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## The Folklore Muse

Frank de Caro

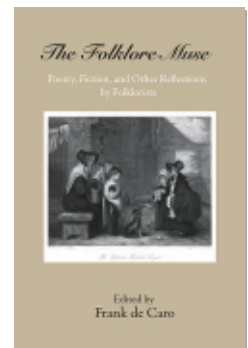
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# Being or Becoming a Folklorist

Folklorists may have many individual accounts of how they wandered into their uncommon profession: a college course, a chance accident, an early or late interest in certain kinds of cultural experiences, a suddenly discovered love for certain kinds of traditional expression. A few years ago, a collection of short essays called *Roads into Folklore* was published in which folklorists talked briefly about how they had become folklorists—the roads were disparate ones.<sup>5</sup> In *The Folklore Muse* folklorists indeed muse on what it means to be a folklorist, and how they themselves may have found this undertaking. In the process they muse on other things as well: family relationships, folk crafts, reading, and other folklorists. What they have to say provides insight into a profession—some might say it's a calling or even an obsession—with its unique perspectives on culture, on what people do with their lives, on how people create and communicate.

Perhaps inevitably, being a folklorist can produce a way of looking at the world in general and perspectives on observing culture and responding to the world around us in particular. Here, for example, both Steve Zeitlin and Daniel Peretti address the question of how writing and folklore may fit together in the mind of the folklorist. Zeitlin compares the act of writing poetry, fitting words together, to the act of creation in the folk craft of stone masonry, a craft he tried his hand at after his wife, also a folklorist, had completed a study of it. Peretti recognizes how the ideas of several folklorists give him new insight into reading literature and into the importance of stories in his own life. Libby Tucker's suffuses her accounts of her treatment for cancer and the events surrounding it with a folklorist's ways of looking at the world. She expresses her experience in terms of fairytale motifs, traditional teenagers' party games, and a shape-note hymn. In "Work Song" Edward Hirsch looks at the performance of physical labor around his house and aspects of his daily life against a backdrop of folksong, notably one of Leadbelly's famous work songs.

Jeannie Banks Thomas sees her poems "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" and "Instructions for Installing Blinds" as part of her "ethnographic impulse" and the fact that she, like many folklorists, is intrigued by everyday realities; she seeks to capture "the wonders of the mundane" and to reveal "how even the most mundane acts are imbued with significant meaning." In one of her titles Thomas even references the system whereby folklorists number the motifs that recur in folk narratives, creating an entirely fictional number for the situation of the poem, adding

“a new motif in recognition of the common but under-recognized story of the woman whose anger becomes heroic when she reaches mid-life.” Leslie Prosterman speaks of her three poems (which appear in a later section) as part of “an ethnographic cycle,” suggesting that a folklorist is ever something of an ethnographer when observing cultural phenomena, whether “folk” or not, and that being a folklorist may be a matter of taking on a way of conceptualizing a wide range of human existence.

Of course, that road to getting there—to becoming the folklorist who does certain kinds of work but who also comes to see the world in particular ways—may be a long and winding one, and several contributors write about what happened to them en route. Mary Magoulick takes us back to her days as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, and uses her experiences there for remembering and for musing upon social realities and social problems, as well as her ways of looking at things as a folklorist. Though she does not draw the conclusion directly, we cannot help but see her Senegal encounters as leading toward her later profession with its concentration on culture and society. Joanne B. Mulcahy ties her account of becoming a folklorist into descriptions of her mother’s use of language and her family’s reactions to that, as she tells us about her life’s progressions and turns. Much of what Elaine Lawless writes has to do with her “pre-folklorist” days, but we never doubt where she is headed; we certainly come to see important connections between her work as a folklorist and what came before in her own life.

Part of being a folklorist involves interacting with that small band of other folklorists, a subject of interest in several contributions. Steve Zeitlin writes of an eminent and eccentric folklorist colleague in “Barbara” and of a collector of folk lullabies in “Julia.” His “Amanda in the Mornings,” about his folklorist wife (also mentioned as being instrumental to his work in “Rock and Word”), inevitably takes on a different tone but continues commenting on the connection between folklorists as well.

## Rock and Word

*Digo da pedra, "E uma pedra."*  
Of the stone I say, "It's a stone."

—Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa)

My days begin—as they have for decades—drinking a cup of coffee and writing poetry. I consider it a form of centering, looking into a different kind of mirror—not to comb my hair, but to remind myself of who I am.

Yet, when I turned fifty, I felt the need for a new avocation. I decided to forgo poems and spend mornings building a stone wall with my two hands in the backyard. In fact, I was hoping to impress my wife, folklorist Amanda Dargan, who had recently completed a project on the stonemasons of Westchester County. Westchester is a great spot for a stonemason, an Ecuadorian mason told her, because its wealthy residents can afford stone walls, and local companies like IBM and Texaco often choose to surround their office complexes with stone structures that suggest strength, integrity, stability, and endurance. Building a stone wall was my way of trying to prove to Amanda that perhaps I had precisely those qualities and I could do something productive with my hands (not something I'm known for in the family), or that I could lift something heavier than a laptop.

Besides, I reasoned, poems are just a few coded chicken scratches on papyrus, or dots on an electronic screen. A stone has weight and mass: it exists as an object in the real world. My poems kept me at my computer, but finding stones for the wall necessitated a journey.

The journey led me on a pilgrimage back to my boyhood. With the years, we forget how a rock rests in our hands, how a boulder feels beneath our feet. Searching for stones took me into crooked streams and woods in Hastings—Steve Zeitlin, Master of Creek Beds—and down to the rock beaches in north Yonkers that run along the train tracks. It took me back to a childhood spent foraging in vacant lots.

And it brought me back to poetry. I soon discovered that stones, like words, are everywhere. The trick to building a stone wall is to find rocks that fit into one another perfectly and form a structure that won't collapse from its own weight. A poem is a dry stone wall, bearing only a passing resemblance to a wet wall, whose

concrete is like the music that holds a song together. My dry wall, like a poem, relies solely on rocks: words and their placement.

A rock-strewn creekbed triggers childhood sensations: the way the bottoms of your feet take on the shape of the uneven stones, and the way your body assumes the form of the boulders as you clamber over them. Writing a poem has some of that same joy, the words taking your own shape as you wander through creekbeds of syllables, with your own life rolling over them. I discover the thrill of unearthing the right rock for a particular spot on the wall, just as I would sometimes come upon the perfect word or line for a poem. I marveled at the way a stone wall—made of one of the planet's heaviest objects (rocks)—has a lightness and delicacy about it as the stones touch and balance. The best poems—made of the lightest things on the planet (words)—demonstrate a sturdiness, coupled together so perfectly that a single one cannot be removed without destroying the whole.

Soon after I finished my motley 15-foot wall, I learned that artist Andrew Goldsworthy had built a 2,278-foot stone wall at the Storm King Art Center in upstate New York, a sculpture garden that celebrates the relationship of art to nature. Having built a wall myself, I paid a pilgrimage. I discovered a grand epic poem rolling across the countryside, at one point bending down into a river and appearing to rise out of it on the other side. Goldsworthy's stone masterpiece wraps around every tree it passes so that it appears to alternately wall them in and openly embrace them. The five-foot-high wall was built with the help of five master stonemasons from England and Scotland, masons who (unlike me) knew how to split a rock along the grain, the way a good poet knows where to break the lines.

As folklorists become less bound by hard and fast notions of "tradition" in our work, we discover that folk culture includes not only crafts such as stonemasonry but poetry itself, even when it's not handed down across generations, even when it originates with the individual—particularly if it's part of the cultural expression of this nation's subcultures, such as cowboys, loggers, cops, nurses, or fishermen. Poetry plays a central role in all the cultures I've studied or been a part of. Folk poetry is among the most participatory of the arts. (As folklorists are aware, the reason it's so hard to find great poetry is that so much of it is embedded in the cadences and imagery of ordinary conversations—and it is rare for poems to rise to that level.) Our legacy of language leaves the possibility of artful communication open to all of us.

Ursula Le Guin writes of discovering a twelfth-century church in Wales with the words "Tolfin was here" scaped in runes on the stone. The words, she suggests, carry this message: "Life is short, the material was intractable, someone was here." My poems often seem to me like those seemingly immutable chicken scratches on the stone prison wall that say, "I was here." But my wall is an exercise not in writing on but composing with stone. From nature's wondrous shapes, I labor to create a functional work of art in my backyard. Life is short, the material intractable, but still, undaunted, I continue to build walls of rocks and words on the unyielding landscape. How else to get blood from a stone?

## Shelfscapes

Stories, like Heraclitus's river, are never the same twice. Audience members—be they listeners or readers—bring to the text their own context. Not only that, each audience member brings a different mental context to the same text each time they experience it. In other words, variation occurs not only in the text but in people—even the same person at different times. Textual variation has been relatively easy to document. Changes in people's mental context, however, are slippery, fleeting, and intangible. Sometimes they find expression in texts, but more often, these changes are only observable in reactions and receptions.

I came across an opportunity to describe this sort of change, drawing upon my own life. It began when I received a book in the mail. The book was *Shatterday* by Harlan Ellison, a birthday gift from an old friend. I had read the book years ago, when another friend gave it to me as a Christmas present, so I merely placed the new copy, a beautiful first edition, on a bookshelf. Glancing a moment at it, I noticed the features of the books on the shelf. The variously sized spines rose and fell like rolling hills. Each shelf in the case portrayed a different landscape with its own topography. After this brief pause, I decided that receiving the book presented me with a good reason to revisit it. I read its introduction once more, but something was different. Something about it hit me, emotionally and powerfully.

Ellison is known for the essays he writes as introductions to his short story collections. They tie the books together, pointing out themes, demonstrating the geneses of the stories, why he writes them, and anything else relevant. This particular introduction revolved around a story about a night Ellison was a guest on a radio talk show.

Ellison, prompted by the show's host, revealed that a story of his was actually about the feelings he'd experienced when his mother was ill and under constant care. He'd written a story to read to an audience one night, and in the middle of reading "a section where the lead character is having the argument with his alter ego about his mother, I realized for the first time that I wanted my mother to die." He explained himself: "I didn't mean that I wanted her to *die*, just to be gone. . . . she'd been extremely ill off-and-on for years . . . she was like a shadow . . . and I wanted to be free of that constant realization that *she was out there*. . . . I just had to admit that I wanted her gone." He's not done: "And it was terrible, just terrible. I thought I was scum unfit to walk with decent human beings."

Though the conversation moved on, before long a woman called in to say, “Thank you. Thank you for telling that about your mother. My mother was dying of cancer and I had *the same thoughts* and I hated myself for it. I thought I was the only person in the world who ever thought such an awful thing, and I couldn’t bear it.” Ellison tells his readers that this is the job of writers, to say the things that most people keep hidden, to tell people that they are not alone in their lives. Other people have these horrible feelings. He calls them, and the introduction, “Mortal Dreads.”

This was what had hit me. This made it hard for me to speak.

But I’d read it before. I knew what was coming. The question is, why? Why did it affect me so strongly this time? Why so little at first? What had happened to me?

I had been teaching an introductory folklore class for undergraduates at Indiana University and reached the point in the semester when I attempt to demonstrate exactly why the study of folklore is important. I do this every semester, and not once have I done so to my satisfaction.

It’s similar to what happens when somebody asks me why I want to be a writer, why I would bother when nobody reads anymore. I *know* the answer, but I just can’t put it into words. The thing is, I should be able to. I’m not new to writing or to folklore. And isn’t my job as a writer and educator to put things into words?

At the time I received *Shatterday*, I had just passed that important point in my folklore class, and I had come to the decision that I could no longer put off writing for a living. I had done so earlier because I felt like I needed to learn a lot more. I continued to write, but graduate school was my priority. When the book arrived, I was at a point where writing professionally was once more an option. This meant that I actually had to sit down every day and write. If I wanted this to be part of my career, my effort had to become sincere.

All of this churned and bubbled in my head as I read “Mortal Dreads.” Other things had changed in me as well. I had become a folklorist, which meant I had been exposed to an entire discipline’s worth of new ideas.

It’s not difficult to see parallels between folklore and Ellison’s job description. In a 1928 essay in the *Journal of the Royal African Society* called “Some Aspects of West African Folk-Lore,” R. S. Rattray writes that folklore is an opportunity for people to express “things about which everyone knew, but concerning which one might not ordinarily speak in public.” This is similar enough to the writer making public mortal dreads, but I had not read Rattray’s article the first time I read “Mortal Dreads.”

Nor had I read Henry Glassie’s *Art and Life in Bangladesh*. I had not learned of his encounter with a potter named Garunga who had chosen to give up his life’s work. Glassie, returning to this man’s shop after an absence, found it collapsed. I’ll allow Glassie to describe the encounter: “Garunga met me there, in the scene of his life’s work, in the dusty beginning of an archaeological site. He told me that pottery was labor too hard for the current generation. The shop was done. I gave him the photographs I had taken of him, and we embraced. He had

now, he said, only one reason to live, and that was to see this book. The one who writes about the living has extra reasons to keep going, late at night, when the body complains.”

