it like those patterns of light behind my eyes that swell and disappear when I'm trying to sleep, when I lie there for hours trying not to see her face, trying *not* to hear the voices, humming love songs to myself. I can make them start but some nights I can't make them stop. If I close my eyes the lights break like rings in water when you drop a stone into it. I let them take me down, the lights, and the silence swallows me whole, a huge black snake.

"You're leaving?" Connie said as if she couldn't believe I'd do it. But I had to. I knew if I stayed it would be the end of me, maybe she knew it herself, I don't know, she could see things too but she pretended she couldn't, that was her way, pretending. She was an actress, I mean, that's how she made her living, how she lived her life, pretending things were the way she wanted them, following someone else's script until she came to a part she didn't like and so she'd change it, boom, just like that, used to drive directors crazy. The other people she worked with, actors, writers, were always furious with her for doing that, they thought she was criticizing their work, and what did *she* know about scripts and dialogue and phrasing? Nothing, nothing at all, but she had this instinct for avoiding a line or a movement that didn't suit her, that made her uncomfortable, to close to the truth maybe, I don't know, she never talked about her reasons for doing it, for doing anything, I don't think she knew herself. She was like a cat smelling water, not a drink but enough to drown in, that natural horror they have you know, of getting their fur wet. They are made perfectly well to be strong and graceful swimmers, but something in them will refuse, something so stubborn they *will not* swim, and if someone else wants to do the rescuing that's all well and good but otherwise they might just go down and stop breathing without a fight. I don't understand that. Doesn't everything have a craving to live? I am a woman in pieces, a lot of them lost for good, but still I want to go on, and if something pulls me down I reach away from it. Unless it's sleep, I love to sleep almost more than anything. Some of the pieces come to me there. Telling the future is almost like sleeping, like telling dreams in the morning when you're hardly awake. Like telling Connie a story to help her close her eyes, my own eyes closing. . . the stories that come out that way, they have this crazy shiny feel, as if they could, as if they were about to explain *everything* . . . .

It was a terrible year for us, my sister and me, that year I moved out of the cramped back room of her apartment where I'd been holed up for almost six years, and into a place of my own for the first time. I'd gone straight from Mama's to living with Connie and now I'm alone. Alone. That word makes my



stomach hurt. So final. Alone, like Connie in the soil, a bulb waiting for spring, but it never comes . . . “The ground is the soil in which to strike root and to stand . . .” I remember reading those words somewhere and deciding to keep them. I like to think of Connie taking root, standing up in the dirt somewhere . . . where you never imagined anything could grow. A long-legged flower. Naked Ladies grow like that, always a shock to come across them, that pink cone at the end of a fat black leafless stem, right in the middle of nowhere. Parking lot, weeds tramped down to dust, and that one wide open flower. Do they start with a bulb? I don’t know about things like that, I just see what I see . . .

Yesterday, I was reading a woman, holding her hand, not looking at it, you know, just to get a sense of her, I don’t actually read palms, don’t think anybody does, you read the whole body, but it helps so much to touch them and people are afraid of that, so if you say you’re reading their palm they’ll let you and the pictures will start pretty soon in my head. I blurt them out as fast as I can to keep up with them and so I won’t think about what I am saying, if I did I’d choke up and have to stop. That happens sometimes . . . it happened yesterday with this woman, I had to apologize and give her money back. How can you make a living like that? It was something I saw, something about Connie. Somehow when we were kids it had come to seem as if her happiness was more important than my own, or maybe mine was somehow dependent on hers, but anyway it was me who knew, really knew, how to make her happy, how to make her laugh or cry when she needed to. And that was true, still true, even when we were grown and and she started going with men wanting *them* to make her happy. She had so many of them. I guess it was because she was beautiful, yes, but she was so desperate for them too, dragging them home with her, trying to get them to do this or that, be this way or that way for her, but it never worked. She’d pretend it did for a while, her face all set and funny. And then she’d throw them out, raving and carrying on after they were gone, it was always the same, climbing into bed with me and I’d stroke her hair until she fell asleep. It was one of them I saw reading that woman yesterday, one of the men she went around with for awhile, his name was Len and he was as beautiful as she was, both of them with all that hair, that black hair, and the swagger of people who know they are lovely to look at . . .

“What are poets for?” I found those words written on a scrap of paper in my sister’s desk. It was after the funeral and I was going through her things because the lawyers told me it had to be done and Mama couldn’t do it. I kept that scrap, I don’t know why. My sister was not a poet. . . well, maybe she *was* a poet, I can’t truthfully say. Poets are supposed to be crazy, aren’t they? Well then maybe she was a poet and those words, that question she left behind, the way she answered it or didn’t, that was what her life was all about . . . Why did she die? Poets aren’t for dying, are they? That can’t be the answer.

Those who reach into the dark stumble across themselves in other shapes. Animal. Vegetable. Mineral. Everything keeps changing. I remember one of the other booths that always drew a crowd at the carnivals. It was the Haunted House. All night it groaned with ghosts and screams flew out, screams and giggles. Inside there was one place where you were supposed to reach into jars and it was so dark you couldn't see your hands or anything, so you took a risk and pushed your fingers or maybe wiggled them slowly toward the bottom making a terrible face because you knew it would be something awful and just the thought of it made you shrink. It was always something soft and wet and shapeless in there, cold and absolutely disgusting. You jerked your hand out with a shriek and went on to the next jar, loving every minute of it. It's funny when you think of how alien our insides seem, the wet dark organs throbbing, the blood, the slippery veins. To kill yourself you have to overcome the fear of blood. At least if you do it like Connie, slashing skin and tendons with a jagged piece of glass. The doctor told me it isn't so easy to do, the skin looks blue and thin there, but the body is very tough, he said, not so easy to kill.

The night Len left, Connie knew it was for good, like the others, that he wouldn't be back, though some of his things were still there, his shoes and his goldfish in that scratched blue bowl. It was odd how she didn't cry, just got so quiet after all the yelling was over with. When she climbed into bed with me there were lines in her face I'd never noticed before. Her face under the lamp, so worn out but childish, it hurt to look at her. But it was that night that I knew I had to leave. I felt it when I held her and she pressed so hard against me, her breathing funny, a jerky little catch, but no tears, no tears at all. There was a huge black hunger, a question in her eyes I could never answer. I took her hair down out of its knot at the back of her neck and brushed and brushed it, humming a song I learned in the mountains once when I was ten and very happy and didn't know what would happen and didn't care. Connie shivered and closed her eyes, her head pulled back each time I swung the brush down her back. I thought she was falling asleep, but when I stopped she grabbed my hand and her eyes sprang open, so I started up again, and it went on like that for a very long time. Finally I put down the brush, wrapping myself around her under the blankets, saying hush, hush, and after a few minutes she asked me if I would tell her a story like I used to, it would help her sleep she said. This surprised me but I said nothing, just nodded. Soon the words started coming without any effort at all, like telling fortunes . . .

I keep thinking there must have been a time when she was still open, when something I might have said or done could still make a difference, when some lucky thing might have happened, an omen, sign, making her change her mind. When did it happen? Had she been moving toward it all her life? That's what it felt like living with her, not that she ever said anything about it, nothing like that, it was just that something was coming, I felt her moving

toward the dark, especially when we slept together on the worst nights, like the night Len left. She never asked for anything or said she was afraid, she didn't have to, I knew.

It was three o'clock in the morning when they called to tell me. Eight months ago. Or maybe by now it's nine. I used to know the days and now the months have slipped out of my grasp. Sleep pulls me and I surrender without a struggle. The puzzle of her death attracts and repels me. I have to know why she did it. Maybe I'm afraid it runs in the family, a taste for drama. Something I need to know before I can rest, like Connie's story.

Mama says it's better not to pry into such things, it's easier. But I don't think so. When I'm telling fortunes I'm always on the lookout for her, expecting to feel her hair on my skin, her breath on the back of my neck, or maybe her voice sleep-talking the nonsense lines she used to fling out of nowhere, choked laughter high in her throat. . . . What did she dream of? I never asked her that. Why did she do it? Does she know the answer? Will she tell it, sister to sister? Will she warn me away from sharp edges, will she help me survive without her?

*Barrie Jean Borich*

## The Disappeared

1.

She leans back in her chair  
and laughs, eyes auburn  
longing,  
after dinner cognac  
auburn fire in her glass.  
Tonight she smokes  
a cigarette slow  
but tomorrow she's  
disappeared.  
We look for her,  
trudge neighbor to neighbor  
photo cupped in palm.  
We stop gathering at  
overdressed downtown tables.  
It's not that we  
never lean back and laugh  
again, but it always  
reminds us.

2.

She knits her thin body  
into poems on the steps  
of the missile factory,  
hair red flocks of birds  
in the stiff slap of dawn.  
She calls it street  
theater. They call it  
trespass. Clerk of the  
court pulls papers  
from files, thin yellow,  
pink and blue, then whispers  
to a uniform with guns.  
He whisks her through doors  
behind the judge's throne  
like dirt on the end of a  
broom and doors click closed.

3.

She weeds a garden long as  
half a central Illinois block  
when the bomb lands scraping  
side of its nose  
in her sweet peas and she  
scatters, her spring's work  
a blister. Her daughter watches  
from the porch, thin arms  
as if held up by strings,  
small sobs rising from  
her stomach like yelps  
of a plastic squeeze toy.

4.

I fear my lovers  
will leave me  
and they might,  
but what of shadows  
of lovers on brick,  
arms held above  
ears, then no shadows,  
no letters, no late night  
calls when rates are  
cheap, nothing.

5.

I want to hold  
your face in my hands,  
your lips to my throat.  
The city outside my  
window smokes white  
with snow and cold  
car exhaust. I watch  
you through Christmas  
lights. It's like  
hands ripping open  
my breasts, my lungs  
torn out. I watch  
you shot.

6.

El Playon

in El Salvador.

This is where bodies  
of somebody's lovers  
are piled like so  
many skinned seals.

Shavings from my pay  
buy men in El Salvador  
who tear apart bodies  
like holiday birds  
for money

for a uniformed post  
for some hybrid of pleasure.

I am a breathing piece  
of this jewelled octopus —  
my country.

None of my lovers  
are missing yet.

I can drag in a  
tentacle with them  
now, or I can wait.

Lynn Crawford

## Bordercrossing: Emissary From A Nightmare, Speaking to Me in a Dream

I am trying to find my tongue.  
Emptiness swells in my mouth and I try  
to speak to you but you  
do not know my tongue and so  
I must use your tongue.

Your tongue feels clumsy in my mouth.  
I want to tell your people that  
my heart hangs heavy,  
a purple splitting  
plum, but I cannot find  
among your words a knowledge of  
my sorrow, ripening.

In school they prepared you to ask  
in my language where  
is the bathroom but not  
where  
is my daughter.

Failing language I will try to open  
the blue observing sky of  
your eyes to  
the square where  
I played as  
a girl in  
the dust.

I want to trust but I am afraid  
you will act as  
a tourist, seeing  
only a dazzle of  
light and color and me  
an exotic peony to strip  
down, petal by

petal, named  
photographed and  
framed

A woman on her knees  
sorting pebbles.

Thirteen days ago four women and four children disappeared  
in San Salvador so for thirteen days  
I have started at the hollow shell of  
space where last  
I saw my daughter walking.

The contours of her shoulders  
burn there but color  
has been sliced  
clean away.

The tips of my fingers redden  
and crack as I am running  
them over and over  
the weeds and gravel trying  
to find

my tongue  
they cut out  
for asking  
where  
is my daughter

her face  
they may peel  
like a grape while

your money buys  
the knife  
so yanqui  
can you tell me



where in this dust  
have they flung  
my daughter or  
my tongue?

"Bordercrossing" served as the basis of a short film titled *A Woman in El Salvador Speaking*, co-produced by the Asociacion de Mujeres de El Salvador (AMES) and Sara Halprin, and featuring the voice of Carolyn Forché.



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Susan Hansell

## Poem For a Goodbye Never Spoken

*para Silvia, doquiera que este'*

when your phone call never came i knew you had  
returned. but it was the note Roque left under my door  
that made me cry

i can't imagine your journey back over mountains  
strewn with 40,000 dead and the blood the blood  
running off in streams.

your land has reached its saturation point  
everywhere the waters rise rivers rebel in the name  
of the Rio Sumpul and the Rio Lempa

from across the Americas, you and i  
collecting our stories  
and tying the years into  
one moment—  
a glance,  
a touch,  
a face can fade  
into a dark photograph  
but it's the land that binds us  
and life  
25 years circling your eyes  
27 in mine

it was april when we met  
in Nicaragua Libre  
on the day the world found out about Marcial  
we traveled to the refugee camps near León  
past corn fields their new green tips  
reaching to the edges  
over miles of bare red earth  
the dust swirling the taste of it lingering  
sweat running in rivulets down our backs  
dripping from our thighs

the dust is like dried blood  
it cakes around the lips  
of our presidents  
and generals.  
it crusts under their fingernails  
folds itself  
into clean laundry

only the longest rain will wash it away

yes, Roque told me of the rains.  
how they choke the skies  
with winter tears  
forcing the bombers to the ground.

i saw your cousin he wanted to know every word  
you had spoken. he told me how you grew up  
gathering fists with your words how if anyone could  
survive las guardias you would

he told me how you two arranged a meeting place—  
a connecte'—an appointed time in a certain street  
exactly two weeks after the triumph of your El Salvador

and if you do not come he will persist  
week after week waiting for you Silvia

waiting

Hilary Mullins

## Witness

Paulette Crickmore was fifteen years old when she disappeared on her way to school in Richmond, Vermont early in September of '86. Two months later a seventy-five-year-old deer hunter, out hunting in the early morning, found Paulette's body in the woods of nearby Duxbury.

You know, I been hunting all my life,  
every fall since I was a boy right here in Duxbury  
and I seen all sorts of dead things in these woods.  
You know, the scraps predators leave,  
little piles of feathers,  
shreds of meat and fur.  
Or sometimes  
you'll see a whole jawbone sitting out  
picked clean and off-white with weather  
but the teeth will still be all set in a row.  
But I never seen this sort of prey—  
if you know what I mean.

If I were twenty years younger  
I never would have seen her at all.  
It's a steep hill over there,  
but back then my wind was better  
and I woulda kept right on headed up,  
never stopped for my breath by that boulder  
the way I did.  
And of course  
that's when my eye first caught sight of the color.

Didn't think too much of it at first though—  
thought it was just some scrap of something  
somebody'd left behind.  
You'd be surprised how much garbage  
people leave in the woods these days.  
'Specially a lot of these hunters.  
Hate to say it, but they're the worst.  
Weren't like that  
when I was a young man.

Not that I like it neither,  
but—  
I've come to the point now  
where I expect it—  
the stuff they leave behind, I mean.  
You know—  
beer cans, food wrappers,  
plastic this and plastic that.  
That's the kind of thing  
I thought at first I was seeing.

But my eyes knew better than me  
and I had to look again  
and that's when I knew for sure  
something was wrong.  
The color started taking shape along the ground.  
Legs—colored pant legs and off-white sneakers  
and there where the color went up  
it was filled with the rest of the body.

I couldn't really believe what I was seeing,  
but I had to, because there she was,  
this girl on the ground in colored overalls.  
The strange thing was  
she could have been just sleeping,  
I swear to God,  
just takin' a nap in the woods.  
She had one arm flung careless-like  
out above her, you see,  
and her head,  
if you looked at it from one side,  
was sort of nestled up against it.  
But she wasn't sleeping—  
I knew better than that.  
She was too still,  
too deathly still.

And when I got a little closer  
it weren't like she was nappin' at all—  
the arm I couldn't make out before  
was twisted, broken back  
and her hair splayed out on the ground.

Couldn't see her face.  
Didn't want to.  
But I could tell she'd been lying there awhile,  
lying there rotting there where she was dropped,  
and I went back to the boulder  
leaning up against it on account of my knees  
and breathing hard.  
I knew I was all alone in those woods

but I could almost see  
someone staggering up the hill  
her body on his back  
and tossing her off like a can of beer  
he'd finished with.  
And I could see her body falling through the air  
and when she landed  
there weren't a sound.  
Nothing  
just nothing, nothing.  
Months  
of that nothing,  
bloomin' like blight in amongst the trees  
and then here I come,  
old fool, stumblin' up to witness the silence.

Well, I was witnessin' it all right,  
even the woods seemed soundless, dead,  
hushed of the usual little animal sounds  
or the creaking of the trees.  
But the damnest thing was  
it was getting in me too,  
seeping in like the first signs of sickness.  
I tried clearing my throat  
and couldn't really muster the thing up  
and right then I knew  
I couldn't even talk,  
that it would be like trying to yell  
twenty feet down in the lake  
and the water is walls  
pressing in on you.

Well, as the saying goes,  
that kind of rattled my cage,  
so I shook my head hard  
and I saw the color on the ground again  
like it wouldn't let me go.  
I had to walk back to that girl's body  
and with the watery feeling  
shook a bit back from my head  
I saw something different this time,  
I mean  
I started seeing  
how she must have looked in life,  
you know,  
the way she might've moved her body,  
and maybe used one hand  
to brush back her hair  
when it fell in her eyes.  
The way girls will do.

And it came to me  
at first in fits and starts  
and then all in a piece  
how she must've pleaded for her life,  
first explaining, then begging.  
And I knew somehow  
that when it came right down to it,  
she had struggled,  
thrashed like most creatures do  
in the grip of something  
intendin' to kill.

And because he couldn't keep her still,  
he'd used his hunter's advantage,  
some tool,  
some way beyond her means.

But she didn't go quiet-like;  
no—she screamed.  
screamed and screamed and I heard her,  
God knows how  
but I did,  
screams that twisted my gut

and then suddenly stopped.  
And there was that silence,  
that nothing, no noise, nothing  
again.

That's when I bellowed.

Bellowed and the woods bellowed back.

Bellowed until an old man couldn't bellow no more

and had to sit down right there.

Felt like I was back under water

with all of it

flooding over in my eyes,

but no—

it was more like I'd come up for air,

settin' there gaspin' on the ground

until I got my breath

back in my body

and knew I could talk again

if I wanted to.

But it weren't time yet.

I stood up,

shucked the shells from my rifle,

put 'em in my pocket

and headed back down the hill

headed for town with her story to tell.



## hunting season

i will always remember  
his hands tenderly  
caressing the rifle

before the hunt    oiling  
the cold barrel    polishing  
the wooden stock    weighing  
grains of sulphur    filling

brass cartridges with a steady  
hand    i will always remember  
when i watch flames dance

like autumn leaves    he left  
us tending the fires every  
fall as he walked toward

the snowline to find the herd  
of deer migrating to the warm  
sierra valley    the crack

of gunshot in a canyon echoes  
in my memory as logs snap  
in the fire    i see a blacktail

deer    dark eyes    deep pools  
of innocence    sandy gray  
antlers spread like bony wings

legs folded beneath  
the weight of a bullet  
i will always remember

Norma Fain Pratt

## Scared: Inherited Traits

Anyone born to Polish Jewish parents in New York City, the Bronx to be exact, anytime in the late nineteen-thirties will tell you what I'm about to tell you. Childhood was not easy. Those times were frightening. The Depression. Being foreigners even after the first rosy flush of coming to this land of opportunity. It's well known; there are even history books and films now about the immigrants. I've read a lot of them and seen the movies because I thought I could understand my own past by looking at the general patterns.

But when it comes down to specifics, family, parents, and all the rest, no amount of so-called historical objectivity will clarify the meaning of childhood. Not enough to satisfy me. My childhood. My mind finds the old places again. I need to look at those places.

I guess it's important for me to understand that love for my parents held at the center of my childhood. Mine was such an exclusive passion that later in life I couldn't regenerate the same feelings for my lovers or even my children. It was downright Oedipal: identifying with Mama, lusting after Daddy. We shared the same bedroom until I was nine years old and then they transferred me to a room with my dear, sweet, senile, eighty-five-year-old grandmother. She giggled during the day, cried in her sleep, and refused to ever speak in English. Only Yiddish. Sometimes she would tell me about her children, the eleven children. Only four were alive still: my mama Audrey, my aunts Irene and Lora, and the apple of her eyes, my uncle Irving, who owned a dress factory and brought the four women over from Lodz in 1922. The other either died in infancy or were still in Europe, maybe killed by Hitler, as she put it; maybe not. In those years, we didn't know for certain and that was scary in and of itself. Recently, I wrote a poem about the three of us, my grandmother, my mother and me, back a few years after the war, in the early fifties. I called it, "Superstition: Three Generations" and it goes like this:

My grandmother buried her clipped fingernails, her toenails, and cut her hair.  
My grandmother spat three times when she passed a church.

My mother terrorized herself when her children were late.  
My mother needed to have a man make her feel safe.

I believe God will not destroy the world as long as I am reading a book.

The other night I was sitting on my little balcony with the potted plants whispering in the damp slightly chilly night: a true Venice, California February evening. But no drugs, not even a little Chablis wine. A memory came to me. Proustian, wafting in on the odors of the night. A gift I thought. Even if it is painful. Well, just uncomfortable, because I was back in the East Bronx at the end of my childhood.

Odd. The memory took form of two scenes as if out of a play. These two brief and seemingly ordinary moments led me into remembering what happened. The important thing that had happened. The cast of characters was small. My grandmother (age eighty-five); my mother Audrey (age forty); my one and only sister Mona, alias Mickey (age seventeen), and me (age thirteen). Both scenes were set in my bedroom, the one that I shared with grandma. I could see that room so clearly decorated by the cedar chest under the window where Mama and I sat dreaming on Friday evenings waiting for Daddy to come home from the downtown millinery shop; the ornate French provincial knick-knacks set on top of the fake fireplace with its glass coals and tiny electric fan; the cut-glass box I always used as an imitation telephone, and the bedroom set itself, a smooth blond maple American colonial style, two single beds, two dressers, a chair, a desk, and the tiny night table where grandma kept her hated false teeth and never wore them. A forest of symbols.

Scene I. Bedroom. Enter Grandma. She wears a shaytl, which is a wig parted in the middle with a bun at the back of the head denoting her orthodox piety and resistance to American culture. She is dressed in a long dark skirt and a white cotton blouse. You can see her breasts are saggy, her body is thin, almost wasted. But what catches your eyes is her bent back, stooped, nearly hunched from carrying heavy sacks. The back of a peddler woman. Every three minutes she sighs deeply almost like a woman in labor. I am sitting on the bed reading a movie magazine. Ripe breasts. Big brown eyes filled with sadness and longing. My favorite movie star, Ingrid Bergman, has told the world she is pregnant with Rossellini's child. No way can I confide in grandma. Just as she enters I walk across the room to the big window overlooking the playground of P.S. 6.

Me: Grandma, how do you feel?

Grandma: (*silence, a sigh*)

Me: Didja eat yet? Mama went shopping with Lora for a chicken. Maybe the grocery store too.

Grandma: (*silence*)

Me: The boys are playing baseball. God, it looks like Mickey is out there with them. It's her. Oh, she's hit one of them.

*(I open the window and call out)*

Mickey stop it. Mama'll kill you.

Grandma: *Farmakh dem fenster, kind, ikh bin kalt.* (translation: Close the window, child, I'm cold).

Me: Just a minute, Grandma, I'm going to run down. Mickey needs me.

Grandma: *Nayn.*

Me: Why?

Grandma: *(silence)*

I stay because I'm such a good girl and do what everybody tells me. It's a kind of paralysis. All of a sudden I see Mickey running across the playground, her chubby legs rubbing together at the thighs, her sandy, tomboy blond hair sweaty around her head. In a few minutes I hear the door open. She comes in the front door. She enters my room:

Mickey: Idiot, who asked you to yell. Everybody in the neighborhood will know I'm fighting in the yard.

Me: So what? You always fight with boys.

Mickey: Shut up. Grandma, come away from the window, lay down, Mama will be home any minute.

*(She turns toward me and barks)*

Why are you reading this crappy movie magazine? Do your homework, genius.

*(She turns and leaves. I sit on my bed. Grandma gets into her bed. After a few minutes there is a long snore.)*

Scene II. The same bedroom. Mama and I are sitting on the cedar chest in front of the window. Grandma is in bed. Mama is small, frail-boned but has a curvacious body covered by a matronly frilled pinafore which does not hide her sexiness. Her blondish sandy hair curls stylishly up around the edges. In her deep blue eyes one can detect a bemused self-consciousness. Always a

mama's girl herself, she holds me lightly around the waist. I'm bigger than she. Anyone seeing this would think she's babying a grown girl. Mama is intensely distracted.

