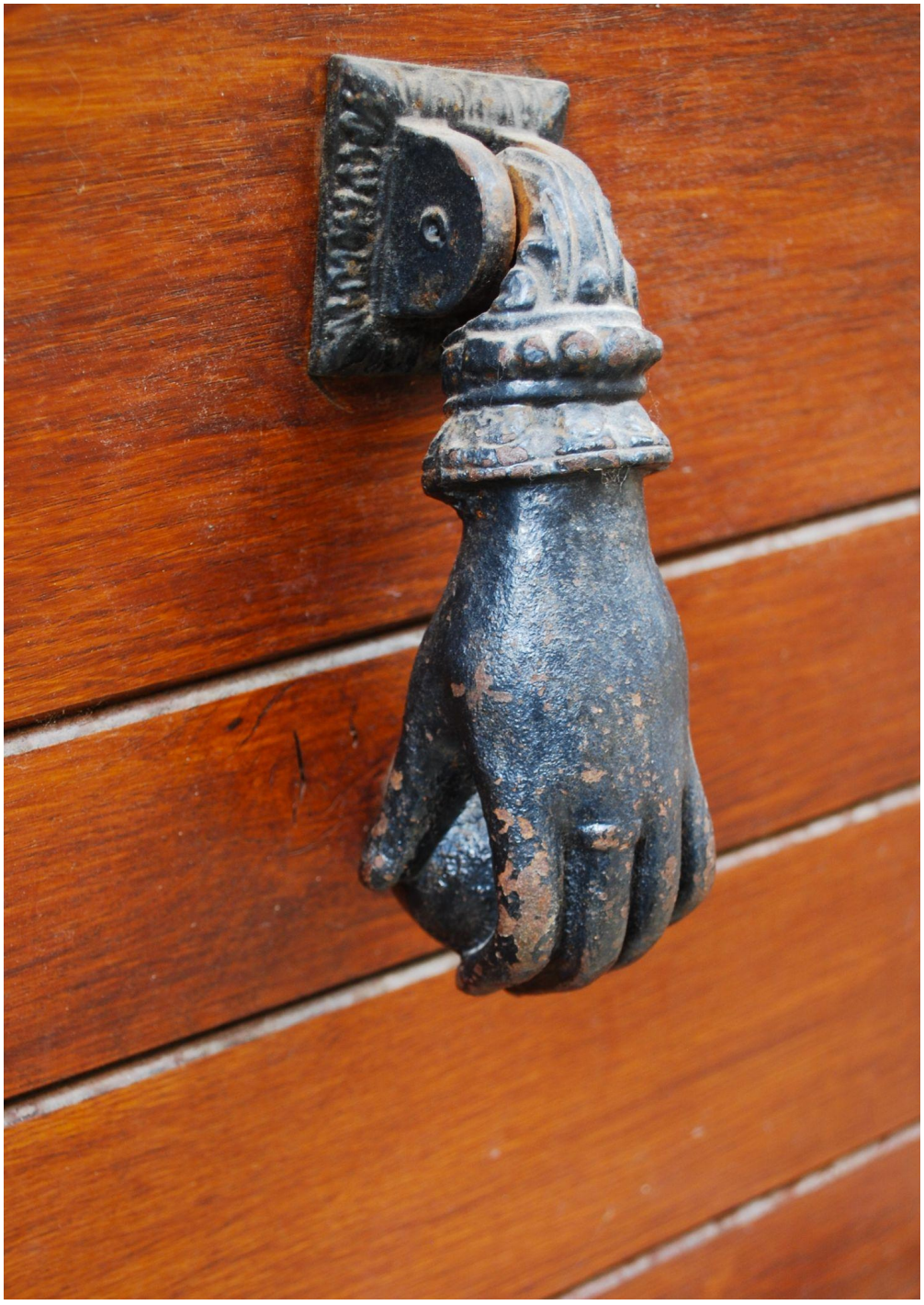

"Knock," *image by Dawn Banghart*

A VOICE ANSWERING A VOICE

One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself, Oh, but they can't buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt you can set upon the freedom of my mind.

---Virginia Woolf

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

---Audre Lorde

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.

---Adrienne Rich

...I say: I will write the book myself.

---Marya Hornbacher

Living with Ghosts
By Ellen McLaughlin

It might seem odd that I would begin a speech about writing by talking about how I can't seem to write, but I have been asked to talk about something I have a certain amount of expertise in and, well…

Anyway, what I decided to do, since I was having so much difficulty just writing this speech, was to examine that difficulty. The first problem I encountered was that I realized that it felt false, given that I am addressing a group of women writers, people like me who are dedicated to the form and have made sacrifices to practice it—and some of you have had to make far greater sacrifices than I have ever had to make—it seemed wrong to speak to the likes of you as if from a position of authority. How to offer rather than declare? That seemed to be the crux of the matter. And I realize that the only thing I can offer as the truth is my own experience. It's a matter of speaking, as Ursula le Guin writes, in the mother tongue, which is intimate, common, conversational, spoken to be answered to, as opposed to the father tongue, which is declarative, authoritative, relegated to announcement and judgment. It presents itself as the truth, the real goods to be meted out to the uninformed for their betterment. I can't pronounce anything from a mountaintop to you. I can only view you as my peers, my fellow writers, and so must speak to you in the mother tongue. I will confide in you rather than pronounce to you. So that's the first difficulty, the problem of status and the language in which I'm going to speak to you. The second problem, which is not so easy to solve, is that I can't fucking write because the voices in my head are so loud.

I can't believe I am alone in this difficulty. So what I've decided to do, and I hope you will hang with me on this, is to use this time together to stop trying to shut the door on these voices or drown them out or ignore them or pretend they aren't howling away in here. I'm going to open the door and face them for once and see who they are, why they have come and what the hell they have to tell me. Maybe by this means I can shift at long last the psychic dynamic I have been suffering with all of my writing life, which is a long time at this point. Maybe, instead of pretending to speak from some enlightened peak of expertise, I can actually learn something by writing this speech. Maybe, with your help, I can become a wiser, freer writer.

I suppose that there must be enlightened, blissful souls out there, writers who never experience the days, weeks, even years when the syrup won't pour, but I have never met them and can't even imagine such creatures, mysteriously free of self-doubt or depression, people who have never known the blank afternoons, the empty mornings when one wakes to think "I will never have another original thought, never work again. That's it. I'm tapped out. Whatever I had, if I ever had it, is gone." No desert in the world, certainly not the one we are in right now, has ever been as dry as the deserts of the mind one inhabits in such states of being.

But however dry, my deserts of the spirit are never silent. There is so much yammering going on that it is literally hard to think. Who are these people? So much of the time one is just trying to hear the faint voice of the soul underneath the din of the inner critics sneering their contempt or urging caution, warning that I'm going to hurt myself or others if I continue, telling me to get up, perhaps make myself a snack, stop, please, would I please *stop writing*? If one of them gets hoarse from yowling at me, another will always take over.

Ask any writer about his or her voices and you'll get a slightly different answer, but we all have them. I recently asked a writer friend to tell me about his. He is Marty Moran, a gay man, a former Catholic, who has written shatteringly insightful and tough work, called *The*

Tricky Part, about his struggles to come to terms with sexual abuse he suffered in early adolescence at the hands of a man in the church. He said, well, of course there are the bigots and the homophobes, but I can't take them too seriously at this point. The ones who get to me are the voices of neighbors, friends of my parents, former teachers, the religious members of my family who feel that I have exposed too much, that I'm not taking it like a man, that I'm sentimental, weak, a sissy…the list, as such lists do, went on.

He, like me, has a voice who is constantly telling him that he should grow up and stop navel-gazing, that he's got to face up to the grit and harsh demands of the reality of the adult world, whatever the hell that is. It's the same voice as the one I hear saying, who do you think you are?—some chick who has never even been on a battlefield–how dare you presume to write about war? Leave that to the people who know what they are talking about, stick to the tiny circle of your own concerns and experience. You have no right to that material.

According to that voice, writing is a silly, girlie, self-indulgent business compared to, well, any number of noble things. Why, I could be devoting myself instead to human rights, politics, medicine—work that involves improving the state of things, actively bettering the lot of others. This is one of the hardest voices to tune out, well nigh impossible of late, since of course, those voices have a point. The world has never been in more dire need, it seems. (But is it really crying out for me, at my age, to start medical school?)

Who else is in there? Well, of course there are the voices who devote themselves exclusively to competitive comparison. They sneer that while I've been sitting there trying vainly to come up with something, So-and-so has already dusted off her hands after having written another Pulitzer Prize winner or whatever. There's the why-not-me? whining voice of wound-licking envy and bitterness, as if the creative life is a zero-sum game in which another writer's success, merited or not, will always be at the expense of mine.

And then of course there are the voices whose only purpose is to distract you—who tell you that your time would be better spent walking the dog, working on your taxes, calling a friend, doing a little more research, going to the gym, really anything, anything other than continuing to sit there… They are totally shameless, those voices, they'll say whatever it takes to get you out of the chair—Is that gas I smell? The doorbell I hear? A child's cry? The basement flooding? Get up, get up, step away from the desk, head for the hills while you can, flee as if your life depended on it from the mortifying, ridiculous, impossible endeavor of writing whatever it is you are trying to write.

I had a friend who literally tied himself with his bathrobe sash to his desk chair every morning. I was always cheered by that image. Similarly, Mark Salzman, author of *Lying Awake*, one of my favorite novels, a short, luminous work, wrote a charming piece in the *New Yorker* years ago about his struggle with at least five drafts of that novel, each one more painful than the last. During the fourth, he was having difficulty in his home office with his cats, who always wanted to sit in his lap, which was interfering with the rewrite. He heard that cats don't like the feel of tin foil so he would wear a sort of lap skirt of tin foil, which meant that they would leap onto his lap and then leap violently off of it, upsetting themselves and him. Eventually they started trying to settle on his shoulders until he foiled them (ha, ha) with a sort of aluminum shawl, which drove them to trying to perch on his head. A tin foil hat, standard crazy-person attire, was the inevitable final result, until he started working in his car where the cats couldn't get to him and he didn't need so much costuming. One day he was scribbling away in his Saturn, balancing his work on the steering wheel and trying not to sound the horn when he bore down, cramped and uncomfortable, his office abandoned and full of sheets of tin foil while his cats

were yowling, pacing and circling on his car hood, peeved with him, until they settled on the sun roof above him. At one point he looked up to see three cat butts directly above his head and thought, "What the hell am I doing with my life?"

I can relate. Can you?

Then there is the problem the critic Harold Bloom has called the Anxiety of Influence—a phenomenon that, once I heard about it, caused me, well, a lot of anxiety. It's one of the oldest and most reliably loud voices—the one that tells me that whatever I'm trying to accomplish has already been done better by someone else.

Of course this is to some extent true.

After Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, William Shakespeare, and Emily Dickinson have weighed in, just to pick a handful from the sea of luminaries who come to mind, the given is that whatever I'm going to come up with on a Wednesday morning might not stack up. But you know, I've come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter, finally, that their greatness is unapproachable. Their greatness has very little to do with what we're grappling with at our own desks during our own days of silent struggle except as an example of what human beings are capable of. Because their work was their own no less than ours is ours alone, and their work is done. We can no more do their work than they can do ours. That's the good news. And the bad news.

It's a matter of how we choose to live with the greatness of those who came before us. We can either tell ourselves that their work makes ours irrelevant and unnecessary before we've even done it or we can decide that their work makes ours possible. The choice is ours. But we do need to make a choice because the fact of the matter is that those we deem great are part of the furniture in our heads no less than our worst inner critics are. We all inhabit the haunted houses of our own minds, so we have to figure out how to live with these ghosts if we're going to get anything done. How do we do that?