The first time I read “Mortal Dreads” I had not read Keith Basso’s “Stalking with Stories” in *Wisdom Sits in Places*. In it he describes how, for the Cibecue Apache, stories and landscape combine to help them live properly. He tells us that these things can change people for the better and stresses the importance of both narrative and geography. It’s not just the stories, but the ever-present reminder of their meanings found in the landscape where they’re set that steers people aright. The Apaches themselves have developed the hunting metaphor: Stories can be shot at people like arrows. They stalk like hunters. It takes the Apache to formulate these ideas, and it takes a folklorist (who may or may not be Apache) to bring them to the rest of the world.

Being a folklorist means writing a lot. It means letting people tell their own stories and finding meaning in those stories—as Glassie writes, learning together.

Harlan Ellison is my favorite writer. To read his stories is to delve into parts of myself that I do not necessarily like. He writes of mortal dreads, making public the secret fears we all share; he brings this into the open, states it unequivocally. He confronts his readers with “the ugliness of simply being human.” So I wondered: what ugliness do his stories force me to face? What mortal dread do I share with the rest of humanity?

Posed this way, the question is easy to answer. I look to the story I have read the most often, Ellison’s “On the Downhill Side.” I am struck by the language, the way it refuses to descend into cliché. But it takes more than that to make me read a story over and over. It takes a connection with the characters, and a realization that I might be a lot like them; or rather, I might have been, had the story not hit me right between the eyes.

At one point in the story, the narrator, Paul, describes to his companion the worst thing that ever happened to him. His ex-wife Bernice had been committed to psychiatric care and one night, years later, her mother called. She told him of the hospital and how poorly Bernice was doing. “And then she did an awful thing to me. She said the last time she’d been to see Bernice, my ex-wife had turned around and put her finger to her lips and said, ‘Shh, we have to be very quiet. Paul is working.’ And I swear, a snake uncoiled in my stomach. It was the most terrible thing I’d ever heard.”

I tend to get obsessed with my work. I lose track of the outside world and very much want to be undisturbed while I do this. I was one of those kids whom people describe as living in their own little world. As I got older, reclusiveness evolved into reticence, which was little better. I began to wonder why I was behaving this way, and in studying folklore, I found part of an answer. Linda Dégh, in her book *Legend and Belief*, discusses ostension, the idea that people act out legends. People respond to the possibility that the stories might be true and, in some cases, they



make them true. She gives examples: tampering with Halloween candy, poisoning Tylenol, school shootings, and copycat crimes.

The result of this is often quite terrifying, but other legends, less sinister but no less insidious, can induce ostensive behavior. There is a legend of sorts (perhaps folk idea is a better term) about writers and scholars existing in ivory towers, isolated from the world around them. They are left alone in their genius, to produce great works. To some minds, this is attractive. But aside from consigning oneself to hermitic isolation or a monastic lifestyle, it is quite difficult. It leads to conflict. It could potentially lead to a phone call such as the one Paul received. In other words, it hurts people. Existing mentally in my own little world, I was in some way enacting the legend of the academy. However, while people who cared about me and wanted me to care about them physically surrounded me, I was setting myself up for disaster. And like Paul in the story, the fact that I wasn't doing it on purpose didn't make it any better.

Ellison's story flew like an arrow into me, telling me not to live that way, to value the people around me as much as I value my words and work. He constantly reminds his readers that they live in a world that requires their attention. Ellison, as a writer and as a person, has continually attempted to demonstrate that writers don't have to live shut up in the ivory tower. He's known for his passionate speeches and activism, for writing stories in storefront windows, and for generally pointing out that we cannot avoid the rest of the world. To do so is madness.

And so I realize the importance of writing and of studying folklore; they are intertwined. The work matters to people. If we do not put stories into words on paper, making them permanent, we fail to facilitate the connections those words make possible between people who do not share the same landscape or the same time frame. We fail to make the connection between past and present, between author and reader. We fail in the mission of the writer: to make known the mortal dreads, to tell people that what they do and are and feel matters. We fail to let people know that they are not alone.

Ellison's book came at the right time. Reading of a potter in Bangladesh, trying to explain why folklore is important to a class of freshmen, experiencing anxiety about my career . . . these things coalesced into the right mental framework with which to appreciate Ellison's "Mortal Dreads." I had not been so profoundly affected the first time because I had not been the same person. As I read it again, I put the above ideas and events together and realized the importance of stories in my own life. Doing so made it easier to explain the potential of both writing and folklore to others.

With this in mind, I appreciate my bookshelves in a new way. My response to "Mortal Dreads" had not been an immediate epiphany, just as Paul's terror in "On the Downhill Side" did not immediately affect me. But a gradual understanding does not mean the changes were not as permanent. They required repeated readings. Of equal importance is the presence of the book. "On the Downhill Side" appears in a book called *Deathbird Stories*, and for me it defines that collection. It's

what I think of when I see the promontory of its hard cover jutting above the lowlands of the surrounding paperbacks. Through the story, the book reminds me of my faults and keeps me from climbing back up the ivory tower. Harlan Ellison and I do not share a landscape, but his stories still stalk me. Just as a story might stalk the Apache as they pass a certain landform, I have but to glance up to my shelf and see the spine of a book.

Travels

*1-22-02: Mermaid*

Driving to New York City through a hailstorm, through swirls of sleet. Not easy to drive down this wet winter highway, but who expects the diagnosis of breast cancer to be easy? Cramped in our car's back seat, I breathe stuffy air and long for a cold drink.

My husband drives; our good friend navigates. The two of them talk continuously: will parking be available at Sloan-Kettering? Will we have time for a pilgrimage to Ground Zero? I stare out the window.

Tense, eyes dry, I think about the books I read last night when I should have been sleeping. *Northern Lights*, *Spinning Straw into Gold*: guidebooks to an enchanted world I never wanted to enter. My legs feel cramped; my neck muscles clench. After two weeks anticipating this appointment with a well-known surgeon, I feel nervous, on edge.

We park our car, then splash through icy slush for several blocks before arriving at our destination. Imagining this place, I've pictured a tower with a gleaming sign:

SLOAN-KETTERING

but instead I see an underground office complex identified by a small, discreet plaque:

BREAST CARE CENTER

A nurse ushers me through the door of an examining room and gives me a seer-sucker robe. Not an ugly, faded blue-and-white gown such as I've learned to expect in doctors' offices, but a crisp new robe with salmon-pink stripes. This robe actually makes me feel attractive. My long hair curls over the bodice of my beautiful robe. Mermaid hair. When I checked this doctor's webpage, I saw that he had a friendly smile. All my web-surfing has made me feel like a mermaid. Webpage, webfoot, mermaid's tail.

I'm braced for bad news but excited, expectant. Perched on the metal examining table, I kick my feet, as if I were sitting on the edge of a swimming pool. The waiting time drags on: ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Time enough for words from the language of breast cancer to wash over me one by one. Lumpectomy. Mastectomy. Chemotherapy. Bone marrow transplant.

At last, Dr. Marshall strides into the room. He's very tall, with dark, curly hair, and his smile looks even friendlier than it did on his webpage.

Dr. Marshall gives me a firm handshake, then tells me to lie down on his examining table. He's friendly, but he doesn't say much. His hands run up and down my breasts, searching for lumps, irregularities . . . who knows what? The touch of his hands calms me. These are highly intelligent hands, magic hands! Dr. Marshall is a healer who knows what he's doing. I start to relax, just a little.

Later, in his office, Dr. Marshall speaks sensitively to my husband, our good friend, and me. He has an excellent grasp of this cancer's patterns. "You're going to be fine," he tells me. "Ninety-nine to one hundred percent of these carcinomas are curable. I won't tell you to have your surgery here—that's up to you—but I'd recommend that you have your surgery here with me at Sloan-Kettering."

OF COURSE I'll have my surgery at Sloan-Kettering! A flash of recognition sweeps through our little group: my wonderful husband, our good friend, and me. This place, Sloan-Kettering, is just what we've been hoping to find. Dr. Marshall is a healer who inspires confidence.

One week later I have my surgery, a lumpectomy. The "procedure," as they call it, goes just fine. After I wake up, Dr. Marshall gives me a bottle of pink pills to take care of the pain. The pills work like a charm. That's good, because my breast feels raw and swollen. There's no bleeding, just pain and pink pills. If I don't take the pills often enough, it feels like there's a small, sharp knife inside my incision.

Ten days later, I'm back in Dr. Marshall's office, breathing stale air as I sit on the edge of a different examining table. The salmon-pink robe I'm wearing has a rip in it, and the curl has come out of my hair. An hour ago we took a taxi to Ground Zero. A cold wind was blowing there, and the sadness was intense. My eyes feel swollen from unshed tears after seeing the memorial pictures, the "find my dad" posters, the teddy bears and hats. And it's not just my eyes that are swollen. My left breast is three times its normal size. It still hurts, and it looks like a piece of Italian marble: purple, yellow, and pale-green bruises.

Dr. Marshall strides in. He slides off one side of my robe and takes a look at my enlarged breast. "Looks like I beat you up pretty bad, doesn't it?" he asks, smiling. I try to smile too. Is this a joke? Does he say this to all of his patients?

"The surgery was a success," Dr. Marshall says, "but I see you still have some swelling. I'm going to aspirate some of this fluid—looks like you still have too much in there." He grabs a foot-long hypodermic and plunges it into my breast. Quickly and efficiently, he pulls out some fluid.

I'm writhing slightly, trying not to complain. The needle doesn't hurt much, but the pressure feels uncomfortable. *Stop, please stop!*

He doesn't hear me. I let Dr. Marshall do what he wants to do. "Hey, I got two cc's!" he says. "I thought there'd be more, but this is fine."

*Fine for you.* The suddenness of his needle attack has left me feeling shaky, but I have no voice to say this. I don't want to be a wimp. I just want to get out into the fresh air. And I do.

The day after we get home from New York City, I can feel the place where Dr. Marshall stuck the needle in start to bleed. It bleeds when I clap after a performance of Dvorak's "New World Symphony." It bleeds when I pick up a load of laundry. It even bleeds when I lift my fingers to the keyboard to do e-mail, to look at webpages on the Internet. Webpage, webfoot, mermaid's tale.

Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid follows her prince through the sea to his kingdom on land. She loses her voice and her beautiful tail, cut into two legs by magic. Every time she walks, she feels like she's walking on knives.

There's nothing wrong with my legs, but my breast still hurts. The bleeding has finally stopped, and the swelling is going down. I feel pretty good. And I'm still grateful to be under the care of my doctor. He's a very capable surgeon with magic hands.

### *2-20-02: Moving Target*

I'm on my way up in the air for my third radiation treatment. When you get radiation, the table rises about six feet. The radiation technicians remind you not to get off the table when it's up high. As Stan, one of my favorite technicians, says, they wouldn't want to fill out the paperwork for the damage that would happen if you weren't careful.

Damage and destruction—teenagers' pranks, teenagers' games. When you play the slumber party game "Levitation," friends lift you up with two fingers. Their lifting seems like magic—it doesn't make sense for two fingers to lift you up so high. Sometimes, while you're rising, the others tell scary stories about monsters and accidents. Then they chant "Light as a feather, stiff as a board."

So here I go, up in the air. This process seems like magic, but it's also scary. Rising up, alone in a darkened room, I start to talk to myself as if I were my own best friend.

Calm down, I tell myself. Don't let it bother you that you can see a red "X" reflected on the surface of the screen above you. Yes, the laser "X" is centered on your chest, but that's okay—you're a target for good rays, not bad ones. Don't be scared when the machine comes down close. Don't let your reflection remind you of a dead body. Just don't go there, girlfriend.

My pep talk works. The round, white machine sends rays from the right, then whirs over to the left for a second round. It's good at finding its mark. When it does, it blasts a warning:

BB

Like an alarm clock. Like a microwave oven telling you dinner's ready. But different. This sound is more intense, more insistent. I'm relieved when it ends.

Down comes the table. Light as a feather, stiff as a board. Stan comes back. He's really nice. I like to ask him questions. "How much radiation am I getting?" I ask him. (My friend Pamela has reminded me that I should find out how much.)

“Oh, 180 Centigrade,” he says casually. This is hard to comprehend. CENTIGRADE? I do a quick calculation in my head. Three hundred fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit! Oh, no! My breast is going to roast like a piece of Perdue chicken!

When I tell Stan this worries me, he is quick with reassurance. “CentigrAY, not Centigrade,” he says gently. “The centigray is a new international unit of measurement for radiation. You’re getting 1.8 grays — that’s 180 centigrays.”

This just proves how much I’ve missed by specializing in English. Centigray: I’ve never heard that term. It’s a great relief to know no part of me will be roasting.

I do, however, wish I could redecorate the radiation treatment rooms. Both of them are so white, so bleak, so plain. One has nothing on its ceiling; the other has an American flag.