Mama: Just a minute, darling, he'll be home soon.

Me: I'm hungry.

Mama: Don't be hungry. Wait. It's better to eat when he comes home. Where is he? Let's play actresses and actors.

Me: O.K.

Mama: O.K. G.G.

Me: That's too easy. Greta Garbo. (*shouting impatiently*) God, Ma, it's too easy.

Mama: Stop complaining. We'll eat soon. Where is he? (*Grandma groans*) I'm so nervous. She cries in her sleep.

Me: She does. Keep that old man away from me. She says it over and over.

Me: She says funny things in her sleep Ma.

Mama: Be quiet.

Me: She does. Keep that old man away from me. She says it over and over.

Mama: Don't listen. It's nothing.

Me: Nothing? Tell me. What old man?

Mama: I'll tell you when you are older.

Me: Oh, Ma.

Mama: You know, I'm nervous.

(*The sound of the key in the front door. She jumps up full of excitement and interest.*)

He's home. Wash your face.

*(She leaves the room. Grandma moans. I sit on the cedar chest alone watching the full moon and the beginning of snow falling.)*

Those were the two ordinary scenes I remembered. They were tiny pieces of the family drama, "The Family Tragedy." Because what happened in the next forty-eight hours following these scenes was awful. My mother swore me to secrecy then. "Don't tell what happened," she begged with tears in her frightened blue eyes. "It will shame all of us." That scared the hell out of me. It left a permanent mark on my personality. Whenever I'm scared of anything, anything at all, I don't talk.

It's time to tell. Simply. Without much embellishment. My grandmother was very old and very senile. She appeared to me to be growing more uncomprehending, more strange every day. Not one person in the family seemed to want to accept that cruel fact, although the evidence just kept piling up: slurred speech; puddles of pee; clothes unbuttoned, put on backwards; objects and food forgotten all over the apartment. Although her sharp blue eyes peered out at you, intelligent and imperious as ever, there was some new quality of cunning laced with bitterness that wasn't quite her. One afternoon I ran into her in the dark long corridor which led from the kitchen into our shared bedroom. Ran straight into her. She hardly noticed; she just handed me a half peeled orange.

Always the dutiful daughter, my mother still acted as if grandma was knowledgeable and powerful. She would ask the old woman whether the chicken looked good or if we needed to get more salt for koshering the meat. Grandma's eyes would squint knowingly, and silently she'd point her finger up and down. Or she would cackle, like a hen, and this would make her laugh at some private joke. My mama's eyes would widen with incredulity. If I were there she'd look away. We were to pretend grandma had a weird sense of humor. No accounting for her actual behavior. Not even my daddy, who prided himself on being so rational and worldwise, commented on how she was deteriorating.

And yet, I was with her at night, alone. Long nights when she mumbled and sat stark up in bed looking for lost things in the folds of the heavy quilted covers. Drooling. "Oh God," I lay there thinking. "What does this mean?"

She began disappearing at night. I never saw her leave. But I knew she was gone because mama and daddy would be walking around in the corridor between the kitchen and the bedroom. "Gevald, where is she?" mama whispered, muffling the sound of her voice by covering her mouth with her hand. I looked over at the crumbled empty bed. Where was she? Such an old lady. Out there on the streets by herself. A trolley car would run her over. "Audrey," daddy said in his deep calm long-suffering voice, "we'll find her. Just have a little patience." "Patience," she intoned with that edge of hysteria mainly reserved for him, "my mother somewhere. How can I have patience."

I'd fall asleep. Before she was found. In the morning, when I got up for school, she'd be lying in bed, covered, pale as a sheet. My sister never said a word about what happened. Maybe she slept through it because she was sleeping on a daybed in the living room. Maybe she didn't want to let me know she knew something was the matter. Maybe she thought I was stupid and I just slept through everything.

That night, the one I remembered, after Mickey had fought with the boys in the schoolyard, when I was reading about Ingrid Bergman, when daddy was late and mama was so happy to have him home that she left me sitting on the cedar chest alone watching the full moon and the snow, that night grandma disappeared again, but I was awake when they brought her home. She was wearing a thin white nightgown, no shoes and no wig so that her closely cropped hair looked boyish and criminal. I pretended to be sleeping when they brought her into the room. Lifting the covers and tucking her in tightly, they settled her into bed. I could see her eyes wide open, yet she didn't say anything. Mama was angry and more frustrated than I'd ever seen her. Daddy was just sad. The full moon made the room so light.

They closed the door but I could hear them somewhere in the kitchen maybe talking, maybe yelling at each other. I heard the phone ring and I fell asleep.

The next morning I looked over and she wasn't in bed. When I went to the kitchen for breakfast mama was ashen and kept her back to me as she squeezed the orange juice, grinding away at the glass hand juicer. I was afraid to say anything so I just sat there looking at her preparing the food. "We took grandma to an old age home last night," she said. "I can't take care of her anymore. It's dangerous," she added in a mumbled sort of way. I could hardly breathe. Then she started to cry and say how her mama had lived with her all of her life, even the eighteen years she was married. She said how she loved her, listened to her, obeyed her. And now it was so crazy. Mama whispered, "How can she be in an old age home when she's been with me always?" I felt numb. When she left the room to go to the toilet, I left for school.

When I came home there wasn't anyone home. "Where is everybody," I yelled into the rooms. Then the phone rang. It was my mama. She said she wanted to talk to Mona. My parent's bedroom door was closed so I figured Mona must be in there. I opened the door just a crack and there she was with her hands folded like some Christian girl at prayer and I heard her say, "God, let grandma be alive." "The phone's for you," I squeaked. She ran past me to the phone, listened, began to cry and then just dropped it and sat on the floor. I picked it up but nobody was on the other end. "She's dead," Mona screamed. "Died in her sleep the first night out. Died of fright."

That was the family tragedy. After eighteen years of all of them living together, mama and daddy had sent grandma to an old age home because she

was senile and couldn't be trusted. And they were ashamed of it as if they had murdered her. They wanted it to be hidden and, for my part, it was. I never told.

"Who was the old man she talked about?" I asked my mama when I was much older and she and I reminisced about the days in the Bronx. "I don't know," was her initial reply. But then she added, "My mother was married when she was fourteen. Her husband was twenty-five. Maybe she didn't like him at first."

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## Mercy

"To the memory of my dear daughter-in-law,  
Mrs. Mercy Bradstreet, who deceased Sept. 6,  
1669, in the 28th year of her age."

Title of a poem by Anne Bradstreet

Head bowed, a dark scarf  
heavy on her shoulders,  
my mother-in-law  
is calling on her God.

Poor Woman.  
Let her think I am in heaven  
playing with my four dead children.  
I am Mercy Bradstreet with  
  
no mercy being given in the end.  
Twenty-eight years I lived,  
giving birth to five children.  
One survived; one child and one poem.

And I, instead of rest, Anne,  
walk alone.

I have let my hair grow  
over my eyes, my nails

in sharp points. I roam  
river beds scratching in mud.  
If you ride by at night  
it's my voice in your ear,

my hand that causes  
the horse to bolt.  
I wear no scarf over my head,  
give no mercy.

Grieving four times over,  
no one's blood satisfies me,  
and the split tongued crow  
high on my shoulder is restless.

## The Perils of Pauline

Pauline is tied to the tracks.  
Ear to the rail,  
the humming makes her sleepy.  
Through half-closed lids,  
the stars collide over her head,  
showering dreams:  
small lights burning.

If she doesn't move,  
ropes fade into delusion  
as the wind creeps  
along each finger,  
licks her ankles.

The train pounds two turns away,  
screaming around the bend.  
It's uncertain how many Paulines  
are strung along the way.  
She can't turn her head to look.

In China, Spain and Newark, N.J.,  
the sun is just rising,  
so bright it burns the tops of the trees.  
Shadows crouch under bushes  
awaiting assassination, and in stations  
everywhere trains bellow and snort.

Pauline's thoughts are perilous.  
There is nothing she can do  
about the masked figure  
who tied her to the tracks.  
The script calls for rescue,  
scant seconds before the train's lights  
discover and reveal.

The audience knows she can't free herself,  
though they shout directions from the darkness.  
Grown old in small town theaters,  
Pauline's celluloid bones crackle.

She isn't even thinking of trains,  
but the peril of rescue,  
the next episode.  
She glares at the camera eye  
of the moon, no longer surprised  
by what she sees.

## The Electrician's Girl

The prospect of having a girl apprentice was starting to grow on him. When the foreman first told him he'd be working with Kehinde starting next week, Tom Bailey had been pissed as shit. But the morning that he saw her ride up to the job on her bicycle was also the afternoon that he saw her eating her lunch with chopsticks in her solitary corner overlooking the water in front of the building, far away from the rest of the crew. Christ, a Black chick eating with chopsticks! Maybe there's more to this girl than meets the eye, he thought.

He'd heard the affectionate "Fuck You's" that the carpenter girl said to her journeyman. They laughed a lot and she listened with rapt attention to his every word. The carpenter was an old timer due to go out to pasture soon and it seemed that he wanted her to have his legacy of knowledge. The two of them seemed to get along well—she carried his tools and made sure that he got his coffee first when she went out to get the break for the carpentry crew. That happy vision of companionship wasn't lost on Tom.

He had a slight reputation among the electricians for being good at working with apprentices. Yeah, he'd like to try out a girl. She could be kind of a cross between kid sister and puppy dog.

Kehinde was strong-looking, solid, like she did some kind of martial art. Her short tower of strength was not exactly the morsel of delicate femininity he had in mind, but hell, this was a construction job. And, she had a real appeal he had to admire. She seemed so . . . centered, rooted. She seemed like someone who'd never get distracted or thrown off balance.

He'd seen she had a sweet-faced smile when she talked to that carpenter girl, but she didn't use it much with the crew. She ought to, he thought. It'd help her out a lot more on the job with the other guys, instead of looking so serious all the time like she did. You liked to see a smiling female. It made a man feel good. He'd get her to smile more. He could see himself looking down from a ladder to a laughing little girl looking up to him awaiting orders. Yes, he was really warming up to the idea of having her as his apprentice.

As he'd done with his other apprentices, he started in with lectures on being a good tradesman. "Hopefully, you'll learn from your mistakes. You're gonna make them, but they can be minimized. I try to do a 99% job. I don't say 100% because once in a while you're gonna cheat. The customer is paying good money and we get good money for what we do, so I try to go the extra inch and put in each and every thing they specified on the blue print. It may require a bend when you want to do a straight run of pipe for your wire pull, but that's what we're being paid for."

Safety and shock prevention were his favorite topics to hold forth on. That always got his other apprentices' interest. New ones were always worried about getting shocks—a real possibility in their work, especially on a renovation job like this one where there was a lot of old wiring and shoddy workmanship to contend with.

It wasn't so much that a guy could get electrocuted, but if you were up on a ladder and got zapped, it was the fall by surprise that could do the damage. 110 volts wasn't so bad, but most of the work nowadays in these commercial office buildings were using 277-volt and 480-volt systems. That could knock a man off a ladder—and that would be your lucky break. If you got hung up in a high voltage circuit, your muscles would freeze and your brain would know what to do, but your body wouldn't be able to respond. You just wouldn't be able to let go. You'd stay there until you fizzled out unless some outside force broke the circuit for you.

When she went about her tasks with him on their trouble-shooting assignment, Kehinde seemed not to notice the excitement she generated amongst the other trades on the job just by her being alive and there. The girl was perpetually neutral.

"Don't look at my apprentice in that tone of voice," he'd said to one of the plumbers on the floor. She remained oblivious to the effect she was creating. He saved a lot of his best lines to use around her and didn't make a dent in her aura; all his good jokes were simply lost on Kehinde. She stayed strictly business and it was like she didn't notice he was a human being with flesh and feelings. This bugged him to no end. Why did she treat him like a tool she kept at a distance? He wasn't like some of these assholes who'd try to bust her chops just for being a female doing construction work.

He knew she could lighten up and joke around. Just this morning he'd seen her be playful with the carpenter girl. He'd heard their gleeful laughter and wanted to move in on their joy. He wanted to join in with a smart remark that would orchestrate their smiles up to him.

He decided that today he would try to get her to break down her insulation and open up and be human with him. He'd talk about safety hazards and precautions. Throughout the whole lecture, he was aching to engage in her interest. Her eyes remained closed, not hostile, but no warmth lived there for him, no recognition for his considerable charm. He'd been working with her for weeks now and just couldn't get past those vague answers when he asked her about her life outside of the job.

"Are you married? Got a boyfriend?" he'd asked her. "It feels like it sometimes," she'd answered, resisting him. "How many feet of wire do you want to pull for this circuit?" She always did that. She didn't leave any space for friendly conversation. He was just trying to make small talk to get the day to go faster.

It was not that she was openly scornful like his wife or constantly criticizing him like his daffy daughter with her feminist stuff protesting everything that he was paying hard-earned money for her to have. Kehinde wasn't full of explanations like the other girl apprentice who'd been on the job a few months ago, before she was rotated to a different work site. It was like she was in another world sometimes, like she was lightly attached to the earth and would beam in to do a job, but kept herself somewhere else. She didn't cut him off when he spoke, but he sometimes wondered if anybody was at home after she closed him out of consciousness. Kehinde would just not be moved. You couldn't touch this bitch.

It was this very quality that hurt and attracted him the most. She was only partly available. He wouldn't call her a space cadet, but she was elusive sometimes.

That was the state she was in when he decided he'd do the splice live. He wanted to get her to listen to him. He knew she'd pull the switch in time. She was a good little mechanic, but she'd have to give him all her focus as they worked together on the high voltage unit in the electric closet. He really wanted to talk and there was no one else around to give him the energy she ordinarily wouldn't conduct. For some reason, he was dying to have her appreciate him. He wasn't a bad guy. She could give up on a little human feeling for once, Jesus H. Christ. Why couldn't she just listen instead of dismissing him and surprise him for once? Come on baby, give me a little thrill. Show some emotion and give me the shock of my life.

Well, he'd force her to listen to him as they worked. He needed to air some of the bullshit his wife was giving him at home. He interspersed his tale of domestic woe on the home front with instructions. Ordinarily, he'd lay out her end of the job before hand, but this time, he didn't tell her what he wanted her to do until he was ready for each little thing.

She didn't raise an eyebrow when he said, "OK, now let's do this splice live. You need to see this procedure. First you undo the hot wire. . . ." She'd been following all his instructions and was fully alert, not in her oblivious realm. He liked the fact that she could be depended upon to do the right thing. If only he could teach the kid to talk. Well, he was working on that project. He'd have her chattering away like a chipmunk if it was the last thing he did in life.

He undid the hot wires and had just cut into the neutral wires when his pliers fell down one rung of the ladder—he'd brazenly used the painter's aluminum ladder because he didn't want to go down to the supply room and lug a wooden ladder up the three flights to the roof in the machine room where they were working alone. As he reached down for the pliers caught on the ledge, the neutral wire hit the ladder and he jumped in terror, grabbing hold of the bare hot wire by mistake. At that crucial moment, as if she'd missed a beat, Kehinde didn't pull the circuit disconnect switch. He was hung up with the high voltage sizzling through him, she remaining safely on the insulated mat.

He screamed, but no sound came out of his mouth, his breath cut off, as it happens when you become part of an electric circuit and start to fry. And of course, she wouldn't touch him, lest she too get pulled in and become part of the circuit, all her limbs frozen as well. That fact of electrical life had been a big point he made during one of his first lectures to her. But didn't she see the wooden two by four that she could use to knock him off the ladder to safety? Why didn't she pull the circuit disconnect switch? He couldn't let go of the circuit on his own, but his brain was conscious, though losing it fast.

She looked up at him and he saw her shrug her shoulders, like he'd often seen her do when she finished a chops-breaking task that the foreman had assigned to her as a punishment, something admittedly unpleasant, but which she wasn't going to get upset about.

He knew then that she did see and hear everything, but she simply wasn't going to give up on any energy or reactions. What a bitch.

But she was finally giving him his first real smile of human sympathy. There was the compassion he'd been striving to get from her for so long. For the very first time, she raised those eloquent eyebrows which were usually furled in concentration on the job at hand and looked him full in the face. At long last she focused her dark eyes on him with a regard he'd so often yearned for—just a simple acknowledgement of his humanity, a look of understanding and caring.

And Tom Bailey was happy. He was breathlessly happy. My God, all she had to do was give me a brief smile and I can't breathe. I'm so happy I could die, he thought. Maybe things will be different between us now. She'd pay maybe even full attention to him when he talked, because they'd just had this sympathetic connection. It was worth nearly dying for. All he'd wanted was for her to notice him, some sympathy, a warm feeling between them. I just know we can be friends now, he thought. But it was really too late to give it much thought, because now, damnit to hell, he was fucking dead.

## Excerpts from Hospital Journal

*For years I have worked as a respiratory therapist in a variety of hospitals. This journal was written at a time when I had just returned to college and was working on an independent study project about death.*

. . . I have started to write down pieces of conversations that I either have or overhear at work. Some of it is very sweet, like an old man waking up from a nap and saying to his middle-aged daughter, "I really dream a lot, don't I?" She, "I don't know, do you? What were you dreaming about?" He, "That you and Chuck Sullivan had gotten back together," and she says, "Boy, you really were dreaming." I can't explain it, but without knowing them I got such a feel for who they were from this that I felt I knew them all. This must be due to the heightened state of being very sick or with someone who is very sick.

I am haunted by the 79-year-old who shot his wife and by the 27-year-old in our ICU who tried to kill herself by drinking kodak chemicals, and most people have a terrible attitude about her and the hundreds like her who do such bizarre things to themselves. But then I guess how bizarre depends on your point of view. M. told me she tried to kill herself a few times but not really, it was just the most dramatic or eloquent way she knew to ask for help . .

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. . . Two beepers. The child wanted to know why I had on two beepers. So I explained, one for if someone in the area I am responsible for needs something and the other if someone anywhere in the hospital tries to die and someone catches them, the red one goes off and says "212 there is a code in 512" or wherever, then I have to run and do my part to try and prevent it. This is the biggest most glaringly awful contradiction at work for me. I don't mind so much administering drugs that help people breathe easier or even taking care of machines that are keeping them alive, sometimes it's only for a little while and they go on with their lives. But so violently yanking them back from wherever they are trying to go really bothers me. I always feel bad afterwards especially if the person dies anyway, I am haunted by my participation. . . .

. . . between the 16th and 18th centuries people were obsessed with anxiety about being buried alive. No doubt this happened often. Wills became very detailed with instructions for making certain of death. One way was to call the person's name three times. I thought of how in CPR training that is the very first thing one does to determine the state of the victim. And many wild tales of the living dead. Such as the "prodigious bleeding of the corpse of a murder victim when placed in the presence of the murderer," the idea of the sensibility of the cadaver.

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### *A day in the big house*

Rebecca says "nine times that chick in bed L has tried to kill herself. She's seventeen. Pregnant for the third time she thought, old man would have killed her, probably would have done her a favor. Sorry, but I don't have much sympathy for that. I'm sorry, but if you ask me, she's just looking for some attention. The pain they cause others, I'm sorry but she gets no sympathy from me." "Well", I said, "luckily for her I'm taking care of her tonight instead of you."

I often wonder why people feel compelled to make such moral judgements about others they know absolutely nothing about. Is it because the third patient of the night makes more work? It's not piece work. We get paid by the hour.

Two ladies in 564 have stolen my heart by referring to their purses as pocketbooks. I imagine their lives, in New York and Florida. They were young and got married, now one of them has vascular disease in her legs and one has a fluid-loaded heart.

In bed L you have Mrs. S. She is seventy-two years old. She passed out and her children thought she might have had a stroke, so they took her to the emergency room. She had, at some other time, told her children that she did not want to be kept alive on a machine. She is in the end stages of chronic obstructive lung disease and also has cancer in her gall bladder. Her doctor also knew of and planned to respect this wish. But neither he nor they (the children) were there in the room when her heart stopped and she ceased to breathe. The emergency room staff did their job and then there she was with a tube down her throat (mistaken intubation) and soon in ICU on a ventilator, which given the state of her lungs it is going to be very hard to wean her off of. She seems pretty depressed but is cooperative. We had to restrain her hands as she will pull the tube out.



. . . The other night I went to give Mr. Peckum a treatment. It seemed he looked much worse than the last time I saw him. But he looked downright sallow. "Mr. Peckum, can you take a breathing treatment? Mr. Peckum?" Mouth hanging open, no pulse, I had just read his chart and saw that someone had written a "no heroics" order. I went to the nurse's station, "Is Mr. Peckum dead?" I asked. The nurse said, "Yes, did you give him a treatment?" I couldn't help laughing. But then a little while later I saw his granddaughter go into his room followed quickly by this same nurse, it was very sad and I felt terrible for laughing. It is hard to feel the right things all the time . . .



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Pamela Pratt

## A Ringing In My Ears

Dora's voice broke, broke over and over, smaller and smaller pieces. Like picking up a vase one has dropped and shattered: but you will piece it together again and arrange in it dried flowers—Queen Anne's lace or baby's breath, for it will not take water, will not hold water again. Tears seeping through the cracks in her voice. Giving her time, I use my words carefully, pulling her together, the sentences connecting to keep intact the substance of her grief, the shock. Waivering, quivering, quavering.

*Dora said: I just got back from California, late last night. I've been away for months. No one even knew where I was. I collected my mail and saw the Christmas card Emily sent me and I called right away. Oh my god—*

*Oh, how rude of me, you must have thought I was a prank caller, asking for her like that, I'm so sorry, so sorry. Condolences to you and her mother from Dora and Gilda, tell her mother from Dora and Gilda.*

*I met her when I was nine years old, at the daycare center. We just took to each other, I guess. She would call me and say, "I'm going to be in Brooklyn at such and such a time, place, meet me there." I remember the day she taught me to say no. When I learned that it made me feel so good, and each time I do it I feel powerful and sure of myself. She taught me that. My family couldn't teach me that because they didn't know what no is. Emily taught me that.*

There is a pause. Dora is remembering what both of them were wearing that day and how old she was and how wonderful and strong Emily looked and what room they were in, the color of the very walls. Down to the tone of voice, the time of day, and the last time she saw her and the first time she saw her and—in short, everything.

*The first day she showed up at the center I told Gilda it was all gonna be different. And it was. She'd always just recognize my voice when I said her name on the telephone and right away she'd go into a happy tirade about everything she'd been doing and then I would go into a tirade and when we were both finished we'd arrange to meet. Sometimes I'd just show up at her door and she'd say, "I've got to meet someone, I've got to go, but come in for five minutes anyway." And we'd have our tirades and our talks and three hours later she'd look at her watch as we'd laugh and she'd say, "Well, I'm too late now," and then we'd talk some more. She never sat still. In my apartment I couldn't keep her down for a minute, always moving, examining, touching, exclaiming! As if each object were the most*

*beautiful, and just from her touch, for that second, it would be. She had to love everything. She wouldn't settle for any less than that.*

Then there were the questions. I was prepared for them, had answered them over and over, till I could say it all without thinking about it, till it wasn't me and it wasn't Emily, just the recital of a litany drained of any meaning.

She died on a Tuesday. Her birthday would have been that Friday. She would have been twenty-eight. Dora is twenty. And Dora is. Dora's sister Gilda, is. I am, almost. The cats are. The cats understood and mourned in their own way. No one walked in the door and picked them up each in turn and called their names and cooed the private sounds in which one communicates with cats. No one walked in or stayed in. No one lay on the bed with the television on low and let them crawl, walk, purr, lie all over her, all over her there was confusion, too many people and then none, no more of what they were born into knowing as love or need. She fed, nurtured, nursed them. Petted, fussed, called, cooed, whispered—was, simply and always, there. They mourned in their own way. They slept in her clothes, they tore the carpet, they waited at the door, on the bed, in the bathtub, their siamese voices raised in a cacophony of misery. They waited in any case, in case she might come, might come home.

We knew she was going to die for a long time. She died in her sleep. Yes, she knew she was going to die, "But we didn't expect it just then."

I told Dora: Emily had influenza, and too high a temperature, and too many other things had already gone wrong, and—

I told her: Emily was taking a nap, resting and she died in her sleep. I didn't tell her that her eyes opened for an instant and that she knew. She knew. I was beside her on the bed, watching, close. Her eyes said she knew, that for an instant, an instant shorter and longer than any describable length of time . . . "But we didn't expect it just then."

"She seemed always to make an impression on people," I say when I have nothing else to say.