I had a friend who grew up in a haunted house in New England. There were a number of entities in residence—a lady in white on the stairs who wasn't so much disturbing as just sad and a little clumsy. If you sat talking on the stairs, as once happened to me, you might feel a nudge on your shoulder, as if a foot slipped as she tried to step around you going upstairs on some sort of ethereal errand. There was an indistinct but masculine grey presence who sometimes seemed to shimmer on the lawn at night, looking lost, and who occasionally tapped at the windows, as if in search of someone who might have once been able to recognize him and do something for him. And then there was what the family decided was a child, who just seemed frustrated and bored and a bit mischievous. Every now and then he or she would create a great flurry in the pantry, flinging mops and brooms around and knocking cans off the shelves. The family called in a ghost-buster at some point who tried to corral the ethereal inhabitants of the house and get them to "move on," as they say, but no one seemed inclined to leave and the family just got used to it. I asked, well, weren't you scared? And my friend said, "Not really, it was like having mice or something. You just get used to putting the cans back on the shelf every week or so." I have come to the same conclusion about my ghosts and voices. They are just the creaks and groans of the house my psyche lives in.

And it's crowded in there. There are the ghosts of every writer I have ever loved, ever held up as a standard of what is possible. But there is also the ghost of every person who has loved me and every person who has ever hurt me. They are all milling around like vagrants at a bus station. Virginia Woolf is perched somewhere in the upper right side of my brain, perpetually sitting in her study in Monk's House, her note pad on her lap, smoking and looking out toward

the garden as the rooks lift, flap and wheel in circles over the trees. Sometimes, it is just after breakfast, the morning when she wrote the sentence, "Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself" and looked at it on the page and thought, ah, this is how it begins. Sometimes it is the morning she saw the sky darkening over the world, the war and her madness overtaking her, and thought, ah, this is how it ends. But she is there, of course she is, my Woolf. She will always be part of me, my Woolf, because she has meant so much to me. And of course my Woolf has little to do with the woman who was born in 1882 and died in 1941, she is what that woman's work has meant to me, what I've made of her. The real Woolf who died before I was born and whom I shall never meet is beyond my reckoning. She is lost, dead, and as such I can't hurt her any more than she can hurt me. So my Woolf is my creation alone, a ghost I constructed because I needed her presence. I can use her as a scourge, a reminder of how paltry my own efforts are always going to be by comparison. Or I can let her be a benign ghost, someone who occupies a privileged and sister spirit in my head, another writer before me who struggled and felt it occasionally, that ecstasy, the flow. I can think of her as she sat—not so different from the way I sit when I write, staring into the silence, just as I do, listening hard, waiting for it, trying to hear the mind of the novel speaking to her. I know she had good days and bad days, just as I do. I know that she must have spent some of that time as she sat on the verge of writing trying not to worry about the toast crumbs on the carpet, the cigarette ash on her cuff, whether there was any milk in the house for tea. (At least she never had to deal with the wild distraction of that ping one hears when an email arrives in one's inbox.) I have to believe that she also dealt with all the psychological chatter that is unceasing in any human life, even when one is attempting to drop into the flow of writing, the sorting through the sand of daily consciousness and event. Was I unkind to my husband this morning? What did my friend mean yesterday when she said what she said? Did I just spend too much money on that thing I thought I wanted so much? (It's a wonder we can do anything at all other than vacuum and write letters of apology.) Am I a selfish person? Am I an attractive person? Am I loveable? Do I really look as dreadful as the old woman who looked back at me in the mirror this morning? What will I die of? How did I get that spot on this shirt? And I know, like me, she was rocked off her center continually by reviews, her terrible vulnerability to them. Despite all her success, all her genius, she went through harrowing anxiety about them before they came, and skidded into dangerous depression if they were even slightly mixed.

Oh, the buzz of all those voices! But look at all those novels she wrote, and book reviews! And she also ran the Hogarth Press with Leonard, for god's sake. While two major wars raged, while Modernism was birthed into the world and she was one of the midwives. And in thinking that, once again I risk letting her be a means of making myself feel like a slovenly idiot by comparison. I can't even finish this paragraph without wandering off into a little eddy of speculation about what I'm going to have for lunch while she, despite madness, rampant misogyny and so forth, got all that done. What a loser I am, but mostly, oh, mostly, how sick I am of the sound of my head.

Because of course, all those clamoring voices are one voice, yours, a skein of sound that you have unraveled into multiplicity, tricked into ventriloquism, a chorus. And what they all want, it seems, is to be heard above the quiet but clear small voice of the self, the one who is tapping in the dark of the labyrinth of your own psyche, your walnut mind, trying to get to the truth. But that voice, the voice of your soul, the voice of the writer, is the one you want to hear, if only you could, if only you could get the rest of your voices to shut up. And since plugging your ears isn't going to do the trick, perhaps what's needed is to change the relationship to the voices.

With real ghosts in the house, the solution seems to be to live with them, accustom oneself to picking up the cans and putting the brooms back in the closet every now and then. With the ghosts in the head, it seems to be a trickier business; perhaps it's a matter of listening to them and trying to understand why you have let them in in the first place. Because, whether you want to hear it or not, the ghosts want to speak.

I wrote a play called *Tongue of a Bird* in which the main character, Maxine, is haunted by two ghosts. Maxine is a search and rescue pilot and one of the ghosts is of the girl she's trying to find—a teenager abducted by a man in a black pickup truck who drove her up into the Adirondack Mountains in the middle of winter. The other ghost is that of her mother, a woman who committed suicide when Maxine was very young. The girl, Charlotte, appears in surprising and troubling ways, banging on the cockpit window, suddenly next to her in the plane or just emerging from Maxine's bed when she's trying to get to sleep. Her mother always appears to her in the same way. She is standing in the air dressed in an old-fashioned flight suit, ala Amelia Earhart. Both Maxine and her mother are a bit embarrassed by this, how obvious the symbolism is, but Maxine is disturbed by it as well. They discuss who is responsible for the nature of this haunting, but the mother is elusive about it, basically saying, how should I know? What both ghosts end up saying is, "I'm all yours." The question with ghosts, I realized as I was writing the play, is not why they appear—they just do—but what they have to say. Because every ghost, from Hamlet's father on, has come to say something. Perhaps all they want us to do is actually listen. When Maxine finally stops questioning the existence of the ghosts or trying to figure out the logistics of how they operate, when she finally says, "All right, what have you come to tell me?" the play breaks into its revelations.

And then there are the monsters. They exist in us too—as I say, it's crowded in there—they are just harder to talk about, and few of us have ever looked them in the face. But we know, if we are honest, oh, we know they are there, the parts of ourselves we have walled up inside our personal labyrinths. We can hear them howling at night, or tapping on the wainscoting. They call to us, our monsters, and if we are to write the truth, it's just a matter of when and how we decide to find them, because we will have to find them. They have too much to tell us.

Rilke says that every monster is really just a part of us that needs to be embraced. He wrote, "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

We are storytellers, so we know from monsters. There are several different kinds you run into in myth and, like any mythic hero, we have to encounter every one of them if we are to write our own stories. There are the guardians of every important threshold in myth, the monsters who make demands upon the traveler who seeks the transfiguration of real adventure. Trolls under bridges, three-headed dogs at the gates of the Underworld, dragons at the base of trees and so forth. These are the monsters who demand that we drop everything we thought made us who we are—our definitions of ourselves, strengths, weaknesses, charming little quirks—in order to proceed. They tell us that the only way to cross the threshold and make the passage toward enlightenment is to give up the sense of the self we thought <u>was</u> the self, the ego. We must lay down all our weapons and go forth alone and empty-handed into the darkness, armed only with an impetuous hunger for self-knowledge. And then, if we can do that, we might be able to encounter the most important monster, the monster I've heard keening on the dark nights of the soul when I have been alone with my truest self. I'm talking about the monster at the center of

my labyrinth. It's the shadow part of me I have relegated to darkness, an aspect of the self that needs to be understood rather than shut in the dark where its screaming can only be muffled but never silenced. The force in me that wants to chain and ignore that monster is always going to have to struggle against the part of me that is curious, that senses the suppression of the monster as a real loss to consciousness. The mythology is always about an adventurer going forth to kill a monster, but the truth of the matter is that the self wants to simply *meet* the monster, because the self knows on some level that it needs the monster, the self will never be whole without it. The monster knows something that must be brought out into the light of consciousness. But the adventure is daunting to consider; just about anything would be easier. Who wants to head into the darkness and encounter such a creature? How is it even done? Luckily, we have all of mythology, every story that has ever been told and every writer who has ever come before us, to show us the way. It's just a matter of getting the red thread of narrative firmly in hand.

I do think of it as a red thread, I don't know why. I don't think any myth mentions the color of the thread Ariadne gave to Theseus. Do you know the story? This is how I tell it. (One of the things I love about the Greeks is that there is no orthodoxy, no sacred text; the story is told according to the storyteller.) The civilization of Crete was ancient even to mythological characters—which is to say, beyond time—intimidatingly mysterious and sophisticated in ways that the mainlanders couldn't fathom—and yet it had at its center two great cruelties, two great shames. Pasiphae, the queen of the Minoans, fell in love with a bull. She became so infatuated with it that she asked the great inventor of the kingdom, Daedalus, to come up with some sort of mammoth sex toy, a construction that would allow her to mate with the bull. One imagines a sort of fake cow outfit made of wood in which she could lie in wait, panting with desire. (I do think the Greeks had a sense of humor; I mean really, how else can you see this image except as comic?) Sure enough, she got her wish and was indeed impregnated by the bull, which led to an awkward situation with the king, Minos, who was not amused and who banished the Minotaur, the son born of the union, a hybrid who had a bull's head and tail but a man's body, to a labyrinth he had the ever-resourceful Daedalus construct, a maze at the center of which the dreadful child lived in solitude, howling with loneliness and hunger. And in that hunger lay the other cruelty, the other shame, which was that the Minotaur could feed on nothing but the bodies of virgin men and women. So every year, or, depending on who you talk to, every seven years, such victims needed to be rounded up to be systematically sacrificed to him. But the Minoan civilization being as powerful as it was, with many colonies on the mainland and on islands all across the known world, the victims could always be supplied in the form of yearly tributes, young men and women sent by subjugated states all across the far-flung empire, particularly Athens. These sacrifices would then be fed into the labyrinth where they would be eaten one by one over the course of the year until the next boatful of victims arrived at the dock with the annual high tide.

I have to admit here that what I particularly love about this whole scenario is what inspired it, which is the actual Minoan civilization, a seafaring empire based in the spectacular city of Knossos, which was indeed immensely powerful, and the most highly developed culture in the ancient world, producing wonderfully lively and graceful pottery, murals, and astonishingly complex, clean cities with running water and peaceable ways. There are no defensive battlements, no signs of brutality, oppression, or violence at all. The ruins of the civilization give off what can only be called a kind of joy. The authority was matriarchal, priestesses seemed to run the whole show, and their male consorts apparently dressed in bull's heads. The sex, judging by the direct gazes of the bare-breasted, snake bedecked priestesses in the murals and sculpture, seems to have been just dandy. No need to construct a fake wooden

cow if your partner is just a man wearing a detachable bull's head. (I always think of that song, "You Can Leave Your Hat On.") Which brings one to the bull dances, which seemed to take place not in a labyrinth but in the open air and were attended by everyone. Indeed the dancers are young people, you'd have to be, but unlike the Spanish bullfighters, who torture and then kill a bull which is the sacrifice, the Minoan murals show young people *dancing* with the bull, leaping over his back in spectacular acrobatics, vaulting by means of his horns and being tossed high in the air. There is no image of the bull being killed, or even harmed. This seems to be a kind of exuberant worship, dangerous, to be sure, but intended as a ritual of celebration. As for the labyrinth, there are theories that that was a mythological response to a kind of weaving solo dance each dancer had to learn, a mesmerizing series of steps that, just like Arthur Murray's, was mapped out on the floor and that would work, if done properly, to hypnotize the bull at the beginning of the dance in order to make him easier to work with.