“Has the flag been there since September 11?” I ask Stan.

“Yes,” he tells me, “it has.”

I figure the flag is meant to cheer us, to remind us of our country’s strength. That’s all right, but I’d prefer another image. Not completely different, just another image from the days after September 11. What I’m picturing is a golden retriever: a rescue dog I saw on TV around the middle of September. He looked patient and tired. Policemen were about to lower him into the pit of the World Trade Center, where he would try to save lives. The dog looked so serene, so beautiful. I can see the depths of his kind eyes.

Visualizing the dog gives me a good idea for redecorating this treatment room. It can be the “Golden Retriever Room,” with gold-upholstered La-Z-Boy chairs and real dogs racing around. A TV can be tuned to “Animal Planet,” and there can be soft cushions all over the place. Won’t that be fun? Of course, the dogs will have to go out of the room when the radiation machine is running.

The second treatment room can be the “Indoor Waterfall Room.” Yes, it will have an amazing waterfall that covers an entire wall. Handel’s “Water Music” will be playing, and there will be a comfortable couch in the corner. One side of the room will have an ice-cream sundae bar; the other will have a shelf of really wonderful books.

Okay, enough plans for improving the treatment areas. Treatment time has ended; it goes very quickly. All the way from getting dressed in a gown to changing back into street clothes, it only takes fifteen minutes.

“See you tomorrow,” I tell Stan. I’m already on my way out, moving quickly. It feels great to move. I’m a moving target, moving fast out of there.

### *3-26-02: Wondrous Love*

I’m spending the afternoon in nineteenth-century New Jersey. Fierce evangelical preachers, gatherings at rivers, powerful visions, and deathbed dramas. This is the world where my three-times-great-grandmother Sarah lived. Because her granddaughter and daughter were devout Methodists, I know she had a passion for the Christian faith. She grew up with Friends, married a seventh-day Baptist, baked cakes for revival meetings. She looked forward to famous preachers coming to town—some hot-headed preachers had come to Cherokee country when she lived

there. People on the evangelical circuit had helped her find her way east, helped her find a home with Friends. Deep down in her dreams, she remembered the woods and streams of her home. Deep down in her dreams, she remembered the healing ritual of Going to the Water. No matter how much she prayed and sang, she never forgot her people's customs.

My own story is dimmer than Sarah's now. I'm humming the nineteenth-century shape-note hymn "Wondrous Love" while doing laundry and baking biscuits. The tune is haunting, the words hypnotic:

What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul,  
What wondrous love is this, o my soul?  
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreaded curse of my soul, of my soul,  
To bear the dreaded curse of my soul.

My thoughts are blurring, my memory fuzzing. Books tell me that this happens sometimes, after a few weeks of radiation. Sometimes when I look at my computer screen, letters fade for just a moment. I'm not writing much. It feels better to travel to the nineteenth century through the Internet. I listen to Methodist preachers and leaders of Quaker meetings. I find out the links between slavery and the Trail of Tears. I find two men in Woodstown, New Jersey, who might be Sarah's great-great-grandsons. Webpage after webpage leads me to the answers I need.

Staring at my computer screen, listening to "Wondrous Love" over and over, I feel tears rising in my eyes. A veil of water is blurring the screen. So strange: I'm starting to see something that probably shouldn't be on this website. Shape-note singers are standing in a hollow square. Beautifully, with nineteenth-century intonation, they're singing

What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul,  
What wondrous love is this, o my soul?

As the song ends, the lead singer introduces an old preacher: fiery eyes, a shock of white hair, restless hands. Near the preacher stands a young man with a sensitive face, dreamy eyes, wavy hair. About twenty or twenty-two years old.

I feel like I'm falling in love with this handsome young man. Am I seeing him through Grandmother Sarah's eyes? Is this her first glimpse of Elias, her much-loved husband?

The image doesn't last long enough for me to know anything for sure. I'm back on the roadmap of Woodstown, New Jersey, now. Did I dream of the young man with dark hair? All I knew about him before was the date of his birth, the date of his wedding.

Sarah married Elias when she was nineteen. Did she dream of wondrous love—love of God, love of a man? Love, rapture, and marriage. A life of religious devotion. Hot biscuits and laundry and christenings of six children, including twin girls. One twin didn't live very long. Wondrous love, wondrous love—give it to the Lord.

This morning I brought oatmeal cookies to my radiation technicians. They were pleased—"Oh, thank you! On such a dark, snowy day!" Amanda ate one cookie while I got my rays. She smelled of oatmeal when she came back. Such a nice girl. She doesn't know I've been baking because I've been in nineteenth-century New Jersey, using ingredients Sarah would have used: brown sugar, oatmeal, baking soda, unbleached flour. The more contemporary part of me has been building a tower of Ben and Jerry's ice-cream containers in my study. You shouldn't completely lose touch with your own century, after all. You might go mad, come completely unstuck, and that would be dangerous, wouldn't it?

After getting rays this morning I felt so good, so used to the place. I brought in cookies, the technicians loved me. Then I had to go get a CAT scan for the next stage, the "boost." Hop up on the table, look for your booster seat. A CAT scan is not supposed to be a problem, is it? I expected it to be easy.

"Get up on the table," John the Radiation Specialist said. No warm CATside manner. I looked at the machine: huge, gleaming white, brand-new. "Get off the table now, you have to wait in another room while the machine warms up!" said John. I went in the other room. It was cold there. I waited for ten minutes.

Finally, John called me in. "Up on the table now," he said. "You're going to go in under the machine." I put my wrist over my forehead. My watch was already starting to make a dent above my left eye. Going under the machine freaked me out unexpectedly. "I don't like this," I said. "It's too confining!"

"Don't move," John said, "it won't take long." His companion, a very large nurse, said, "Think about sand on a beach!" She sounded bored. Both John's and the nurse's voices were firm, insistent: "DON'T MOVE!" They had no time for a nervous person. Everybody knew a CAT scan was no problem. I closed my eyes and went in under the machine. Fast-moving wheels pressed close to my face and chest. I felt tears starting to form, but I didn't want to give John and the nurse the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Inside my head, I recited my lines for the Jenny Craig scene in Pamela's play: "Stand over there. Hop up on the scale!" This calmed me. I heard clicks, felt a warm glow. The machine moved me back and forth. Damn these impersonal CATpeople, anyway! They acted like they couldn't care less about the person moving back and forth through their gleaming new machine.

After the scan, I got down feeling calm. My lines had gotten me through. Curious to see what the inside of the machine looked like, I peered in. It was a hollow white doughnut, very shallow. No monsters, no cream filling. Why in frozen hell couldn't the two professionals have told me there was no back to the machine? I was hardly confined at all, but I didn't know. They didn't care. I hated them.

What happened at the hospital is already fading; I'm back in nineteenth-century New Jersey, eager to discover something new. What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul. . . .



## Work Song

All day I'd been trying to write  
about the work song and the rhythmic origin  
of poetry, but I couldn't concentrate

because the dog kept barking  
at four or five hands from the museum  
tearing down the metal carport

and shouting at each other  
as they took turns jackhammering  
the heavy concrete in our backyard.

I wanted to say something about the pull  
and push of an oar, about hammers and anvils,  
about sea chanteys for hauling up sail,

but the rambunctious noise filled my head  
like a dentist's drill and the jack-  
hammers slowly turned our courtyard

into a floating island of white stones:  
my wife wanted a fresh green lawn  
and a garden with crape myrtles.

I just wanted to hear Huddie Ledbetter  
singing his version of "Take This Hammer"  
on a tape I ordered from Folkway Records,

though I had to wait until I snaked along  
through rush-hour traffic at three p.m.,  
picking up our son from school.

I had a splitting headache and a deadline  
and a boy who didn't want to hear prison songs  
since he was living in his own prison,

but when we got home the hammers had stopped  
and the workers were heaving thick stones  
from a wheelbarrow, grunting and laughing

and calling to each other in a soft music  
that syncopated their bodies in the late sun  
and sounded like *Take this hammer—huh!*

so that the two of us started to hum  
and sway in tandem, trailing the leader,  
our bodies hypnotized, our voices joining in.

## *Jeannie Banks Thomas*

### Instructions for Installing Blinds

Blind shade.  
But not dark  
enough  
to keep you from  
looking.

All dressed in black  
and a power drill.  
Sweating  
for the sake of work  
and darkness.

Down  
your  
nose  
that drop of sweat,  
to my belly,  
your lips.

What is it Simic says?  
Ah, yes,  
Love worker.

### Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)

I know why  
at that age,  
on the bus  
Rosa, tired,  
not caring anymore,  
just  
all that unspoken-fuck-you anger

that  
becomes  
a love song

that  
welcomes in the world.

## *Steve Zeitlin*

### Barbara

Considered her body a basket  
in which to carry her mind

Ethnographic bag lady!

Collecting shadow puppets,  
skelly caps, evil eye charms

Until she met Max the Magnificent  
abstract painter  
who challenged her fascination  
with the traditional  
by filling the passion of her canvas  
with his deep red stripe

### Julia

Childless collector of lullabies  
(The first is the mother's heartbeat  
in the womb)

Julia's heart plays Brahms's lullaby  
but hears only  
the galloping horses of time

Yes, the old grey goose is dead!

And all the pretty little horses  
Ride Julia to sleep on muffled hooves

## Amanda in the Mornings

The cat nestles on her breasts,  
the children's arms and legs  
branch haphazardly across her bough

Until her laughter shakes the branches  
like the wind  
blowing limbs into their sleeves,  
and the cat out of the tree.

How many years must blow through empty covers  
till they calculate the value  
of that carefree intimacy  
lost forever in the branches  
of the mother tree

## *Joanne B. Mulcahy*

### “Affectionados”

#### What My Mother Taught Me about Language

“Every Nancy to her fancy.” “Live and Learn.” “Count your blessings.” My mother’s aphorisms spread across my childhood world like balm. Similar phrases still pepper her speech. When annoyed, she’ll exclaim, “That irritates my soul,” while a lively event is a real “barn burner.” We savor her mispronunciations. When my sister, Chris’s ESL students come to dinner, “Yuri” and “Hugo” merge to “Yugo.” In Italian restaurants, “risotto” becomes “rudito.” When I was young, my father, five siblings and I thought her speech funny and quaint, like the small Vermont town where she was raised. We laughed at her malapropisms, her “small world” tales of unexpected connection, and for going on beyond the story’s point. We thought our ribbing affectionate. Never did we imagine that we were denigrating her or a female, rural way of speaking.

Both my parents come from Irish-Catholic stock, but when I was growing up, I thought them profoundly different. If my mother was rural Vermont, orality, and folk wisdom, my father was urban Boston, literacy, and worldly knowledge. If my mother soothed with adages—“Your day will come”—my father delivered pronouncements, “Simple declarative sentences!” If her words blossomed in the private domain of family, his language surged into the public realm of power. Boston Latin School and Harvard catapulted my father from the working class. He rose through the ranks at the Campbell Soup Company, often bringing work home. As kids, we didn’t understand advertising or marketing, but we watched his piles of paper in the dining room translate into talks for business executives. His storytelling around the dinner table held us riveted; we knew he’d be grand in a larger arena. My father, we thought, was the person who laid out the path that my siblings and I would follow as writers, editors, and teachers.

\* \* \*

Mr. Kellog beckoned us to stand when we read from our eighth grade geography text. Despite my shyness, this put me at ease. I still jumped from the chair when called on, an auto response instilled by Catholic education. The year before, I had transferred to public school. My recitations shifted from how and why God made me to the capitals of Europe. Overall, my parents judged the move positive, though

no one, they still lament, could match the nuns for teaching grammar and diagramming sentences.

One day, Mr. Kellog cocked his buzz cut toward me—the summons to read. He indicated the page, a segment about a dowager queen. But the word that emerged from my mouth was “dogwagger.” Snickering filled the classroom, followed by silence. At dinner that night, I foolishly related the story to my language-obsessed family. Getting the floor at mealtime was a challenge. Talk was thick, fast, and witty. If you stumbled over words, you could expect stony silence or ridicule. The story made me the butt of jokes for weeks. Only my mother regarded my humiliation with compassion. One day after the dogwagger incident resurfaced, she tried to defend me. But the clan paid no attention until she made a comment about “language aficionados.” “Aficionados!” my sister shrieked. “You mean *aficionados*.” Everyone guffawed, choking on the tuna and pea casserole. I remained silent, marveling at how my mother diverted attention away from me. Years later, I would claim her move as a covert strategy, a statement of solidarity in the dizzying, competitive arena of words.