Her heart waited for last. Everything else went first. That's why she couldn't see you for months at a time, after the operations. She didn't want anyone to know. She didn't want sympathy. I guess we really didn't think about it: we had enough money for her medicine, and then later we didn't. We should have realized that other parts of her body would start to go, too: we weren't prepared for that—the ordeals, and the finance. The first time she was sick I said I wouldn't go to work, I was going to stay with her. She said, this will

happen alot, you can't stop everytime I get ill. And in the end there wasn't any choice, I went to work to pay the bills and I was home less and less, and she got sicker and sicker, I was there less and less, less time together when we needed it more and more, and more. When she would say my name to me it would sound like a light being turned on, the sound of pure light, of doors being opened, I loved her so much.

Over and over, reliving Emily: her clothes, what she ate, her photographs, her feelings, her acting career; peering at remnants of "our" life in the apartment—things not thrown away or burned in my first rage against her death. Months later I find a letter she had once written me, in purple pen, she loved purple, and I can't touch it, my fingers burn, my throat aches. Later, I light a fire with it. The questions hurt, the answers hurt, everything hurts, and still I am. Still Emily is, valiantly or hopelessly: in my own way, Emily is.

Through the twists and turns of these rooms she is saying, not under her breath, because she had no breath left, but the lips moving, faintly forcing sound through a shell, a hollow, she is saying *is it my heart? it's not my heart, is it?* Through the halls and the windows and closed doors and the cats frantic over illness, echoes of her words are ringing in my ears: I hear what they will mean *heart, hard, heart of my heart, heart of gold, beating, dripping, failing, losing, stopping, no, do not say the words, it's all right, just a little blood, you lost just a little blood, you'll be all right, will be all right, everything will be all right, everything, losing everything, losing my love, my heart*

*Try to get some sleep, my love, I'll be right here by your side, it will be all right  
Try to sleep now*

Bending over her, not believing it could happen, for one long afternoon against everything, believing the words: say them, say them for me *it is not my heart, it is not my heart*

try to get some sleep now, try

## On Father's Death

Sunny school day  
in the back door  
all happy and alive.

He's dead.

Who?

Your father. Irene called today.  
it happened two months ago.

Oh.

Well?

Well what?  
gonna play baseball.

She shrugged her shoulders.  
wanted something.

I couldn't cry.  
didn't know why or how.  
never cried  
just  
hit the ball in twelve-year-old springsun  
and  
ran.

Next Saturday, Mom took me to the cemetery.  
forever find  
found  
his grave.

he spoke that  
death is one life to another.  
tears were for ourselves not the dead.  
how could we be sad when

the spirit stays as always was when alive?  
giving council  
being a warmth.

for the truth in his speaking there was  
acceptance  
so no tears.  
no tears for missing  
what had never been a present presence.

I never cried a missing.

We went to the house where he had lived with my aunt.

Father's den was a shrine.  
ceiling covered with model planes and cars  
shelved books rest,  
held upright by his bugle.

I remembered hearing the bugles  
low mourn-filled notes in the night's darkness  
when I had lived with him.  
could see him sitting  
legs open  
arms propped on them  
back bent  
bugle toward the floor  
gently blowing  
what I knew as sadness.  
when he drank all the sounds were  
brightly loud  
not coordinated into a touching.

I stroked the bugle  
his papers,  
piled and crooked  
corner ratty  
song-filled  
poem-full.  
I had seen him with his  
slim narrow-pointed pen  
heard it suck ink to scratch,

all without his looking at me.  
caught  
lost  
real  
it was his private place.

Irene poked at remembering with  
"He left you this."  
holding out his fountain pen.

Shadow splattered splendor  
I never cried for my father.

I just hit the ball in twelve-year sun  
and ran.

Maude Meehan

## Maxima Culpa

On Cayman Island the old fisherman told you  
that after the turtle is caught  
and hacked from its shell the flesh squirms  
and quivers, steaming on the deck.  
He said, "Thees mon seen them pieces jump all  
night. Sometime they still jumpin' next day."

He won't eat turtle because the spirit  
is trapped. "Bad ju-ju."

Last night you flirted with death again.  
No real embrace. Just a quick kiss in passing.  
A moist flick of your tongue between her lips  
to let her know you're still interested.  
Not quite ready to settle down, but willing to gamble.

No needles this time. Just downers,  
booze, a select number of phone calls.

And next time who knows, maybe there won't be  
anyone at home. Out of town, happy our, the movies,  
who knows where, and no time left. Maybe  
you dial one last number, the line clicks in  
and you've beaten the odds one more time. But a  
machine answers, "Sorry I can't come to the phone,  
please leave your name. . . ." and suddenly you panic  
sobbing, "For christ's sake LISTEN TO ME!"

Maybe next time you'll catch on. This game  
is real. Next time, maybe next time we'll find  
your shell, stiff and empty, and we who love you  
stripped raw, quivering, trapped in your pain.

---

from *Chipping Bone*



## Release

you died yesterday at noon.  
by 5:00 pm there was wind  
that howled at my windows  
and shook them into rattle  
and moan but the wailing  
was mine and only  
mine. a good jew, I tore  
at my clothes, came to  
my flesh, kept on tearing  
trying to feel even  
deeper, trying to warm  
my fingers by reaching  
bone—the center where a tornado  
is calm, where the steel support  
beams from the carousel horses  
meet. you always wanted me  
to take you to a carnival, buy  
you blue balloons and hold  
your hand on the ferris wheel but  
we never went because neither  
of us are children anymore.  
especially you, who tried to die  
so many times and finally  
got it right because you practiced.  
the dead are always old

and well informed. I will not  
deny this death as I have  
so many others; instead I want  
to know what gave you  
the right to do it today. I did  
everything you asked me to:  
drove miles out of the way  
in order not to pass  
a cemetery, never asked  
about your family, cooked passover  
meals according to tradition,  
rubbed your temples that always  
seemed to ache, everything

except need you. lady, you were  
never crazy, you just took  
too much responsibility—when  
my white malamutes died  
you mourned harder than I  
ever could, because they were hurt  
on your street by a neighbor  
you were friendly with—and gave  
yourself guilt as others  
give themselves presents or holidays—  
once after loving me, I heard  
you breathe the words, “one day  
I must stop this and marry  
a man,” as if they were a chant.  
mad, sometimes, yes  
but never crazy because you asked  
for the color blue  
as if you wanted to be calmed

and if I need you now—  
as I sit at the edge  
of your livingroom under  
a photograph of us wading  
into the Rifle River, jeans  
rolled to our knees  
and twigs in your hair,  
sorting books, a pile especially  
for those with a bookplate  
reading “Sarah,” a name  
you never told me,  
and wrapping tissue paper  
around the small enameled  
vases that you loved—it is because  
I am tired of death  
so much of it in the middle  
of my life, as if  
I need the practice.

## Eulogy in Three Parts

the funeral was yesterday.  
eight of us stood close  
against the december chicago wind.  
each of us had been her lover  
at one time, or over  
a period of years. each of us  
cried. there was no eulogy,  
no compassionate funeral director  
to choreograph the grief, no  
somber music — just eight windows  
and the wind full of dirty snow.

Billie, it is damned hard  
to believe that you are dead.  
you were the model bar dyke,  
claiming the end stool at  
any bar between the two coasts,  
a pack of camels in your white  
shirt pocket, a shot and a beer  
set directly in front of you.  
you watched everything, everyone.

you beat us at pool,  
lit our cigarettes, bought  
our drinks, listened to our  
troubles, took us home with you  
as if to keep us warm. you  
slicked your hair back, wore  
a gold pinky ring and had  
a heart as big and pure  
as your approach to life.  
we claimed to love you;  
you were a good time  
and asked nothing in return

so how dare you die. they  
told you years ago that you had  
to stop drinking, that your body  
would give up, give in. and  
it did, the kidneys first,  
the heart last.

so we wept. some because  
of being left behind. some  
because of not having  
loved her enough to help  
her live, and some because  
the empty bar stool will not  
stay empty very long.  
after, we stood around  
by the cars, waiting  
for my taxi to arrive.  
we talked about her  
and about ourselves,  
how her disappearance  
from the scene would alter  
the quality of the scene  
and how some of us  
were finally living sober.

you were my first  
woman lover, big  
red-haired and so sure  
of your moves. we  
went to new york and  
you bought me small gold  
earrings in the shape  
of an apple, fallen  
from the tree. you  
never spoke of your three  
children, their father,  
the life you walked out of.

Billie, let me write  
your eulogy and let  
it be about an empty  
bar stool and a full heart  
not afraid of spilling over.  
let it be about women  
who never, in the whole  
length of their lives,  
take a drink, who never  
hurt themselves with poison  
dressed up as a key to pleasure.  
let it be about us standing,  
shoulder to shoulder, in love  
and in bloom.

*Elana Dykewomon*

## From My Journal: The Night That Willow Died

Someone dies  
someone young cheerful  
someone who knew  
death was asking after her  
who said  
at the beginning  
hell, I'm scared, this  
might be the big  
shuffle off to Buffalo  
someone grinning  
who had work to do  
who said  
she wanted to live  
to be alive, proud of how she was moving  
through a hard life  
someone who had been denied  
and came back fighting  
who said  
she was not afraid  
at the end  
at what we think of  
as the end

Someone dies  
who gathered  
the spirit of life around her  
who opened her bones  
wide wide  
opened her butch bones up  
to take in  
the hearts of womyn  
caring about this  
caring about her  
caring about ourselves

And then opened again  
to take in death

Someone dies  
and womyn want  
to be important  
when there is a death  
someone wants  
to wash the body  
someone wants to  
be the one who sings  
someone wants to tell friends,  
bringing the news of death  
someone takes off her rings  
someone watches her lover  
light candles

Everyone is  
important in death  
when one of us dies everyone  
who has a story to tell  
is important  
for what we learn here  
for what we share

These are our lives  
where we have to  
take care know how  
to be with our dying  
know how to hear  
when the last breath comes  
know how to sense  
what change happens  
when someone needs us

death is a gift  
our friends give to us

I did not die at  
thirty-two for nothing  
she says  
one of the messages  
is what I give to you  
use it  
love each other  
care what happens next  
& enjoy  
& live

Someone dies  
her wisecracks and her art  
become a herstory  
all the photos she sent  
where we played in piles of dry leaves  
laughing and can look again  
at that green waterfall  
where an oregon trail ends  
gifts  
to press against the place  
where the ache sticks

O transform loss

& time & grief  
for us

because we wanted her to live  
because good friends  
are hard to make,  
to find over years  
because losing her  
is hard to bear  
and hard to understand

transform

so we can take with us  
the spirit  
she meant to give



Beth McDonald

*from* Four Beginnings For A  
Novel Never Written (narrative)

III.

August 9, 1981

When two pearls grow within the same oyster, they may lie so close together that each bears an imprint of the other. Yet, they are not a matched pair like gloves or shoes. Each has its own beauty and worth, independent of the other. Like one pearl that remains after the other is crushed to dust and the dust scattered, I am indelibly shaped by Claudia. Like a dancer left without a partner, I still move through life with attitudes and ways that are in response to her attitudes and ways.

I never changed Claudia. She changed me. I adapt. I took on her best characteristics, and she helped me to develop my own. But she just held onto lessons of seduction, manipulation, and materialism that she learned while she was a girl, flirting with her daddy. She thought she could control people, because she won such favor from him.

God I loved her! Love her still. Her influence in my life grows, forcing all new relationships into shallow rootedness. How *long* I've remembered every dress she wore! How long to see her in memory, as she moved with a swift dance step in those dresses: the gray jersey with "windows" of bright red, the Italian gold thread suit she wore to symphony, the white brushed jersey that emphasized her vivid brunette beauty. If one had a slight wrinkle or a faint spot, she'd laugh, "On a fast horse, they'll never notice." And I remember the shorts I ironed for her: white ones, red and black in old, soft chino.

The memories crowd, swirl, cascade, flow over and through and *are* me. Too much and too close. That's why it's so hard to write. How to organize what is chaotic and tumbling? Where to begin? I try and I'm surprised with fresh pain. It's like searching for old snapshots in a trunkful of razor blades.

I think of nights around the pool in Louisiana. We sat at an umbrella table with our drinks; and the southern moon just above the water, so close. We knew no one but ourselves, the excitement, the closed circuit electricity of being together—or were we opposite poles? Negative and positive, showering sparks between us, always attracting and repelling. My physics may be faulty but I know we made currents of wit and laughter and sheer volatile emotion. No wonder I hate her sometimes, and she surely hated me. We could shake

one another's self-control all to hell, hurt one another so tearfully. We were pushing one another off cliffs and over falls all the time.

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#### IV.

June 28, 1984

The story of Claudia and me is a love story. All the world loves lover, right? But it won't be an easy story to tell. To a major degree, I am on the side of those who have judged and condemned us. I cannot justify either our feelings or what we did about them. Whatever I tell will be told within the scope of the icy, soul-weighting glare of a Texas judge who pronounced us as adult delinquents, unfit mothers; and awarded custody of our children to their fathers.

But another judge is harder to write against. That one is the Relentless Reminder within myself saying: "You followed your love, just as the Prophet says we must do." But that's only the prelude to what my interior judge-reminder really wants to say: YOU RAN OUT ON YOUR KIDS! The accusation drops into my consciousness each time like dry ice on bare skin. The searing is deep. It leaves scars without also healing.

How do I answer the judges? Twenty-two years after that first eye-locking moment of enthrallment with Claudia, I insist: Actions can sometimes be chosen and modified to fit circumstances and honor commitments. Feelings are not that governable.

In 1959, Claudia and I were not lesbians. We were barely aware female homosexuals existed. But overwhelmingly, we *were* both vulnerable, each in desperate need of being heard by someone able to care and understand. We found one another.

Now, I push the grief away. I'm too old. My body can't take the stress. How can I grieve alone with nobody else around who loved her in spite of her sharp tongue, her vindictiveness, her excesses of irony, her exhibitionism, her seductiveness? Who else saw her addicted, defeated, fingernail beds white and then blue as she retched out stomach acid in the agony of withdrawal from seconal? Who else held her while she sobbed her bitterness when men used her body but scorned her opinions?

First, she put herself on the line for Spence. For him, she worked nights in admitting at Chicago's Presbyterian Hospital and then as Echo Aluminum's company nurse. She came home to two babies and to helping Spence pass Hebrew and Greek.

Next, she put herself on the line for me, working at Plains Machinery and later for Coach Kerbel, coming home to help me learn advanced grammar. In a cast from ankle to hip after knee surgery, she sat with a board across her chair

arms and used my manual typewriter to type the second and final drafts of my thesis, understanding *Campbell's Thesis Writing Guide* better than I did. Did I pay her? The thought never entered either of our minds. And I was the one who walked across the stage in my master's robe and got the degree.

Spence wanted to be a minister; I wanted to be a teacher. She set her jaw and said to each of us in turn: YOU SHALL BE!

How do I grieve for the one who shared my vision and freed my mind? But those are big, abstract terms, not adequate for expressing what was eye to eye and skin to skin. I put out my hand and she took it. For the first time, I realized that touch doesn't have to include demand or mean my submission as *his* possession. She wanted the sensitivity of my fingertips, needed the back rubs and hair brushings I gave, returned the kisses, accepted without question my thousand hours of staring at her face, her hair line, the birthmark lock in front, the deep-set left eye, the patrician brow and nose that was still patrician though twice broken, accepted my staring at her hands as she moved them with grace in smoking and talking.

She would not let me be less than the best I wanted to be. And she died. Sold out to men and drugs, another statistic to prove no one licks pancreatic cancer. She fought it a good fight, sixteen months from surgery and diagnosis to death.

I can't grieve hard enough, long enough. *I am* too old. My body *can't* take the stress. There *is* no one else who knew her to grieve with me.



## *L e s b i a n* *E t h i c s*

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## “Miss” Alma

Two letters from my mother are spread out on the table of my unfinished house. The late afternoon sun comes in big chunks through the windowless openings, flooding their pages. I've just come back from the post office with them. It's the first time in weeks I've gone to town. I've been here all this while, struggling alone, trying to get the roof on my house before it rains. This morning I finally finished. I climbed down victorious, feeling strong and proud. Now all that seems so very far away.

I'm sitting here reading and re-reading those letters. I'd inadvertently opened the second one first. “Dear Hildi, Alma Culver died yesterday. It was probably for the best. She was so old and she had just gotten weaker after the last operation. The funeral will be tomorrow. Your Uncle Clarence will be the . . .” I stare at those words — “Alma died yesterday.” The letter is already a week old. In her first letter mother says, “Dear Hildi, I went to visit Alma Culver in the hospital today. She is quite sick. She's had pneumonia. There are other complications as well and now they're planning to do an exploratory operation. You remember Miss Alma don't you? You used to play at her house when you were little. She asked about you several times and would like to see you. Of course I had to tell her that I have no quick way of getting in touch with you since you've chosen to live off in the woods. . . .”

It's hard for me to focus on the words. That letter is almost two weeks old. That means that while I was wrestling with my roof and worrying about rain, Alma was struggling to breathe. She wanted to see me and I didn't know it. I feel such a lurch of loss and pain. She wanted to see me and now I'm too late. Whatever else I do in my life I will always be too late to go and see her.

Mother says in her second letter, “You must really work out a way of being in touch with us in case anything happens to someone in the family.” The implications of that hadn't hit me the first time I read it. Now, even through my grief, I feel a burn of anger — old familiar helpless anger. “She *was* my family, mother.” I shout at her, punching the table, “more family than you'll ever be.” And mother's way of saying — do you remember Miss Alma? I want to tear up her letters but I can't. They're about Alma. Except for the silver frog, they're all I have of her right now. I jump up and go outside. The blue hills quiver and soften in my tears. It's beautiful here. Alma would have loved it. She loved the woods. She'll never see this place. She'll never see my house. A new wave of loss comes over me. This house meant something special to her. On my last visit home she was the only one that gave me support. She was so pleased.

“So you’re building a house, Little One? That’s good. That’s wonderful. You always were a strong girl.” With a smile she squeezed my arm to feel the muscles. “You’re not afraid of doing things.” She opened my hands and rubbed her fingers across the calluses. “Good strong hands.” Her own hands were shaking slightly. They’d gotten soft from her being sick so long but you could still see the strength there, the work they’d done. The veins were like blue snakes across the backs of them. Looking down at them I remembered how, when I was little, I used to push down on the veins in one spot to see them bulge in another. I used to say, “Alma, your hands are funny,” and she’d laugh. Impetuously I bent to kiss both her hands where they lay in mine. Then I blushed. When I glanced at Alma she looked confused and pleased. She put my hands together and held them between hers. “Don’t get discouraged. There’ll be times when it’s hard. You just have to keep at it. It will be such a pleasure to you that you built it yourself. Every day you live in that house it will be a pleasure to you.” She turned quickly and looked out the window. I thought she was going to cry but instead she said proudly, “All those flowers, they come up each year. I planted every one of them.” Then she looked back at me so intently I felt her look was full of messages. “When you’re finished I’ll come visit you.”

I laughed. “At the rate things are going, who knows when that will be. You better come sooner. I’ll fix a space for you with a view of the hills.” She’d smiled and nodded though we both knew she wouldn’t come. She was too old already. It’s too far. The land is steep. But I’d planned to send her pictures.

The rest of my family made me feel like a fool. I was naive. I was so full of enthusiasm I told everyone, “I’m building a house,” thinking they’d be excited. My Uncle Clarence said in a weary voice, “That must be very interesting. Are you studying architecture?” as if I were constructing a model for class instead of building a house to live in. Aunt Cicily, my mother’s sister, looked me up and down and shook her head. “Well, young women these days are doing all kinds of things.” Then she gave me her quick crooked smile that always has some malice in it. “Aren’t you worried you’ll scare the boys away? A man might be afraid of a woman who builds her own house.” I gave her back a hard look that said — you know who I am and I know you do. You know damn well I don’t care if I scare men away. But she wouldn’t meet my eyes. Nothing honest ever gets said between us. It’s been that way for years. She didn’t ask me a thing about how I’m building the house or what it looks like. Neither did my mother. She just said tightly, “You always have to do things your own way,” as if that was a character flaw.

Alma got me to draw the plans for her. “You’ll need a center post, Little One. The span’s too long. There’s not enough support for your upper floor.” I’m almost six feet tall and she still called me Little One.

Now, looking at my house I think, I'll never share anything with her again, not this house, not my work, not anything in my life. "Alma, you would have loved it here," I say out loud to her and the pain comes so quickly I have to press my hands against my chest to ease it.

I miss her, I really miss her. But if I had the power I wouldn't call her back. She was too old, too sick. Already the last time I saw her, I felt she was waiting to leave. I was just hoping for one more visit. My adult self knows. It's the child in me that's grieving, that can't let go. I lean against a beech tree and sink slowly to the ground with my arms around it. My face is pressed to the smooth bark for comfort. I sit against it for a long while and somehow it does comfort me—its slow deep rooted life, its coolness and its permanence. I feel gentled the way I used to be gentled by the woods when I was little.

Alma was my oldest friend. She was the first friend I found for myself. I really did find her. There's a lot I've forgotten about my childhood but I remember everything about the way I met Alma. It was on one of my explorations. I must have been about seven then, maybe eight. At that time I was in the woods as much as possible, in spite of my mother's scoldings. On this particular day I was following an old road and it led me to a big white house set in the middle of a patch of fields. I was amazed and a little scared. I hadn't known anyone lived in that direction. To someone used to orderly lawns and hedges it all seemed shabby, overgrown and mysterious. I sensed immediately that this was a fascinating place and probably forbidden. There was a woman digging in the yard. I didn't want to get scolded. I certainly didn't want to get sent home. But I needed to see more. I hid up a tree.

From there I could watch that woman. She was old and not old, I couldn't tell. Her face when she turned looked wrinkled but the way she moved, she seemed young and strong. She used tools like a man, digging vigorously and wiping her hands on her baggy pants. She talked to everything, the cat, the trees, the birds that flew by, the plants she was setting out. "I hope you like this spot. I want to see your face here again next spring." Once, when she stood up to ease her back, she looked straight in my direction. I was sure she'd seen me but she said nothing and went on planting. When she had her back turned wrestling loose a big rock, I slipped out of the tree and ran home.

"Where were you?" Mother asked sharply.

"Just walking," I said quickly as I slipped out of the room. I was still out of breath.

"I want you to stay close to the house. I don't like you going off that way," she called after me.

But I was back the next day in the same hiding place. The woman had a big wooden bowl in her lap. She was sanding intently, humming and singing to herself. Occasionally she glanced up at the sky. Once she turned and looked all around. Again I felt sure she'd seen me but she went on with her sanding. Yes, I decided, she was old. Her hands and face were all wrinkled.

On the third day there was a shoe box tied in the crotch of the tree. It had cookies and a note inside. The note said, "If you want to come down and talk to me that's fine and if you don't that's fine too but I would like to meet you. The cookies are for you. They're good. I made them with honey." I know now what was in the note because I saved it. Then I could only read a few words but I was sure I understood the message. I gobbled down two cookies, shoved the rest in my pocket with the note and slipped out of my tree. Now it was going to happen. But the women didn't look up from her digging. I was afraid to go any further and didn't know what to say. I stood for a while half hidden behind a bush. Finally, without turning her head, she said, "It's all right, little one, come and say hello."

I went dragging my feet and looking at the ground. "How do you do. Thank you for the cookies. They're very good," I said very fast, trying to remember how to be polite.

"Well, it's a girl." She seemed surprised but pleased. It was the first time in my life anyone had ever been pleased I was a girl. I was used to hearing my father say, "Three girls, that's too many." Then my mother would sigh, "I wish we'd had at least one boy."

The woman wiped off her hand and held it out. "My name is Alma, Alma Culver. What's yours?"

"Hildi Mason," I mumbled quickly. I was too shy to look at her but I did hold out my hand. Alma actually shook it as if she was meeting an adult. I pulled my hand back and stuck it in my pocket. Then I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do you like flowers?" she asked me.

I nodded.

"Do you know their names?"

I shook my head.

"That's a tulip. I just planted some red ones but they won't come up till next year. Those are peonies. This one is a . . ." She took my hand and gently touched my fingers to each flower. We walked through the garden together. She introduced me to all of them. I didn't have to talk till I was ready.

"Do you want something to go with those cookies? There's some cider in the house. I pressed it myself." Trembling with excitement, I followed her to the house. I was actually going to see the inside.