Anyway, back to the story. One year, Theseus, a young hero at the beginning of his epic adventures, steps off the boat with all the other tremulous lads and lasses, but he is already different: he is a prince, the son of Aegeus, the King of Athens. Theseus has decided to sacrifice himself if need be so as to end the wretched system whereby so many of the younger generation from all of Greece are being killed every year. So, with great chutzpah he volunteers—much against his father's wishes—and climbs on board with all the others to sail what they think is their last voyage across the Mediterranean to Crete, there to die. What happens is that Ariadne, the legitimate princess of Minos, sees him and immediately falls in love, as he does with her, and in one of their secret meetings she offers to free him, let him escape alone, but he refuses, confessing that he has a larger project in mind; that in truth he has come to topple her civilization by killing her half-brother, the Minotaur, then destroying her palace and her city, so that no more tributes would ever need be made. And here is where every story is different: the moment of decision for Ariadne. It's an ethical decision, whether to honor the brutal system of her native country, her mother and father and everyone she's ever known, or turn her back on all that, let that extraordinary civilization be destroyed in the name of justice, in the name of love. She decides to help Theseus navigate the labyrinth by giving him a magic ball of thread. He will use it to track his entrance into the maze and to make his exit when the time comes. Sometimes it is actually rolling before him, showing him the way, sometimes it is just his means of getting out once he has to make his escape, but it is always the key to his success, the thread I picture as being red that he can tug on in his blindness as he makes his passage through the darkness to where the terrifying monster sleeps. It isn't only Ariadne who is the traitor here, it is also the inventor Daedalus, who has the idea of the thread as an aid to navigation. But it is she who gives it to Theseus and who stands by at the entrance to the labyrinth keeping watch and awaiting his return. It is also she who helps him release his comrade captives and escapes on the boat with them, watching her city burning behind them, growing smaller as they sail away.

As so often happens, the traitor is in turn betrayed. It happens to Medea, it happens to Hippolyta. These women sacrifice their family and country, breaking every code of honor, putting themselves into perpetual exile and dependence for the sake of a man who then betrays them, abandons them for other women or just for the next big adventure. And in each case, the traitor who is in turn betrayed is not just the usual interchangeable woman, some blonde in a chiton, the mythological equivalent of a trophy to be traded. These are clever women, women of particular talents specifically necessary to the men who then abandon them. Medea is a sorceress who provides crucial help to Jason when he steals the fleece from her father. Hippolyta, the greatest of the female warriors, the queen of the Amazons, betrays her tribe by going soft over

the same man Ariadne betrays her people for, the fast-moving and feckless Theseus. Such women, it seems, must be cut out of the greater narrative, silenced and abandoned. Cassandra is another exceptional woman whom the chugging engine of the heroic narrative shoves to the sidelines. She is gifted with the ability to see the truth and the desire to warn her people of it, but cursed by Apollo, whose advances she had the temerity to reject, never to be believed. She can scream her woefully accurate prophecies but no one, no one at all, will ever hear her. We pity her feelingly because we know such women, some of us have *been* such women, speaking what they know is the truth, always to be ignored or simply misunderstood. They are always excised from the public record, now no less frequently than they were back in mythology. It's not surprising. They draw too much attention to themselves, keep bending the light toward themselves and away from the heroes. They are too much for these narratives to handle, so they are thrown overboard at the earliest opportunity. The heroes of Greek mythology leave a host of such women in their wake.

Ariadne, for instance, is left at the first rest stop along the route away, the island of Naxos, where she is pitied by Dionysus, who dries her tears and makes her his mortal queen. We might be able to see her diadem tonight in the night sky, where he had to put her after she died her human death because he missed her so much.

But about that red thread, the gift of the clever woman who risks everything for love of the hero who needs it.

I think that's our way out of the labyrinth of our doubt, confusion and the dinning of self-consciousness and fear. We have to grab the thread of story and let it lead us out to the self who is waiting in the light and the end of the adventure of the soul's revelation. That thread is story and it is our only salvation. And story, I have to say, is female. We have always been the storytellers, we are the mothers after all, the ones who speak the cultural narrative and teach it through…well, old *wives'* tales, which is to say, the ancient, subversive and immediate mother tongue, the language of metaphor and myth. The mother tongue is our first tongue and we've all shared it, men and women, in the first meaning that was ever communicated to us in language. Who told any of us our first story? Our mothers did—even if it was only the story of where we came from, which we knew—because we remember it without remembering it—was from *them*.

I was very lucky. My mother was not only a gifted storyteller—she is a novelist in her own right—but a mother who taught my brother and me to weave our own stories from a very early age. When we were stuck somewhere, in line for a ferry, in a doctor's office, sitting at a table in a diner, waiting for a meal to arrive, she would point to someone and quietly say, "Tell me her story." And then we'd be off, spinning a tapestry, rich and complex and increasingly real as we put in the time, godlike in our ability to endow reward, punishment, and tragedy at our childish will. These are characters my brother and I still think about, the length of our lives away from them, the people we constructed from, for instance, the lost look of a lady in a blue coat with frayed cuffs sitting across from us in a coffee shop in Natick, MA, in 1969. Why we were there in Natick, what we were waiting for, where we were on our way to, what we were doing—all that is lost, but not that woman–no, that woman I will know until I die because I made her. Her name was Connie St. Vincent and she kept goats in the back yard and she missed her husband, who was a sailor and had been lost at sea… If my mother had never given me anything else I would always be grateful to her for giving me that woman.

The image of the storyteller as a spinner of a tale, or yarn, and as a weaver of a tapestry, becomes literal in some mythology and is generally associated with the female. This was

certainly true in classical Greece, where a woman's primary occupations outside child-rearing were spinning and weaving. The loom and the spindle were tokens of the sphere where she held complete authority.

The association of a thread to a life story is perhaps inevitable, which gives the act of creation to the female, but also hands her the shears. The notion of a life as a thread to be spun, measured, and cut by the Three Fates originates in Greece, but then crops up all over the Western world. Oldest of the deities, they are also the most feared. They are mysterious, implacable, and indifferent to negotiation; they hold the scissors for all of us, even the other gods. But then female divinity is often as bound up with death as it is with birth because it is always bound up with story. We all begin our stories by exiting our mothers at the length of an umbilical cord and still feel that pull, the sense of our life story as a linear, fragile link to our past, which is the female. And since the earth is generally perceived as female, we sense that we will at some point in our lives turn to make the journey back to the mother, the earth, which will receive us in death. But we are suspicious of stories, even those of us who spin them. Spiders are nature's weavers and are associated with the female, and our feelings about spiders are complex, despite our wonder at their artistry.

One sees that ambivalence always in Woolf, for instance. Female figures like Betty Flanders, who is seen several times trying to write letters, always to men, in *Jacob's Room*, or women who paint, like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, are awash in self-doubt and clumsiness. These women know that whatever they manage to do will be belittled, ignored, or misunderstood. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf refers to "the unpublished works of women, written by the fireside in pale profusion, dried by the flame, for the blotting paper's worn to holes and the nib cleft and clotted." These women haven't had the kinds of education their brothers and their fathers had; they have no pretensions and no resources. The materials are always so shabby and the efforts, by their own standards, so often ludicrous. That Woolf clearly likes these women because she knows the source of their self-contempt does not make them any the less vexed as portraits of creative women. She knows what they are, their petty envy, their self-mockery and occasional hectic grace, because she knows what they are up against—the roaring machine of the masculine world, with its institutions, prejudices, and ingrained exclusivity, the oppressive power of the father tongue. What Woolf herself struggled all her life against is rehearsed constantly in her work. Her artists, high and low, are desperately overmatched, pushed to the sidelines, denigrated, and condescended to. They are as pathetic as they are occasionally striking and well nigh heroic, as Lily is at the end of the novel.

Alone on the last morning of the novel, she sets up her easel, determined to capture something, the essence of the family summer house, which is to say, the dead woman, Mrs. Ramsay, who once animated it and without whom the soul is gone from the place. Lily is returning to a canvas she began years ago when Mrs. Ramsay was alive, back in the first chapter of the book. She left it unfinished then after struggling with it. I remembered that there was a passage in that chapter about her difficulty and was heartened to see it a few days ago as I was finishing this speech, as if to hear Woolf echoing, in her inimitable way, everything I'm trying to get at. We are in Lily's head here:

> "She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark

> passage for a child. Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see; this is what I see."

But she loses her courage to those terrific odds, the "forces" as she puts it, "that do their best to pluck her vision from her," reminding her of "her inadequacy, her insignificance" and she abandons the painting of the house in the beginning of the book. She only takes it up again, years later, at the end of the book, when so much has been lost and as she is visiting a house she senses she will never visit again and trying to see it for the last time. Once again, she has been frustrated by her work, alternating between self-doubting stabs at trying to capture something and giving her work up to muse on the recently dead Mrs. Ramsay, her mystery and her fascination. As the time passes, her thoughts wander and the scenery shifts:

> "But the wind had freshened, and, as the sky changed slightly and the sea changed slightly and the boats altered their positions, the view, which a moment before had seemed miraculously fixed, was now unsatisfactory. The wind had blown the trail of smoke about; there was something displeasing about the placing of the ships.
>
> 'The disproportion there seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind. She felt an obscure distress. It was confirmed when she turned to her picture. She had been wasting her morning….What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her….Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything….Let it come, she thought, if it will come…"

But it evades her until the very end and then appears to her as if by accident, in a kind of vision.

> "Mrs. Ramsay…sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat."

The ghost appears, in other words, and provides the missing shadow, a triangle of meaning at the center of the painting that makes all the difference. The ghost of the novel—who is the ghost of Woolf's mother, a figure who unsettled and haunted Woolf all her life—bestows her benediction on the character most like Woolf herself, the marginalized and odd Lily, painter of paintings no one but she ever cares much about. No one except, of course, the author of the novel, who gives Lily the ultimate gift, the final paragraph of the book, which is this:

> "Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did it matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision."

Which is to say, Woolf has had hers. But what matters most to me here is that in giving Lily the gift of that vision, Woolf gives it to us as well. And that act is a profound gesture of generosity. We are one with the act of creation. And now, with your help, having seen that moment in the novel for what it is, I can never turn Woolf into an instrument of self-torture again; she can only rightly live inside me as one who has bestowed grace upon me in the moment she found it in herself. Now when I encounter her ghost, I can just nod to her in kinship and gratitude as we pass in the corridors of my mind. I can claim her as my own creation at the same time that I acknowledge that my writing self is to some extent *her* creation. All those ghosts, all those voices, I see them as moths, battering the candle of my spirit, circling the flame of that part of me that is always waiting patiently for me to come back to the desk and work. They teem in me, those ghosts, I feel the press of their wings fluttering inside my chest when the writing takes hold at last, hear the almost inaudible murmur of their thought as the wave of creative life surges and I begin to ride the long crest of it to a shore I have never visited.

And in writing this, what I have realized is that my plays are so often about the attempt to have a vision, tell a story, despite self-repression, despite the distrust of the very act of storytelling. My plays often reach their climax at the moment that the story is finally told; the truth comes out, the repressed returns. They happen, much as my plays happen to me, when I stop running from the voices, the ghosts, the monsters, and simply turn to them and let them speak to me, in me and from me. The point, I suppose, is to know your ghosts, your monsters and your demons, yes, face them and hear them out, but then to grasp that fragile yet mighty red thread and head for the light, towards the self that stands waiting in the warmth of day for news of your adventures.