\* \* \*

On a late June afternoon, midway through a softball game, I remembered my mother’s speech to the school board that evening. I doubt that I thought of it as a “speech.” Oratory was my father’s arena. My mother taught gym and coached sports in a Catholic girls school, but her passion was public education. As a school board member, she had worked tirelessly to create an alternative high school with smaller classes and fewer restrictions. The project mattered nothing to me. At sixteen, I’d found my own alternative to the grim boredom of school: skipping classes to read Russian literature in a nearby library. A friend would pull my pink absence slips from the disciplinarian’s office. I’d bring my blue polyester uniform to the library, heading directly to my job at the Mari-Nay Diner. On Saturdays, I shopped on Philadelphia’s 69th Street for the white lipstick and black eyeliner that I carefully painted on even for this softball game. Makeup, friends, novels: these were the boundaries of my world.

Still, something pushed me beyond adolescent self-obsession the day of the softball game. I suspect we drank from jugs of Boone’s Farm apple wine placed on each base to enliven the game. Perhaps I teetered when I stopped on third to declare I was leaving. I biked to the board meeting at the township community center. The hall brimmed with people. I slipped quietly onto a rickety folding chair in back. My mother sat on the stage with a group of men in cotton shirts and baggy chinos. Other women served on the board, but I don’t remember seeing them that night. My mother looked casually beautiful in the way of athletic women who refuse to fuss over themselves. Her black curly hair was brushed back. Even after six children, she looked slim in drawstring cotton pants, a white blouse, and her ever-present tennis shoes. When my mother rose to speak, I held my breath. Then, the Red Sea parted. She argued eloquently for funding the alternative school—no

aphorisms, ramblings, or mispronunciations. The divide between us shifted. Mother and daughter became speaker and audience. Her words shocked me. Had I ever truly listened to her?

\* \* \*

My high school teachers would have described me as quiet, if they remembered me at all. I knew the local bar and the smoking room of my library retreat better than the halls of my high school. When I did meander into class, I never spoke. Maybe I feared the ridicule I remembered from junior high or that meted out to my mother at home. But silence can cloak many emotions; some silence is active, a nearly religious renunciation of speech. Such was mine, a low smoldering passion I nurtured in the library, communing with the dead. I moved alphabetically through the work of women writers, ending with Virginia Woolf. Sometimes I read aloud, borrowing the eloquence of Anna Akhmatova or Tolstoy's Anna, a literary ventriloquism that made me feel powerful.

I applied to a few colleges to satisfy my parent's dream of higher education. After one semester at the University of New Hampshire, I dropped out and resumed my job at the Mari-Nay Diner. A few months later, I left for Mexico with my friend, Holly. We journeyed by train through the Copper Canyon in Chihuahua, dozing on ripped leather seats with Mexican families, stray tourists, and the occasional rooster. The train stopped in tiny towns that spilled down the mountainside. Into the windows, women draped in blue and black *rebozos* thrust chickens, fully cooked. One woman touched my hand, offering a warm tortilla wrapped in thin paper. "Para ti, señorita," she smiled, her Spanish as delicious as the still-sizzling birds, the hand-woven *rebozo* dazzling in the sun, the life behind the dark hands an invocation. Here was language that begged for response but my mouth was empty. Was it then, or on the bus back from Mazatlan that I decided to return to school? Touching that woman's hand rekindled a yearning. I wanted to hear language from the streets, from foreign lands and distant villages, spilled from the tongues of real people as well as characters in books. Beneath those desires, not yet articulated, was this: I wanted to talk back.

The next fall, I started college at the University of Pennsylvania. One day, my Russian literature professor, Saul Morson, asked about a character in a Dostoevsky novel. Something stirred in me, a welling up akin to nausea. Hesitating, I scanned the room. Surely, someone else would say something brilliant before my hand even rose. Professor Morson nodded in my direction. I remember thinking the voice came from someone other than me.

\* \* \*

On a May afternoon, sunshine brightened the blue onion dome of the Russian Orthodox Church on Kodiak Island. I threw off my red apron after the early shift at The Mecca, grabbing my tape recorder from the waitress station. I'd joined my fisherman boyfriend in Alaska six months before. A few years out of college, I'd



refined my strategy for making a home as I moved around the country: find a waitress job and women to tell me their stories. Now, I crossed the boat harbor crammed with wooden dories and steel crabbers to the Senior Citizens Center. Katherine Chichenoff, a Native Alutiiq elder, welcomed me into her apartment. My tape recorder buzzed. Katherine mixed Russian and English as she recited nearly word for word stories I'd heard from other women about Kodiak's traditional midwives. "They were so much better than doctors. We never had problems before. They just knew what to do." What did it mean, "to know?" Later, when I transcribed the tapes, a new pattern shimmered, as though I'd shifted the figure/ground of a M. C. Escher print. This was not just medical expertise. "Knowing" celebrated Alutiiq culture, especially women's healing roles. Through centuries of Russian then American colonization, women talked back. Words rested beneath the words, if only I could learn to listen. A linguistic pentimento emerged, the shiny underside of meaning revealed.

\* \* \*

Graduate school was not what I'd expected. I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, to study anthropology, hungry for a deeper understanding of Alutiiq women's stories. I'd anticipated cafes brimming with students and lively intellectual debate. Instead, I spent hours alone in the library, poring over dusty tomes on structural-function-alism. That winter brought record cold. The chill deepened when the relationship with my boyfriend in Alaska ended. To battle depression, I studied, sinking into anthropological theory—the public language of power. Yet what I craved was a soft voice whispering that I would "live and learn" from my loneliness—the salve of aphorism, the solace of a story.

In a folklore class, the universe realigned. We delved into stories about star husbands spread over the sky in tales from Native North America, wondered at Coyote, the shamelessly talkative trickster, and explored women in fairy tales. Everywhere, women use stories to hint at what we can't say, to seek power when we have little, to find ways to be heard. My mother's aphorisms found a place in the pantheon of folk speech. Under the sway of stories, I began to find my path.

When I passed the qualifying exams, I joined another student, Peter, on the terrace above Lake Mendota. Over frothy Leinenkugels, we toasted our respective PhD programs. Peter would stay in Madison to analyze migration patterns in China. I was en route to the folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania. A grin inched across his face as he tilted his beer. "No more 'real science,' huh? Going soft and mushy—folktales and myth—all that story stuff?" "Yes," I responded, raising my glass to his, "all that story stuff."

\* \* \*

"A PhD in Folklore?" Strangers' eyebrows rose; their smiles condescended. "Expect to get a job?" I didn't really, so I returned to the Northwest and waited tables. A year later, I became director of the Oregon Folk Arts Program and happily plunged into

fieldwork. I could almost hear the whistle of the train roaring through the Copper Canyon, smell the sizzling chicken in the air. All over the state, I found saddlemakers and woodcarvers in their shops and scoured church bazaars for women's work. "I haven't done anything" or "there's not much to tell" often preceded a woman's story of quilts made, families raised, shops tended, or ranches kept.

That first summer, I sat with Eva Castellanoz in her kitchen in Nyssa, Oregon, next to the *metate* for grinding corn that her mother carried through a lifetime of migrations. For years, her family traveled back and forth from Pharr, Texas, to Nyssa to pick sugar beets and onions. They had come north from Valle de Santiago, Mexico, crossing the Rio Grande with a coyote and a palate of dreams. During Eva's early years in Oregon, her husband, Ted, remained in Texas to fulfill a work contract. Eva said, "Immigration would find me in the fields. I would be wet up to my neck because I was so small and the beets were so big. They would take me in and make fun of me in the car, saying that they had to get me my husband because I was so young and shouldn't sleep alone. At that time, I was very quiet; I didn't talk back."

I looked at this powerful woman—mother of nine and grandmother of many more, the matriarch of a clan spread through the Snake River Valley, recipient of a National Heritage Award for her wax and paper floral *coronas*, the first traditional artist to serve on the Oregon Arts Commission, a woman who calls herself *la mula* for her stubborn insistence on speaking the truth—it should have been hard for me to imagine her silent. But it was not.

\* \* \*

After many years as a teacher and a writer, I still circle the question of women and language. Here is a scene: I am teaching a feminist theory class, sitting in a largely female circle of students. I think about Adrienne Rich's statement, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing." I want students to awaken to language and describe their own worlds. But I do not know which path will empower them: the "simple declarative sentences" that my father taught me led to power or the sometimes-meandering personal voice; the authority of theory or the comfort of story. I turn to the group with a question. Melinda, a gifted writer, will surely have a response. Perhaps I'll hear from Lydia, the most theoretically savvy student in the class. I wait in vain. The only two men in the class raise their hands.

The next session, I try a new strategy. We write personal essays about gender. Everyone speaks now, unveiling through narrative what couldn't be directly stated, discovering through writing what we didn't realize we knew. On the terra firma of storytelling, fears dissolve, distinctions level. New theories unfold.

\* \* \*

In the Willow Creek Correctional Institute north of Anchorage, nine women sit around a long wooden table. From the far end, Norma volunteers to read her

writing. She grins crookedly, revealing gaps in her few remaining teeth. Even in English, her voice rises and falls with the musical cadences of her first language, Inupiaq. She describes her childhood home in Barrow, at the edge of the Arctic. The tale is dark—her mother dead at thirty-five, an abusive father who drank—but Norma sings the story with silver-tongued grace from a paper held close to her face. At the break in our workshop, I wander the room, talking to the inmates. Near Norma's seat, I glance down at a crumpled piece of paper. The drawing depicts people dressed in parkas skinning a seal outside a house; inside, a stove and refrigerator fill a small kitchen. Upstairs, next to a thin bed, a young girl cowers beneath a man with a knife. Nowhere on the page are there any words.

\* \* \*

I send a collection of my writing about stories and silences in women's lives to an editor in Boston. She writes back, "What I'd like to see is the story of how your passion for chronicling women's lives developed." She also wants to know why I "gave up everything" to pursue this goal. I think about Adrienne Rich, about my yearning to describe a world in which young women see themselves, about my profound need to help shape that place. I think about Alutiiq women's version of the past, about Eva Castellanoz's emergence from silence. I think about the women in prisons who write to be seen as more than the crime that sent them there. I think about Virginia Woolf and the proverbial room of one's own and the millions of women in the world who don't have a room or pen or paper or knowledge of what to do with those things if they had them. Yet these same women sing and praise life in stories drenched in meaning and lyric style. I marvel that I found the lens of folklore, pursuing oral tradition in subarctic villages, everyday artistry in Mexican American towns, and writing in windowless prison classrooms. This, I think, is what I will tell the editor. Then my eyes fix on the words, "why you gave up everything." There is only one image I can offer back to her. A young girl at sixteen, raw and vulnerable, on the cusp of becoming or not becoming the person she secretly hopes to be, ready for something to shatter the guard of lipstick and sprayed hair. She sits on a rickety chair in a hot community center, sweaty from a softball game and cheap wine. She watches a woman she hardly recognizes rise and begin to speak. She is stunned by the utter singularity of the woman's eloquence. She is stunned by the first glimmer of a truth she will pursue for many years: there are women like her mother everywhere.

## Women and Water in Senegal

In 1986, the United Nations sponsored an international conference on women whose major resolution agreed to find ways to relieve women of the universal burden of fetching and carrying water. Around the time of this announcement, I was on my way to Senegal, West Africa, as a Peace Corps volunteer. With other evident problems, such as child care, illiteracy, poverty, AIDS, malaria, malnutrition, and general oppression, I wondered why carrying water should figure so prominently. Undoubtedly there were levels of the discourse and politics at this conference that made agreement on other issues problematic. But once I lived in Africa for a few years, I understood the significance of the burden of carrying water. Most people in Senegal live in conditions quite unfamiliar to Westerners. In Africa and the rest of the world, women perform many taxing, time-consuming, and strenuous tasks daily in communities that sometimes can offer comforts and joys less familiar in our world.

In Senegal I grew accustomed to seeing women, from the time they are young girls, carrying loads on their heads as they walk. When young they might carry “only” a bowl of rice, or a platter of mangoes, or their schoolbooks. Women would carry what I often found to be impossible, Herculean loads—big, bulging bundles wrapped in cloth, large loads of firewood, huge platters of food, and most amazingly, laundry-tub-sized basins full of water (many buckets worth). Typically these women wore long, sarong-like *pagnas* of colorful, joyously patterned cloth, and contrasting colored and patterned, loose-fitting blouses. But rather than perceiving these ensembles as clashing, I came to see them as dynamic, lively evidence of richly patterned lives. The colors they wore, which washed out or seemed jarring when worn by Westerners, seemed more colorful and harmonious against the richly dark skin of women there. The women balanced their loads by gracefully curving one arm up; they walked in steady, slow gaits that were sure and graceful, reflected all the more sharply under the intense sun that brightened sand and trees. Perhaps carrying these huge loads lent Senegalese women perfect posture and the graceful, slow gait for which they are often admired.