Alma's house amazed me. It was certainly different from anything I'd ever seen. All the houses I'd ever been in were like my parent's house, stiff and proper, all the furniture looking like it came from the same store. Everything in Alma's house was fluid, chaotic, beautiful and jumbled, different styles of furniture, piles of books, masks, swords, baskets, strange dolls toppling over in corners and plants everywhere. And on everything there were little white streaks, even on the old velvet couch. She saw my look of surprise and said quickly "the bird." Then she made a gesture toward the bookcase. A feathered ball on little stick legs dropped down from the shelves. It flapped its useless wings and hopped around the room, screeching for food. "I have to teach it how to fly and how to feed itself from the ground so I can let it go. No use cleaning up till after it's gone." She lifted it on her finger and the bird balanced there, swaying back and forth. "It's a baby robin. Every year some of them fall out of the nest and I pick them up. Sometimes they survive, sometimes they don't. I suppose it's foolish to save them. There are probably enough robins in the world." Wordlessly I put out my hand and wordlessly she set the robin on my finger. I held my breath and felt the tiny claws bite into my flesh.

That was the first of my many visits. I was there whenever I could slip away. That house and the things in it seemed as strange and wonderful to my child-self as a fairy tale. For a while my fantasy was that Alma was a witch, my witch. I wasn't afraid. I loved the idea of having found my own witch and being the heroine of the tale. I made up wild stories about her when I went to bed.

Much later, Alma told me she'd been a teacher for years. "I wasn't much good at it. I liked teaching the children but I had a hard time with discipline. I stuck with it though. I had to earn my living and it did give me the money to travel." She'd been all over the world, to Egypt and Haiti and Japan. That's where the objects in her house had come from. She taught me geography with masks and spears and travel stories. She even taught me some history that way but not the kind of history I learned in school, especially the part about the Indians. When Alma talked about the Indians she got angry. "It was their country, Little One. Remember that. We're the invaders. Whatever they did was to defend themselves." She would say it fiercely, wanting me to understand. There was power in her anger. It frightened me a little but she never turned it on me, never except that one time with the frog.



Oh, that frog. I can still see myself running up to her house with that huge bullfrog squeezed in my hands. I was holding it so tightly its eyes bulged and its legs were flapping helplessly behind it.

She ran out to meet me, shaking her head. "No, no. You can't do that to it. Let me have it right now."

"It's my frog. I need a box. I want to keep it." I was frantic with desire. It was the first time I'd ever caught such a big frog.

"Let go of that frog, Hildi." I tried to jump away. She grabbed my arm and looked at me fiercely. "You caught that frog here. Things that live on my land do not live in boxes. Open your hands." Her grip on my wrist was very strong. I opened my hands. She took the frog from me gently. The poor thing was limp from my grip. Still shaking her head but smiling now she said, "We'll put it in the lily pond. It will probably stay. You can catch other frogs to keep it company but be kinder next time."

I named the first frog Goldy. After that there was Greeny and Spots and Bigfoot. They got so tame I could lie at the edge of the pond and scoop one up in my hand. For a while they were my best friends.

Alma had become the center of my life. When mother asked, "Who do you want at your birthday party?" the first person I thought of was Alma. I certainly liked her better than the kids I knew.

Very excited, I rushed over to see her as soon as I could. "It's my birthday next week. I want you to come to the party."

Alma gave me a funny look. "I don't think your parents would like that."

"It's my party. They said I could ask whoever I wanted." But I really knew she wasn't what they meant. She was shaking her head. "If you don't come I won't have a party."

"You certainly are stubborn." The way she said it made it seem like that might not be so bad.

"Please Alma."

"Alright, alright." She was laughing but she seemed pleased. "But we'll pretend it's a game and have some rules. I'll wear a dress and I won't wipe my nose on my sleeves and you'll call me "Miss Alma" and be very respectful and polite. Can you remember?"

"Yes, yes. Miss Alma." I would have agreed to anything.

So Alma came. Everyone was painfully polite. I could see the surprise on my mother's face but she was gracious the way she is when she's uncomfortable. My father even said, "How nice to finally meet our neighbor." Alma was witty and lively. She was wonderful with the other children but she also remembered to be cautious. We both kept to our

bargains. She called me Hildi instead of Little One and I remembered every time to call her "Miss" Alma even though it was a strain. Even so I was thrilled at really having her there in my house.

She wore a dress. It was the first time I'd ever seen her in a dress -- some soft flowered material but it looked a little baggy like her pants. Most of the time she remembered to wipe her hands on the little paper party napkins but once I saw her wipe them down the sides of her dress and struggled not to laugh. Sometimes our eyes met. The I felt a secret bubbling between us.

For my birthday she gave me a tiny silver frog from Germany. "That's for the one you had to let go. You can keep this one in a box if you want."

My mother shook her head, frowning. "I don't think you should give her that. She's so careless she'll lose it in no time." She seemed ready to jump between us and snatch it away.

Alma smiled a big sudden smile. "It's been lost many times and it's always come back." She closed her hand around it and its coolness warmed my pal. It needs to go on to someone else."

As soon as Alma left mother said sharply, "You better let me have that frog for safekeeping. You can have it back when you're older."

"I don't know where it is," I lied outrageously. Then I began shuffling helplessly through the litter of papers pretending to look.

"My God, just what I said would happen and you haven't even had it an hour." She went around the room shaking things angrily and I felt a guilty pleasure watching her. "What a shame. What a ridiculous thing to give to a child. I told her but she wouldn't listen. Well, what does she know about children anyway? Go up to bed now Hildi. You can look again tomorrow."

I slipped away leaving her still searching and slept with the silver frog in my hand that night. I had it with me every night for years, rubbing it gently between my thumb and fingers as I fell asleep. In the morning I always remembered to hide it, a pretty good record I think for someone who's careless. Years later I had a loop put on it so I could wear it on a chain. The details on it are all gone now, all softened and worn away.

Alma came to all my birthdays after that and sometimes other family gatherings. I invited her. Mother didn't like it but she felt a social obligation to be polite to a neighbor. I overheard her saying to my father with a sort of honeyed contempt, "Poor lonely old thing. She's probably taken to Hildi because she has no children of her own. She seems nice enough but she's certainly a little strange from living alone all these years."

"Well, I don't want Hildi over there too much. She can't really be a good influence."

"She's teaching her to read."

“What in the hell are we sending her to school for? It costs enough, let them teach her to read. That child is weird enough by herself without hanging around an old woman.” I guess he was angry that private school was so expensive but I hadn’t asked to go there. My mother was the one who insisted. She thought I had learning problems.

It was true that I learned more from Alma than I did from school but after that I didn’t talk about it. They said other things about her that I overheard. “Those baggy dresses she wears must have come from the charity box.” “She always looks like she’s just been digging in the garden.” After a while I realized those things were said for my ears. I learned that the house she lived in, the “witch” house, had been her family’s. They’d died there and she’d stayed on. “Such a fine old house. I hear it’s a mess.” “She could at least get someone to paint it.” “She probably doesn’t even notice.” I’d smile and think —you don’t know anything about that house.

Alma only had two dresses. I don’t think she cared how she looked, not the way other people do. She’d wear one and then wear the other one for the next occasion. They were both baggy flower prints. I had to agree that she looked funny in a dress. I liked it much better when she wore pants. She was more herself. And somehow we were more equals. She used to say to my parents, “I love children. Let them come and play at my house whenever they want.” My sisters came a few times. I enjoyed showing them everything. By then I knew all the stories about the masks and swords. I even knew where there was a piece of elephant tusk. But I made it clear that this was my special territory. They had a good time while they were there, exploring the attic and the closets, but when they were back home with my parents they made fun of Alma. “She’s weird.” “She wears funny clothes.” “There’s a bird loose in the house. It makes a mess on everything.” One evening, in a protective rage, I grabbed hold of Peggy and pushed her up against the wall. “If you say one more bad thing about Alma I’m going to punch you.” Peggy was two years older but I was bigger and fiercer. After that they stopped coming. I was glad. Alma was mine again. A few times there were other people there but not often, no one that mattered, not until Jenny.

That day must have been one of those times I was walking softly, practicing being an Indian. Alma was sitting in the yard with another woman. They didn’t hear me. Neither of them looked up. They were talking low and intently and holding each other’s hands. I slipped up into my hiding tree. I had a sense that something momentous was happening. The air was charged. I wanted to hear what they were saying but I could only hear a word or so now and then until Alma said loudly, “It won’t work, Jenny.” She almost shouted it. Then she looked up and saw me. “Come down, Little One. I want you to meet my friend.” I felt foolish being caught that way in front of a stranger. Alma introduced us. Jenny reached out to take my hand, then impulsively, she put an arm around my waist and hugged me.

“Hello, Hildi, I’m Jenny. Alma talks about you all the time.”

I could see Alma had been crying. Her face was wet and dirt streaked. She was wiping it with her sleeve. I pulled away and turned on Jenny like a fierce little animal. “Did you hurt Alma? Are you making her cry?”

“No, no, no,” Alma said quickly. “We’re crying together. We’re both sad.” She hugged me too and Jenny put her arm around me again. For that moment standing between them, I felt such expectancy, such a sense of force and power. I’d never seen adults crying together. I was excited but frightened too. I felt some great potent mystery there and I wanted to be included.

Then Alma looked up at me, catching my eye. “You have to go home now, Little One. Jenny and I need to talk. Don’t come back today.” She said it very gently but it was like a hammer coming down. I was being excluded, shut out. They withdrew their arms. I pulled back and walked away, stiff-legged and self-conscious with rejection.

Alma laughed and called after me, “You can’t hide up in trees anymore, Hildi. Your legs are too long.” Already I was the tall skinny one in school. I remember hearing Jenny laugh too. As soon as I was out of sight I ran to my favorite hiding place in the woods, the old wooden water tower. There I climbed up the rusty ladder. For most of that afternoon I sat on that narrow platform above the trees with a terrible new feeling coursing through me. Much later, looking back, I knew it was jealousy. Why was I sent away instead of her? It was a long time before I felt ready to go home.

I swore to myself I’d never go back to Alma’s. I didn’t for a while, not for a few weeks at least, not until Alma sent a note.

“Miss Alma has invited you to lunch. I think you should go,” Mother told me in that wonderfully hostile way she has. She made it sound like a social obligation, detestable but necessary. I made an appropriately rude face but I was delighted. I could go “home” again — an official summons. The note had birds drawn in the corners and a frog at the bottom. I saved it for a long time, stuck it in the edge of my mirror.

Alma made peace with me in her own way. She’s saved a grass snake for me, a long green ribbon of life that wound between her fingers and mine in supple figure eights. We went together to let it loose below the gardens.

She didn’t say anything about Jenny that day and somehow I knew not to ask. She never said anything about Jenny but often I felt her there in the house with us. I don’t remember anything about her appearance, nothing at all. I have an impression that she was younger than Alma but even that may be wrong. What I do remember to this day, imprinted in my flesh, is the electric feeling of standing between them when they hugged me.

Alma was a constant in my life but as I got older she became less the good-witch-grandmother and more a friend. High school was a painful time for me. I felt like an outsider there and it was no better at home. My sisters were dating. The house was always noisy and full of boys. I went through stages of trying to be “feminine” and not knowing how and stages of wearing boots and pants, being rowdy and getting in trouble. Under it all I was painfully shy. I was already very tall, five foot eleven, and felt awkward most of the time. When my family was too much for me I went to Alma’s. I started studying there. Finally I was there so much of the time she cleared out a corner for me — a table by the window and even some bookshelves. If it was spring, that year’s robin might perch on my shoulder or book and leave white streaks on my papers.

It was hard for me to study, hard to keep my long growing body so cramped and still. Math was the worst. “I hate this, I hate it. Why do I have to learn this stuff?” Alma would come and sit by me and try patiently to explain algebra, geometry, whatever I was snarled up with at the time. “But it will never be any use to me.” I felt tortured by it.

“You never know what may be useful. You have to learn it all.” She’d look at me with so much concern it was almost like pity.

“I can’t, I can’t. It hurts my head.” Last week when I was on my roof trying to put up the rafters, struggling to cut angles so they’d meet other angles, I thought about Alma, how she was back then, looking at me with love and pity and saying, “You don’t know what you’ll need. You have to learn it all.” You were right Alma, I’d say to her when I cut the board too short and the angle was all wrong and I couldn’t figure out why. You were right — then I’d think back to my tall awkward self sitting cramped up and rebellious at her table, refusing to learn. But I loved history. I loved to listen to Alma tell stories from the past. That was her way of teaching it. Those evenings when she made a fire in the fireplace, lit the kerosene lamps and we sat talking, those were the best times in my strange high school years. Sometimes we even had a little glass brandy together. Then I felt completely an adult and her equal. Once she asked me about boys. I was in a stage of being tough and arrogant, a “boots and pants” time. “I hate boys. I think they’re stupid.” But I could have said the same about girls. I hated their silly ways and was angry that they closed me out. I would have given anything to be included, even my pride, even myself — but I wasn’t wanted.

“All the same, you’ll get married someday?” It was more a question than a statement.

“Never,” I said fiercely. “Never.”

She was shaking her head. “You don’t know.”

“You never got married.”

“No, I didn’t. I guess I’m an old maid, what’s called a spinster.” The way she said that word it had layers of meaning.

Those first few years after high school I didn't see Alma much. I was out in the world discovering myself and didn't come home any more than I had to. It took a while for me to discover the thing about myself that mattered most. I think Alma must have known it all along. That's why, when I got involved with Leslie, I wanted to take her home so they could meet. I knew it was important. They liked each other instantly. They even formed an alliance together for teasing me. "Have you noticed how she . . ." "Well, actually, she never . . ." "Oh, but did she tell you that . . ." But there was something else there, some strange mixture of hostility with that affection. I couldn't understand it. It made me uneasy. Later Leslie was very critical of Alma. "She certainly is a frumpy dresser. Does she go out of her way to look like that? And that house, God, you can hardly walk through it."

"I thought you liked her." I felt hurt and protective. It was like my sisters all over again.

Leslie stopped and thought a moment, then she said slowly, "I do, I love her. She's wonderful. I'm just jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Jealous and scared. She's known you for so long. She was your first love. Maybe I don't feel I can measure up."

"What the hell do you mean? We were never lovers." I was shocked, outraged, as if she'd accused me of being lovers with my grandmother.

Leslie laughed. "Don't get yourself all upset, Hildi. There are other ways of being lovers. It doesn't have to be with the body. You can be lovers on the spiritual plane. The energy's just as real. Can you tell me it isn't there?"

I shook my head remembering my own jealousy that afternoon at the water tower. "Leslie, she was my survival all those years. She helped me get here today, alive and sane. Can you understand that?"

"Yes I can understand and it goes both ways. You're the validation for her life."

"And you're my lover. You don't have to be jealous. There's a lot to be said for the physical plane." Laughing, I pulled her over on top of me on the rug.

That was a revelation in my life, that there were other ways of being lovers. I learned so much from Leslie that year. She must have learned from me too but by the end of it we separated. It was a painful, hostile separation that left me feeling almost suicidal. We were too much alike. We'd both been so unmothered. Our needs and demands were too great. When they collided, all our vision, all our wisdom was gone and we were left with raw animal rage. We even fought physically, violently. It scared us each time, scarred us too, some terrible ferocity let loose between us. I took my wounds and my pain and went back to the woods, my one sure place of comfort.

"You're not living with Leslie anymore?" Alma was looking so concerned. I was home for my yearly visit.

"No, she's with someone else now."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Are you living with anyone?"

"Not right now."

"Tell me what you're doing with your life?"

"I'm living in a tent in the woods and learning auto mechanics in town."

"Aren't you lonely?"

"I like what I'm doing."

"It's not good to live alone."

"Alma, you've lived alone all your life."

"Don't you think I was lonely, Little One? If things were different, if I was your age now and had to do it all over again, I wouldn't do it that way, no matter what they said."

I looked at her sitting very straight and fierce in her old velvet chair and for a moment I wanted to cry out to her, "Oh Alma, I'm so unhappy, my heart is breaking, I feel like I'm going to die." I wanted to put my head down in her lap and cry and cry but I didn't. It was an impulse, not the reality. We've never been that way with each other. So much of what's happened between us has been unspoken, unacknowledged. I just put my hand on hers. She looked at me again with that caring so much like pity that I remember from high school. I wanted to ask her about Jenny. I wanted so much to ask her about Jenny. Her name hummed in the air. But I couldn't break that seal of silence from so many years. Would she be glad if I did, relieved at last it was being said? Would she never forgive the intrusion? I tried several times. No words came. But Jenny was there in that room with us, large and present.

Alma stood up suddenly. "How good is your mechaniking?"

"Getting better all the time. Why?"

"Let's see what you can do for that old car of mine."

I'm crying again. The pain comes with the memories. I want Alma back, want her the way she never was. I want her to put her arms around me. I want her to comfort me for my loss of her. Hold me . . . hold me . . . And I'm feeling Leslie's loss too. She's not in my life anymore. I can't go to her for comfort. Even my mother — suddenly I'm grieving for my mother.

I sit there crying, forgetful until I'm chilled and cramped. Then I have to move, to do something. I get up thinking about the funeral. I'm sorry I wasn't there. Then in ways I'm not so sorry. There would have been a minister saying stupid pious hypocrisies over her body, making me want to shout "Liar" in the church. I would have had to sit still and wear a dress, or be accused of being disrespectful. Maybe the worst of it would have been listening to what other people said about her, my family especially. No, I'll say goodbye to you in my own way, I tell her.

I go inside. In the middle of the room is the walnut centerpost, a tree that came down in a storm. I'd planned to carve its surface with everything, birds, animals, flowers. I can hear Alma saying to me, "You'll need a centerpost, Little One. The span's too long."

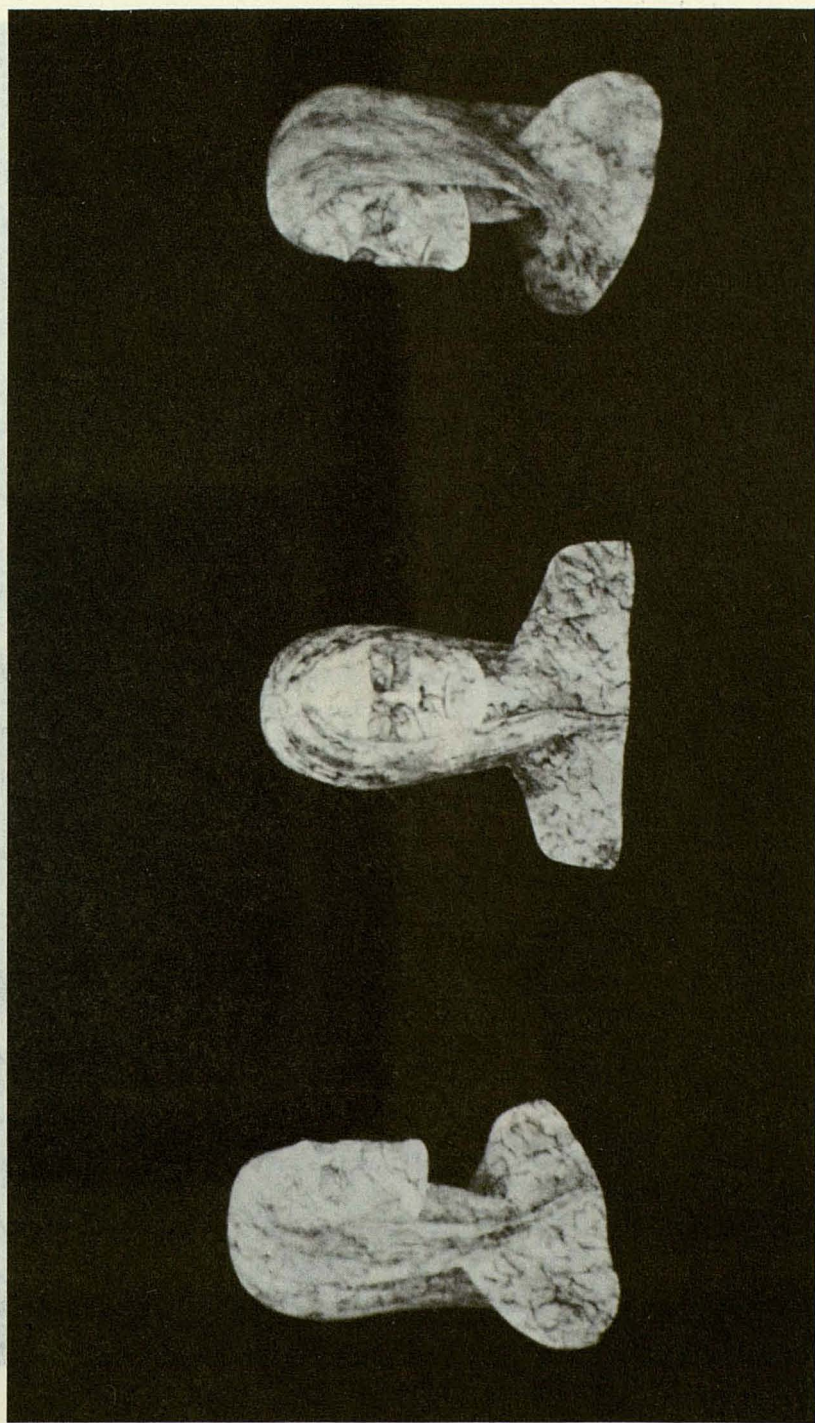
"It's here Alma. It's holding up my house," I say, running my hands over the cool surface of the wood.

I get a black crayon and with clear, simple lines draw a frog with a tulip on either side, the stems crossed to make an arch. Under that I write Alma Culver — 1887-1979. Then I get out my carving tools. The frog and flowers are easy enough. The letters take longer. I've never carved letters before and it's getting dark. I light a lamp. It throws quivering and confusing shadows. I work a long time. The curls of dark gleaming walnut pile up on the floor. It's late when I stop. I'm stiff and my hands are cramped. I stand up to look. It's crude but it's beautiful. When I touch the letters I'm crying again.

I take the big red candle from my box of treasures. Leslie made it for me when we were still together. I light it and set it on the floor under Alma's name. Let it burn there for as long as it lasts.

I look at the carving again. It's not enough. I want to write something more, to say how it really was. I want to write, Alma Culver, my first love, or, my real mother — something more. But the wood is so absolute and direct and final. Those words are ambiguous. They're confusing and distorting, have many meanings, need more words to explain them, and still more words, and can obscure the reality as much as reveal it. The wood will have to stand as it is, clear, primitive, permanent; a frog, two tulips and that simple line of letters. If I want to say more, I'll have to write about her.





*Self-Portrait, Oil on Canvas, 8 by 11 feet, 1970.*



*Detail from "Self-Portrait."*

## Heart Attack

My mother's mother died  
when my mother was 4 years old.

My mother died  
when I was 8 years old.

When my daughter was 4  
I had a minor heart attack.

When my daughter was 8  
I burned a hole in my chest;  
unable to breathe, I quit  
smoking. I'm trying to remember  
what I learned in Math  
about arithmetical progressions  
and geometric progressions.

According to one  
I'll have a fatal attack  
when my daughter is 12.

According to the other  
I'll have a fatal attack  
when my daughter is 16.

I think.

And I wonder whether  
there are other ways  
to figure this.

## Questions

1.

They stare:

a woman about my age,  
her young son in the shopping cart.  
I maneuver down the aisle on crutches  
she averts her eyes.

He smiles I smile back.

“Where is your leg? What happened to your leg?”

Before I can respond she slaps him hard  
shoves the cart ahead.

He sobs looks back in horror  
the questions thistle in his throat.

“Wait!”

She turns the corner.

I swallow my answers  
choke on their bitter roots.

2.

Boldly smirking

he watches me move  
from washing machine to dryer  
approaches cracking his gum

“Why ya limping?”

Artificial leg, huh?

Yeah, I thought so.

I had a woman once with one leg,  
she took better care of me than most with two.”

He blocks my way.

“Maybe you’d like to take care of me for awhile?”

3.

She staggers from the bar to our table  
clutches my arm  
her coal black hair painted face  
too close to mine.

“Such a pretty girl.

If that happened to me I’d kill myself.”

I look at her, this woman  
old enough to be my mother,  
"Why, why would you do that?"  
"It's tough enough being a woman," she says.