Meet the ghosts, listen to them, and tell the story anyway.

Quotations [and Responses]
By Sandy Gillespie

Helene Cixous [and me] May 11, 1988, Irvine, California

I only know what my direct experience
[strong current of her voice]
my life
[rushes into me]
my body has told me
[carries me]
and it's open to question.
I am going to take only one way
[the skin at her right elbow wrinkles into circles]
my way
[patterns of her fifty-one years]
I consider it only an example.

Intertextuality is the basis of every text I write
[*Oran* across the chalkboard]
not a theory, just a need
[*Oran je* add self, get fruit]
For me, all texts are composed and grow out of intertextuality
[born from the city that is a fruit that is a word]
We are composed beings exactly like a text
[her hair is semi-sweet, the rich dark of my mother's long ago]
composed of many people
[tight-coiled, close]
Who we are depends on who composes us
[my breath in sync with hers]
I'm mostly peopled with women
[MarieFranPollyKimMichelleJen]
I might have been composed of men
[my father had no interest, my brother eight years older]
and I would write differently
[I would not write]
I want to write at the very edge of the abyss
[leaping into chaos]
stories that tell secrets of life and death, almost imperceptible
[the sleepwalkers are coming awake]
Writing must out write itself
[write out itself]
go as far as possible from our limits and the limits of writing
[the book has somehow to be adapted to the body]
and yet it is just words.

The voice is the essence of the body
    [body the essence of voice]
The first person always comes back
    [nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen]
It is necessary
    [her voice and mine and ours]
It is possible
    [it is coming, it is gathering, it is about to burst our heads]

Hymnal
By Linda Ravenswood

And there she was —
on Broadway
between 49th
and 50th —
and you know
what that means,
even if you don't
know the city
you can still feel it —
because New York
is everything.

And
I hailed —
Toni Morrison !

And she said —
You know
I am !

And I said —
Tell me
you didn't
win the Nobel Prize
for those stories !
And
she threw
her head
all around
and said

Girl,
You know I did !

And we laughed
and crossed each other
on the sidewalk.

And
smiling
I kept
looking
back of me

at how
she was
going along
like you do —
but then —
I just kept
walking

til
I heard
quick steps
behind me
and
I turned around —
and her face
was in my face
and she stopped
a second
to catch
her breath
and
she told me
something
I'll never forget.

Anna's Hut at Komarovo
By Trina Gaynon

Snow melting on the roof and damp from Pike Lake
bring chunks of plaster down on our heads,
a small matter with Vivaldi on the phonograph
and the room filled with cigarette smoke and poets
who drop their new work on the table before me.
Memorization no longer necessary, reciting is out of style.

When I'm alone, pine trees drift into the room,
driven by winds of the past and the future.
They shadow work on the poem that rises and falls
in me, as a glacial lake laps at its beaches.
Look for the candles that sputter in my window.
I welcome those who venture back across the Lethe.

Celebrate for Anais Nin
By Nancy Shiffrin

in the hills I learn the design
the lizard outside my door
has different markings each year the same tissue
flame terrorizes brush strips ravines
cleanses the small animal population
I mourn quail and rabbits I've fed
fire part of the plan

the wild cells baffling your armor
aspects of the scheme
stain them adjust the lens
see how they multiply
jewels blossoming in your marrow
these homely parasites will devour your high cheek
your graceful step child-woman air will disappear
I weep do not despair
we are one cell -- you I lizard rabbit quail

bequeath me your wigs
orange and yellow bobbed and fringed
I will comfort your falling hair

in *The Vast Unknowing,* Infinity Publishing
first published in a slightly different form in
the *Los Angeles Times,* 1981

What Woolf Dares Us to Write
By Lauren Rusk

The Inspiration of *Orlando*(1)

When in her diary Virginia Woolf describes herself as "writing against the current,"(2) she refers to the force of expectations, those of writers and critics—many of them her friends—who belong to the masculine literary establishment. Woolf braved this current because she wanted her work to be valued and widely read. But then if so, why did she set her course *against it*?

I think Woolf opposed expectation because she couldn't do otherwise. Temperamentally she was driven by two intertwined goals. First, to enact her sense of what life is in essence, the flow of consciousness itself. And second, to make each book a fresh experiment.

Orlando was a particularly daring one. It violated the conventional understandings of gender and sexuality, of genre and narrative, and even of time. In this fantasy (which Woolf mischievously subtitled *A Biography*) the main character moves through the Renaissance of Queen Elizabeth all the way to the early twentieth century, growing from age 16 to 36 in the course of 340 years. The only explanation the narrator gives is that "some [people] we know to be dead, though they walk among us; some are not yet born, though they go through the forms of life; others are hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six. . . . it is a difficult business—this time-keeping; nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts" (223-24).(3)

Even more startling is the fact that Orlando changes sex partway through the book. As the ambassador to Turkey who's just been made a duke, Orlando falls asleep for a week and then awakens to find himself: herself. Transformed. Again explanations are brushed aside. "It is enough," the narrator says, "to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (103).

As for sexuality, the male Orlando becomes enamored of someone skating on the frozen Thames even before he knows the person's sex. Later the female Orlando cross-dresses from time to time, befriends women of the night, and "enjoy[s] the love of both sexes equally" (161). Finally, when at last Orlando finds her soulmate—one Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire—gender cannot contain either of them. "'Are you positive you aren't a man?' he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, 'Can it be possible you're not a woman?' . . . For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once" (189).

Each of her experimental novels, especially one as radical as *Orlando*, was risky for the ambitious, anxious, and exacting Woolf. She feared that each book would fall short of what she envisioned, dreaded dismissive reviews, and craved confirmation from writers she admired. Nonetheless, never mind the odds against women, Woolf went ahead and wrote exactly what she felt like writing.

In the case of *Orlando*, she felt like dashing off a fantasy "at the top of my speed"(4) for a "holiday"(5) between *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. She pictured the "escapade" that became *Orlando* as "half laughing, half serious: with great splashes of exaggeration"; "the spirit to be satiric, the structure wild";(6) "Everything . . . tumbled in pall mall."(7) And "Sapphism," she said, "is to be suggested."(8) (In fact, Woolf first imagined two women as the main characters.)(9)

A couple of years earlier, after *Mrs Dalloway* had come out, Woolf's friend Lytton Strachey suggested that she try "something wilder & more fantastic, a frame work that admits of anything, like *Tristram Shandy*," Laurence Sterne's digressively satiric eighteenth-century novel. When Virginia objected, "But then I should lose touch with emotions," Lytton said, "Yes . . . there must be reality for you to start from. Heaven knows how you're to do it."(10)

Six months later the emotional reality arose: Virginia and the author Vita Sackville-West became lovers. And after two more years, when Vita had moved on erotically, that reality had become complex enough for Woolf to conceive Orlando as "Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another."(11) Thus she reframed their relationship by making Sackville-West into a character she could both dwell on adoringly and step back from critically.

Within the flexible confines of this wildly structured fantasy, Woolf could also explore, and did, any subject that came to mind—history, society, the aims of writers, and the mysteries and multiplicities of selfhood, consciousness, and time.

It is important for us as writers that Woolf's originality didn't arise from thin air; it was nourished by voluminous reading. The liberties she took with structure and genre in *Orlando* had precedents—in Sterne's "shaggy-dog story"(12) of a novel and also in *Some People* by Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson, a book that intermingles biography and fiction. The process of writing essays praising both these authors must have strengthened Woolf's resolve to experiment with genre and narration.

Encouraged by Sterne's example, Woolf galloped, sauntered, and digressed her way through *Orlando*. Toward the end, the narrator, at first a parody of conventional biographers, begins to sound more and more like Woolf herself.

Among all the anomalies, though, what I find most striking and disconcerting is the way the narrative keeps pulling the rug out from under me, confounding whatever it has just led me to expect. Orlando's attitudes, the narrator's opinions, and even the plot continually reverse themselves.

For one thing, there's the matter of Orlando's feelings about people on the fringes of society. In Turkey he feels a kinship with those who pass beneath his balcony, "fanc[ying] a certain darkness in his [own] complexion" (89-90). A cleaner sees him drawing a peasant woman up to his bedchamber by a rope. He embraces her. Then during his trance, "a deed of marriage" is discovered between Orlando and "Rosina Pepita, a dancer, father unknown, but reputed a gipsy, mother also unknown but reputed a seller of old iron in the marketplace" (98). However, when Orlando wakes as a woman and then runs away with the gipsies for a simpler life, Pepita disappears from the story. And soon thereafter Orlando finds the nomads a bit too down to earth: "'Four hundred and seventy-six bedrooms mean nothing to them,' sighed Orlando. 'She prefers a sunset to a flock of goats,' said the Gipsies" (110). Hence, our lady sails back to England. Not until centuries later, when Orlando's legal status has been settled, does the missing wife come up again, and then only in parentheses. "Turkish marriage annulled," Orlando announces to her lover, Shel. "Children pronounced illegitimate (they said I had three sons by Pepita, a Spanish dancer). So they don't inherit, which is all to the good. . . ." The passage hurries on: Orlando is declared legally female; she can marry and have heirs, and plans to; the city celebrates; "Hospitals [are] founded"; and "Turkish women by the dozen [are] burnt in effigy in the marketplace, together with scores of peasant boys with the label 'I am a base Pretender,' lolling from their mouths" (186-87). As the love story surges to the end of the chapter, I wonder whose cavalier treatment of the underclass this is. Orlando's? Vita's? The novelist's?

And then there's the question of gender. The book begins, " He—for there could be no doubt of his sex" (11). Woolf's opening recalls the first words of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*: "Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that"13; each passage raises a red flag. After Orlando wakes from the seven-day sleep, we are told, again categorically, that "Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it." "But" (and here the claim begins to sound more like a puzzle) "in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been." Striving to be exact, the speaker navigates slippery ground (momentarily gaining a foothold in our time): "The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity" (102, italics added). Further on, though, musing over Orlando's cross-dressing and shape-shifting, the narrator reverses course: "The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity." And then demurs, "For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix" (139), the provisional conclusion of one who claims "the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever" (161).

At some point, the reader may feel moved to cry, "Enough of this rug-pulling!" Where does the book *come down*, regarding gender, or class, or sexuality, or Vita, its biographical shadow-subject? It doesn't.

As various critics have pointed out, Woolf's lightning reversals and changes of subject were self-protective. Cloaked in bravado, camouflaged with an abundance of froth, *Orlando* dances back and forth like a fencer avoiding a hit. Thus Woolf maximized its reach as well as shielded its reputation, and Vita's, in a period when Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* was ruled obscene and ordered to be destroyed. "[T]he balance between truth & fantasy," Woolf warns herself in her diary, "must be careful."(14) Similarly, the female Orlando, also in the early nineteen-hundreds, wonders whether "the spirit of the age" will allow her to be a writer. Like Woolf and Sackville-West, "She was married," that was in her favor; "but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything . . . to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts." Although she manages to write a quatrain without the pen exploding, Orlando wonders whether, "if the spirit"—like some customs officer—"had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine." Because, as the narrator observes, "the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of [one's] works depend [*sic*]" (194-96).

This passage, of course, flirts with the very dangers it refers to, and caricatures them. To me, *Orlando* doesn't feel like a cautious book, but rather an overridingly playful one. It seems to echo Walt Whitman as he writes, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; [. . .]"(15) But why does Woolf keep reversing herself, and our expectations, until I at least give up expecting altogether?