Women need to carry large basins or buckets (or traditionally clay pots) of water because most houses do not have running water or even a well nearby. In the Sahel—the northern semi-arid part of the country—whole villages (scores of

families) might share a single well. I knew volunteers who spent their entire two years trying to help villagers build a new well. Sometimes they had to dig fifty meters or more, a long way to pull up gallon after gallon of water to fill a tub. Even in towns, women sometimes need to share wells or a community faucet. Motorized and mechanical transportation are limited and expensive. The need to carry heavy loads is surprising to Westerners only because we are disconnected from traditional and fundamental patterns of living. In cultures still living like all our ancestors did, there remain traditional ways of carrying loads like water or firewood; in West Africa using one's head wins out as most practical. One can carry far more weight on the head than one could carry other ways, but that does not mean it is easy. The basins of water I saw women carrying required two or three women to lift them into place or unload. Sometimes a woman had to carry this load a half-mile or more back to her home. I found it a tremendous feat to carry such a load so far, yet with practice the women there have become accustomed and do not particularly complain about it. And to meet the cooking, washing, laundry, and drinking needs of a whole family, a woman might have to make this trip to the well several times a day, however good she is at conserving water. Women use a doughnut-like circle of twisted cloth, which sits between the (often flat-bottomed) load and the top of the rounded head to help balance the load more than cushion it.

While I lived in Senegal, I usually enjoyed the luxury of running water. A "cold" morning there, in winter, might find the temperature dropping to 75 or 80 degrees, which felt cold after being accustomed to nonstop heat. The Peace Corps doctor told us it was because after six months in the heat our blood thinned a little. Those "winter" mornings I longed for a hot water heater, but since I had a stove, I could use some of my precious supply of gas to heat water if I so desired (which I did occasionally). Villagers rarely enjoyed heated water baths; in fact, for a while I thought they were unknown. But near the end of my stay, a pair of volunteers got married in a traditional Diola village ceremony that I watched. After a long, slow group procession through the village (where bride and groom were displayed), older village women ceremoniously washed the bride—Amy—while all the women gathered around her in a protective circle. Amy was worried about being cold from the bath, but she told us the water they used was warm, a luxury for a bride.

Daily complications of my life there included refilling my gas canister (for the stove) and dealing with a backed-up septic tank, a sporadic electrical grid, and screen-less windows that let in clouds of mosquitoes and swarms of flies. Such things made me feel like I was roughing it, yet I lived in relative luxury in a Western-style apartment in a village-like neighborhood on the outskirts of Zinguinchor, the capital city of the Casamance region of southern Senegal. My government-issued apartment was in the lower part of a stucco house that towered above the sandy streets with its two stories, a fenced-in, mostly-cemented yard, large windows, a sliding glass door, tiled floors, balconies, and even some landscaping (bougainvillea and eucalyptus trees). The neighbors on the other side of the wall pulled their water from a well. Many nearby houses had mud floors, mud and straw walls,

and patched tin roofs. Some women from my neighborhood who had no running water in their homes paid a monthly fee for the privilege of lining up at a community faucet where they could fill tubs with water to carry back home. The French family who lived in the main part of my house hired a guardian to keep away would-be thieves, vagrants, and neighborhood children who couldn't afford school. But my apartment had its own yard and entrance, and I resisted the typical foreigners' response of "guarding" oneself from the locals. My whole purpose in joining the Peace Corps was to get to know and interact with the people and culture of Africa.

The neighborhood children spent much of their days hanging outside my fence or on my fence (which had a little wall they could stand on at the bottom of the iron railing). They sought to catch glimpses of me as the breeze stirred aside the hand-dyed, sun-patterned pieces of cloth I'd bought at the market to hang in panels as curtains inside my sliding glass door, which I usually kept open to relieve the heat. They wanted to see how the "rich white woman" lived. I enjoyed fewer possessions during those two years than during any period of my life except when I have been backpacking. I had no television, no lamps, no fan, sparse wooden furniture (issued by the Senegalese government for foreign workers), a Peace-Corps-issued stove, fridge, a secondhand mattress, empty jam jars for glasses, a tin cup, borrowed dishes, a crummy hand-me-down radio/cassette player, a few small suitcases of clothes, and a knapsack of books. Yet I was rich compared to most of my neighbors. When I visited them, I realized that many had wells, no electricity, or only a bare light bulb and an old radio for which they needed electricity. Even those whose wealth rivaled mine probably did not have any store of possessions elsewhere (as I did). Of course, there are wealthy people in Senegal, but they live behind guarded walls so that for the most part their luxurious lives can only be imagined. Mine was the biggest house in the neighborhood and one of the only big houses in town that wasn't guarded. Sometimes when I cleaned out and defrosted my freezer I would carry outside large chipped-off chunks of ice to throw away. The first time I did this, the neighborhood children came running to ask me for these ice chunks, which they seemed to consider a great treat. So watching me and hanging on my gate all day was an amusing way for them to pass the time. In Senegal, I came to realize the relativity of wealth and luxury.

Whenever I had the pleasure of visiting villages (which I did every couple of weeks), my volunteer friends and I would carry buckets of water from a well Senegalese style—on our heads—for our own drinking and bathing needs. We would pour some of this water for drinking into a large clay pot set in a plate of sand. The sand would make the clay sweat, thus keeping the water inside the clay pot cool no matter how hot it got. We figured out early on how many liters of water the clay vessel held, so that we could calculate how much chlorine bleach to add to treat the water and kill parasites. When in villages, I got in the habit of fetching and carrying an almost full bucket (one bucket, not a tub) of water about a quarter-mile once a day. This was a strain for me, but the delicious kind that made me feel

I had earned a cool bucket bath as a reward. It was amazing how efficient I became at washing myself with only a few large cups worth of water, and what a luxurious refreshment these bucket baths were. The first time I performed this routine task of carrying my own bath water from a well several hundred meters away, I was already hot, exhausted, and sweaty just from the heat and humidity. I was so inept that I sloshed most of the water all over myself while en route, was left shaking from the effort, and was not effectively cooled down. I think it takes years of daily practice carrying lighter loads to strengthen the spine and improve balance to be able to carry those huge basins of water.

Carrying water requires skill, strength, endurance, grace, and humor but is only one of many daily tasks that most women face. Besides the very young, old, sick, or rich, most women work hard from before sunrise to well after dark. Imagine a young woman of nineteen named Kumba N'diaye, who lives in an average Senegalese village. She is married with a few children. She rises before dawn each day, awakened by her internal alarm. She rummages through her few pots and containers in her "kitchen" (a little hut) to get some millet, puts it in a wooden mortar as high as her knees and pounds the grain with a long and heavy (twenty pound) wooden pestle. Once she has achieved a fine texture that makes the millet palatable when cooked, she builds a fire (using up a scant supply of firewood she gathered the previous day), puts the millet in water she drew from the well the day before, and boils it into mush. Then she pounds some coffee and chicory beans. Pounding in the mortar with the heavy pestle is a routine her strongly muscled arms are accustomed to and she finds the rhythmic work familiar and soothing. Other women in compounds throughout the village prepare their families' breakfasts as well, so that the sounds of their pounding resonate and echo. The giant pestles make a noise like drums as they pound into the mortars of grain. The women play music with the rhythms they make, complementing and challenging each other in complicated patterns of beats and claps. It takes skill to manage the clapping because they have to clap while releasing the pestle on an up stroke, and catch it again in time to keep up with the rhythm. Such displays can inspire virtuosity. Mornings free of electrical alarms or radios are full of music and community.

Once everyone is fed, Kumba washes dishes (using more water saved from the night before), sweeps out the sand compound (which is usually immaculate), straightens in the huts, and then goes to the well (at perhaps eight or nine a.m.). Typically, she stands in line at the well for a half-hour or more, waiting her turn to draw water. The women purposefully time their trips to meet up at the well, to help each other and to visit. The well is deep (more than 100 feet), but there is usually enough for every woman to draw water twice a day. Standing in line gives Kumba time to gossip with friends and help others lift their full basins of water onto their heads. Each woman pulls up water using a rubber bladder at the end of a rope. Maybe there is a pulley or grooves worn into the rock or cement sides of the well from the ropes rubbing along the same track day after day. Once it is her turn, Kumba efficiently hauls up ten or more bladders of water and empties them into her

basin. Cool air comes up from the well and off the water in the basin to relieve the sweat from her work. It feels good in the 90-degree morning heat. Kumba's friends help her lift a full basin onto her head, and she walks back, through sand, to her compound. The sand is hard to walk through, but she is used to it. Her only footwear, called *batas* (rubber thongs), have hollows worn into them from the pressure of the balls and heels of her feet. They are comfortable and practical shoes for walking in the dry, hot sand that covers most of the village. The only exceptions are a few cement floors some people have in their huts. No one has or needs better shoes, not even for going to town for business or school. While walking, Kumba concentrates on her steps and on the feel of water in the basin. If she keeps a steady gait, matching her rhythm to that of the water, she can keep it from spilling over the side.

Once back, she will go in search of firewood, tend crops, and then prepare a lunch of rice and some minnows her husband caught in his net. She has a little oil, but she doesn't waste it on this lunch. Instead, she gathers some leaves, which she steams, mixes with dried okra powder, and whips into a frothy "leaf sauce." To the rice, she adds some salt from her store of it. It is a good lunch, and everyone feels full and sleepy after eating. Since this is not the busy planting or harvesting season, many people take a siesta now. The men sit under their big *niim* tree sipping strong, sweet green tea, three rounds of it that they spend hours preparing and chatting over. Each little pot of Gunpowder (a Chinese brand) gets progressively sweeter and weaker (as the same leaves are used in the pot for all three rounds), and the final round may have some mint added as well. A skilled tea maker will also be sure to build up a good head of foam in each little glass before serving it by pouring some tea back and forth from glass to glass from a great height. This rhythmic motion hypnotizes the watchers, and they appreciate the tea by sipping it loudly once it's ready. Kumba sits under another tree in the compound with all the other wives and older daughters. Except for a few who moved here after marriage, many are related and have known each other their whole lives. They might also make tea, or just lie back on straw mats they have woven, watching their children play, maybe weaving more mats or fans to keep away the persistent flies and heat. Their quiet chatter is interrupted only by their children's voices, whose tears and laughter sometimes demand attention.

After this rest, Kumba tends the animals, giving them scraps of food and cleaning their pens. Once she has washed the dishes, she uses more of her water to wash clothes. Her fingers are callused, so she can scrub hard, working the bar of peanut soap she and her sisters made into a good, fragrant lather. Later she washes the children, then prepares a dinner of dried fish, a small eggplant, some manioc root, and onion served over a large bowl of rice, which is enjoyed early in the evening, after the intense heat of the day. After washing dishes, and cleaning and sweeping the compound again, she takes a bucket bath in an area set off by a woven palm fence. By then, it is after dark, and she prepares her stores of food for the next morning before joining her husband for bed. They sleep on a foam mattress laid on a palm wood frame, covered with sewn-together, coarse, red and white checked



pieces of fabric. The modern mattress and “sheets” are a luxury from town they received when they were married. Every possession is valued and tidily cared for. The sheets will survive many years of washing by hand and hanging beneath the intense African sun to dry.

Kumba’s dreams are her own, rich and full of images she tries to decipher as she works through her days. They are not, and will never be, my dreams. How can I dream of planting millet or peanuts, of sleeping in a millet stalk hut, of the hot sun beating bright blessings on my children’s heads as they play? Although I observed every one of the scenes I just described from the imaginary Kumba’s life, such is not my world. Senegal surfaces only rarely in my dreams, at odd times that always feel intense and leave me wondering and remembering. Maybe my great-grandmothers, or more distant ancestors lived this way, but no one I know outside of Africa does.

Until you’ve seen it, it is hard to realize the fact that most women on the planet still live like Kumba, and apart from a few obvious modernizations (like plastic laundry tubs), have lived this way for millennia. We who live so disconnected to these patterns are the unusual few. What does fetching water mean in our world? Clean, fresh water is abundant so readily that we rarely think about it. We live with machines that use water automatically, washing our dishes and clothes for us, keeping a supply of hot water always on hand at several taps in our houses. I couldn’t help but remember the laziness and casual waste of my life as an American as I watched women carrying basins of water in Senegal. When I first left Africa, even though I was returning “home,” I would find myself baffled by my own culture—especially the extreme materialism of our lives—where, for instance, we must choose from fifty or sixty kinds of shampoo that we wash down drains with gallons of hot water, and where we watch built-in sprinkler systems spray uncounted gallons of water onto lawns that we promptly chop back down with loud, polluting machines. The reverse “shock” of such scenes eventually faded, as they inevitably do for cross-cultural travelers, but I never forgot those women’s lives in Senegal.