4.  
On our wedding day  
my father-in-law asks,  
"Why couldn't you have picked someone  
with all of her parts?"

## The Wolf

### I

i write  
when it hurts.

last night i dreamt  
there were tubes in my back  
my body  
hooked  
to machines,  
this morning i couldn't bend over

i write  
when it hurts.

one night i dreamt  
the soles of my feet split

i walked on bare bones,  
glass splinters grinding in my joints

i write  
when it hurts.

my mind pouring out through my fingertips, relieved

my mind melting into images i create, relieved

the words  
tie me  
to a past  
to a future  
where our lives are re/lived  
over and over

---

i have a chronic illness called Lupus, which is the Latin word for wolf. Lupus causes my immune system to make anti-bodies against my own DNA. this means my body is literally devouring itself.

write it down    write it all down

push  
the pencil  
across  
the page

i write  
    when it hurts.

searching for words  
    to tell  
        how it feels

## II

in a dream    i am walking alone at night    i come to an intersection of wide streets and stop to peer in every direction    i am very careful    i begin to cross then a car drives speeding heading right for me    i can't run    i'm not able to run    somehow    i jump onto the hood    this life is still in me    i curse    make fists    and pound against the windshield,    but there is no one to hear me    there is no one driving

i wake  
    to the cries of the wolf  
    circling  
        my brain

my mind spins  
    into the day while  
    my body lags behind

licking  
    the wounded legs  
    the swollen joints

if the pain controlled me i might  
tear through my flesh  
and pull open the back bones  
        spine by spine

if time controlled me i might never sleep  
there's so much left  
undone

but i have learned the power of each breath  
in and out

### III

i dream i have 10 days to live.  
i flee the city for the earth's edge  
          where water turns mountain to sand  
and lie naked  
          under yellow cliffs  
          spilling salty currents  
          into the sea

rivers run from my pores  
          until i float  
          on my own  
          dusty bones

will you  
          take me  
take me  
          turn my body  
          into smooth round stones  
          and scatter me  
          across  
          the shore

---

*First published in THE POWER OF EACH BREATH: A DISABLED WOMEN'S ANTHOLOGY, Cleis Press.*



## Sergi's Surgery

Janet Sergi hobbles now  
leaning on her four-pronged cane  
fighting off the cracks and crabgrass  
that she jokes are "out to get her."

I am in Chicago when I get the phone call  
The voices warn, "Come quickly.  
They're slicing through her brain tomorrow morning.  
The doctors say no hope." No hope.  
I take the first flight out and mourn her death  
the long trip home  
and mourn her death  
the doctors say no hope.

Janet Sergi takes things slowly now  
ties her shoes one-handed  
conquers forks and phones and phonemes  
She learns that patience is no virtue  
It's a trial  
that's lined  
with terror

Arriving back in Denver  
Thana says don't even stop to use the restroom—  
She whisks me off at highest speed  
but Janet's room is empty as a campaign speech  
The cutting of her brain moved up an hour.  
I take the service elevator down  
in disappointment.  
Next floor it stops—  
They're wheeling in a gurney:

Janet  
pale as babies' cheeks—  
"It's not going to get me."  
She grits her teeth.  
"I'm going to be *mean*."  
They cart her off.  
She raises both her hands like Muhammed Ali.  
"I'm going to be mean!"  
The doctors say  
no hope.  
No hope.

Janet Sergi speaks more slowly now  
Searching for her words  
the way a Scrabble player hunts for double plays  
She sometimes can't remember who was there  
or who is coming  
or if she let the dog go out in time  
Although on certain things political  
she remains quite logical.  
"Be very careful about Ronald Reagan.  
A woman can catch brain tumors  
just by thinking too long about Ronald Reagan."

The operation on her brain  
lasts longer than six hours  
The waiting room fills up with women:  
old friends, ex-lovers, new-found allies.  
L. Fowler paces all day long  
The goddess of the snake in hand  
She never gives up  
She never lets down  
She thinks she can prevent the death of Janet Sergi  
by herself  
We think we can prevent  
the death  
We sit in circles folding hands  
"Sending energy"

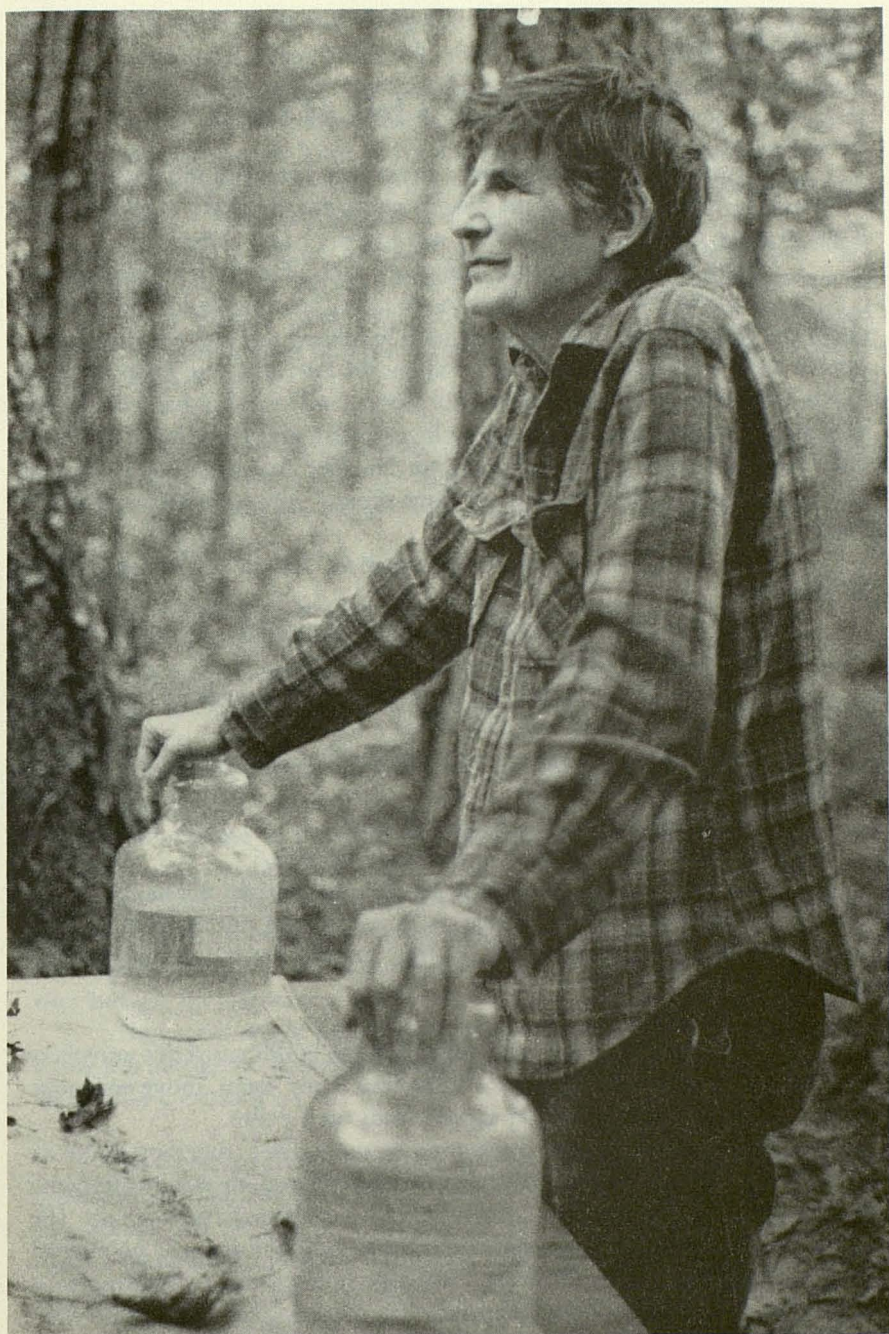
a euphemism that we substitute for prayer  
Janet Fons leaves the room uncomfortably.  
Jackie says, "Oh what the hell; it's worth a try."  
Thana warns that Janet also has the *right* to die.  
And Ronnie cries.  
And Katie never cracks a joke.  
The doctors say  
    no hope  
    No hope.

Janet Sergi's softer now  
kinder with her friends and with the world  
She still throws plates across the room in anger  
and has little mercy for the ones she thinks have  
done her wrong.  
She will not miss a chance to tell you so:  
"There are three things you have to watch out for  
in the universe—Birth, Death and Lover Stealers . . ."

Intensive care  
The doctors claim she'll need extensive care  
around the clock  
She cannot be alone  
The operation over  
The halls all lined with women  
The bandages around her head  
as blinding as a snowstorm.  
The wires all connected  
heartbeat steady  
She takes my hand  
Her eyes are closed.  
"Love me," she says, "Love me.  
Pray  
    for  
    me."

Janet Sergi's hairless now  
Her thick expressive hair  
the price of radiation  
Her fingers trace the nine-inch scar distractedly  
The quarter of the brain they have extracted  
She lives alone  
She goes to therapy  
She takes her meds  
She watches TV  
Comforts Lady Wolfe the dog  
Sometimes cooks a steak  
Women friends come days and nights:  
Marg cleans house  
Kay goes shopping  
Fons does laundry  
Jackie signs the checks  
Nina gives massage  
Thana fixes things  
L. Fowler supervises

And just the other day  
Janet came across a memory  
She said she saw old friends  
Sitting in a circle holding hands  
They were saying,  
    'Live  
        J. Sergi . . .  
            Live . . .



*Ruth*  
photo by Susan Iverson

Sandy Boucher

## Last Year This Time

On his desk sits the flowered espresso cup I am so familiar with, a few brown drips down its side. On the file cabinet stands the photo of his children, fixed in early childhood just as they were when I first came here.

Lifting his moist dark eyes to mine, he asks, "Do you have insurance?"

This man I've been coming to see every six months for ten years to check my cystic breasts. This surgeon with his plump face, his expensive grey suit. In these ten years, he has told me about the rash afflicting his broad pink hands, caused by the wearing of surgical gloves, and I was sympathetic; he has told me about the open heart surgery he endured, and I commiserated with him. Now he wants me to feel sorry for him because, as he says, "It is so difficult to have to *tell* women about these things," and he gazes tragically to the side.

Now, telling *me*, does he offer sympathy? Does he say he hopes it will be all right?

No. "The biopsy will cost two thousand dollars," he announces.

Two thousand dollars!

"We will have to do the operation under full anesthetic. I can't stand to have the woman go through this under a local."

He slips the mammograms back into the X-ray envelope, lays it flat on the desk and spreads his hands.

"Well, and how will you manage this?"

"Really, I don't know." I can hardly breathe.

He looks, at once, sorrowful, kindly and worried about me.

"Good luck," he says to me as he escorts me to the door.

I walk down the hall with its shiny marble floors and out onto the sidewalk.

In the years I have been coming here, the buildings of this university hospital and medical school have multiplied. They loom above me now, many-windowed towers flashing signals from their panes.

When I was four or so my mom took me to the barbershop on Route 40. After the barber had sat me in the chair and tied the cloth around me, Mom said she had to go do an errand, and would be back soon to pick me up. The barber was a silent man, who did not converse with children. As he clipped away I stared anxiously at the door. Finally he brushed off my neck with his little soft brush, and lifted the cloth off me. I got down from the chair and went to stand by the door, waiting. Soon a man came in and the barber got busy with him, and I waited. She didn't come, and still she didn't come. And I gave up.

She would never come. It was a deep and wracking realization. I hung my head to hide my tears from the barber, and then I pushed open the door and went out. Trucks roared by on Route 40, shaking the earth. As I stumbled down the gravel apron of the road, fans of wind from the speeding cars were like giant brutal hands hurting me. Tears blurred my eyes. Somewhere out here was my home, but this world of freeway was so stark, so violent, the distances so vast, that I realized I would never find it. I was utterly alone.

In front of the university hospital I stand, not able to cross the street, walk down the hill to my car. Maybe I have cancer in my breast, and this man who has examined me and taken my money for ten years, who has exchanged pleasantries with me and told me his troubles, has sent me out on the street with nowhere to go.

My lover finds me curled on my side in bed, staring out the window at the tree hung with its red berries like clots of blood.

"I'm going to die," I say. All strength has gone from me. I have sunk deep into a dark place.

This night two friends are to come to dinner.

"No, I'm not getting up. I can't. Nothing matters."

But when they come, after they have sat on the bed and heard my story, after they have expressed outrage and given me hugs, I begin to be tired of my despair.

I am fully clothed. I can easily get up. My long sobbing with my lover has cleaned out the worst of the pain. Just as the sight of my mother's car stopping next to me on Route 40 brought comfort. I saw her face, frightened and angry. But her fury was directed at the barber, who had let me go, and when she gathered me up into the seat next to her she gave me a short strong hug. As we drove home I sat choking back tears, and she said, "You're all right now, you're all right now." I'm all right now and if I'm going to die anyway, why not get up and have a good time!

So I crawl out of bed and join three women in the kitchen. I let them know it is all right to talk about something else now, and we proceed to have an excellent evening.

Last year my friend Veronica had a mastectomy. Having no money she wound up in Highland Hospital in Oakland, the only hospital in the East Bay that accepts MIA's, otherwise known as "medically indigent adults." Jesus God, a mastectomy! I visited her there, small pale woman, her chest bound with bandages, her blue eyes calm.

"The pain isn't bad so far today," she said.

We had been lovers once, five years ago. I knew her body, and was filled with sorrowing tenderness as I held her hand. Before I left, we walked

down the hall, she wheeling the i.v. bottle on its high stand, and she asked the nurse at the desk for a painkiller, and as we came to the bend in the hallway she said, "I realize that after we broke up we never talked. You were so hurt, and you tried. I just couldn't then, I had my own struggles. But I want us to talk now, to work it out, what we both felt. Can we meet someday when I get out of the hospital?"

Veronica had told me one of the hardest parts of the experience of the mastectomy had been figuring out how to get it done without having the money. Harder than the fear of death, than the physical pain. Because there is so much shame in it, so much self-blame. "Here I am, an adult, and I can't afford to go to a doctor." Veronica is an artist, a performer and teacher who gives much joy and empowerment to her community. She is a proud, independent person.

Along with the humiliation comes rage and terror. I feel dark and clotted inside, and I am obsessed with myself. My friends' concerns and problems fade. Apartheid, the nuclear threat, the situations in Nicaragua and at Big Mountain are so many abstractions. What is substantial is my threatened body. I spend hours on the phone calling hospitals and clinics. I leave a message on Veronica's phone machine, asking her to call me.

In the interim I buy and begin to read Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, thinking I may find it in some word or perspective to give me strength. Instead — and perhaps because it takes me to the heart of what I most want to avoid — it sends me to a hot bath where I sit, my head hung low, steam rising into my face, and the sensation of a giant rock weighting my chest.

Soon Veronica calls, and she tells me that at the very university hospital where the doctor (I refuse to write *my* doctor) had spread his hands in unconcern and sent me out the door — in the clinic building right across the street from his office — is a Breast Screening Clinic known to be one of the best in the area. And this clinic, she tells me, because it receives federal funds, is required to adjust its fees for low-income patients and to allow patients to pay in monthly installments.

I'm stunned. Probably he can look out his window and *see* this clinic. He surely knows about it.

The appointment has been made. In three weeks, I will go to the towering clinic building where in X-ray they will insert a large hollow needle in my breast to locate the microcalcifications which are the problem, then thread a wire down through the needle and hook it, then pull out the needle. The wire will be left in. I will go to surgery where I will receive a local anesthetic and a surgeon will cut down the wire until he gets to the area of the microcalcifications, which he will cut out, after which the tissue will be taken



to Pathology where they will determine whether it is malignant. All this has been painstakingly explained to me by a young woman at the Breast Screening Clinic, after she told me she knew my name, had considered taking my writing workshop the year before.

The appointment made. Nothing more to do until then. I enter a period of heightened awareness. One day, cutting a half-cooked little new potato, I find an inner faultless circle of creamy white. Next to the fresh green of the brussels sprouts it is all the bright beauty I can imagine in the world. Staring, smiling, I know the rest of my day will be transformed, as it seems my eyesight has grown supernaturally sharp and all my senses quickened, and time has slowed to a leisurely blood-rhythm, heart-felt.

It's harder with people. At first when I tell someone, a chasm opens between us, as if I have stepped over the line into another universe. The diseased and the healthy are of a different order and speak to each other with difficulty over a great distance. The person expresses shock, sympathy, embarrassment; and I feel shaky and exposed, made weak.

Then it is tenderness that comes to me. Hard to receive. Caring. There is a miraculous happening. I see a woman I have known for fifteen years, as a writer and peer, with whom I did political work in the old days. She is someone I have always wished would care about me and be my friend. When she hears what is going on with me, she is solemn, thoughtful. The next time I see her, at a gathering, she comes up to me and puts her arms around me and says, "I love you," and I feel her open heart, I know she means the words.

One could be cynical about these demonstrations. I remember receiving a letter from my father after he had been critically ill. In the letter he wrote that he loved me. Only such a devastating event could have wrung that admission from him. And I talk with a friend who says, "God, it really says something about how we treat each other, doesn't it, when you have to be threatened with death before people appreciate you!"

But I overlook the ironies when people offer me their love now. It is a great gift to me, especially as I get to see my friends at their best, open and responsive, operating from that which is most positive in themselves. The woman whom I have cared about for so long: her telling me she cares about me too — this enters with great sweetness into me, fills in a place in myself that had been empty and sore. From this moment a real friendship between us begins.

"A healing circle?"

"Yes, let's set the date. Next Tuesday? Wednesday?" My friend Ann is insistent.

I sneak out the door muttering, "Oh . . . one day soon . . . I guess . . ."

It is too much. How could I possibly ask six or seven people to give a whole evening to *me*?! Ann says *she'll* ask them, I don't have to. That doesn't help. I don't deserve people focusing their energy on me in that way. I don't want it.

For a few days I avoid Ann. Then finally she corners me and asks again. I tell her what I think about this.

She frowns. "Sandy, you had better check into that. What do you *mean* you don't deserve it! Wouldn't you gladly do it for someone else?"

The night before the biopsy seven women gather at Ann's house. We sit in a circle with candles and cedar and crystals in the center making a sort of altar. One woman has brought a sculpted face she made, my friend Flo brought a mitt of soft fur for stroking.

Resigned now, I begin by telling what will happen tomorrow, and how I have been experiencing life in these past three weeks. For an hour or more these women talk of their feelings for me, sing songs, offer objects, create a sort of a joyousness in the room.

I look around the circle. There is Jeri, whose lover recently left her, whose face is slimmer, clarified by suffering; there is Ann, who was in an automobile accident, whose joints ache and her dislocated wrist gives her trouble; there is Flo, who works with the Shanti Project, whose clients are young men dying of AIDS, who carries their sadness with her and sometimes has to retreat to her room for days at a time just to return to herself; there is Frances, struggling to resolve a nine-year love relationship which is changing now to a friendship; there is my lover Barbara, who works so hard healing others and rarely takes care of herself; Alice, who is so critical of herself, saying "I start things and I never finish"; Tricia . . . Nadine . . . Each of these women is in need of healing. We are equally dis-eased, out of ease with ourselves, chafing against ourselves or our lives.

This realization releases me. It lets me relax, deeply. And I see that invisible line over which I had stepped into the universe of the diseased never existed. There is no such place separate from the world in which these people live.

The biopsy showed normal tissue — this time — and I was delirious with relief. For a week or so I was blissful. Then so-called ordinary life resumed. A year has passed now. My friend Veronica has given a dance performance to a sold-out audience. At the breast clinic they say that everything remains the same, and as long as that is true, I'm safe. Strange word, safe: one I have come to understand is never accurate.

The branches outside my window droop, heavy with red berries like little hard balls of rosy light. I work, I love, I question, I fight. And when I think of this time last year it is with gratitude, for never again can I imagine myself separate from others, special in my pain, unique in my sense of struggling, wounded, hopeful life.

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Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum

## Cancer in Two Voices (Chapter One)

(Sandy)

February 19, 1985

I am on my way to Winnipeg for a conference. We had, as always, much difficulty separating. Her need of me. Mine to distance. The ways we tear at each other for comfort and reassurance. My fear of losing myself in her need of me. Jane and Linda help us to listen and console each other.

I feel misgivings about all the travel I have planned for this year. There is a frenzied rush to much of my work that leaves little room for pleasure. I remain harried and unsatisfied with one task merely leading to the next. For now, I immerse myself in details—lists—notes—and find the usual soothing that results from the accomplishment of assigned tasks elusive. I am worried about the changes in her body but trust—mostly trust—that it is not to be alarmed about and her anxiety is more habitual than necessary. She goes for the results of the second test and needle biopsy tomorrow with Anna and I'll call after work for the results. No need to worry about it in advance. There will be plenty of time to worry if that becomes necessary.

February 22, 1985

I am on my way home. Barbara has cancer. It is fast-growing and has already spread to her lymph nodes. More testing, then a mastectomy. I lie here in a Holiday Inn in Winnipeg, my mind skittering away from it, "it" being somewhere between mastectomy and death. I make lists in an effort to maintain a sense that what I do will matter. Is it that I feel the worst at once, or is the story I tell myself necessary so that I can handle the simpler eventualities? I remember Deena's story about the writing of the *Book of Hags*. She finished it in December of 1976, her exploration about the nature and function of cancer attacking the breasts of so many young women. What did it mean and why was this the form it took? Only weeks later, she was diagnosed, her own breast being attacked by cancer. How did she know to prepare for her own battle? What was the genesis of the *Book of Hags*? How does the subject matter present itself for exploration? The fears announce themselves as preparation for reality? When does "knowing" begin?

I want so desperately to engage with Barbara, with this disease in a loving and useful way and in my racing to strategize and to plan—I lose all feeling. I cannot yet know what this will mean and only hear the terror in her voice.

*(Barbara)*

February 20, 1985

*I am a sociologist and that is a big part of my identity. I was drawn to my discipline because of many natural and instinctive ways I look at the world. I look at systems and their sub-parts and how they all interact. And, mainly, I look at people and figure out what makes them tick.*

*During my years of formal training to become a sociologist, I learned and developed very fine observational skills. A tone in the voice; the raising of an eyebrow for emphasis; the gesture that accompanies the sentence and gives it meaning and emotion; and something I borrowed from art and philosophy, an appreciation of a person's posture. Everything who one is can be seen in posture, in gesture.*

*I'm very good at my work. And I'm proud of how good I am at reading micro-behavior.*

*So when the doctor came into the room, folder in hand, comporting herself firmly and with an air of ordinary, matter-of-fact efficiency, I searched for every clue—every curve in the face, the lines of the eyes, the hand (if it would reach out to me), the axis and position of the head (if it was engaged) . . . I searched for clues to anticipate what she would tell me. If the result of the rest was positive or malignant. There was no clue, only her words.*

*"I'm glad you went for a second opinion because it shows that it is malignant."*

*I shut my eyes and saw absolute black, no lines of red or purple, pure black. My agitation lifted me off the table and I started walking around in small steps in the examining room, working off the tension. I thought I might put my fist through the wall.*

*And then when I opened my eyes, I couldn't see too well. Or hear anything too well either. Anna, my good friend who was with me, took the notes, handled the paperwork, received the forms for the additional tests, escorted me through the distorted corridors of the hospital and finally drove me, in my brand new car, my first new car, that no one else but Sandy has driven, home.*

*How to see what is there. Simply. Plainly. Without denial. Everything is about seeing and how to see, what to see, knowing what you are looking at, figuring out its meaning in terms of diagnosis and prognosis. Biopsies, machines, microscopes—how to see it all.*

*They need mechanical, electronic, and computer extensions of all the human senses to see what disease process and its tributaries have already ravaged my body. They need mechanisms that fit in the system of diagnostics, the way a camera is an extension of the hand, the eyes, and memory. They have to penetrate the invisible with instruments that extend vision into unknown places. CAT scans, x-rays, radioisotope scans are all ways of seeing, of extending the eyes. Ultrasound extends our ears and uses wave technology to infer, model, and image the internal spaces, using the differential densities of tissue as the basis for imaging. Computerized thermography uses heat, an extension of touch, and makes images of the body based on different levels of heat given off by different organs and tissues.*

*Some diagnoses are as elementary as palpation, touching a lymph node lightly and sensing its swollen form. Other tests require that my body be illuminated by radioactive materials so that my inner parts glow on a screen, making computerized images. Imagism. Imagistics.*

*Then, with this data, they chart and classify me. What other symptoms are included under the family resemblances? Then, on another level, knowing the pathological process, what predictions of related symptoms will be generated?*

*How does the doctor know if there are micromastastes in my body? The doctor doesn't. It's all supersonic, frontier electronics, perpetrated on this still stone-age human form.*

*The point is that I am going to die earlier than my average survival would have been because of medical incompetence. Today, I have a stage 4 breast cancer which gives me a survival of between 5 and 8 years. It travelled far into my system. But statistical evidence is so crazy anyhow. There are so many individual differences that comparability of cases is strained, if not forced. How many people who received exactly the same protocols responded exactly the same way? But my training is to see generalities, tendencies, and trends, not individual cases and I must learn the new logic of individual cases, recoveries, and miracles.*

(Sandy)

The shock has worn off a bit but I continue to feel frightened. It took so many years to allow my dependence on her, but now that I have, I feel desperate not to lose her. The tests have begun and I insist upon being in the room with her as they place her on a metal table, wheel her into a tunnel-like apparatus, see the machines slowly and inexorably moving up and back over the length of her body. She lies so still on the table, not moving as she is instructed. I stare at the screen producing color images that I cannot decipher. A young man sits immobile before it making notes. I cannot see what he writes and cannot tell from his posture or expression if there is danger on the screen. She avoids looking at me, just stares up at the ceiling as my eyes race around the room trying to understand the technology, the stillness. In one corner, a young intern reads the daily paper. In another, a doctor makes notes on her chart for the staff. Everywhere there is silence. I would speak to Barbara but cannot imagine what to say. I hope my presence is of help to her. It isn't to me. I feel superfluous. Helpless.