Her contradictions arise, I believe, from the greatest urgency. Woolf needed to reflect her experience of conscious being in all its flickering changefulness. "I am growing up," Orlando muses, taking her candle. "'I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones,' . . . . Change was incessant, and change perhaps would never cease" (129-30).

In the adventure of writing *Orlando*, Woolf jettisoned consistency in favor of authenticity. She let her contradictory impressions and attitudes show. Repeatedly the text delights in fairy-tale aristocratic luxuries, then briefly parodies and deconstructs them, then turns to revel in furs and skates and carriages once more. It reveals not only Orlando's, Vita's, and the

narrator's choices of what to dwell upon, but also the author's. I find this troubling. And yet, isn't it good that I'm troubled? I am disturbed, in part, by recalling my own self-indulgence and callousness. In various pieces of writing, Woolf lets snobbishness and egalitarianism sit uneasily next to one another. Is this a flaw? The fact that Woolf reveals herself to be imperfect and unresolved leaves her open to critique. But that openness also invites us in, to take up the questions she provokes and examine ourselves as we read.

The last twenty-five pages of the novel are one great gesture of opening out. All in a day, Orlando riffles back and forth through the centuries, her many selves merging and colliding in the present. The essence of life, love, and poetry that she has always sought approaches. Woolf depicts it as a wild goose, and sometimes an elusive fish. "Haunted!" Orlando cries, "ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. . . . past the window out to sea. . . . I've seen it, here—there—there—England, Persia, Italy. . . . and always I fling after it words like nets . . . which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them. And sometimes there's an inch of silver—six words—in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves" (229). On the very last page, the wild goose reappears when Shel returns from Cape Horn; then it flies up and vanishes again. This final vision is followed by an ellipsis, the three dots with which Woolf planned to end, even before she conceived the plot.(16) Planning not to conclude, she wrote an open-ended story, leaving gender, genre, honor, time, and self, ungraspable as water.

Beyond the phrase "writing against the current," Woolf uses fluidity as a metaphor so often that water seems almost to be the medium she lives in. Her first memory, recounted in the essay "Sketch of the Past," is of listening in bed to waves breaking on the beach at St. Ives, of "hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive."(17) In her diaries, Woolf wants to "get into my current of thought"(18) and "swim about in the dark green depths."(19) For material, she "go[es] adventuring on the streams of other peoples [*sic*] lives—speculating, adrift[.]"(20) At other times she "toss[es] up & down on . . . awful waves" of "black despair. . . ."(21) Clearly the currents are inner as well as outer. But without such fluid indeterminacy, how could she arrive at moments of inspiration like this one, in *A Room of One's Own*? "Thought . . . had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? . . . however small it was, . . . put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still."(22)

Looking ahead, Woolf aims "to saturate every atom."(23) *Orlando* is just one in a series of experiments that, like *The Waves*, she can't resist running right into. Thus, by example, Woolf dares us to follow our own deepest impulses, no matter how idiosyncratic they seem. Pursue them, she urges, as far as you possibly can.

What asks to be written? Is there a subject you've dismissed because it feels odd, or sensitive, too complicated? An image or a memory that keeps rising to the surface but seems risky for the page? Perhaps a new *way* of writing, one you haven't yet tried. Dive in, why not—a ten-minute plunge—and just see what springs through your improvising hands to mind.

Notes

1 Beyond Woolf's writings, the research of Hermione Lee, Pamela Caughie, Karen Kaivola, Nigel Nicolson, and Karyn Sproles has informed this essay.
2 Woolf, Diary, vol. 5, 22 Nov 1938, p. 189.
3 Woolf, Orlando, page numbers in the text.
4 Woolf, Diary, vol. 3 (D3), 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
5 D3, 18 Mar 1928, p. 177.
6 D3, 20 Dec 1927, p. 168.
7 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
8 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
9 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
10 D3, 18 Jun 1925, p. 32.
11 D3, 5 Oct 1927, p. 161.
12 Ricks, p. xi.
13 Dickens, p. 1.
14 D3, 22 Oct 1927, p. 162.
15 Whitman, p. 118.
16 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
17 Woolf, Moments of Being, pp. 78-79.
18 D3, 16 Sept 1929, p. 253.
19 D3, 21 Sept 1929, p. 255.
20 D3, 20 June 1928, p. 187.
21 D3, 18 Dec 1928, p. 212.
22 Woolf, A Room of One's Own, pp. 5-6.
23 D3, 28 Nov 1928, p. 209.

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Her Poem, the Oak Tree
By Tammi Truax

I have carried this poem for centuries. In the end I shall bury it under an oak tree still in the prime of life, assuming life shall attend that symbolic celebration, and that I remember to bring a trowel.

Incarnation I

The many oak trees in my childhood yard were my playmates. I had no grandfathers, but those big daddies stood sentinel over me daily. I played in their shade, and played with their babies – the acorns that littered the lawn by the thousands. In the fall, after the most magical kaleidoscope of colors ever a child could ask for, I'd play in the dying leaves that littered the lawn by the millions. Twigs and sticks were toys too, or weapons, as needed. There was one tree that had been cut to a high slanted stump and I thought it my princess seat. Before my childhood was over a boy I loved would kiss me as I sat upon my throne. My attachment to the yard was greater than to the house upon it. I miss the land, and the oaks.

Incarnation II

I did not know how to choose a husband. Girls are not well schooled in this important skill. Many years after the fact I realized that I chose mine, though I'd seen his hard ways, because he seemed like a tall mighty oak nothing could ever bend or break. That was before I knew what cancer can do.

Incarnation III

For years I had a cross-temporal affair with another man. Like my husband, also dead, though famous. He was known as General George Washington. I'd learned a lot by then about how to see the real strengths and weaknesses of a man, much as I had better learned to see my own. Humans have so many more flaws than trees do. I went to George's home to gather what I needed, to write what I must write. I prayed over the unmarked graves of his slaves. I gathered acorns under his massive oaks and brought them home. I cherish them, though I could not bring myself to plant them.

Incarnation IV

It is the present. I've moved to a cottage in Maine. The babies are gone, my pockets nearly empty. I've no office anymore so must write in the kitchen. With the last of my money I splurged on a special table. One that would support and inspire me. Where I can sit quietly and see the trees outside. Where I can write what I must write. She is old and purposeful. She is scarred and beautiful. She is, I can see, full of stories, like me. She is solid oak.

Incarnation V

This is the future, so all is phantom. But I believe I will slam my fist upon the table, and cry "Ecstasy!" Then I will sail to a place where I'll see the waves rippling peacefully in the moonlight.

To the Lighthouse
By Kim Hamilton

I saw her lighthouse once,
off St. Ives' shore, a whitewash slip
to sunrays sideways glint, a dozen
canvases like sails raised on sand
Sunday painters working with the wind.
But we ate pilchers from a rolled back tin,
salty oils running through our hands
like the turn of light, the flash that never
will be caught, and never quite repeats.

Virginia Woolf's Hollyhocks
By Deborah Doolittle

Country born, they are still the village
gossips at the garden pump, watching
the neighbor's cat, the doorman's dog,
the grocer's delivery boy. Some say
there is always something new to look at.

It is a commonplace they cannot help
repeating: how the days come to them
in exaggerated quantity and the hours
slide past like slugs and snails. How they
don their Sunday bonnets most days

and yearn to become part of Mrs. Dalloway's
next dinner party, the center of her guests'
attention, leaning in the crystal bowl upon
the table. They'd bask in the conversation
swarming about them as thick as bees.

One needs only to keep one's head turned,
as heads are turned in Regent's Park
and Covent Garden, and nodding down
Flower Row. Pause, reflect, admire, retire,
take heed of their winsome ways, even when
terraced to the contours of London streets.

What Remains
By Maggie Stetler

— Remembering Virginia Woolf

I.

As a woman, I guarded
my body too, longed for a
mother, not a man, married
for love and art but not sex.
As a child in Pennsylvania,
I dodged imaginary Cold-War
bombs, pre-divorce barrages.
In London, yours, a real war.
No matter, wounds concur:
woman down. Still you met
head on: fiction, insanity, the
folding over of mind and world.

II.

You, buffeted, frail — your words
shot me out of orbit. A blast of
truth lodged in the central nerve.
A kaleidoscope of self
and others fused, refracted;
time and space collapsed,
colliding. I rode your waves,
voyaged out and back, safe
by your piercing light. For you,
repercussions: headaches,
despair, voices. You died
many times before you died.

III.

I stand in the 21st Century
on my river bank. Cast
a stone, wade out, tread
water, float. Easier than
your walk, still a distance.
Other side, sepia in morning
haze, you wave recognition.
In a second lasting 130 years,
your body bursts into flames.

What remains: a spinning thread
of connection — blood, veins,
hair, gut, gamete — all *pure gold*.

The Only Surviving Recording of Virginia Woolf's Voice
By Alison Townsend

I'm not expecting to hear her speak, stopped as I am
at a red light in Stoughton, Wisconsin, on the daily, desperate
dash home from work, my fractured spine throbbing
as if it housed my heart not my nerves, this snippet
on NPR as unexpected as recent November warm weather.
But here she is, sounding husky and a bit tired, her plummy
accent drawn out as she speaks about words, *English*
words…full of echoes and memories, associations
she does not name. It's still 1937 in her mouth
and later I'll learn that she's not speaking informally at all,
but reading – a talk called "Craftsmanship" on the BBC's
program *Words Fail Me* – the script held up before her,
like a tablet of light in her long, white hands. Or a window
the sound of her voice opens in my head, her deliberate
phrasing a kind of eulogy to words and the way
They've been out and about on people's lips, in houses,
on the streets for so many centuries, time passing in the hiss
and skritch of the tape. As I imagine her in the studio,
a bit tense perhaps, her hair in that dark knot, dressed up,
though no one will see her, though years later her nephew
will describe the recording as too fast, too flat, barely
recognizable, her beautiful voice (though not so beautiful
as Vanessa's, he'll add) deprived of all resonance and depth.
But I don't know this as I listen, nothing to compare her to
but the sound her words made in my American head, as I lay
on my narrow dorm bed in my first November in college,
underlining phrase after phrase from *To the Lighthouse*
in turquoise or fuchsia ink, not because I understood
what they meant but because they sounded beautiful
aloud and my teacher had her photograph up in her office.
After my mother died, the first thing I forgot was the sound
of her voice, nothing to preserve it but a moment or two
on tape where she speaks in the background, saying
"Not now, not now," as if no time would ever be right, even
that scrap vanished somewhere in the past. Though I recall it
as I listen to Virginia Woolf, her voice—which is nothing
like my mother's, which my Woolf-scholar friend tells me
she "needs some time to get used to"—drifting on for eight
entire minutes, a kind of dream one could fall into, *as words*
stored with other meaning, other memories spill like smoke
from her throat and the light changes, and I drive on
through the gathering darkness, thinking about voices
and where they go when we die, how to describe pain

then leave it behind, her *lamp in the spine*
glowing, briefly lighting my way.

To Virginia
By George Ella Lyon

If you knew
I sat
at your feet

I think you do know

If you'd seen me
retrace your steps
Hyde Park Gate *where you were born*
Gordon Square *birthplace of Bloomsbury*
Asheham now a cement works
Monks House *last home*

perhaps you did see

If you'd watched
your words
light my darkness
like the Milky Way

If you'd felt me
pouring over
leaning into
your diary
and *To the Lighthouse*
and *Jacob's Room*

boarding an aeroplane
to cross the Atlantic
catching a train
from Paddington
to St Ives
to stay in the nursery
at Talland House
sacred site
of your childhood summers
before your mother's death
slammed that gate

If you'd heard me
reading aloud your words
in that room where you drew
your baby breaths
and blew bubbles of words,
where you were translated by time
into a fierce, dreamy, always
ink-stained girl

would you have said
do you say

Welcome, daughter?