In my world of comfort today as a university professor, I sometimes recall my hot, sweaty, leisurely days in Senegal, where keeping the flies away might occupy hours and a bucket bath in the evening brought tremendous, cleansing, luxurious relief. I wonder about the fates of the women I knew there, the women I saw working day after day. Are they still alive? How many children have they had? How many survived? Have they succumbed to malaria or AIDS? Fetching and carrying water is only one small part of very long, hard days for women around the world, and I know that however disconnected and innocent we may feel, the socio-economic infrastructure around the world contributes to this global pattern. Yet, I met very few Senegalese women, no matter how hard their lives, who complained. They have little reason to hurry and little competition or media to push them to aspire for more. But does this make their lives comprehensible or enviable? Each task has its time and place and will be repeated thousands of times, day after day. Figuring out a new design to weave into a mat, a performative breakthrough in music or dance,

a happy laugh shared among women waiting in line at the well—all these moments add beauty, meaning, and humor to life. As a folklorist, I admire that and think that maybe it is enough, maybe there is even a karmic lesson here of working hard but staying balanced. Then I think that this is my Western romanticized notion of other cultures. Which of us would really trade places, after all? Most women have no opportunity of going to school, getting out of village life, or making decisions about marriage or childbearing. Well-educated and successful (in a Western sense) Senegalese women are from the cities, probably the capital, and most likely from privileged families. In the villages, if a family can afford to send anyone to school, it will be a boy. As a brief observer of these women, whom I saw tired, sweating, patient, and usually uncomplaining, though obviously exhausted at the end of each long day, I can't simply consider them lucky or admirable. I understand the impulse to want to help them, to relieve them of at least this one burden of carrying water.

I have not been back to Senegal in almost twenty years. I have heard that in many parts of the Sahel, the water table has risen, which is a hopeful sign. Maybe life is different there now, better for women, even if that only means an easier task of collecting water. There are aid and human rights organizations from inside and outside the culture working to help with birth control, AIDS, female genital mutilation, education, and other issues. But I suspect I would recognize the country and the people and places I knew as largely unchanged. Senegal has lived through a sort of civil war and significant unrest, so the economy has not significantly improved. Recently I taught for Semester at Sea, a program that tours the world by ship (with mostly well-heeled students aboard). We saw that around the globe—from Vietnam to India to Tanzania to Brazil—women still work very hard, carrying water and other loads, tending crops, caring for many children and animals, cleaning, serving, and working all day long. I saw women lined up at spigots just as I had in Senegal, struggling with huge loads they carried on their heads. I continue to be an outsider, an observer of such scenes. I went into the study of culture and became an educator because I thought that through education, understanding each other would be a way forward—but little changes. As folklorists, we celebrate the world, all the variations of politics and economy and resultant cultural expressions. As with Peace Corps volunteers, we get to know local people, learn their languages, and listen to their stories and music. Our politics are largely buried in the hope that by presenting and celebrating cultures we are serving the world and history well.

Under the African sun, I sometimes felt I was in the glare of an unblinking eye. No clouds except during the few months of rainy season, and then the clouds came and went within a few predictable hours. Where I lived, we had only one dust storm in two years, so virtually every day was bright and shining. That sun so close to the equator was always strong and predictable, twelve hours a day, day after day, staring, unblinking. It relentlessly revealed the patterns of lives, shining even into dusty corners, reflecting off the water women carried, glinting into our eyes just enough to be a little painful.

## *Elaine J. Lawless*

### In Search of Our Mothers . . . and Our Selves

on a torn and yellowed sheet, I found the following  
handwritten poem with a note inscribed  
“my birthday, September 29, 1978”

I went to hell this week

Alone.

I watched a man with gaping mouth

Scream with no sound.

Bent above the body of his dead wife,

He'd been screaming, thusly, for a million  
years

Knife in hand.

Below another knife I saw

A man and woman tear asunder

A child

Who had trusted both without question

But finally questioned both the same.

And, then, a mirror image of myself

Showed me the door and handed me  
a bloody key.

I escaped

Wounded, but free.

—Elaine J. Lawless, *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment  
Through Narrative* (2001)

### *In Search of My Mother*

My mother was the seventh child of a seventh child. She latched onto that like a promise. But before she was twenty, she knew it was a false promise full of superstition and born of fear and loathing. Being the seventh girl of fourteen children—all girls but one—only insured that she would be invisible—too young to be trusted, too old to be coddled. She could not ever remember her mother, Grandma Clara, taking time from baking and cooking and cleaning and canning and running to help other women give birth to more and more babies or to just sit down in the rocker that stood by the back door and hold her, or sing to her, or ask her a question about what she was thinking or had been doing all morning.

Caroline was a bright girl. She knew what she should be doing inside the farmhouse alongside the stair-step sisters in every direction, seven of them. They all had to help out, and Caroline did her share. But she preferred the milk barn. Sometimes she'd escape into the hay loft and hold her breath, praying none of her sisters younger or older would find her so she could have even five precious moments just to lie on her back and breathe the sweet smell of the hay, hear the mice running through the bales, or watch the barn cat stalk something just below her field of vision—his sleek, lean body poised for attack. Below her, she could hear her father, Grandpa Silas, talking in low tones to the horses, the mules, the old cows. He loved it out here, too, away from the din in the house, the bustle, the chatter, the shrieks of young girls' voices. When they came out here, they knew to talk low and move slow. Grandpa's anger was swift if the animals were spooked or the cow refused to give her milk. They knew the rules. And, for girls, they were quite adept at handling the mules in harness, running the saw or the sorghum mill, driving the plow, or winnowing the wheat on the hard packed floor of the barn. At fourteen, Caroline was brown and strong in her brother's old shirt and jeans; her lithe body could scale the air above the hay bales two at a time or climb the ladder into the loft without a second thought. Her hands were calloused from the harness reins, and her brown-red hair wet with sweat and the early misty rain curled into tight corkscrews all over her head, wild and unyielding in their fierce beauty.

As she drove the horses around and around for the sorghum, she left her body to do that physical work, and allowed her mind to skip down the dirt road to another, smaller farmhouse where Robert Foster lived. Tonight, walking to church, she would walk beside his short, dark body and let him grab her hand in the twilight behind the ever-watchful eyes of her older sisters. She would look into his eyes and know that she was not really invisible because she could see herself reflected in the pupils of his deep brown eyes. He was a boy of few words, but the depths of those looks drove deep into her soul and she knew love as her own.

When she would tell me about her life growing up, she said she always knew walking slowly back to her own home from the one-room church or the school that was just farther down and around the corner, when another baby had been born. She came to think of her mother as forever round, never slender, always bulging, waddling between the sink and the pump on the back porch, standing for a moment to look out over the brown fields, her right hand cupped over her squinting eyes, her left hand unconsciously supporting the constant pain in her back. No one ever mentioned the word "pregnant" and Grandma forbade any of the girls to talk about what happened when babies were born. Caroline remembered the sharp slap when she had remarked that one of her sisters had "had" her baby the night before. Women don't "have" babies, Clara had warned her, babies are "born to them." It is a miracle, a mystery, of God's doing and we don't need to go making it sound vulgar. Women aren't animals, after all. But Caroline learned quickly enough not to say the cow "had" a baby either, or the horse, or the mama cat that delivered litter after litter under the front porch steps in the dark August heat.

She also recalled how much that slap had hurt the entire side of her face and head. For nights now she had been stifling her sobs from the pain in her ears into her feather pillow that was wedged between the pillows of her three sisters who shared her bed in the room down the hall from her parents. She knew Grandma would not be happy if she awakened the younger girls from their fitful, hot summer sleep. Their nearly naked bodies glistened in the moonlight from the sweat that dotted their skin, a futile attempt to cool their softly contorted bodies.

Caroline's ears had awakened her every night for more than a year now. She told her mother, and sometimes Clara would drop warm vegetable oil down into her ears and tell her to run and play. Caroline wondered about the loud noises she heard in her ears, the rumbling and the hissing, and the explosions that occurred in her eardrums on a regular basis. She knew it would take a broken leg or a severe fever to bring the doctor to their house far down the dirt roads, miles from the nearest town. It would go away, her mother promised, but it never did.

Babies were always being born in their cold farmhouse. After the initial shock, Grandpa loved to tell the story of the night the triplets were born. He'd been letting the mules find their way slowly home in the thick twilight through the woods pulling a load of supplies in anticipation of an early winter. His mind had, no doubt, been wandering, or perhaps he had nodded off to sleep when the reins jerked out of his hands and the old horses tried to rear up, stamped their feet wildly, and refused to move. He froze as he saw, there above the sweaty, salty air about the animals' straining heads, three bright spots wavering, floating, filling the air with a crackling energy that illuminated the paralyzed faces of man and beasts. His tongue filled his mouth, his eyes filled with uninvited water, and his ears were ringing. He had dropped the reins in his moment of astonishment. Just as quickly as the lights had appeared, they were gone. The dark moved in around the heads of the horses, and Silas felt around his feet for the dropped reins. He knew what it meant, as he told it later; he knew it meant that Clara was in labor. It meant another baby was on its way. He slapped the panicked horses sharply; they were eager now to leave the place of the ghostly lights and pull the heavy load toward home and the safety of the barn.

To hear him tell it so many times over the next few days and years, Grandpa also knew that the three lights were a warning to him that, in fact, *three* babies were being born to Clara in the double bed they shared on the second floor of the farmhouse beneath the eaves on the south side. Caroline never really believed him when he told it that way, although it was easy enough to believe that, indeed, the three lights *were* somehow connected to the three incredibly tiny forms that lay on clean towels next to Clara's still large but now quiet body. Only a small kerosene lamp revealed all those forms on the four-poster bed.

As she watched them lying there so quiet with her mother on the high bed, Caroline strained to remember the first moments after her birth that she, too, must have shared with Clara, before the activities of the farmhouse enveloped them all and eventually moved her down the hall away from the warmth and security of

that miraculous moment. Grandpa told the story of the lights to everyone who stopped by to view the three tiny babies from the doorframe that led into the sanctuary of Clara's bed. He told it time and again as she lay there in the dark, trying without success to get the babies to suck her hot, painful breasts. The warm milk dripped down her gown onto the already crusty sheets, but the babies were too little or too weak or too premature to know how to latch onto that lifeline and suck as though their lives depended upon it. All night she would bring one after the other onto her still soft stomach and cradle the babies in her arms, sometimes holding two or even three, they were that small. Cooing, singing, crying—her tears mixing with the milk, diluting it. But it didn't matter what she did, two of the babies were content to lie next to her body and sleep. What color were their eyes? Clara couldn't remember. Had they even opened their eyes? Were they breathing? She would move her head lower, next to the small mound each of them made in the folds of the blankets, holding her own breath—trying to detect theirs. By midnight of the third night, she knew two of the babies were gone.

Only one kept breathing. She ate nothing for days, but she somehow kept breathing. Clara felt her breasts swell. She knew her breasts would soon fester, so she took the pan she had asked Caroline to fetch and held it beneath her throbbing breasts and extracted what seemed to her to be gallons of rich, white milk. Wasted life juice, no help for the two tiny forms next to her, the bodies that did not breathe anymore. She must have fallen asleep then, exhausted from her vigilance for three days and nights. She awoke at the unmistakable tug at her breast, a signal that the third girl wanted to live. Timid at first, the little one she named at that moment Virginia began to pull and tug at the swollen breast, relieving her mother of at least some of her pain. But nothing could ever have prepared her for the dawn when Grandpa and the deacons from the church arrived with tiny caskets and took the other two babies from her bed forever.

Clara had braced herself long before not to love her babies too much. There were too many of them and there would be more, she knew. He never asked her what she wanted. He never checked to see if she was ready before he demanded she "do her duty." He never thought of the strain on her body and on her mind. Her only defense was to steel herself against the pain and the loss and the multitude of mouths to feed and the mountains of laundry to do. Actually, what Caroline did not realize was that she was no more invisible than all the other girls were. For Clara, some days the girls just melted one into the other. She could barely distinguish them in her mind or in her eye. Getting through the day was a worthy goal. Soon enough they would grow up and leave. One less. Two less. Three less. And leave they did, early and young they left the farmhouse, stealing off to church or into town with the boys who had a little money to spend on them. Soon enough they were married, leaving little evidence of their habitation in the farmhouse. One bed had a little more room, a closet had three inches more space, Caroline had a new drawer for her underwear. When they came back pregnant and sad, Clara had no resources to gather for them. She listened with a kind of far-away look in

her eye, trying to recall what her own mother had said to her when she first married Silas at fifteen, but she could not remember one single thing her own mother had said to console her. So Clara sat on the back step and pretended to listen, her daughters' words washing over her like last week's dishwasher. Then she would rise and go into the house to prepare the evening meal for the eight that were left, and for Grandpa.

Caroline had watched the three babies for days from the edge of the bedroom door, sometimes slipping into the room to sit quietly in the corner on the floor, her knees up to her chin, her eyes taking it all in, wondering at these days of drama, of birth and death. She watched in secret and silence as Grandpa cried tears with no sound on the porch chair away from the sounds and smells of the birthing chamber. She knew he cried not because two of the babies had died. No, he cried because Clara had delivered yet another girl. She now had given birth to thirteen girls and one boy. How could she keep doing that? Why? How could a farmer make it with all girls? Where were the strong, strapping boys who could help him throw bales of hay with ease and control the spirit of the strongest mule, who could plow forty acres in a day without flinching? Was she doing this just for spite? Girls, all girls. Well, hell, he said to any and all. They would just keep trying. They would just keep trying until she got it right.