There are so many dangerous possibilities. So many symptoms. A lump under her armpit may mean further spread. Tendonitis may mean metastasis to the bone. Dizziness—it may be the brain. A sore throat, symptomatic of cancer of the larynx. There are endless possibilities and right now, as I stand over her, they all seem ominous.

Then we sit and wait for the results in an empty room. Again, I cannot imagine what to say. My hand does not move to reach out to her. I am encased in my own terror and cannot join her in her own. Like the staff in the examining room, we sit side by side without moving, in silence.

“Everything seems just fine,” we are told. “No further spread that we can see.” We turn to each other then, our hands reach to touch and we allow ourselves to breathe. We celebrate that small victory with an expensive dinner. At least, we reassure ourselves and each other, it is only what it is. It isn't more.

Our level of tension is cyclical. Laughter and tears blend, our moods are labile, and my desire to protect her is sometimes overwhelming.

I re-read Audre Lorde's distinction between fear as an appropriate response to something real and anxiety as succumbing to a shapeless and formless terror. I am aware of needing to find a balance between my need to protect her—to throw myself across her to keep the cancer away and respecting her need to proceed through this experience as she needs to, allowing all the people in her life to love her and not be in the way. My own sense of balance eludes me now and I stumble.

(Barbara)

*Sandy goes with me for all the tests. We've been together for six years and yet, she sometimes feels like a stranger to me. She has been unusually quiet these last few days of testing. They put me into machines, Sandy sits in a chair nearby watching. She cannot ask them to stop the test, to comfort me. We sit together in waiting rooms, one after the other, with long silences and yellow pads. The only stuff worth talking about is the medical information, it seems. Words about us just hang there, become useless. They are revealed as clumsy instruments of communication, so she and I are mute. Dumb. This woman of so many words, so many verbal styles, presentations, public speeches is mute with me and that is how I know—in part—how deadly serious this is. We cannot use words to build bridges between us, as we have done in the past. We are each trapped in our terror and cannot find our way towards each other.*

(Sandy)

It wasn't until the skin around her nipple began to pucker that she grew frightened and called from New York asking me to arrange a second opinion. I made an appointment with an older established woman in a prestigious hospital. That was the turning point for her, I think. That was the point at which she began gathering information outside the public health system. The shift from public to private was a major one, for it took a while for us to understand she had been misdiagnosed. The lump we found in March of 1984 was not diagnosed as cancer until February of 1985. During that time, it grew from 2 cc to 6 cc, her breast enlarged to nearly twice its original size, a mammogram that B. demanded was taken, read incorrectly as negative by a radiologist who never examined her. She saw three doctors and, still, no one was concerned. Below the index of suspicion, she was told by the surgeon at Kaiser three weeks before the consultant's diagnosis of cancer. Told to stop drinking coffee for fibrocystic disease; they would watch it.



The ambivalence she suffers is painful for me. The overwhelming sense that she should—somehow—have known. She should have insisted on something. And yet she did everything she could. She insisted on a mammogram when they would not have ordered one. She insisted on the tests that have not been routinely ordered. She drove herself to be the best consumer she could, in the same way she drives herself to be the best at everything she does.

Once the diagnosis was made, once the cancer was discovered, she began to research obsessively. Chemotherapy first. Surgery first. Radiation with lumpectomy was ruled out. There was a blur of days filled with doctors, examinations, treatment recommendations, yellow pads filled with questions and answers, and B. with her pocket tape recorder recording every doctor's answers in case she grew too anxious and could not hear what was being said.

*(Barbara)*

*And then there is another problem: the differences in the recommendations given by different specializations. Surgeons tend to see breast cancer as a local disease, so they want to cut first. Oncologists see cancer mostly systematically, as an immune system disease, and they say attack with chemotherapy. And then, when I went to see three different oncologists, and I got three different opinions anyhow, it threw me into a crisis of uncertainty.*

*Now I make lists of questions, gather up my tape recorder and am lucid, direct, insistent, and clear in my repeated interviews with the series of private "experts" Sandy and I now consult. I have chosen an oncologist finally, a tough-minded woman, and developed a treatment plan. The "best." A "top man," as my mother would call it. Chemotherapy first, then surgery, and then more chemotherapy, then radiation, then more chemotherapy. It is very aggressive treatment with devastating side effects, loss of hair, vomiting, menopause, fatigue, but seems the only chance of controlling this virulent force that has invaded my body.*

*Medicine offers no certainty but I must trust someone. I pick Kathy G. She is a tough, gentle, sensitive, coolly professional woman a few years younger than I. She will be my lifeline. She will become the center of my life. I will visit her for a year and a half for my treatments. I will fall in love with her, hold on to her every word, her every hope for me. I will turn to her for optimism, realism, help, understanding, drugs. She is my doctor, my hope, my survival.*

Two days ago, I filed a malpractice suit with an attorney because a series of incompetent doctors failed to make an accurate diagnosis of breast cancer. I hate them but I'm also filled with self-loathing—self doubt. What should I have done? Why didn't I insist upon something? Why didn't I know better? But I never learned to recognize a good doctor. Public medicine was all I had ever experienced. Despite my "class travel," I still went to clinics, just as I had when I was 10—waiting for my glasses to be given to me for free.

Often now, when I go to the doctor, I remember my father. When he was eleven, two years before his Bar-Mitzvah, my father became an apprentice to what is called in Polish/Yiddish a feldsher. While there is no adequate translation for this phrase, my father says it could be translated as "para-medical" or "country doctor," but, when he talks about feldshers in a nonselfconscious way, he calls them half-doctors. A feldsher was a Government-certified, somewhat trained medical person who did the following: applied leeches for bloodletting, applied heated cups to lacerations he made on the back in order to draw blood; he pulled teeth; he lanced and then filled abscesses with iodized gauze; he was in charge of the health of local villagers and, when there was even an eruption of one case of a contagious disease, such as what my father calls in Yiddish scarletina (scarlet fever), he would report it to the authorities of the local medical district. My father was a feldsher's apprentice and, had he remained in Europe, would have probably become a feldsher himself.

All of my life I believed that, if I became ill, I would go on the subway to the hospital, wait patiently to see the doctor and be appreciative of the small hurried bits of time they proffered. It was the only experience I ever had. Mass medicine for the mass of people—I was one of the masses. I never had a private physician, had never been to a private hospital. Never to a lawyer's office. Now I go to the Heads of Departments, the Chief of Oncology who refers me to the Head of Radiology and the Head of Surgery and they spend time with me. Not Kaiser's quota of one patient every twelve minutes.

March 6, 1985

Exactly one week and three hours after I learned I had cancer, I had a meeting in our house of 20 women who would be involved in my healing and care-taking. It was a conscious and deliberate choice to mobilize a battalion of friends to help and assist me in every phase of fighting my disease. When the doctor told me I had cancer, I was forced to stand alone on a ledge so steep and so scary that I reached out my hand—grabbed the outstretched hands of the women who form my community.

*I assembled them so I could tell them at once of my illness. Oddly, because I am a teacher, I found myself making notes as if for a lecture. I outlined what I needed from them. I listed the concrete ways Sandy and I would need help. It was all neatly categorized and outlined, as I would for an intro class. Being the center of attention was an unusual experience for me and I was nervous and began to read uncomfortably from my notes. Torn between my usual feeling of wanting to be competent and feeling grateful for the room so full of love and concern, after a while I found myself no longer needing my notes for my heart began to speak. Without censor and artifice, the words found themselves. I began by sharing the basic information about my cancer, the treatment plan I had chosen to pursue, and as I began to hear myself speak, became aware of how I was lingering on the medical information as a way to postpone saying the more deeply felt words that were in my heart. As I watched their faces react to my words, as well as the silences between them, I came to understand that I am only the first among our friends to have cancer. There will be others. As the graphs and statistics show, we will hear about more cases as we grow older. Such a weighty responsibility, to be the first, yet it gave me a purpose. I am trying to live self-consciously (and perhaps die self-consciously) in an exemplary manner. Many of my friends will see their future in the way I handle mine.*

*I told them that I needed to feel useful and to be needed. They spoke of their feelings and love for me, their commitment to the shared struggle of winning the battle against cancer growing in my body and dedication to whatever was needed to win the battle. The chemotherapy was the strongest currently available, hopefully doing enough to match and conquer the formidable enemy that had invaded me. There would be a battle waged inside my body and I would need support, nurturance, caring, diversion, laughter, and safety to endure the 18 months that lay ahead. These 20 women and others across the country would serve as my companions.*

(Sandy)

I see her emotional vulnerability, the trembling of her chin when she speaks publicly. She acknowledges my greater ease with the public self by whispering to me before the women gathered, "This is like my first keynote speech," referring to the speeches I made regularly as part of my work. Her late awareness of the love, respect, and concern she generates are unfamiliar, she cannot quite trust these feelings. She simply has no frame of reference for them. I too, found myself caught in old forms and patterns. After she spoke, I found myself being charming, gracious, welcoming—all the social skills I use without

thinking. Appalled at the ease with which such forms blot out feelings, I just as unexpectedly began to cry and spoke publicly, perhaps for the first time, utterly without charm, grace or style. From my heart.

(Barbara)

*That night changed the way I spoke. Since then, many friends have reminded me of my own words. "Your life is not a rehearsal. It is what it is and you must live it." "Don't wait to finish your novel to have a baby." "The days when you want to get dressed up, look outrageous, put those gold earrings on to teach a class, do it. Do it all. There is no time to worry if you are too dressed up to go to work. Do it. The restaurant you want to go to but is slightly too expensive. Do it and put it on a credit card. The orchestra opera tickets you've always wanted but sat in the balcony because you are saving for a "rainy day"—buy the orchestra seats. The trip you wanted to take but you were waiting until next year. Do it. You might not have next year. Do it now. Do it all. Live your dreams. Live it."*

*After I was finished speaking, I was asked to stretch out on the floor and the women gathered in a circle around me, each of them laying hands upon my body. Rituals and those who practice them are strange to me but it felt soothing and I could hear the sounds of women weeping and feel their energy being passed from their bodies to mine.*

*Earlier in the day I had spoken to Deena in Los Angeles who suggested I find a visualization for the moment the chemotherapy entered my body for the first time. I asked the women in my healing circle to visualize the same image at the time of the injection/invasion. It was to be at 4:00 PM on Monday. As I lay upon the floor, encircled by their bodies, their hands, and their love, I began to sense the power of such a suggestion.*

(Sandy)

Now that the house has emptied, the images that keep intruding are those of a malevolent circus. The kind in the movies of the 40's where the final chase scene takes place on a carousel gone mad with the chilling voice of the laughing fat woman as seen through the mirrors of the fun house. My images those of tightropes I must walk to keep balanced between my life and ours. The highwire act or juggling to keep us distinct yet joined. The speed with which the disease is

growing in her body like a rollercoaster out of control. My moods are wide-ranging and unpredictable. I marvel at her. I marvel at me. And sometimes I want her to tell me she's sorry for getting cancer and ruining our lives together. And sometimes I'm angry at her for getting it. Other times I want to tell her that I am sorry for my letting her get cancer and not making her go to a better doctor. And most of the time, I lie in her arms grateful for the life we have together.

## Four Poems

### I

The assimilation of a shocking experience  
how is it done? Even the flood  
of loving, my heart  
exquisitely aware  
kind  
and caring,  
even that is a shock    requiring notice  
and recuperation.

### II

#### Haircuts

We give separate reasons  
for doing the same thing.  
"I will cut my hair," you say  
"So it will be easier to care for  
in the hospital." "I will cut my hair,"  
I say, "because it needs cutting."

We face the hospital at dawn  
with hair cropped  
like warriors,  
when we kiss goodbye  
it is the promise given before battle:  
to survive.

### III

I wanted to be angry at her  
to yell: my lover has cancer  
my lover has cancer and  
where are you now my best friend,  
now  
when I need you?

I wanted not to have to do  
the caring things I wanted nobody  
else but me to do: to wash her hair  
to wash her body, to drain the tube  
leading from her wound.  
I wanted not to be so dreadfully  
needed, would have felt denied  
an honor if I were not her good right arm.  
I wanted to yell  
best friend where are you?  
but she was recuperating  
and I needed to be quiet.

### As If The Sun

As if the sun  
really was a source of energy  
the days we spent indoors  
left me  
tired.  
Waiting rooms  
examining rooms  
waiting rooms  
consulting rooms  
the hospital her apartment.  
I was accustomed to the season of May.  
I was accustomed  
to my backyard steps  
fuchsia, nasturtium  
green succulents  
the yellow sun  
serenity of knowing  
her at work  
my child at school  
me alone with the sunlight  
all safe and sound  
all right with the world . . . .  
There was something numbing  
to the days spent indoors  
as if  
I were a plant,  
deprived.

At night the evidence of something else  
the grief  
slipping out  
in a sigh  
dampness gathering on the ground.  
Mourning, keening, wailing  
very quietly  
very quietly matching the fall of tears  
to the soft inhale exhale of her  
sleeping breath.

I was alone in a vast double bed.  
Worse than our worst battles —  
every line of personal survival drawn  
between us, the terrible lovers' questions  
how could you say that to/  
how could you think that of/  
what am I doing with/  
Worse than the nights her body felt too close  
my anger longing to fist into her back,  
worse than the nights her back was everything worth loving  
in the whole wide universe  
and it was turned toward me daring me  
and I afraid to touch.

Worse.  
Worse than all.

In the morning  
I would be tired  
and forgetful of the night's dreams.  
We were only in a phase  
a temporary change  
a brief aberration before  
life would return . . . .  
I was almost present  
by day.

One night  
her hand  
whispered familiarly along my thigh.  
"Just watch out for the tube,"  
she cautioned. Fitting our bodies and  
our memories together, she smiled into  
my surprise



“You know I learned this from you.”

meaning the desire when ill  
my cautious touch  
echoing the tentative strokes  
once given me when I  
bedridden, beckoned her close  
and closer.

Now she lay upon her back.  
Now I could begin again  
the return to self which is sex  
which is sex as gender which is  
female which is me  
naked and full  
of lust with her.

Now I could begin again  
the return to her which is the longing  
to belong to her lust to be inseparable  
from her sensations to join the tip  
of my finger to the tip of her clit  
to the tongue tilting up up upon her palate  
to release sounds of sex

us  
female  
breathing into each other  
photosynthesis  
transforming our exhalations  
into life.

After that  
I always knew her to be alive  
and turned to her for comfort  
for all the ways  
that would not return.



*The Haircut*  
photo by Susan Iverson

## Foldings

for Carmela Marian Ermilio Careri  
1897—1983

I wake to the green glow of a digital clock—  
not the kind of time you spent with me, grandmother:  
days of lying in a cool room,  
head in your lap,  
laundry in piles,  
t.v. on.

You taught me how to fold,  
I at one end of the sheet,  
you at the other.  
Each corner exact and sharp,  
each fold bringing us closer.  
Finishing,  
you took the sheet by yourself,  
made the last, perfect movement,  
and slid the bundle, compact,  
onto a pile with others.

Now you are dead  
and I do the laundry alone,  
pare down the linens  
to one sheet,  
one pillowcase.  
Each newly washed piece  
gets tossed on the floor,  
sits there organic, voluminous  
until I tug  
first one corner, then another  
over the far edges of a large bed.  
In the morning, the green glow  
casts a solitary light  
on the edge where noone fills it.  
I lie alone.

Grandmother—  
your exact fingers,  
stern foldings,  
controlled bundles  
taught me one way to live.  
Now, somehow,  
I must teach myself another.

## You Watch For Me

If I were to call you by name  
I'd call you mother  
but I don't  
so you just sit there  
watching me as if  
I might breathe life  
into you.

Deflated like those rubber clowns  
that when filled  
could be beaten and pummelled  
and still they would spring back for more  
you sit  
sadly forgotten.

On this summer's day  
I run to the pond  
play hide and seek  
with the fish. Your gaze  
can't find me here  
though it reaches into every cupboard  
and closed room I try to squeeze into.

Late in the afternoon  
someone comes by  
and you smile winningly  
behind your cup.  
The coffee in it is seven hours old  
but you don't let on.  
She chats, prods you  
into alertness.  
Then she must go home  
get dinner  
call the kids  
be ready when he comes home.

The clock moves slower  
after she leaves  
and you know you can't move.  
You watch the shadows grow longer  
along the crucifix  
nailed to the doorframe.  
I come home.  
I have eluded you.  
I try not to notice  
that you have not moved.

If I were to call you by name  
I'd call you Graham  
but I don't  
so you just sit there  
watching me as if  
I might surprise the  
into you

Defiant how those rubber clothes  
that when fitted  
could be better and punctured  
and still they would spring back for next  
you are  
why forgotten  
O the summer's day  
I ran to the beach  
pay him and work  
with the hat. You was  
can't find me here  
through a screen into every cupboard  
and closed doors I try to whisper this

Late in the afternoon  
someone comes by  
and you smile warmly  
behind your cap  
The coffee in it is even burnt old  
but you don't let me  
the chair pads you  
now shrunken  
Then she must go home  
got dinner  
call the kids  
be ready when he comes home

## Just That Would Be Enough

My mother who was washing the dinner plates when I told her  
about my rape and who was rinsing them  
when I finished said Iris you just don't know  
how to let a thing go.

She likes my sister, who slits  
her yellow silk dress open  
at the throat like some  
tulip and assumes  
she can always choose  
who will pick her.

How neatly she pauses between each  
morsel of meat instead of  
eating eating eating  
as though each bite  
could pad the coat  
I could wrap  
myself in, an armor  
of indifference.

It was a friend who told me sex  
sometimes lines the undersides of your eyelids  
with a violet light and just once  
after the rape she asked  
kind of nervous, do I  
ever be afraid of  
sex now and I confessed Lucy  
I haven't had sex, what  
happened to me was  
war. War  
that shattered all the windows of  
this house, my  
body and fear  
that drops like heavy plaster on  
all my ordinary moments.

Like anyone else I used to have nights  
when I could wrap dark around me  
like a soft thick fur and sleep,  
just sleep would curl  
its smoky feline tail along  
my back and lull  
me.

Like anyone else I used to have days  
where waking I sat with  
a boiled brown egg in its cup  
before me and just  
stared,  
stared at that bald little world  
so lopsided with genesis  
and its face so naked  
of roads or  
fences and  
joy,

Joy would break its golden yolk  
inside me and I  
now think just that  
would be  
enough, just  
that.



## Belly Song

I sit naked on a chair with my legs slightly apart. I hold my bones very straight. You can barely see my cunt. My belly pours down over it, hangs, moves, grows hair, shines in marks that fall like fingers curving up around its sides. I am loose, I hang. There are not enough names for the places where my fat gathers on me; there is belly, thigh, hip, chin, but no simple way to say soft-mound-between-breast-and-arm, or low-full-folds-that-are-sides.

Before, my light held me in, circled me. It hung over the bed. I was a girl. It was smooth, pale, flat, faintly blue, then darker towards the center where the moths' bodies had fallen inside the fixture. There was a little gold knob on the outside. If the bulb was turned off and there was sun in the room, I could see most of my body naked on the bed. My ceiling was low, but the reflection was very small. The gold knob cut me in two.

I saw my knees rising up, blue. I saw the fat tops of my arms shimmying against my breasts. I saw my sprawling hair, my neck, and my glasses, of course, but my belly was left out.

Right now, I want a chocolate cream doughnut. I take one from the box, and break it. Powdered sugar dusts the floor. I hold the halves delicately, like crust cups. I look down at them over my breasts, wrapping my feet around the legs of the chair. I'm naked in the kitchen. Soft jazz pads out of the radio on the table. Water is leaking in the sink. I hear each drop.

Last summer I worked painting a fire escape, spattering paint on the leaves of the tree below me from five flights up. I bent over to get at the rust between the slats, working the tip of my screwdriver. It slipped over the surface, caught, slipped again.

I bent down. The sun made me warm and damp. My shorts rode up. I wasn't high enough to see the river, but I was out of sight to anyone below. I reached for the power sander, switched it on. The vibration made me shake. Rust powdered off. Blood rushed to head. My feet were apart for balance, but my thighs touched.

I stopped, stood up, and pulled in a breath of warm air. The silence felt good. A breeze came up. I took a drink of water from the silver thermos, letting it dribble down the outside of my throat into the neck of my t-shirt.

I bent again, picked up my screwdriver, and felt my fat swing down with me. I moved my back from side to side. My breasts and belly shifted, catching the motion. I could smell my hands in my work gloves: leather, paint, and sweat. The first blisters had peeled off and hardened to smooth red places on my fingers and palms.

When I squeeze the doughnut in my right hand, cream wells up. I lick a bit; it's sticky. I set the other half on the table, and dip my fingers in it. I coat my face, stroking my eyebrows and lids, circling my nose. I put a streak on my forehead, and hair falls into it.

The half in my hand fits over the tip of one breast. Pulling it off, I smear the cream around that nipple, then dab the other. I roll the rest of this half between my palms, gathering the last thickness, then make one long pass down my arms, my sides, over my thighs, knees, calves, and the soles of my feet. Little bits of dough stick in spots.

Most of the other half of the doughnut is left on the table. I consider my belly.

It's pale. I fasted. It's loose. I never ate dinner. It's under hairs. I went to the hospital every week. It swells out, then folds, They said my body was made of cubes of butter. It shakes, it moves, it jiggles. They said each quarter-pound I lost was like cutting a cube of butter off a big block.

I take my belly in my hands. It's warm. My fingers feel cool, but quickly warm, too. It has a good weight, is soft. I sit very still, and feel the pulse in my thumbs, then find the pulse in the place of my thickest fat. It's delicate and regular, there, yes, there, yes, there. It comes from the underside where my palms are resting, from the left half and the right half, from veins that curve out with the rest of me. This is not dead lard. It's my body. It's my living fat.

A drop of water spatters in the sink. I look up. My eyelids feel stiff. The doughnut half has fallen over on the table, spilling cream. I bounce my belly in my hands a couple of times, then let it drop. I stand up and reach for a paper towel. I wipe the table off. Leaving footprints on the floor, I walk to the sink to begin to rinse clean.

## Eagle Woman

Across red rock canyons  
her songs echo.  
Across circular skytrails  
her wings climb.  
Across snaking rivers  
her shadow hovers.

Eagle Woman has left the land  
her talons scrape the sky,  
the smoke from her pipe  
smudges the way.  
Her spirit soars  
to the place of emergence.  
Her blessings, like feathers  
return to earth.

## Waiting

I am six years old. I wait for the gun to go off to begin the swimming race. I don't want to race. Father, huge bald eagle sits imperiously. He has commanded it; he wants to see his child perform. No one says no to him. He is vicious, quick, his tongue like the eagle's claws, razor sharp and deadly. He sits, waiting, perched. The gun goes off. I swim desperately. When I reach the end, gasping, I am told it is a false start and I will have to do it again. I collapse, crying, "No, no, I can't, I don't want to."

*Lying in my bed, pretending to be sleeping, I hear my father striding down the hallway towards my room. His gait is heavy and determined. Like the predator who knows his prey has no escape, he does not need to approach quietly.*

He is visiting from Canada. Years ago my mother, sister and I moved to California for our health. He was to follow soon, but instead became a commuter—coming to California for vacations. Because he is visiting I am expected to make myself available to him. But any contact with him is frightening to me.