The Poem
By Diane Furtney

" . . . this loose, drifting material of life . . .
Some idea of a new form. Suppose one thing
should open out of another—as in an unwritten
novel"–Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*

It's instinctive, the lift at it,
the damp summer grassweed smell,
and you think small: gopher,
badger, fox; an over owl; between the weeds.
Then these shallow ditches, and the low
foliage recovering from shock,
scrambling off from our passing headlights.
And now crickets, deploying over a square
cornered exactly as a blanket,
chanting their formations uniformly
to the border. At just one spot,
on past the next field, it's
unaccountable: warm cinnamon.
And good, dulcet Bradley,
so unnerved all spring, really,
seems calm at the wheel now
for the first time in weeks. Continuously,
my threshed hair, blown at the window,
bothers my raised bent knee
and thigh; when my right hand dangles
off the fast steel ledge,
its fingers unconsciously canter the wind.
And I would agree, dear
aggravating V., there may be in these
enough of moment to sustain the novel—
whatever happens in the warm, wide wind—
though just barely,
I daresay, the poem.

Reading Virginia Woolf in the Nineties
By Kristie Letter

yes, Virginia
in irregular rhythm and (extra) articulation, who thought beyond plotting, to take on and through and know mermaids (singing) and sisters who never flower into bards, swimming in words, sapping down difficulty becoming, re-evaluating Madonnas, beyond teen spirits into Victorian charms, a nose for truth, for key moments, the heat of the sun, an embrace in it, the threat of bursting into here-now flames.

a thing there was
in thrift store dresses, embracing flash-smiles, Clarissa's moment with Sally, one breath treasured and polished, a nub of something between the tea, towards survival beyond sweet Septimus, weaving together his fragments of language, warping the past, wefting what's worn-torn and decorating hats, a recognition of money, Buy the flowers her self. Buy herself flowers. By herself, flowers.

for there she was
in waves, with smoke spirals spelling upwards, with waves of desire and desolation, smart girls don't have to sink to simper, but make up the world, each vision, each jaunty hat or chapter without end, without regular periods, without individual fear, with Virginias sallying forth, with Doc Maartens not quite crushed beneath car wheels, while dancing in flower, flinging hair unbound, an embrace.

The Power to Contemplate: An Artist Responds to Virginia Woolf
By Jennifer Carson

Five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate …
a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself.

Several years ago, when my partner agreed that I could live in his house without contributing to the mortgage, I thought I had landed the perfect life. He had granted me Woolf's five hundred a year. I could work part-time in academia and write the novel I had started in halting pieces.

The arrangement gave me serious material comfort. Together we had built a beautiful contemporary house: granite, bamboo and white oak under my feet and soaring ceilings above, warmly stained concrete walls and tiny skylights that evoked stars. We laid wool and silk rugs in every room and hung chandeliers. Twelve feet of glass doors framed the garden I tended almost daily. I smelled the ocean from my living room. I had my own "deep armchairs and pleasant carpets" and felt for myself "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offsprings of luxury and privacy and space." I could focus on the only two things I was sure mattered: writing, which had become an acute creative need, and meditation, which I had practiced intensively for six years.

"The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes," Woolf quipped, and indeed, mine lit more easily in such material security. I had grown up poor and lived on student's wages for most of the first fifteen years of adulthood, as I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in physics and a PhD in astrophysics. There were many days of beef and prunes. At the end of my second year out of school, I could no longer pretend interest in the work I was doing. I did not want the academic career in physics. My partner's offer made it possible to leave it without giving up financial wellbeing. In that luxurious, borrowed house, I finished a draft of my novel. I attended my first writers' workshop, joined three writing groups, and won a scholarship for a year of classes at a local university. These experiences changed me: they charged my work, deepened my commitment, honed my skills and exposed me to literature that challenged me by example.

Eventually, though, the cracks in the arrangement began to show. I cared that the lamp in my spine lit at the discretion and favor of another. Conscious of my dependence on my partner, I became increasingly concerned with gaining his approval. Although he never forbade my writing, he did not particularly approve of it either. He is an engineer, short on creative impulse and long on industry. I do think, in his quiet way, that he wanted me to succeed, but his ideas of what it meant to be productive ran counter to that desire. I felt, always, beholden to him — that I should make myself accountable, that I should waste no time. His thrift and practicality stood in contrast to my tendency "to dream over books and loiter in street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream." I worried often about producing something that would register as legitimate in his eyes.

Intensifying our divide, my partner was never fond of my work. He likes comedy and politics, has no interest in poetry and little in fiction. In contrast, my writing is serious and dense, and I care deeply about language. We had little explicit communication about this growing rift, but his opinion of my work, and of creative pursuits generally, began to fill my pleasant material refuge with the fumes of dependence and self-doubt.

My subversion of my work was subtle. I still picked up the pen, but my thoughts were compromised by an effort to bury my worries, to ignore the residue left by my partner's lack of interest. The work leaned into a frantic and superficial cant, as I hurried for the tangible prize of publication and the legitimacy it would bring. Such a mode discourages exploration of language and form. It dulled my wilder instincts — the very instincts that set my work apart. My impulses toward risk and innovation became alloyed with fear and an undue emphasis on what was acceptable. I could be weird as long as I wasn't too weird.

The risks I refused to take in my relationship were reflected on the page. I laid the novel's foundation during my time with that partner, and there is certainly risk in those pages, but eventually I could not ignore the limits in the relationship — limits that existed even within the material advantage it seemed to give me. External changes were necessary before I, and the work, could grow. "Think only of the jump," Woolf implored Mary Carmichael, and I heard advice for myself. *Jump*.

And so I did.

My perfect life was missing the second half of Woolf's admonition: a lock on the door. The power to think for myself, which I was not going to find under the conditions of protection I had adopted. When I split up with him, my partner insisted I move out immediately, and so within a few days I gave up financial security, the comfortable home, the spacious schedule. But also these: the loneliness of our superficial conversations and the ever-present feeling that I had to account for my days. Jobless, I spent two months cobbling together house-sitting arrangements while laying a new foundation for myself. Eventually I secured two teaching jobs and freelance work. I rented a small but pretty apartment where I could no longer smell the ocean but could still walk there.

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In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes of author Mary Carmichael, whose work she admired, "I am afraid, indeed, that she will be tempted to become, what I think is the less interesting branch of the species — the naturalist-novelist, and not the contemplative." Woolf argued for the necessity of contemplative writing. As Mary Gordon states succinctly in the book's forward, "It is to encourage writing of genius, to discourage flawed work, that Woolf is so insistent upon money and privacy for women." Woolf's contemplative is someone who aims for such unflawed writing.

I have seen the effect of a lack of privacy on my own creative process and have now been in my modest home, with its lock on the door, for over a year. There is much less time to write, but in the hours I do carve out, I loiter and dip. The space itself has begun to fill not only with my piles of books and notes, but with ideas and questions, poetry of my own generation. No one but me can cross their arms and judge my lack of industry.

How, then, to work toward that seemingly unattainable "writing of genius"? Gordon elaborates: "The important thing is that they express reality; they must express their own genius, not themselves. They must illuminate their own souls, but they must not allow the souls to get in the way of reality." But what does it mean to express reality?

"Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints," Thomas Merton writes in *Seeds of Contemplation*. "They never succeed in being themselves." We start by illuminating our own souls. A true contemplative cannot saddle herself to ideas that are popular or sanctioned, cannot "waste years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint." Paradoxically, this pursuit does not increase egotism, but humility, for "humility consists
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in being precisely the person you actually are." Woolf seems to agree: "I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else."

But as Mary Gordon warns, to illuminate one's own soul is not enough. We must plumb deeper, to find and express the "reality" that is not obscured by our particular and limiting neuroses. Woolf described reality thus: "It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech…. [It is] what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge." This points us to a deeper experience of living, so that we may be truer to life in our writing.

The process of training the mind to get out of its own way in order to better discern reality seems to me a kind of purification, producing an unalloyed intelligence, the mind's deepest potential. This pure experience of the intellect is, I think, what the teacher and writer A.H. Almaas refers to when he describes "brilliancy" or "essential intelligence": "brilliance" as a luminous quality of mind and "essential" because it is innate and fundamental, existing underneath the neuroses that obscure it. Our "soul" no longer gets in the way of reality. Woolf described this state of mind palpably, as "unity of mind," "resonant and porous, … it transmits emotion without impediment, … is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided." This luminous mind seeks reality and finds truth. Annie Dillard insists on it when she instructs us to "Aim past the wood; aim through the wood. Aim for the chopping block."

What is at stake in our writing is no less than truth itself. Not the depiction of beauty as we usually conceive it, but the record of the real, of things as they are. This strikes me as the Buddhist quest: to see the world — and as a writer, to record what we see — without the obfuscation of opinion, interpretation, prejudice, or grievance. This is, perhaps, the deepest understanding of beauty, as Marilynne Robinson asserts: "For me, this is a core definition of beauty: ... that it somehow bears a deep relationship to truth."

To bring forth truth, to express such beauty, requires that we cast aside the pernicious "self", another task at the heart of the Buddha's teachings. I once heard a student ask Charles Johnson how his decades-long Buddhist practice and perspective affected his work. I immediately thought of the Buddhist themes and wisdom that saturate his novels, but Johnson gave a more process-oriented answer: he gets the self out of the way when he writes. After decades of meditation, he understands the ultimate fiction of self and can write from that place of understanding. What is left, he said, is just the world of the story. No 'Charles Johnson' to erect a barrier to the place where his characters live.

When our allegiance to self is strong, it bleeds out into our writing. Woolf notices it as "... a shadow [that] seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'." She disdains the "aridity, which, like the beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there." It is out in the sun, away from such withering shade, that true contemplation proceeds.

Woolf's call to women is to be that contemplative. Some of us must try to become capable of expressing our own "genius," of accessing that unalloyed intelligence that makes great work possible — writing without the taint of grudges or personal vendettas and undistracted by concern for what others think. Such purification is different for each woman. There is no generic enlightened mind. Like the purification of metals, each mind has its own properties and transforms according to its unique color, heat, malleability and luster. In bringing forth "genius," we do not lose our individuality, but become, as Merton points out, more ourselves.

Every time I write I try to remember this commitment to truth, to the paradoxical movement in which we loose the shackles of "I" in order to more fully manifest work that is unique and irreplaceable. I know for myself the necessity of the door and its lock, of the time alone, safe within walls I pay for, in rooms slowly imprinted with my creative will. But to maintain these rooms, I, like most women, must work for money. Teaching physics pulls me away from my deeper creative work — not because it is impossible to be a contemplative in physics (though it is as rare there as it is in literature), but simply because it is not my path. I commit to as little of it as possible. I live on a financial edge, tolerating the lack of security so I can keep writing. I eat more beef and prunes than I would like.

The cracks in this arrangement are obvious. I cannot continue to make so little indefinitely. I cannot write well living like Hemingway, skipping lunch and filling my short stories with food. Neither money without privacy nor intellectual independence without material security can support the works of genius Woolf charges women to produce. Five hundred pounds a year *and* a lock on the door are necessary — not for living, merely, but for the *more* that Woolf expects of writers: "to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life." From across a century, I heed her call to that life.

Women, Windows
By Lauren Rusk

after Vermeer

Light on a wall,
a woman. Light—

the pour of milk, her round

forehead as she reads

where he arranged her—each
of those women—

near a window to catch the glow,
not look through.

But to the women that light means
opening out—

bellying clouds

painted on the virginals
she's poised to play,

a stretch of river blowing.

Lifting her pen, she pauses,

tuning a lute string

listens—does it
ring true?