That night Caroline knew no one would notice her slipping away to run down the dusty road toward the sad, rundown Foster place. Robert (always Robert—never Rob or Bobby—only the formal Robert Foster even when I knew him later as my father) had instructed her to meet him at their favorite tree next to the smallest pond. She ran breathless through air that held just a hint of fall in it but stopped short of the tree to catch her breath and peer through the thin gray evening air to see him sitting there, already waiting for her. *For her*. No one had ever waited *for her*. No one. Unless it was her father waiting for her to harness the mules, or her mother for her to finish kneading the dough, or her sisters for her to finish the dishes. No one had ever waited just to be with her, to talk to her, to look into her eyes and tell her she was something special. But Robert did that. Maybe not with too many articulate words, but he was there, wasn't he? And he loved to hold her hand and look into her eyes and grin that crooked Foster grin when she shyly asked how long he'd been waiting for her.

By the time she was fifteen, she was standing in the front yard of her parents' farmhouse in front of God and witnesses pledging to love, honor, and obey Robert Foster as long as they both might live. He had lied about his age and joined the Navy the same day, although he did not tell that to his new bride until they had traveled to the city. But she was a quick learner, after all, and already knew better than to question Robert Foster. They moved for a brief time to St. Louis, and Caroline was completely enthralled with city life. She had never been beyond the low-lying fields and rolling hills before, and the lights and sounds and smells lured her in and captured her heart. The thrill of being Mrs. Robert Foster in the city was almost too much to bear.

But the glamour wore off soon enough. She was throwing up violently these days unable to eat any of the wonderful foods offered in the stalls and the small cafes. Robert was working nights in a greasy spoon around the corner, and she rarely saw him. Before she knew it, she was waving good-bye to a busload of rowdy boys, none truthfully older than eighteen, as they drove off in the back of a flatbed truck, bound for glory and World War II.

For four long years Caroline, the invisible girl again, scrubbed the entrance-way and walls of the grimy apartment house she had to move into when her husband could no longer help with the rent. She went home to Clara's house only long enough to let this stranger in her body be born. When she returned, she was seventeen years old, alone in the city with a new baby, waiting for a government check to buy day-old bread and watch for the mail. His letters were scarce, cut to ribbons by the censors, incoherent by the time she got them. Sometimes sixteen or twenty would come in one day. Then there would be months of nothing. She read and reread the letters, pasting down the tattered pages onto full sheets of paper, crying over the undeciphered love thoughts, making the paper tear more with every tear. She pored over those letters for a clue, anything, that would tell her where her new husband was in this god-forsaken world, but she never found his secret. Only when he returned did he steam off the stamps and reveal to her, too late, the routes of his travels to places she had never heard of and where he never wanted to return.

In time, she talked with the apartment manager and agreed to clean the foyer and collect the rent checks for him in exchange for some of her rent. It was the first time she had ever earned any money of her own—and it would be the last time she did. She and the little boy made tentative excursions to the park, around the block, walking circles that widened with each trip, exploring the city that both enthralled and terrified her. She realized at last she was relaxing a bit, learning to find the shops where people might talk with her, offer her a better cut of meat, or where she could buy cheap clothes for herself and her son. For a short time, she actually thrived.

When Robert came home, he scooped up his little family within a day's time and moved them all back to the farming country where he felt safe. He didn't think to ask Caroline what she wanted to do. Actually, she wasn't even sure what it was she wanted. The city had been a lonely and alien place during his absence, she agreed—although she thought its charm might return now that he was home. She tried to tell him that she had actually come to enjoy it a little, sometimes, once in a while. Certainly, the hard farm life, the calloused hands, the mules, and the outhouses did not appeal to her. But Robert had spent the last four years hidden beneath the ocean surface packed into the too-tight space of a submarine with four hundred other men who were terrified every time someone sneezed. The terror of his memories filled the rural nights. Caroline tried to soothe his body and his mind, but she never could reach most of the spaces that had been wounded beyond repair. It would be years before he would turn to whiskey to erase the memories and allow him a kind of stupor that would make all of it a bit more bearable.



For now, Robert bought a mule, and soon another, and set to farming the dry, hot sand, determined to erase the horror of what he had seen with each broad swath of the plow as it turned the earth over, replacing the topsoil with a clean slate. Caroline worked alongside him as often as she could, but she was pregnant again; her little boy was five and not too certain he wanted to be on this farm with his mother and this very strange man he was supposed to call "Daddy." He cried a lot at night, and Robert hated that. "Shut that kid up," he'd say to Caroline. "Just get that kid to shut up." So she would go and lie down beside the boy, as she had done so many nights before in the city, wrapping her body around his small frame, enveloping him in her misery and her love and cry them both to sleep.

Robert was not very happy when I turned out to be a girl. My mother had a long, hard delivery. Her mother came and at least one of her sisters, but I was stubborn, not certain I wanted to join this family, loving the deep, dark, wet spaces in her womb, unwilling to pass through the narrow passageway and claim life separate from her. But she was tired of me inside her body. She hated the weight, the waddle, the backaches, the way her breasts felt. She pushed hard and forced me to land in the world, wailing at her insistence that I leave her body and claim my own space.

I have no recollection of those three years when I had my mother all to myself, the only baby. I do not know if she loved me to pieces or put me down only to walk away and reluctantly return when I screamed for food. I have no memories of my father holding me, hugging me, even addressing me directly. I was a nuisance and would never be any help to him, he knew.

My first real memory is when I was three and my mother came home from the hospital with my baby brother. It was Christmastime and my father moved their double bed into the living room so that my mother and the new baby boy could sleep next to the gas stove we had recently put into our home. We all loved the flames visible in the glass front, and Mom felt blessed not to have to carry coal into the house in the broken metal bucket anymore and nurse the fire all day long through bitter winter months in a house that leaked cold air. I remember standing between the stove and the bed, barely able to peer over the top of the mattress and the heavy blankets, and staring at my mother holding a bundle close to her body, cooing and feeding him from her stupendous breasts. I remember how I would slither up onto the bed and slide under the covers next to my mother, hoping to be noticed, longing for her arms to curl around me, jealous of the baby's rights to her attentions. At three, I was expected to be a "big girl," but I desperately wanted to be a baby; more than anything in the world, I wanted to be a helpless newborn again. But my dad would have none of it. At three, he would order me into the kitchen to bring him a glass of water, a diaper for the baby, to shut the door, to call the dogs and feed them. I grew up quickly that winter, not at all pleased to have suddenly attracted my father's attention. He let me know even then what my role as a woman would be in his and any household. He guarded his pride for his sons.

Later, when my mother came home again with yet another baby boy, I was too old to crawl up into her bed and would never have admitted that my longings to be held and loved hadn't evaporated, just moved deeper beneath the surface of my most inner being. I was aloof and looked upon the new baby with disdain, as I did my mother for continuing to deliver these babies, all these baby boys. I was not number seven, but I felt just as invisible as my mother had been in her household of girls.

I knew my mother continued to be beautiful because everyone else thought she was not only beautiful but delightfully happy all the time, a joy to be with. Robert Foster was the luckiest man alive, they'd say. Aren't they a perfect couple? So handsome, so in love, so perfect. As she walked before him through the church door wearing her new homemade dress with the self-fabric belt she fashioned from a kit tightly cinched about her narrow waist—she walked expertly in her “high, high heels,” as she called them—my dad would grin his famous grin and say to anyone within earshot, “She sure cleans up nice, don't she?” I knew her heels were at least thirteen years old then, but every time she wore them, she cleaned them off when she got home and carefully tucked them away in the box they had come in. Even today, she has some of those same shoes, more worn now and rather tattered looking, but the styles have returned, and she finds it amusing to wear these old shoes that are again in vogue, not to mention that at eighty-one she can still wear them with flair!

I knew the woman who dressed to the nines to go to church on Sunday or to town on Thursday afternoons to buy groceries was a far cry from the woman who worked in the cotton fields with me, alongside my father and three brothers. We would try to keep up, filling our sacks with the white, fluffy stuff I came to hate with every bone in my body, trying to weigh in with as many pounds as the men and boys did. But no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't keep up. I came to resent the effort, the demand, the expectation that we had to be there in the field straining our backs dragging the weight of that dirty cotton sack.

Many afternoons I watched my mother as she rested under a shade tree at the end of the endless rows of cotton stalks. Here, she was exposed. Hot, sweaty, brown, lean, hard, quiet—fiercely quiet. I could feel her palpable anger, a kind of seething rage she rarely expressed. She would lean against the tree and rub her aching legs, or wipe her face with a wet handkerchief of my father's. Or she would sit and gaze off beyond the cotton, beyond the ditches that harbored snakes and worse, past the rows of planted conservation trees and government-supplied multifloral roses and leave this earth. I swear, she would leave this earth. Her mind would go somewhere else, there was no doubt in my mind. I could talk to her, but I knew she couldn't hear me. Often she would cry, sitting there in the middle of that sun-baked field; she would silently weep and the tears would run, making tracks down her dirty face. I knew not to ask. I even knew why she was crying, although if you had asked me, I wouldn't have known what to say. My mother's marriage was a complete enigma to me. I could not fathom how she could stay with my father. My guess is

that she could not imagine any other life. From my point of view, he was mean and brutal. He would come in covered with mud or sand or grain from working in the fields or at the grain elevator that he later owned. He would track up her house, sit on the chairs, and drop his clothes in the mudroom for her to shake out and pick up. Like Edith on *All in the Family*—which we all watched faithfully on our black-and-white TV and laughed at without once recognizing it as a parody of our own family—my mother would literally run between table, refrigerator, and stove, trying to get everything on the table at once, barking orders to me to help with dishes, napkins, the bread, the butter.

Dad would lose his temper if the butter was not on the table, swearing, “Caroline, where the hell is the butter? You’d think you could remember the butter, just once. Get the butter on the table.” “Caroline, how did you fix this meat? It’s just like shoe leather.” “Caroline, did you fill up the car with gas today? I thought I told you to fill up the car with gas. What were you thinking?” “I swear you are deaf as a doornail. Turn around. Hello!” He was laughing now at her inability to hear, sneering at us in derision, inviting us to agree that it was pathetic how she couldn’t hear a word if her head was turned toward the stove.

It took years before I realized that her childhood ear infections had taken their toll on her eardrums. She was, practically speaking, deaf. She would politely turn from the stove at my father’s rants and say, “Excuse me? What did you say?” And of course, that would begin the barrage anew. I thought perhaps he hated her, her presence, her deafness, her femaleness, her inadequacies—at least as he saw them. From his chair in the living room, he would clink the ice in his glass as a signal for Caroline to come fill it up, knowing she would never hear that tinkling sound from the kitchen, then rail against her because she did not run fast enough or respond quickly enough.

When he began to drink, he was an unusual drunk. But then, I didn’t know much about drunks. We were, in fact, hard-shell Baptists: we didn’t drink, and Dad was a deacon in the church—a fine, upstanding, God-fearing, respected man of the church and of the community. With only a junior-high education, he owned a business. He was respected and a little bit feared because so many people owed him money. We realized all of this later, of course, when we were older.

By the time I left for college, my family no longer had to work in the fields. My father had built a business around the only thing in the world he knew—farming. He had injured his back in an accident at a grain elevator where he worked for nearly a decade. Thinking he could run his own farm supply operation, he secured risky loans and built his own store and elevator in a small town near where he and my mother now lived with their two younger sons, my brothers. Years into the business, he began to drink at work. His business, the grain elevator, the feed and seed store, the truck scales, the huge storage bins for beans and wheat, the debits and the credits were actually a minefield of confusion and bewilderment to my father. He was in way over his head and would be forced years later to auction off this monster that had taken him by surprise and lose his shirt on the whole

endeavor. But by then he couldn't feel a thing. He was too numb with the alcohol and the pain. He kept a pint in the drawer at work. He never, ever drank at home, but he left for work in the early morning mist and by 7:15 in the morning, he would begin to sip. A sip here, a sip there. By 10:00 he felt great. Men would be in the office drinking his strong, bitter, free coffee and the stories and jokes would fly, yarns about local women and racist jokes about "niggers" would fill the air. He would sit at his desk and laugh with the best of them as they stood around his office and warmed him with their friendships and their farm smells. By three in the afternoon, he was getting woozy and mean. My brothers knew to avoid the office in mid-afternoon. The smiles were gone, as were the farmers, and Dad would begin to stew. He knew the business was in big trouble. He had not a clue how to save it—it was all he had. For ten long years, he hung on by a thread of clear brown liquid that ran smooth as silk down his throat. How much longer? How much longer could he hold it all together?