He will insist that I get up and fix his breakfast, or make phone calls for him while he eats. Or perhaps he will simply point at his bald head, an unspoken order that I massage it. I constantly have to ward off his orders, his sarcasm.

*I pull the covers over my head, hoping that he will honor my attempt for privacy. Instead he stands by my bed and jingles the coins in his pocket to waken me. He thinks he can buy everyone.*

When we go out to dinner he insists I dance with him. I am so nervous that I cannot hear the beat and have trouble following him. Sometimes he counts the beat out loud so I can follow. Other times he just scoffs. If I refuse to dance I will be punished with silence and scorn. My mother will tell me how selfish I am to deny him something so simple as dancing. I learn to hate dancing and to think I am clumsy and inept. Years later my mother tells me what an impossible dancer my father is.

I am required to wear white gloves and curtsey for the guests. Again and again I hear the refrain, "Breeding tells." He decides I should become skilled at learning names and making introductions, so at age seven he makes me introduce his party guests to one another. As I panic and forget names, he says, "You have to learn this if you are to succeed in the world."

When we all lived together in Canada, my sister and I were required by our mother, when he came home each evening to run to him happily, as if we loved him. It was our ritual. He must have known; he was not stupid.

He made a point of letting me know he thought I was stupid. One afternoon when I was in my room studying, he called me into his bedroom and asked me,

“What is fifteen percent of eighty?” Knowing this was a test, I froze and could not answer quickly: he peered at me through his glasses and said only, “Dummy,” then dismissed me. The word never left me.

*Lying in my bed, covers over my head, knowing that I cannot continue to feign sleep, I panic. Want to scream at him, “Go away, leave me alone,” but I do not think I can bear the punishment that would follow. I would wait a little longer; perhaps he will leave.*

If he were all bad he would have been so much easier to deal with. But there were times when he was loving and playful. He taught me to shoot a gun, to play baseball and badminton, and to drive a car, all by age seven. I loved learning those things; but he seemed to take them all away when he ordered me to drive him at whim, or to play with him at his command, and then criticize me while I did it. He was not safe.

I remember when my young cousin talked back to his parents, my father said, “If that were my child I’d knock him across the room and he’d never do that again.” I knew it was true. When I was six he had knocked me across the room. It was a stormy Canadian evening and the electricity had gone off. I was happy. It meant candlelight, a fire in the den and the whole family sitting together. I began to worry that all this would be lost as soon as the lights came on. I begged my parents not to turn on the lights. When the lights did come on I began whining, pleading for the candlelight. As I crossed the room in front of my father I was suddenly hurtling towards the couch. He had knocked me hard from behind without warning. He stood up hugely in front of me, instructing me to sit down without a word or a movement until he gave me permission. He then forgot me and went off to bed. Later my mother came and gave me permission to go to bed saying what was to become her litany over the years, “He doesn’t mean it, dear; he loves you.”

*I feel tormented. The fury withers inside me. I don’t know how to tell people how afraid I am. I have no words, no names. He stands now by my bedside and I am immobilized. I know that I will have to surface — he will outwait me.*

My half-sister tells a story that lets me know that she understands and I am relieved. When my father was a boy of eight the neighborhood cats kept disappearing; no one could find what was happening to them. One day his mother climbed into their attic and discovered that he had killed and skinned them, nailed their pelts to the wall. His mother relates this story with great amusement.

*I am afraid, hold on to myself. He is maniacal. I have no words; I do not know how to name it. My only defense is to wait. Knotting inside, I cannot pretend to hear the coins jingling, feel his presence; I emerge from under the covers, smile and say, “Good morning.” I am always polite.*

Writing this chapter is painful. I write and re-write and destroy. A white cloud of anxiety all around me. For relief I take a bike ride along the cliff drive. I want to be near the ocean. It is early morning, and sunny -- a relief from the battering of winter storms. I am hoping that this ride, the ocean

breeze, the warmth of the sun, will calm the inner storm that threatens as I write.

I slow down to watch two people out walking their dogs. The woman, a white woman in her forties, wears a comfortable looking teal blue dress and has on the end of a leash a sweet but shabby looking collie. The man walking with her, also white, carries a full pot belly, which hangs softly over his green work pants. I can't tell if they are husband and wife, lovers, or have just met. Behind them runs a small Airedale terrier, looking pleased with himself, his balls intact. But I am drawn to the little old dog that follows behind all of them. It is homely, rotund, with a greying muzzle and long toenails that click as it moves along awkwardly. It does not seem to be enjoying this outing; it is breathing heavily, working hard, and not quite keeping up. As I slow to watch this dog it turns to look at me. Its big brown watery eyes make contact with mine and I have the curious sensation that it speaks to me, but I do not know what it says. When it turns its head away I feel infinitely sad. There was no disguise in that gaze, no show. Just a little old dog out for a walk with the big people, and it seemed tired. I start to cry and continue to peddle, regularly wiping my eyes, feeling embarrassed. How do I understand this? Why am I moved to tears?

There was a certain emptiness I saw in that little dog. It seemed to have no choice but to follow along. As I rode on, I made the connection, remembering how *I* followed along as a child. It seemed I had no choice. I watched my older sister try to escape: she tried drinking, drugs, marriage, suicide. She only became more and more unhappy and my father more vicious towards her, my mother more hopeless. I did not try to escape. I decided I would be very, very, good and I would wait: there had to be something else. Safety became my first priority — survival. Like the lizard who sits immobile on a rock in my garden as I walk by, I learned to freeze whenever I sensed danger. As I approach the lizard it locks itself into form: only if it moves I can see it. Only if *I* move can they see me. Rigidity becomes a form of survival.

Another memory surfaces. How often I felt like the chameleons that were sold at the county fair when I was a child. They had sweet little gold chains around their necks, attached to a pin. I walked home one day with one pinned to my shirt. I watched it change colors as I placed it on differently colored material. I did not imagine that it might feel terror, sorrow, separation, even humiliation or sadness. And, like the lizard, I could sense danger and like the chameleon, change color to adapt. Learned that being nice, being polite and keeping my opinions to myself were how I could and would survive.

I learned also to keep private those things that were precious to me. In my last year of high school, desperate to find a way to express something about my life, I began sculpting in clay. In my first attempt, without intention, under my hands an ancient Chinese man appeared. He was old, wrinkled, very sad and

very beautiful in his own way.\* The ancient wise man reached out to me and touched my heart. This lump of clay coming to life under my hands was my life.

As I sat holding the sculpture in my hands, my mother walked into my room. I showed it to her tentatively, shyly. She said it was wonderful, but wanted me to let her spray paint it gold so it would look *more* beautiful and we could display it in the living room. The next day my father looked at it and said, "It's a little sad isn't it." I could not answer but felt afraid and my body stiffened. I knew I must not let them take that sadness from me, spray me with their gold.

Quickly I found an old shoe box, wrapped my sculpture carefully, lovingly in newspaper, and buried it deep in my closet, where even my mother would not find it.

I made one more sculpture that year, an old sailor man, whose expression reflected anguish. He too was wrapped carefully and hidden away, then I stopped sculpting. It was too dangerous and painful to create something and then have to hide it. I decided to wait.

And what do we do while we're *waiting*? Some of us become rigid "good women," some loose "bad women"; most of us just do the best we can. While I was busy being good, staying safe, my body reacted to this unnatural containment which was both forced on me and which I forced on myself. My face erupted. I ground my teeth at night and bad dreams haunted me. My body was for years a battleground.

Fear keeps us isolated from ourselves and each other. My home was a microcosm of a terrorist state. Violence was a form of control: unpredictable and vicious. I was never safe. I trusted no one. My mother either praised me as the perfect one, yet was unavailable to me, or she excoriated me saying I was not good enough. That when she was my age she was: a star, buying her mother diamonds, working harder than I ever had or could. Now *she* was on a pedestal and my arms could not reach that high.

My sister and I were never close. She was five years older, and, as often happens in dysfunctional families, assumed the role of the "bad" daughter. Warm and playful with me one minute, then without warning scratching and slapping me viciously.

\*He spoke to me through the pain on his face. In later years in a discussion with author/poet, Ray Gwyn Smith, it became clear that this was my first encounter with my own spirit and sense of integrity — my first attempt to move past control into the creative voice. And the voice was very sad. It was going to be through this pain, this sad voice that I would find what was valuable and worthy in my life.

My father was a sadist. Any time I was excited and happy about something, he would take it away from me, and would laugh afterwards. Mother, sister, father, all unavailable, all dangerous. I waited alone.

As I became watchful and secretive I remember always thinking that if things got bad enough I would take my rifle, the one my father gave me when I was eight, load it, and kill myself. It would be years before I would abandon suicide as an escape. Before I would learn that I wanted to turn the gun away from my own head and point it away from me, towards the source of that violence.

I have a nightmare: a man's head with no body floats in the air staring at me while I sleep. It is a handsome, grey-haired man in his forties; he only stares and I am horrified. I try to scream in my sleep, the sound sticking deep in my throat. I struggle to come awake and am sweating from terror and effort. For weeks afterward I am afraid to fall asleep.

Another dream: a huge shark with enormous jaws is about to attack. I wake up with my jaws aching. When I tell a friend that I think the dream is about my father, she says simply, "Look at who's talking." I am becoming both the attacker and the attacked. My father is in my body. As I write this I feel my jaws tighten and hear myself say in his voice, "Your writing is drivel, pure crap. Who cares." I see the letter I wrote when I was nine which he returned to me with words circled in red and the demand to re-write it and return it to him.

My mother made me write to him each week. Believing the lie, turning away from the violence for whatever reason — fear, ignorance, inability to imagine another life — she offered no help, only repeated that he didn't mean any of it, that he loved me.

I have learned my lessons well: the oppressor is most successful when his subjects rule themselves. Most successful when he can have their mother re-inforce the sadism.

As we talk years later about his sadism my mother says, "I did not know, I did not know." What is true is that she did not *name* what she knew. I do not know why, but as I struggle to name for myself what I know, I begin to understand the difficulty. My mother is filled with fear; often I have seen it in her eyes. She cannot accept feeling sad or angry, denying both constantly. To name my father's violence she would have to feel both feelings deeply: I do not think she knows she could survive.

I feel hugely sad. I want this chapter to be over as much as I wanted growing up in my family to be over. Sadness wells up through me like water bubbling up through desert sand. I think again of the little dog I saw: old dog, I hope they do not abuse you or neglect you. I could not tell if you were happy, but I want you to be. I want your old years to be gentle. I want them to feed you and keep you warm. Old dog, I want more for my life than to trot along, tired, trying to keep up and stay safe. Old dog, I feel so sad for the child I was.



This morning on the radio I hear that Reagan is fighting for more money to build his war machine, "for peace." My father attempts to buy land and build condominiums on sacred Indian burial land. He says to me, "What is right belongs to those who have the money to make the rules. That's what ethics and ideals are all about." Tonight I will go my ethics class at the university: it is a class on moral ideals. We ask the questions, what is honesty, integrity, courage? What makes our lives meaningful and why do we care? And until this moment of writing I have wondered why I was so fascinated with ethical issues and moral struggle.

My father was an evil man. It has taken me thirty-six years to say this, to tell these stories. When I first began to contradict all the lies that I have been told of how close and loving our family was, how noble and good our nation, as I began slowly to speak the truth, I had this dream: my tongue was torn out at the roots; my mouth bleeding and raw. I was filled with anguish. But as I looked in a mirror I saw that a new tongue was growing, forming underneath the destruction of the old one.

With this new tongue I now speak. It reaches out sinuous, eel-shaped, moving through air as through water. It touches the tongue of a woman poet. We play, our tongues meeting, circling each other, a serpentine dance. She says to me:

I am no longer afraid of mirrors where  
I see the sign of the amazon. . .  
I have relinquished some of the scars. . .  
On the book of my body, I have permanently inscribed a tree.\*

I am gentled by this woman. Laughingly I draw in my tongue. No longer fearful, I have words of love, of delight. I become my own Prince Charming, placing the kiss of life on my mouth, breathing courage into my lungs.

As I write this I continue to breathe deeply, feeling air circulate throughout my body as if for the first time: and I soften. Every taut muscle letting go. Sinking deeply into this home of my body I find the peacefulness that has eluded me. I remember when the stillness and quietness that now gives me solace seemed ominous. Like the returned soldier who although the war is long over, becomes tense and vigilant walking under the light of the full

\* Deena Metzger, *Tree*

moon, so too I feared the vulnerability of being seen or heard. I had been at war for so long that to let go, to sink into stillness seemed dangerous. If the light shone on me, if I were quiet and listened to those inner voices, what would I see, hear? Would a monster rise to the light, would it be me? But, the worst hours for me were the early evening hours, when day slides slowly into night. A sense of dread would crawl over me if I were alone. I would rush out to be with friends, or go out to do anything, always, always, keeping busy. My lover, who relished the hours of dusk more than any other, and who had a great capacity for stillness, suggested that I try facing what frightened me: that I sit alone some evening, watching the sun set, the darkness rise, and allow myself to discover what might be there for me.

I knew she was right, yet I waited. I wasn't quite ready — for what I did not know. Some waiting is about the refusal to *act* out some fear. Some, about the refusal to be *still*, out of fear. And I was afraid.

Several months later I entered into a long period of depression. I thought, "I can't fight any longer," and gave myself over to depression. As I sank into it, it became a thick blanket of sadness. I was heavy with an unnamed despair. I was able to work, and work well, but that was all. When the day was over I would return home, leave the lights off, the music off, the curtains open, and lie on my bed, facing the window. For three months I faced the evening dusk this way: grieving for something I could not name. And day after day the evening darkness would come and wrap itself around me, offering comfort. The monster I feared never came. Instead I felt a hardness melting, slipping away from around my heart. Something in me was stirring.

One late afternoon I came home as usual, wrapped myself in a quilt and lay down. As I lay there, I was captured by the radiance of the changing light. Golds and rose-colored streaks moved over me making everything sparkle with movement and color. I felt alive with light: sensual, erotic, and charged with a desire to create — to say — this is who I am.

That same afternoon, I began a series of self-portraits experimenting with a new technique which was to keep me occupied for the next year and a half. While taking these photographs I *knew* I was capturing the moments, the time of healing, and the eruption of my spirit out of depression into the formation of something new and vital.

Rather than ugliness and monsters, in my stillness and waiting-time I had discovered something, unnamable yes, yet profound. Out of sorrow something unspoken in me had a chance to emerge, to release a song. This kind of waiting needs a new name. It is a letting go, it is an allowance.

Waiting, when it is a refusal to take necessary action or a refusal to be still, is a holding back from entering into the depth of experience; it is an attempt to be safe and to avoid what is assumed to be frightening or unendurable. If we choose to enter into experience we may in fact encounter dragons. And our

dragons have powerful voices: voices of rage, of sadness, but also of great tenderness, desire, sensitivity. These voices call us, sing us deeper and deeper into our inner lives. I know now why I am so fond of dragon stories. They teach us that where we learn to be still and face our fear, inevitably courage grows.

Vickie Sears

## Ceremony

Out of gray  
red comes morning with  
flowerwinds pushing clouds aside.

I see it coming  
smell it bringing itself  
feel its brittle newness.

Wash my body to reflect my spirit.

Brush my teeth with request that  
all words be true.

Swallow water which gives life ask to  
give back a living which justifies the water gift.

Thank the Grandfather for  
winged people two legged ones water creatures  
fourlegged persons beings of the underground.  
profile of the earth.

Thank the Mother for life she gives  
births renewal springs winter-resting.

Ask the Hall of Grandmothers to  
use me as channel of help in healing  
sharing hearing.

Thank the Creator for me.

pray cleanse myself

All is right. it is time now I can share the morning.

## A Mother's Journey Into Loss

*The Absence of the Dead is Their Way of Appearing*, by Mary Winfrey Trautmann. Cleis Press, A Women's Publishing Company, P.O. Box 8933, Pittsburgh, PA 15221. 1984, 255 pp \$8.95.

Mary Winfrey Trautmann's journal, *The Absence of the Dead is Their Way of Appearing*, represents a chronicle of the last years of Trautmann's daughter Carol's life, a tug of war between the intense growth-momentum of a young adult and the life-stopping cells of her leukemia. Published by Cleis Press, a feminist outfit based in Pittsburgh and San Francisco, this 1984 release has been followed by other such exceptional works of feminist nonfiction as a disabled women's anthology and Alicia Portnoy's tales of political persecution in Argentina. Cleis remains one of our most valuable publishers.

Death-and-dying literature abounds with tender works in which a female author details the last months or years of a husband or son. Trautmann's work is almost unique in exploring the loss for one woman of another, in this case a mother her daughter. Finally, in print, a woman seems worth grieving for. Further, Trautmann's feminist vision gives the reader access to aspects of the loss experience that a more establishment view would refute. Only Alice Bloch's remarkable work, *Lifetime Guarantee: A Journey through Loss and Survival* (Alyson Publications) tells a similar story. In this work, lesbian/feminist Bloch details the denial, anguish, grief, and ultimate passage toward grace the death of her younger sister, also from leukemia, brings to her. In these works, no punches are pulled. Female caretakers are not portrayed as simplistically all-loving, all-giving. Trautmann is not a Sainted Mom, hovering over the pillows of her gently expiring daughter.

Instead, a middle-aged wife, mother, poet, spiritual seeker finds herself propelled by her daughter's illness and eventual death down a twist in the path of her own journey for which she had not bargained. The way contains rage, fear, bone-deep loneliness, serious questioning of faith. *Absence* finally becomes, not Carol's story, but Mary's. When Trautmann seeks out a fellowship of Charismatic Christians for the prayer, the music, the support, it is her own healing as much as her daughter's for which she reaches.

With the characteristic energy of an adolescent plunging full tilt into her young adulthood, Carol veers constantly between a childlike emotional state, in which she needs her mother, and a keenly mature stance about her own options and limitations as her life draws to a close, a place into which her mother cannot follow. Carol refuses to give up anything this time in her life

would ordinarily involve, if she can possibly manage it: camping trips to the mountains with friends, school, work, a boyfriend who skis and plays baseball.

In contrast, Mary finds herself in suspension. She cannot be the mother approaching “empty-nest” who looks forward toward a life of her own; her dying daughter needs her. Yet what that very daughter also needs is for her grieving mother to let go, to let her child steer her own course. Trautmann writes of the closeness the two feel after Carol receives blood: “adult, adolescent, child, infant, she recedes within my arms and returns for a blinding scintilla of time to my womb” (p.196). Yet, weeks later, Carol’s off to Utah to ski, to cram for final exams.

Of all the works on the terminally ill I’ve read, this one brought me the most acute sense of loss: not even for Carol, who indeed took her life at full measure for as long as she could, but for Mary Trautmann, who seemed, as death grew closer, to come dangerously adrift from whatever previously had moored her in her life. Again and again, within the pages of the journal that comprise this volume, she returns to Carol, her early poems, anecdotes of childhood, “snapshots” of a life already passed, yet, now, desperately combed through as if some magic, some truth, and some gleaming image would redeem the future, the inevitability of that final last blank page of the album.

While, as a literary structure, this succeeds completely, the reader is left with a hollow ring. Reading *Absence* I wanted so much to reach out and envelop Mary Trautmann in some blanket of warmth, care, and solace her seekings did not bring her. When, with the Charismatic group, she, along with others, eventually begins to “sing in tongues,” I felt, not that she had broken through to some new place of how to be, but that the unspeakable had remained so: incomprehensible, unarticulated.

Still, Trautmann’s spiritual progression, within these pages, shows growth: Christian imagery does not eventually satisfy her. Her own psyche creates in time a goddess figure, whom she calls The Comforter, a Mother for herself — who needs one as much as her daughter, perhaps more.

This fact seems especially striking in light of how empty Trautmann’s marriage seems during this period. Although she does not editorialize on the situation, her very silence on how she and Carol’s father deal with Carol’s illness speaks volumes. Most couples whose child dies of leukemia experience serious marital disruption; over half end up divorced. Paul Trautmann remains a shadowy figure in these pages, a successful businessman who just isn’t around. Not surprisingly, Trautmann herself ends up hospitalized, for vascular surgery (could the similarity to leukemia — both disorders involving the body’s blood systems — be coincidental?). Recuperating, she confronts her daughter—in remission, dressed up for partying, on her way out the door. “I miss you,” she says — and we know that more is dying than Carol’s physical body. *Absence* ends up being not only a special chronicle of terminal illness but

a story of our time as women: how patriarchal constructs of what a mother must be in our society intersect and collide with what one soul journeying needs for herself.

When the inevitable end approaches, Carol extracts from Mary a firm promise that her mother have, in Carol's memory, a lemon tree planted. It is in this image, deeply-rooted, flowering, bearing fruit into perpetuity, that I see Carol Trautmann. For Mary Trautmann, such groundness has not yet happened: she remains at the end of her story, in her own words, "a restless woman exploring many worlds."

## Notes From the Editor: A Letter to Elana

Dear Elana,

Today is the 19th of March, outside a few flakes of snow, almost Spring, between Purim and *Pesakh*, and I am thinking about genocide, survival, revenge . . . . I'm remembering revenge will be the theme of one of your issues and how happy I am for your ideas to be feeding, dressing and transforming *Sinister Wisdom*. The metaphor is so maternal.

When I was visiting in February I began leafing through the stack of old *Sinister Wisdoms* piled on the chair beside your living room couch, my bed. In 1976, in the first issue, Harriet expressed her and Catherine's commitment to publish *Sinister Wisdom* for one year—one year—to print three issues: there is enough money and time to do this, she said, and then we'll see.

So they saw. . . for another 4 years, another 13 issues, 16 in all; and Michelle and Adrienne gave her 2 more years, 8 more issues; and then Michael and I, less than a year together, two issues, and then me alone, supposedly alone although of course I would have slit my throat without the help, advice, support too mild a word, sustenance, and labor of Irena, Linda, Esther, Helga, Edie, Judy, Bernice, Gloria, Beth, Fauna, Morgan, Marianne, you, Dolphin, many many others.

Working on *Sinister Wisdom*, I have —like any well-trained woman—mostly focused on shortcomings: that I was not managing to find reviewers to cover the books which needed and deserved attention; that I did not develop the visual side of the magazine more, that I was so often behind schedule . . . . The truth is, for four years now I've lived with the sense of being always out of control. So today, thinking about turning this over to you, I'm flooded with relief. Relief that I never have to meet another person postcard phonecall asking what is happening with her manuscript; never another panicked search for an elusive bio; no more Linda and me scraping the wax off the paste-up sheet with a razor and the express mail goes out in 15 minutes and will we make it; no more massive post office trips where the line stretches out behind me into the lobby and everyone stares at me with deep hatred. Relief that I will no longer be trying to pay the postofficeprintertypesetterbillsbillsbills . . . . .



Worst is the sense of work lost through the lack of time to work with it, the review that needed attention I never had time to give, the story with promise but me with no time to nurture that promise. I'm reminded again of mother and child, of the mother in Tillie Olsen's "*I Stand Here Ironing*": She knows what that child would become if she, the mother, could do more, and she can't. I did what I could. You will do what you can.

This makes it sound grim, and like I did everything by myself. Sometimes I felt like that. I remember times of feeling overwhelmed, alone with the burden, the responsibility; afraid, afraid of deadlines, of controversy. But the truth is also that I was not overwhelmed, I was not alone, I didn't have to be afraid and I'm braver now.

It's four days since I started this letter. Today I feel proud. In 1976 Harriet and Catherine aimed at one year. In 1987 this magazine is still alive and thriving, and in the words of Audre Lorde, we were never meant to survive, none of us, not us, not our children, not our magazines. She is 11 and I helped mother her and now I pass her on, fat and kicking and I am proud of her good health. And, as children do, she taught me. I learned. I learned that the impulse to act, even to act inadequately, incorrectly, without sufficient care is still a more valuable impulse than the drive towards safety, self-protection. I learned there is no point in caution, though there is much point in care. I learned—not well—to give up some control. I learned humility: I will always fuck up. It—whatever it is—will never be perfect. I will always wish I had done more.

And I'm remembering the thrill of seeing those first blues (the exact prints of the magazine, but all blue; the first time you see what it will look like; the last chance to catch errors). And the first cartons of our first issue, *Sinister Wisdom* 25—and yesterday, when Kate drove down from the truck depot in Burlington with 38 cartons of *Sinister Wisdom* 31 in her truck (because otherwise we would have had to wait two more days, delay distribution, etc.) Morgan and I went racing outside to cut open the first carton we would get our hands on. And the letters, sometimes pissed off, exuberant, sometimes small notes in the margins of subscription renewals, thanking us for our work, giving courage, offering help.