The seeds prick and sparkle like water,
in her cracked wheat

rising on the sill.

People as Evidence
By Lauren Camp

for Alice Neel

Not so much the eyes
but the middle of the gesture—
early bloom, late wrinkle, the most multiple parts,

nipple and fat roll. Leg and tangle and temper.
It was that entrance
to the center that made it impossible

to look away. Saturation of bones,
the subjunctive. Next I saw black-on-blue
hair and the swirl of a shadow on a cheekbone;

saw where light was offered to forehead.
She drew the fleshbruise of each person,
then smoothed them to drifts and deeper

insinuations of breathing. Desperate mouth
invitations. Each painting told subject-
verb-curl-cleft in overindulged shades

of shoulders and hollows. She knew every
rule and broke them to piles
of mudcolored poses. Hair and knees,

the uncomfortable compassions. Arms in despair
and the opening of casual shapes. For her,
no delicate structure. Cleaving creases

and cheeks to sorrows and obsessions,
she mixed warm and cool, let her fingers conjure
scars, detail, possible selves. With her wrists

she closed off mistake. The painting not saying
but willing to gather
what otherwise sensibly hid.

Studio Visit: Later
By Susanna Lang

Alice Berry

What's left—bobbins, scraps
of fabric, reds and pumpkins
in one bin, blues in another.
A jacket, dark as its corner.

I remember tea in a fairy tale
harem splashed with glistening
silks that spilled from hangers
and shelves, from full-bodied

manikins. The light
now wintry, filtered through
high-set windows,
power switched off,

worktable bare. Ready.
For a year she did not enter
this studio, not sure what the room
was still good for. But out of a duffel

she pulls her new shawls, the fractured
lines like the quilts once sewn
by Dahomey women, whose squares
never lined up—they knew

that evil must walk a straight path,
can be foiled by angles and corners.

as published in Self-Portraits, one of three chapbooks included in Delphi Series Volume IX from Blue Lyra Press (October 2020)

Droom
By Margaret Chula

M.C. Escher wood engraving, 1935

The bishop reclines on tassled cushions
hands crossed at his waist
in sweet repose.

A praying mantis straddles his chest.
Legs, knobbled like rosary beads,
knead the red fabric of his robes.

Thorax and forelegs
cast a shadow over
the bishop's trusting heart.

In the great beyond,
arches of the coliseum
hold up the night sky.

Venus and Jupiter shine out
from their glass coffin—illuminate
the antennae of the mantis

as it prepares to bite off
the bishop's head,
just above his frilled collar.

This one-sided love—nothing
like bees and buttercups
or the honeyed wings of hummingbirds.

Prayer has turned into prey.
Mantis, Greek for *prophet*,
has become mandible.

Sharp teeth of the predator
sever cords, as chords of hymns
play in the young man's head.

Who will believe the bishop
when he awakens,
church bells pealing,

his hands stroking
the thin red line
stitched across his throat?

Pentimento
By Catherine Moore

She painted over his works because she felt he had spent too much time in his blue period. The disemboweled female forms were barely swathed in bolts of lapis atop ecru. Draped over in wide eyes afraid—primitive empties, effigies of sad spoils. The figures needed their horror broken. These moments buried. Their beauty enriched with sun washed colors. Her own brush was true, as the paintings sold well. It was money she rejoiced in spending. At art auctions, she examined the subterranean canvases for original strokes, while critics praised the rather childishness about his final paintings. How wonderfully derivative it all seemed.

Color Coded
By Lauren Camp

Since no one ever wanted to paint me,
I took a brush elsewhere in the city—
behind the white fence, into night.

To my husband I said *Find me there*
with the collapsible blue.
What? he asked. *Do I have to trail you*

through Dame's rocket and upended furniture?
I readied the skin and fat
of my small piece of purpose, so tired

of tallying a landscape to see it slung
on screws for a month on a wall. The distance
was visible either way. By the time I had an audience

and had tucked one drift
of my insistent color theory around them,
I understood multiplicity. Perhaps I was only

surrounded with the discarded: shape
to logic, the absence of faces.
But whatever I saw was the truth.

Among my many actions, I continued
to twist my wrist.
I fingered fat licks of oil,

my work always waiting for surrender.
Such mercy to need it. This was eight years ago.
He was happy, my husband,

that I put a red box in the left corner
when I was unsettled. He told me so
as I laid it beyond the limits of horizon.

Practice
By Alison Hicks

The small precision:
word matched to moment,
finger placed squarely on the string,
the pitch containing not only itself,
but itself halved, and that halved, and again.
Ratios that move the small bones of the ear
translate resonance to the brain.
Lives of sloppy shifts, wrong notes,
mistakes in tonality.

Late at night in the living room,
try to make up for this.
In your notebook, on the instrument, with a partner,
practice harmony, or necessary dissonance,
half-step leading tones.

Contact Dance in the Mission District
By Dawn Banghart

She is there, sitting on the dance studio lower bleachers
untying tennis shoe laces
socks off, toes touching the rough paint chipped floor
spandex tights snug at the knees, hugging her thick thighs
a loose silk shirt swirls as she walks
across the floor past us the small pod of early arrivals.
She opens the windows and breeze rolls across her hand.

We are on the second floor overlooking an intersection
three burrito shops, two bus stops, a BART station
and a woman with a microphone wielding Jesus like a club.

It's Alejandra, the dancer's turn to speak.
She challenges the wall of mirrors
becomes larger here
larger than the pigeon hunched pedestrians below.
This is the place she comes to bend back, stretch
one hand on her hip, one forearm a curtain across her face
fingers postured high past the crown of her head.
Then her chest lifts, an offering.
Now. She dips and around spins
tucking in and dropping low
stretching up, hands out, ribs high
all open, tilting over into a fall and roll
so forgotten, so blurred
she becomes her brother's flipping peso.

Her orange sun silk flutters, memory obscures
Alejandra becomes
a nun's open fan flitting on the Yucatan bus
wings flapping, a chicken held by the ankles
eddies of warm beer spilt into wet mouths
the aroma of tamales wrapped in napkins
the bus axle rumbling Mexico's hip bones
anybody's reason to go to the ruins
a dance on the infinite rise of stone stairs up going up
once more up.

Alejandra's feet are bleeding again.

Copper
By Caroline LeBlanc

A sculptor friend gave me his scraps of sheet copper although
I had no immediate use for it. Still it shines, reddish, in the
cellar after years of collecting cricket's
casings, after long summers of their rasping song.
Even time has
not dulled it, dry and wrapped tight in the dark, so no
free elements oxidized it green or blue. Words
can be like that, pristine as long as they are still
neatly packaged. Heat and hammer it
out though, and copper transmutes color and sounds.
Shape an "o" into deployment or alone, and it's like
cracking a bone, spilling red marrow and sorrow.

After Izumi Shikibu

Make a Body
By Nancy Meyer and Janet Trenchard

First chip away at a block of granite,
pour water over it, rub with oil.
In her hands, the heft of chisel, hammer, pitcher.
Dust whitens the floor, leavens her hair.
Studio walls close in, tools slip,
she wheezes with each breath.
Should she leave it out in a rain storm,
hope for lightening's magic crack?
Climb above tree line, spine against the boulders'
heat, fronds of Castilleja flame red at her feet.
Chip after chip she hews off
history, reveals the wild inside.
Legs roam like clouds, hands are roots around stone.
She makes a body that refuses plinth and price.

Audre Lorde's Unfinished Business: Working Through Religious Resistance to Cancer Treatment

By Pamela Yetunde

I, as a pastoral counselor and theologian, have had the privilege of reading through Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde's journals and diaries archived at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. Many people are acquainted with Lorde (1934-1992) through some of her more famous rally cry-quotes like, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," or "We were never meant to survive." Here is just one quote of many I would like to offer, demonstrating Lorde as a lay psychologist:

> In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us – that thin persistent voice that says our efforts are useless, it will never change, so why bother, accept it. And we must fight at that inserted piece of self-destruction that lives and flourishes like a poison inside of us, unexamined until it makes us turn upon ourselves in each other… ("Learning from the 60s" in Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, p. 142.)

In addition to being a lay psychologist, Lorde was also a lay theologian. She grew up Catholic, deconstructed hope in Catholicism and the Catholic god of her youth through poetry, had positive encounters with *I Ching*, African spirituality, secularized Buddhism and Taoism, and integrated them all proclaiming that one should change their religion if it was not supporting their will to live. Ancient and unreformed religious traditions in contemporary contexts tend to harm women's self-actualization.

Lorde's unfinished business is bringing humanist-feminist-womanist psychology and theology, pastoral theology, together for the welfare of women whose religious orientation prohibits them from seeking cancer treatment. In order to continue Lorde's psycho-spiritual work for helping women work through intrapsychic religious resistance to cancer treatment, here are a few considerations:

Consideration #1

As a patient facing cancer, consider the historical context of your religious tradition and discern whether any of the contemporary sciences help you understand what your religion can and cannot provide. If your religious tradition is anti-science, consider whether your tradition really values truth-seeking.

Consideration #2

If a woman's religious heritage is male-dominated and male-centric, engage in a thorough critique of that tradition to determine if and how the tradition subjugates women. Externalize the critique through writing.

Consideration #3

For those of us attending to and caring for people with cancer, remember to ask them what is important to them before we place our cultural norms on them.

Consideration #4

When there is a gap in treatment for patients who want to live and are also objecting to treatment on religious grounds, they may lose their religious/spiritual leader as a resource. They cannot access the hospital chaplain if they are not hospitalized, and unless their medical doctor refers them to a pastoral counselor, they may not get their religious resistance worked through. Medical doctors should be willing to refer their religiously-resistant patient to a pastoral counselor for a collaborative treatment effort.

Deep compassion calls us to continue Lorde's unfinished pastoral theological business of helping women work through religious resistance to cancer treatment.

… and Stones
By Gillian Barlow

She bends over to pick up a pebble – no, not that one – her hand skips across the roundish brown pebble to the black oval one and then on beyond to where she sees below the surface, the very one she wants - the chosen one. She curls her fingers around it, lifts it from the river floor and turns it over, feels its smoothness, its coolness, its rounded edges, the way the colours move subtly from a brownish beige to yellow. Her hand closes around it, then opens. The final one. She peers at it, at its colours as they mingle, sometimes as a gradation, sometimes as an abrupt change. How do the colours do that? She rubs her finger over the change, closes her eyes to see if she can feel this, rubs her finger across it again and again to try to rub it out. Opening her eyes and looking more carefully, she notices a darkish line that separates the two colours. The last one. She plunges her hand into her pocket, holding the pebble tightly and then lets it go. A crashing of ages. The end of the line. She hears it clack there amongst the others. She feels each stone, caresses them, checks their weight.

She runs through what she has in her pockets, The pebbles and stones that will accompany her are:

Grey sharpish ones that cut and bruise the fingers and keep you on the path.
Safe, multi-coloured ones to remind you, life can, or was or might, be good sometimes.
Long, smooth, sexual ones to remind of a person's body.
Tiny fragments to remind you that this is not everything, not the whole of it.
A handful of small ones.
Five large ones.
Four like balls.
Eight with harsh stripes through them; the truth cut into their very depths.
One like a woman’s leg.
One that is perfect for skimming across the water.
One shaped like a heart to remind you of your loves.
Three darkish, reddish, orangey coloured ones.
Two like blades – one side perfect for holding, the other for cutting.

Collecting stones as she had collected people. Casting them off if and when they are no longer useful. Overlooking so many. She reddens. So many. How many exactly? Her privilege blinding her to so, so many. She hesitates, panics some… Can she make up for it now by collecting stones and hence people she had by-passed earlier?