By 6 p.m. he would move very, very slowly—his head pounding, his legs heavy and throbbing—to his truck and he would drive, stone drunk as a skunk, down the four miles of fields to our house. His eyes glazed over, his hands shaking as he took the curves through sheer willpower and memory. And then he would walk into Caroline's kitchen covered with dirt and grain and drop his filthy clothes and shoes and sit at her kitchen table, his eyes glazed over, and be just as mean as hell to her. All day she had gardened, washed his clothes, cleaned the house, sewed clothes for us kids, mowed the lawn, cleaned the garage, washed the car—whatever needed to be done. It was a joy to her to be home. She had hated the fields as deeply as she had ever hated anything in this life. All day Caroline had hummed to herself, working briskly, enjoying the quiet of her house. She never turned on a radio or the television set. She hated the telephone. She did not want to talk to anyone. Talking was difficult because hearing was almost impossible. The telephone roared in her ears. She prayed it would not ring. For a few quiet hours when we were in school and Dad was gone, she would remind herself to relish the quiet, knowing it would all too soon end. And it always did.

She gave him her body, her soul, her mind for as long as he lived. She stood by him, she took his abuse, she cried silently, she never once complained. Her duty was to love this man who had loved her first. And love him she would, through thick and thin—she got her share of both. She made all his favorite foods; she catered to his every need, she tolerated his assaults and seemed to ask for more. Dad was the king, we knew, and we were accidents at best, worries most of the time, mouths to feed, nuisances, pains in the butt. And I hated him as intensely as she loved him, knowing the two were so dangerously close as to be life threatening. Years later, when he was very, very sick, he would revolt me with nasty, wet kisses on my cheek and mouth, telling me how proud he was of me and how much he loved me. I did not believe him then; it was too late.

Being the only girl at our house certainly did *not* translate into being "special." It meant no way could I get my license when I turned sixteen. It meant no way could

I go cruising in cars with my friends. It meant no way could I date boys before my eighteenth birthday. It meant I could never wear shorts or go to dances. From the beginning, my father was convinced I would be “married and ruined” before I turned sixteen. Even with all the rules and watching me like a hawk, my father totally expected me to get pregnant and drop out of school. But, in truth, the one place I could shine and get noticed was at school. I loved school; I loved to write and got good grades. My teachers quietly encouraged me. When I graduated from high school with top honors, no one at school was surprised, but my parents were not at all interested in educating a girl. Gingerly I began to talk about why I wanted to attend the teacher’s college only twenty-five miles away (although it might well have been a thousand miles). Since then, I have, on many occasions, heard my mother tell stories about this period in our lives. Her stories tell of *my father’s* resistance to my college education and her own support beyond the scenes, helping me fight his angry, stubborn, immobile stance. *I think* I got to college on my own. The way she tells it, it was only through her persistence and support that I finally moved my few belongings into the all girls’ dormitory in the fall of 1965. I don’t contradict her, but I know she’s remembering it all wrong. She was not supportive, that much I know. I wouldn’t get that wrong, would I?

### *In Harm’s Way*

Is it any surprise that I married a serious young man who looked into my eyes with smoldering intensity before he left for graduate school and then proposed by mail? He was the smartest person I had ever met, and he had noticed me. He had never had a girlfriend. He wrote from graduate school that it was time, he felt, for him to marry—that having a stable home life while in graduate school would be a solid base from which to launch his career in biology. He sent a series of collages to me that he had crafted from magazines, a pastiche of color and images. The one I remember the most vividly was a photo of a bride with her head cut off. I did not notice the omen then. Would I consider marrying him and move to Illinois? I should let him know by return mail. I didn’t even hesitate. It took me about thirty seconds to weigh this proposal against the prospects of marrying the good Baptist boy who groped for my blouse in the dark on our way to church functions. It took a little longer to wonder if my growing relationship with the quiet poet in my English class might blossom. But I knew my parents would never approve of him, and at eighteen I wasn’t going to make this my first battle with my parents. Except for insisting on going to college, I had been an absolutely perfect daughter. Only my brothers had acted upon the rebellion in their blood. I was terrified to speak my mind, usually I did not question. This Lutheran farm boy would fit the bill. He would take good care of me, and I knew he was my ticket out of the Missouri boot heel, into a world of books and more schooling, a world that was as alien to me as the stars or a black hole. So I answered back a meek, grateful “yes” to the boy who was in graduate school.

We married before my twentieth birthday and I moved to Illinois with him. Within nine months, I was not pregnant, nor did I give birth to a child until several

years later, but I did wind up nursing a bleeding ulcer. I had no idea who this stranger was that I had married. He was a cruel and hard man, unflinching in his criticism of everyone in the world, especially me. He sneered at my ineptitudes, took on an air of superiority that confused me. He had made a mistake, he said. I really wasn't as bright as he had thought I was. That frustrated him; he didn't make mistakes. I disappeared into myself. I spoke rarely and carefully, never to reveal my inadequacies, my lack of knowledge. I read vociferously. I could, eventually, talk about quantum physics, bioethics, and the metabolism of the animals he used in his laboratory experiments. I tried to learn the nuances of microbiology and electronmicroscopy. I typed his dissertation every night until the red sun came up over the tops of the buildings and lit up the keyboard, my fingers still black and greasy with the smelly liver I fed to his lab frogs. And my stomach bled as I held myself tightly so that I would not explode. One typo, I knew, and he might push me up against the door of the silent hallway in the deserted building in the silence of the early morning and tell me again, just for good measure, how lucky I was to be married to him. By virtue of being his wife, I would share in the glory of his brilliance. The world just might notice me, he jeered. I knew, as well, that I had made a grave and dangerous mistake. It would be nearly ten years before I began to leave him, driving around town looking for a place to live. Eventually, my graduate school friends cleared out a closet for me; I happily slept on the floor for months, safe in a yellow house on the corner filled with women.

Recently, I read about a woman killed by her ex-husband in Tennessee. He'd walked into the place where she worked and shot her four times, shot three people sitting close to her in the building, and killed two policemen on the way out the door. I cannot recall now if he killed himself or if he was shot. But I could not get that woman, and that man, out of my mind. She had taken out several orders of protection against her husband. Her story reminds me of all the stories I have collected in my work with battered women, getting their stories on tape in the back rooms of women's shelters. I had totally forgotten that I had also gone to court once and petitioned for an order of protection. Before that, I'd never even heard of an *ex parte* or an order of protection. Lucky for me, my lawyer was a hard, no-nonsense kind of woman who had no use whatsoever for John and all the men like him. She suffered through my bouts of doubts and my confusion and my fear with a sober face, and suggested I get everything I could out of this low-life, as she would call him. Well, I knew John was no "low-life." I knew he was superior to all of us, but I learned not to say that in front of my lawyer. She urged me to let the sheriff take me out to the house where John still lived and get half the furniture, our records, our son's photographs. We eventually agreed on joint custody. I was not in a bargaining position. Little did I know that because I had left my son out there in the house with my husband when I moved into the little yellow house, the court in this state would call that "child abandonment." I was grateful for the closet but remember listening to my own breath in the dark, expecting the worst. I had, he said, embarrassed him. *No one in his family had ever been divorced. Ever.* He told me that a lot.

What would he tell his boss, his advisor at the lab? Besides, he claimed smugly, *You won't get to the end of next week without me, you sorry excuse for a woman. How will you get around? Who will take care of you? You'll be back*, he said.

But I didn't go back. And I did just fine. I rode my bike. In fact, the first morning that I rode that bike from the little yellow house, across the railroad tracks and onto the university campus with my books in my backpack, I soared. Never, before or since, have I ever experienced the release of that amazing ride under the summer blue sky. I thought my heart would burst, it felt that good. At the first hearing, John didn't show up at the courthouse, but he showed up at my house that same afternoon, madder than hell. He seethed. He raged. He called me names. How dare I? What gave me the right to slander *his* name in front of a judge and other people? I felt myself backing out of the living room where he stood shaking his finger at my face. He followed me, a dark moving cloud. He picked up a glass and threw it past my ear and broke a hole in the wall behind my head. I do not know if his aim was off. I doubt it. Had he wanted to hit me with the glass, I'm certain he could have. Our son walked in and the tension dissipated ever so slightly. John backed off, taking his son with him out my front door.

After I stopped shaking, I called my lawyer. Months later, at the divorce hearing, I wore the only suit I owned, a thick wool tweed that I wore like armor. My girlfriends were dressed to go with me in their summer dresses, skirts, and sleeveless tops. They worried that I might just pass out in the August heat in Indiana, but I was determined to wear that suit: it was the only protection I had that day.

### *In search of our mothers, take two. . .*

Alice Walker reminds us to go in search of our mother's gardens to find evidence of the beauty they were able to create in their otherwise barren lives, and Virginia Woolf says we tell our own stories backward through our mother's and our grandmother's stories. When we do this kind of remembering work to bring our mother's stories into the present, there is, on the one hand, a sense of joy and nostalgia for the recognition of lives we perhaps never really knew. But there is to this work another side, a darker side that also reminds us that we are, indeed, our mother's daughters. For many of our mothers, their gardens were not enough to heal their wounds or enable them to be strong enough to help us when we most need them. I was not prepared to discover in the stories from battered women a persistent story of disconnection from their mothers. Their stories eventually led me to uncover some of the truth of my own mother's story and eventually link it back to the women's stories in this research. I believe this link is critical. Daughters all, we know the pain of abandonment from mothers who could bear no more pain.

Some time ago, about two years now, I asked my mother if I could tape record her life story. I had finished research on the life stories of women ministers and had embarked on a project collecting the stories of battered women. I was still high on the potential for these stories to tell us about each other and about ourselves. I wrote my mother a long letter outlining the usefulness of these stories and how

much I could learn about her from collecting her own, even appealing to her need to see me more often in order to talk her into a polite, even interested “yes.” What I received was an emphatic, resounding, “No.”

I was insulted, flabbergasted, and confused. How could she say no to me, the dutiful daughter, the researcher, the writer? But she did. She claimed that right with more power and authority than perhaps I had ever encountered from her. When I finished being angry, I was even more astonished that she had mustered up the courage to make this statement about her right to the privacy of her own life. Her answer? She said too many people were still alive; there were too many people who might possibly get hurt or misunderstand if she did this, knowing I meant to use the story somehow in a publication not yet imagined. “You tell *your* story,” she told me in a voice I had come to dislike over the years, “and in doing that you can also tell what you know about mine. But it will still be ‘your’ story, not mine, and you have every right to do that, you know.” At the time, I had no intention of ever telling my story, and I felt I only knew pieces and fragments of hers, not nearly enough. So I put the idea completely away, thinking the episode was over.

But as I began to work more and more with the stories from the women in the shelter and spent the long, tedious hours transcribing the tapes of the women who had agreed to tell me *their* life stories and the stories of abuse they had endured, I was haunted by the stories of my mother and grandmother, as well as my own. I heard our stories in the stories of the women on the tapes; I heard my words in theirs; their stories, my mother’s stories, my stories sometimes swirled together in my mind as I walked long hours on the trail near my house, trying to sift through all the transcriptions. In the air in front of my eyes, it seemed as though I could actually watch my mother’s and grandmother’s stories, and my own, weave in and out of the ones I had collected and listened to over and over and over again on tape.

I came to realize in a visceral moment that some of our mothers have been too wounded themselves to give to us a sense of our own value and worth. I have come to realize that their own pain and sadness were so overwhelming they simply did not possess the energy to actually “see” us and provide for us a safe haven where we could be nurtured to grow in positive ways. So we sought that empowerment, attention, and worth elsewhere. But because we had no sense of our own value going into relationships beyond our home of origin, we were ill-equipped to seek better situations.

*This* is a part of the cycle of abuse that is rarely acknowledged: for some of us, our mothers and grandmothers have perpetuated a sad tradition of neglect and pain passed through generations of abuse. They, too, left their mothers in a vague, dizzy moment of aloneness and woke the next morning to find themselves locked into abusive marriages that sapped their energies and left them vacant and pained. They passed this legacy on to their daughters, not by plan or intent, but just by who they were and what they were not able to give. In fact, I think their stories lay bare what is at the very heart of how some women come to find themselves in abusive



relationships, and why they cannot extricate themselves from the partners who abuse them.

Oddly enough, even though I have immersed myself in an ethnographic study of a battered women's shelter and have written a book about women's narratives of abuse and violence, it was only recently that I was able to connect the dots about my own life. By meeting a distant first cousin, basically "for the first time," I found a link in my own encounters with domestic violence. My cousin grew up in a loving family and spent her summers playing at our grandmother's house and her paternal grandmother's house as well. She told me how the rest of the family worried about my mother and the isolation her husband had imposed upon our small family, never encouraging visits, connections, reunions. While I have recently been able to write about the violence my father imposed upon those of us who lived in his house—how he "unmade our world," as Elaine Scarry puts it—I had not put my own household into the larger picture of violence and abuse that I was trying to study and write about. The work I am doing has helped me realize just how difficult abuse is for other women to live with and how varied are the ways in which we are demeaned, battered down, diminished. I'm the scholar. I'm supposed to know what I'm seeing under the microscope. How could I have missed it? It was right under my nose.