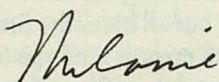
Most wonderful was the discovery, the new writers who skyrocket out of nowhere I know and explode first in my brain and then onto the printed page. This is how I got addicted to publishing. This is what publishing is for. This is why I'm keeping on with *Sinister Wisdom Books*, making sure, at the very least, that *Gathering*, *Dina*, Irena's *Keeper of Accounts* stay in print. I learned that what is in print takes an objective identity, escapes its origins, becomes something

else and I learned to be ready for that, to welcome the transformation. I learned the beauty of paying attention to the material side of creation, *how the work gets out*: to respect the “mechanical uncreative” process.

It's dark now and the snow has been melting all day, Spring, between Purim and *Pesakh*, and I'm thinking again about genocide, survival, resistance . . . and the role of culture. The lesson of Amerika is strip bathe shave your head let us see what in you is shameful let us make you ashamed. Genocide can mean killing a people or a people's culture: let a people die or let them live stripped and naked let them lose language history food customs songs which lift a people teach them in their bodies they can join to make something of beauty something of power something of change teach them together they—I should say, together we are something I alone was not.

And I think about the role of *Sinister Wisdom* in this, for lesbians, isolated lesbians, lesbians in prisons, lesbians all over the U.S. and beyond; I think of *Dina* and what it's meant for Jews; I think of Beth's *Gathering*, what it meant to Native Americans in 1983 when it first came out and what it still means. All this work is about resisting assimilation, resisting the great American whitewash. I know *Sinister Wisdom* is a tool for the making of culture and culture is bread, culture is roses, culture is inspiration, inspiration is the breath of resistance, resistance is how we survive who were never meant to survive. May you survive well together.

*mit khaverteshaft* and much love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Melanie". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

## For The Record

This letter, which is true in its way (partially, like any truth), and the credits on the inside cover, true in their way, add up to a lack of clarity. Who did what? Division of labor on issues 27 and 28 (produced in Maine) was clear: Fauna Yarrow put in 20-25 hours a week as office manager, sometimes friends helped, Irena always helped, Edie Morang typeset, Helga Manning designed, pasted, advised and consulted, I did everything else.

With the move to Vermont, me working a full-time teaching job, Irena co-editing and co-producing 29/30 every step of the way, Esther Hyneman working as an associate editor on 29/30, Linda Vance helping out in every conceivable capacity, from copyediting to putting down each page number by hand—and there are 336 pages—, Morgan Grey assuming control of the office apparatus, things changed considerably. Often it was Morgan who picked up the loose ends; always it was Morgan who managed the subscriptions, advertising, coordination of announcements, bookstore accounts and orders, post office runs, distribution, xeroxing, bill paying, and most of the sorts of work which no one thinking about “doing” a magazine ever conceives of as a major component; the sorts of work that enable a magazine to survive.

When Morgan cut back her hours, Marianne Milton took over advertising, correspondence, post office, xeroxing, the inordinate amount of required shlepping. A professional copyeditor, Marianne also did a final copyediting and initial proofing and, by default and good grace, served as production manager for 31. So Marianne was now picking up the loose ends.

I should add that since I began working full-time, in 1985, I've planned to take time off from both teaching and publishing for three months, April to June, 1987. I also planned that my final issue of SW would be at the printers by then, but the final piece of wisdom I have acquired from this work is *everything always takes longer than you think*. Both Marianne and Morgan have generously agreed to stay with SW past the expected time of transfer to complete the necessary work. Marianne is again copyediting and proofing, Morgan is production manager for 32, and will work till the end of June to facilitate the forwarding of subscriptions, mail, etc., and to fill book orders for Sinister Wisdom Books. Kate Taylor, who began with SW as a volunteer, as did Morgan years ago in Lincoln, Nebraska and Marianne here in Montpelier, will be helping out in a general capacity, book packing, the famous post office runs, taking copy to

and fro everywhere it needs to be. Irena will continue working on promotion for Sinister Wisdom Books. Finally, Linda Vance, who has already worked with me on many of these manuscripts, has volunteered to be the final editor, to check proofed copy, layout, artwork, the blues, and whatever needs arise, as they always do.

That some of the required work, the less glamorous—and hardly any of it is glamorous—is paid work as it should be. No one in the SW office gets paid as she deserves, and no one works that hard, that committed, simply for pay.

To thank each of these women for their help seems in a way presumptuous. We, all of us, have kept Sinister Wisdom alive.

## Contributors' Notes

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**Donna Allegra:** Writing, dancing and African drumming are my Life's work. The Goddess speaks to me and through me most clearly in those languages. I work as a construction electrician in New York City.

**Nancy Barickman:** Born 1948, Detroit. Raised, Southern California. Living in Santa Fe, NM. Trying to get out of hospital work and into hospice care.

**Barrie Jean Borich** is a poet, born to schoolteacher parents on the south side of Chicago in 1959. Her family is Catholic-Eastern Europeans immigrated to midwestern U.S.A. at the turn of the century. Now Barrie lives in Minneapolis, publicizes multi-cultural literary events, and is part of a team that writes and produces the theatre serial *Toklas MN*, a lesbian soap opera.

**Sandy Boucher** is presently writing a book on Women and Contemporary American Buddhism. Her new book of short stories, *Mountain Radio*, will soon be published. She is the author of three other books: *Heartwomen*, *Assaults & Rituals*, and *The Notebooks of Leni Clare*. "Last Year This Time" was first published in *Mama Bear's New and Notes*.

**Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum** are life partners and collaborators on a manuscript entitled "Cancer in Two Voices" from which this chapter is drawn. Sandra has written extensively in the field of child sexual abuse and is currently completing a book of healing stories called *Once Upon a Time*. Barbara is finishing 18 months of chemotherapy and is preparing for a long and healthy remission. She has worked as a teacher, counselor, academic administrator, and editor. She is now redefining what's important.

**Lynn Crawford** is a poet and clinical social worker. She practices in San Francisco and at the Iris Project, a multi-cultural women's drug and alcohol recovery program. Her work has been featured previously in *Sinister Wisdom #21*, *Broadside (A Canadian Women's Publication)*, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and at local readings in San Francisco and Ann Arbor, Michigan, her former home.

**Lauren Crux:** I live in Santa Cruz, CA and have been here for so long—21 years—I am considered an old-timer. I always thought I would leave, but the great surf and the good weather have been too compelling. For work I am a psychotherapist, trainer, and consultant. For play I like all sports, particularly bodysurfing, hiking, biking, and

wrestling. For art I am a published photographer, writer, and poet. In idle times I sniff roses, visit with friends, and just lie about. I am in and out of love, for the last four years mostly in. "Waiting" was first published in *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Women Healing the Trauma of Family Abuse*, ed. Liz Raymer, published by Spinsters Ink.

**Elana Dykewomon** wrote this for her friend Willow Winterfire who died from cancer on January 16, 1984.

**Susan Hansell** is a poet/dramatist who lives and works in San Francisco with selected friends and her cat, Calypso. Susan's first book of poems, *Decisions Terminate Panic*, (which tells the story of a doomed love affair via sequential prose poems), is due out from **e.g. press** in later '87/'88. Currently, she's finishing up her M.A. and also working up the nerve to schedule a production of her theatre piece, *14 Ladies in Hats*, for performance on the S.F. stage.

**Laurie Jo Hoskin**: I am a twenty-seven year old sober lesbian who holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from Vermont College, is currently teaching English in Michigan, and whose passions include Deborah, Celeste, and Rachel.

**Susan Iverson** lives in Davis, CA where she is currently doing massage work. Her photographs have appeared in *The Blatant Image* and *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*.

**Tania Kravath** lives and teaches in NYC and has been working in clay since 1980.

**Maia**: I'm 41, a single mother, working as an editor and attendant to support my writing, artistic, and ceremonial lives, choosing to identify myself with the Cherokee thread that runs through my heritage. Although I've been writing all my life, until 1985 when I began a collection of short stories, I thought of myself primarily as a poet; now I am deeply committed to exploring all of fiction's rich possibilities.

**Beth McDonald**, 59-year-old lesbian. Teach English composition part-time for Frank Phillips Junior College of Borger, TX. Formerly taught full-time for Louisiana State University at Alexandria. Also substitute for the local high school, Perryton High School. Have had material published in *Matrix* of Santa Cruz, CA (two poems) and *Feminary* (autobio sketch). First prize poem in *Images of High Plains*, an anthology of poetry. Non-fiction and a poem in *Focus Magazine* of Pampa, TX.

**Lynn Martin** is a graduate of Vermont College's writing program. She is currently living on Welcome Hill in N.H. in "a studio of one's own" and works in Brattleboro, VT. She has been published by *River City Review*, *Kalliope*, *South Florida Review*, *Lezzie-Fair*, *Andrew Mountain Press*, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*. She has recently had poems accepted by the *Centennial Review* and the *Green Mountain Review*.

About 7 years ago she submitted one of her first poems to *Sinister Wisdom* which was returned with "loving criticism" at a time when encouragement was crucial, so it is especially wonderful, she says, to be in this issue of *Sinister Wisdom*.

**Maude Meehan** has been widely published in literary journals, magazines, textbooks and anthologies. Her book, *Chipping Bone*, a collection of ten years of poetry, was published a year ago. She has edited and published four anthologies of Santa Cruz Women's Poetry and is co-author and editor of "Wheels of Summer" a film script. Ms. Meehan is a political activist and frequent guest lecturer in fields related to creativity and to women's studies. She has been conducting writing workshops for women for several years in Santa Cruz. "Maxima Culpa" was first published in *Chipping Bone*.

**Marianne Milton:** I live alone in Vermont and spend most of my waking hours at Goddard College working as Coordinator of Educational Services, finishing my M.F.A. in Creative Writing, and talking with Vicki, who has, over the past two years, in her own way, shown me that only by valuing myself will I ever learn to fully love other women.

**Hilary Mullins** grew up on a farm in Vermont and is now living "up the road a piece" in Burlington. She free-lances for local publications and works at a crisis center for teenagers, her self-chosen focus there being on sexual abuse survivors.

**Norma Fain Pratt** is an historian and playwright who lives in Southern California. Her book *Morris Hillquit: A Political Biography of an American Jewish Socialist* (Greenwood Press, 1979) explores the ideals and culture of the immigrant Jewish Left in the early twentieth century. In the 1980's, as a recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, Pratt did extensive work about Jewish women including her article "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers in America, 1890 - 1940," and a play *Margolin*, about the Yiddish poet Anna Margolin. Presently she is working on two projects: a book about Yiddish women writers, *New Songs in a Strange Land*, and a translations of Margolin's *Lider*, her collected poetry (1929) with a biographical introduction. "Scared: Inherited Traits" was first published in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, State University of New York Press, Albany, No. 5, 1986, pp. 151-157.

**Pamela Pratt:** I live and work in New York City, But my heart is in London. Writing has been both a necessity and a pleasure for me since early childhood. It is the way in which I learn about and connect with the rest of the world.

**Diana Rivers:** I'm a 55-year-old ex-New York artist/writer living in the hills of Arkansas on women's land, in a house all built by all women's hands, including my own. I have been writing short stories of our lives for the past 10—12 years. They have appeared in magazines such as *Conditions*, *Feminary*, *Sinister Wisdom*, etc. This spring (1987) Lace Publications is publishing my full length lesbian, visionary, fantasy, adventure, story *Journey to Zelindar*.

**Rose Romano:** Most recently my work has appeared in *Earth's Daughters*, *Rebirth of Artemis*, *Poetessa*, and *Sinister Wisdom* 31. I'm especially happy to have in *Common Lives* a review of the novel about Italian-American lesbians. Italian-American lesbians are often ignored and misunderstood by the community, and I hope to help change this situation by contributing more in the future to our small but growing literature.

**Teya Schaffer** is involved, along with her lover and other women of the California Bay Area, in the creation of the Women's Cancer Resource Center. Designed for women who have/had cancer and their friends, and families, the center will offer information and referrals, counseling and support. For more information or to send a donation, write WCRC, P.O. Box 11235, Oakland, CA 94611.

**Patricia Roth Schwartz** is a psychotherapist in private practice in Somerville, MA working from a holistic and feminist perspective. As part of her graduate training, she served as a counseling intern on a pediatric ward with terminally ill children, adolescents, and their families. She is also a writer, publishing poetry, fiction, reviews, and nonfiction in feminist and small press journals.

**Vickie L. Sears** lives in Seattle, WA. She is a writer, teacher, and feminist therapist. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Sinister Wisdom*, *Calyx*, *Backbone*, *Ikon*, *Gathering Ground: New Writing and Art by North West Women of Color*, *The Things That Divide Us: Stories by Women*, and *Hear the Silence: Stories by Women of Myth, Magic and Renewal*.

**Susan Stinson** is a fat dyke, raised in Colorado, and now writing and working as a secretary in Boston.

**Amber Coverdale Sumrall** is currently at work on her first edible poem about the kiwi. Her work has appeared in *Ikon*, *With the Power of Each Breath*, *A Gathering of Spirit*, *The Greenfield Review*. She teaches workshops on disability issues and lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "Questions" was first published in *Toward Solomon's Mountain: the Experience of Disability in Poetry*, eds. J. Baird and Deborah Workman, Temple University Press, 1986.



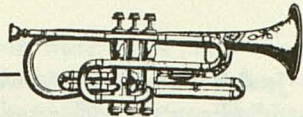
**Judith Waterman:** This work is part of a thematic series of paintings on death begun following the suicide of my lover.

**Chocolate Waters** has published three collections of poetry, short stories, and rubber stamp cartoons: *To the Man Reporter From the Denver Post, Take Me Like a Photograph*, and *Charting New Waters*. A fourth collection, *The Coming Out of Chocolate Waters: I was a Closet Woman*, is looking for a publisher. She lives and writes in New York City.

**jillian wilkowski** lives in San Francisco.

**Correction of Contributor's Note in #31:** **Margie Erhart**, whose story "The Unforgiven" appeared in our last issue, has a novel coming out in the fall with E.P. Dutton. Look for it around November. The title is *Unusual Company*, and the author has become a Margaret.

## Announcements



Do you have any **thrilling stories about travelling abroad**? Submissions are being accepted for an anthology on women travellers. Please write POB 14757, San Francisco, CA 94114, for writing guidelines.

**National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights** scheduled for Oct. 11, 1987. For more info, contact POB 7781, Washington, DC 20044; 202-783-1828 or 783-1830.

Anthology on **Lesbian Coupling**: seeking non-fictional essays, poems, cartoons, drawings, and songs from lesbians about the committed coupling experience. Contact Lynn Scott and Pam White, Box 506, Millers Falls, MA 01349.

**Feminist Women's Writing Workshop**, July 12—24, 1987. Contact Kathryn Machan Aal, Director, Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, POB 456, Ithaca, NY 14851: 607-273-9040.

**Flight of the Mind**, 4th annual summer writing workshop for women, July 26—Aug. 4. For info, SASE to Flight of the Mind, 622 SE 28th, Portland, OR 97214.

**The West Coast Lesbian Collections** is proud to announce that it is re-opening at a new location and under new sponsorship, continuing its service to the preservation of lesbian history and culture. The change is accompanied by a re-naming and renewed commitment to the future of lesbian archiving. Now named the **June Mazer Lesbian Collections** in honor of June Mazer, a pioneering LA lesbian activist and affiliated with Connexus, a social service agency in W. Hollywood serving the lesbian community. JMLC, 3721 N. Raymond Ave., Altadena, CA 94001; 818-791-4561.

**Reclaiming A Past: A documentary with Sophie and Judy Sloan**, recounts the creation of the character and script development for Sophie, Sloan's brilliant portrayal of an elder Jewish woman. Video available from Ladyslipper, POB 3130, Durham, NC 27705.

The National Women's Studies Association 9th Annual Conference "**Weaving Women's Colors: A Decade of Empowerment**" at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA, June 24—28, 1987, will explore issues related to the intersection of race and gender. For more info, contact: NWSA '87, Emory University, POB 21223, Atlanta, GA 30322; 404-727-7845.

**out here flying** by Jan Hardy—out, proud lesbian poetry to inspire, arouse and cheer. \$3.95 + \$1.50 postage and handling to Jan Hardy, Sidewalk Revolution Press, POB 9062, Pittsburgh, PA 15224.

**Jewish Lesbian Daughters of Holocaust Survivors:** We meet for support and networking and welcome contact from other Jewish Lesbian Daughters of Holocaust Survivors. A partners group has also been formed for women who are in relationships with JLDHS. Membership is not dependent on both partners. Write Box 6194, Boston, MA 02114 or call 617-321-4254.

Seeking **lesbian mothers and their children** who might be interested in being interviewed about the lesbian family for a forthcoming book. Especially interested in talking with children 12 and older about what it is like to be raised in a lesbian family. The mother need not be in a relationship. Write: Christine Ratzel, POB 267, Amherst, MA 01004.

**Class and Classism:** 3 lesbians from different classes interested in presenting a performed anthology are looking for submissions of taped, written, sung, performed, or photographed material about how class/ism has and is affecting you and your life. We are committed to a multi-classical, racial and cultural exchange. Contact: Christine Ratzel, POB 267, Amherst, MA 01004.

Looking for **10-12 women to form women's cooperative business** growing jojoba in Calif., or Ariz. Contact Mariann Soulek, 1444 N. Jones, Las Vegas, NV 89108; 702-646-0538.

**There's No Place Like Home:** writer seeks contributors for anthology by and about women (esp. lesbians!) who grew up in environments other than their "natural" homes, i.e., foster homes, adoptive homes, group homes, institutions, etc. Confidentiality guaranteed. Submit writing and bio to: Robyn Weissman, POB 20885, Baltimore, MD 21209. Let's share experiences!

**Cross-Cultural Health Seminars & Fitness Adventures,** Yelapa—Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Internship in traditional healing, women's health, and rural health. Certification and CEUs for nurses. Brochure: Center for Traditional Medicine, POB 1526, Cambridge, MA 02238; 617-489-3806, V/TTY.

**The Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series** makes available in a highly accessible format, political analysis by women of color who are working at the forefront of liberation movements all over the globe: #1 *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, with a new Foreword by Barbara Smith, \$3.25 paper, 24 pages. #2 *Apartheid U.S.A.* by Audre Lorde and *Our Common*

*Enemy, Our Common Cause: Freedom Organizing in the Eighties*, by Merle Woo, \$3.30 paper, 28 pages. #3 *I am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities*, by Audre Lorde, \$2.95 paper, 12 pages. New York State residents add applicable sales tax to your orders. Please include \$1 for postage and handling for the first pamphlet and 35¢ for each additional pamphlet. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, POB 908, Latham, NY 12110.

**The Alternative Gallery**, an Archive of Libertarian/Alternative Culture and Social Ecology, PO Box 20037, GR-11810 Athens, Greece, wants to complete their collection of *Sinister Wisdom*. They are missing issues #1—6 and 8—18. If you have copies that you would be willing to donate, write to them.

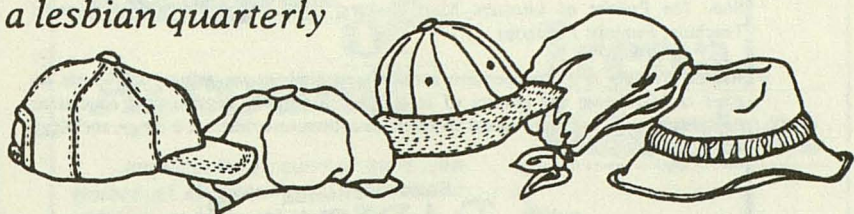
**Mountain Momma Packing and Riding Co:** Horse and burro pack trips in the high desert mountains of New Mexico. Trips available from March to October. Write Harpy, Rt. 1 Box 23, Chimayo, NM 87522. 505-351-4047.

**Our Eyes Have Found You: Angry Words from Honest Women.** Submissions wanted for an anthology that will provide a creative and constructive expression of anger as we use it to heal from acts of physical, sexual, emotional, or mental abuse. We can actively shape ways to express our anger that foster growth and change. **Our Eyes Have Found You** will help create a language that reflects our experiences and provide a way to hold perpetrators of violence responsible. Righteous anger protects our boundaries, fortifies our resistance and heals our wounds. Send poems, short stories, plays, journal entries along with a SASE to Celine-Marie Pascale, POB 2959, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Deadline: Sept. 1987.

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### Sinister Wisdom, Issue #33

**In the eleventh year, time to take stock:  
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How do we express the wisdom we've come to have, the wisdoms we still seek? How do we name what we've accomplished, how do we give ourselves credit? What's made us cynical, skeptical? What gives us the courage to risk, to try new ways? Where are our sources? How has wisdom been passed on to us? What's stayed through time — from family, other womyn, from what we've read, from experience? How do we use what we've learned to keep growing? Or do we use it to make peace in the place that we've stopped? Can we recognize stages or cycles in our lives? Is knowledge wisdom? How do we use systems of knowledge: astrology, politics, spirituality, sociology, technology? How do we learn to be wrong, to make and learn from our mistakes? How does outsider status (lesbianism, class, race, ethnicity, age, ability, size) shape our visions, and how do we account for that? How *do* we know what we know — and how do we pass it on?

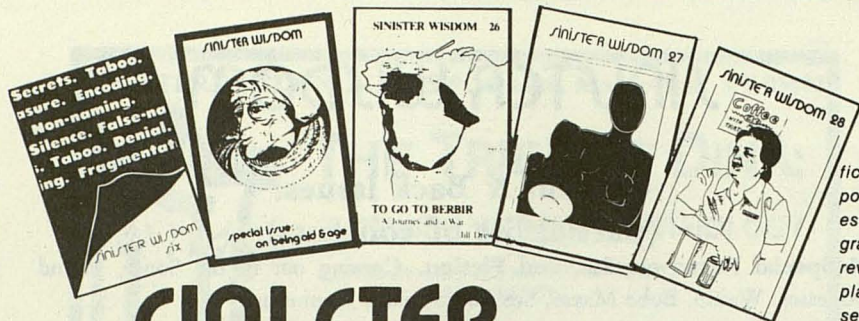
**Issue #34: Science fiction and lesbian visions  
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- #31/Special Focus on Sex and Fiction**, Coming out in the South, Found Goddesses, Waitin, Bobe Mayse, Sex and Socialist Feminism.
- Smukler Blackwomon Romano Davenport Dykewomon McNaron •
- #29/30/The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology**, edited by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisc
- #28/Special Focus on Women & Work; Body Image, Size & Eating**, Aging, Comedy about Outlaw Lesbian Communities, Courage, PC/PI, Letter about SW #26
- Clarke Heather Klepfisz Sturgis Gould Boucher Dykewomon Gomez Sardella Moran •
- #27/Special Focus on Girlhood Sexuality and Violence**, Office Work, Navy Dykes, Feminism & Snobbery, White Trash, Passion, Poetry/Performance, Women of Color/women in Israel/women in Lebanon, Ed. Statement on SW #26.
- Adnan Felman Calvert Grahn Schalet Bogus HaMa'avak Touch Quintanales Anzaldú'a •
- #26/Special Issue: full length book, *To Go To Berbir*** by Jill Drew, a journal written by an American nurse who worked in Beirut in 1982 during the Israeli invasion.
- #25/Butch/Fem in the 50's**, Women's Peace Encampments, Erotic Satire, Native American Roots of White Feminism, Welfare Motherhood, Palestinian, Haitian, Puerto Rican struggles, Jewish Radical Identity, Sexuality, SciFi
- Allen Cotrell Root Stecenko Love Paz Smukler Hall Lipstadt Brant •
- #24/Violence Against Women & Resistance**, Alcohol, Fighting Racism, Leaving Husbands, Black Lesbians, White Working Class Identity, Censorship, Dyke Culture, Jewish Identity
- Harjo Derricotte Nestle Lynch Sylvester Pratt Moirai Parkerson •
- #21/Separatism Revisited**, Jewish Survival & Defiance, Black Lesbian Writing, Photographs of Dykes in Drag, Suicide, Bars, Letters about Anti-Semitism
- Klepfisz Arobateau Segrest Simpson Tornos Addison Justice Foley Crawford Wagstaff •
- #20/Lesbians Getting Fired, Madness & Incarceration, Class Pain, Mirros, Fat, Dykes in the Army, Japanese-American & Jewish Lesbians, Dyke Buddies**
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- #19/Vulnerability & Power, Anti-semitism, Sobering Up, Coming Out, Scars, Halfbreeds, Mothers & Sisters, Black Student/White College**
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