She tries to turn back but then places her hand once more into her pocket, feels the heart shaped stone on top, takes strength from it - so corny, hopes they will notice and recognize the sign. She feels the indentation in the top of the heart-shaped stone.

She walks into the current thoughtfully, feeling the stones, convincing herself she is doing it for her, for him, for the others, knowing it is for herself, knowing she can't go back now. She has ridden that wave one too many times.

She feels another wave arriving - waves made by fish beneath, by boats on top, by her walking, her stomach reacting to what she is doing. The waves' lapping is soothing. Reckless. Free-ing. The thick river water enticing her. She wades deeper. Her clothes beginning to clutch and catch around her legs, dragging in water and river mud. Water at her waist. Water at her neck. At her chin. Her mouth. Her nose. She closes her eyes. The water continues flowing around her.

She breathes out. One hand she keeps in her pocket feeling the stones, grounding her, earthing her in water. The other hand tries to brush the water aside, trying to make a path before her, blindly feeling her way.

Don't panic. Not now.

She needs to take a breath. There is no air - only water. Relax. She grabs again at the heart stone. Her cardigan's pockets sagging with the pebbles and water. Tipping. Relax. Sinking. Relax.

Remember this.

The current of life flowing. Her feet planting one in front of the other on the muddy floor of the river. Don't float off. Be firm. Be solid, stone-like. It is only water. It is only walking.

She moves in against the current.

Confessions of a Family Woman
By Chivas Sandage

> "Five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate…
> a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself."
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

How strange it sounds: "family woman."

But "family man" ranks as compliment or defense, connoting respect for "a responsible man of domestic habits." Or a general term for a man, responsible or not, who has dependents. And the man who isn't a family man, as long as he's heterosexual, is still considered normal, manly, just a little too manly—it's in his nature, we say.

"Family woman" does not exist in the dictionary, revealing a curious, culturally ingrained assumption that no such term is needed—to be otherwise would go against feminine nature. This ancient notion, alive and well today, sustains an old, internalized taboo: women are less likely to express ambivalence for their roles as wives and mothers, except, of course, within the context of humor. It's one thing to complain about the behavior of your partner and/or kids, or even admit that you're fed up and feel you can't hack it on a particular day, but women rarely question *choosing* the roles. At least publicly.

In talking to my women friends, especially other mothers, I have reinforced this taboo. Regardless of how deeply I love and adore and cherish my child or how incompetent or successful I feel in my parental role from one day to the next—I have rarely admitted to the deeper ways I struggle, nor publicly questioned my own ability to be both a good mother and a good writer. I am a warm, caring, consistent mom. I am also passionate about my work. But unlike my friends who are dads, I always feel the tension between the two.

Which leads me to confess: as the mother of a tween daughter, I sometimes look forward to aging and fantasize being an old woman who spends her days in the library. There it is! Or perhaps I just long for endless afternoons, alone, in a quiet room. Yet, I love the library for its occasional clearing of a throat, lone question, or the soft thud of books set down. These are sounds more comforting than silence: air rushing through vents, a computer's tiny chirp, small voices of children that do not call me. I long for one full day of sounds that do not depend on me—lives being lived that do not need me, that meet with mine only by chance.

These are the fantasies of a mother, writer, partner, and teacher with only a few hours to spare, sitting at a table for one in a small town library, in a corner where there is little chance of crowds: poetry. Even if a soul or two ventures into this ghost town-like part of the library, they're unlikely to stop, probably lost. In this way, I hide.

Yes, I confess to lust for the greatest of luxuries: time and space to explore my own mind. A room of my own, a lock on the door, a mind that's free to think without worrying about rent. Virginia Woolf's words have haunted me since I first read *A Room of One's Own*. And when I fear that I'll never achieve my goals against all the odds, I remember the book's end: "…to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while." And so I do. I return to my notebook, suspending disbelief in favor of passion—to read and write for ten more minutes.

In that sacred realm of the library, if I whisper aloud while putting each line down, no one will hear—I only have to share my table with a computer that's out of order. I know to avoid sitting upstairs, even in a solitary corner, where my words flowed freely until a gentleman, hacking and steeped with smoke, took it upon himself to keep me company. Though he did not

say a word, the mere presence of another, so close yet unseen on the other side of a divider was enough to silence the speaker in my head. And so, I left within minutes of his smoky arrival—the presence of another so palpable, making the air thicker and synapses slower.

The only distractions now, in the desolate aisles of poetry, are the hundreds of titles staring at me. Close by, calling as loudly as poetry, biographies about poets lure; I gravitate to them with guilt, feeling I should focus on the works themselves, not the writers. Perhaps this pull has to do with the tension between my own life and writing—a friction that threatens to explode.

I want to know: in his heyday, did Yeats have a day job?

He started out as a journalist, but eventually, did poetry feed his wife and kids? How did he do it—being both a writer and family man? I try to imagine Yeats scrubbing the insides of a baking dish instead of writing the lines that float precariously in his head. Or carrying armfuls of dirty laundry down rickety steps to a basement while contemplating rhyme schemes. Or the poem he is jotting down being hijacked by the cry of his small child—

My partner arrives, telling me—with compassionate regret—it is time to leave. I have to eat, after all, and I've already passed on my one chance to see the ocean during a short trip to visit family. What have I come to, that the sea lost to the library? And *what* was that thought I had just been thinking?

There was a line, arriving in my head. It was settling like a leaf sailing downward through the air. Then it was gone. Hijacked by the call of my life. No, my words were not hijacked; they were shot out of the sky. Not by my partner or daughter, but by my own choices and chance—starting from day 1 with fate's lottery we call birth. A childhood in poverty followed by school loans I'll keep paying for decades. But that's another story. What, what was that other thought?

That last word, like a bird just shot—suspended mid-air for an instant—begins to fall, wings akimbo, down from the mind's sky, out of sight.

I pack up paper and pen. Fold my notebook closed. I will return to that page, and other words will take the place of those lost, like the reconfiguration of birds flying after one is taken by a hunter's bullet. Other words will rush in to fill the empty page. The new words will fly in another direction—the story, poem or essay that was becoming, will become, another.

*

After savoring a book with my daughter and wishing on glow-in-the-dark stars, I retire to my own bed exhausted. I pick up Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* and begin the essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." As I turn the pages, I sit up straighter. Rich describes being "determined to prove that as a woman poet I could also have what was then defined as a 'full' woman's life." She continues, "If there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps a monster."

Monster. The word echoes in my thoughts. On a daily basis, I wonder why my small parcels of time to read and write are not enough? What is wrong with me? While my women friends all want to have another baby, I admit to them that I'm very happy with my one, smart, beautiful daughter. Instead of another child, I want to birth a book, and then a dozen more—books already growing in me.

Tomorrow I'll steal two hours in the library, where the rules of conduct innately protect solitude. How magical, to have a place where no one is allowed to converse at length! Or whine,

scream, weep, argue, eat, or play loudly! To be—at least relatively—alone! How can I feel the loss of time to work so palpably and miss it so dearly?

I continue reading, jotting down marginalia, and thinking. In contrast to Rich's struggle to create a "full" life that includes both children and writing, Woolf—who, of course, did not have children—articulates what's at the core of the dilemma:

> For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away.

How can I really write if I so rarely enjoy the "freedom to press on"? In my worst moments, I have caught myself considering the pros of remaining single for the rest of my life! Of course, this is not what I want—which is simply to write. So I choose between things like working at my desk and cleaning. As someone who loves a clean house, I take solace in the fact that words on paper can last forever while a dust-free house "lasts" only a few days.

In Rich's words, I see myself: "I wanted, then, more than anything, the one thing of which there was never enough: time to think, time to write." She describes "reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments…" This is my life. I read and write on the run. Advancing by even a paragraph in a book is worth it. In a notebook, I start a short story or a poem with a single line. Sometimes, just a title or a phrase. If I'm lucky: a scene, a few stanzas, paragraphs turn into pages! But usually, it can take weeks or months to return to that fragment. Yet I know it's there. And I know a poem, essay, or even a book can grow from a line or two on the back of an envelope.

It took the lives of every woman I know or have known to teach me to teach myself to write while my daughter sleeps, dishes wait, and in every room a fine film of dust descends.

Mad Bad Sad Woman
By Audrey Chin

If not for words

I'd be a mad bad sad woman dancing on the razors edge
petticoats flouncing
fallen over the ledge
hurtling through yesterday's bed sheets and tomorrow's linens
on my way to the moon.

I'd be a basket case
folded and crumpled
blood stained and rumpled
crashed out on green grass bright bright red
fresh and dead.

WAVES: AROHO Retreat 2015
By Kristi Crutchfield Cox

That summer, turning forty and evaluating my choices in life, roads taken through Oklahoma, the grey slickness, red crumbling, swelling clay churned in fields, sticking to me, claiming me.

I was supposed to live in New York, sidetracked by farms and families, frustrations and illness. Paths changed.

Maxine arrived in an email, I held her face in my hands, she stared off past the insecurities and uncertainty of beginning.

Real writers apply to this kind of thing.

"The henchman didn't let you in," a voice whispers, reminding me of the conference I attended, locked out of a room.

"They won't let you in, you're too…" a dark-haired fairy educated me on the nuances of academia and entrances into guarded rooms.

I debated. Three days to deadline, a decision made; locked in a room; drinking wine, creating an art project and workshop.

I'm not an artist.

An email, "Congratulations."

Oh my god, what are they thinking? Oh shit.

Weekends spent with my mother, waves flowed towards our lives. Women arrived, drawn to rivers of conversations, reclaimed selves narrated their experiences, snuffed dreams, rekindled. A young rodeo rider joined us, aggressively smeared and pressed desert hues into thick grooves. Shifting to raging rivers and oceans, swirling terrain hues landscaped rocky cliffs.

She spoke with frustration, "I read where no one bugs me, the boys make fun of it," her fingers wiped and dipped, splashing larger blends of colors across her canvas.

I read on the floor of Walden's Books, wore library cards out.

My mother confessed, "I am losing my eyesight," as she etched the outline of frothing foam atop cresting swells, smearing darkened blues into sea foam murkiness.

Thank you, Momma, for helping me.

Porch sitting till moonlight reached for dawn. Lavender scented laughter. Tarot cards turned, strengths of kinships on mountain tops, paths lost beneath a thousand stars.

Misogyny said hello, his bright orange handprint topped our monument.

WTF?

We gathered, swirling our power into paints, kaleidoscope muse, each claimed her rebellion, against her own tale of angst, delighted sparkle of closure.

Bunny called the storm.

French parasol elegance walked past butterfly bushes. Tattooed, tree pose yogi dancing amidst haiku mobiles. Carved skin of written words, scrivener of scars. Spoken word SLAM, rattling your soul with her soft-spoken megaphone. Multi-faceted wordsmiths of beauty. Wine and water satiated parched tongues, as times of suppressed voices shared by those who walked the front lines, reaching back, they bring forward awareness, unforsaken. Goddess infused blessing, walking labyrinths in the rain, sitting along a wall, invited to accept self. Scotch and laughter, exhaustion stole my words, waving goodbye.

Arriving home, renovating and rebuilding foundations.

Each claiming A Room Of Her Own.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman
By Patricia Farewell

She wanted to plant
the long and learned
Face-of-Virginia Woolf
in her garden:
a firm bulb whose roots
would seek every
direction, whose strong,
fine, green stem would
relish its time
climbing the loam
back to the light
it had left on
the waves of the river Ouse.

Surely come spring
a leaf unlike
any other
would brush her ankle
and remind her
that rain and fog and
stark naked stars
could be trusted.
That leaf would
double, then
triple, and
finally a flower
would begin to bloom.

What a flower
it would be, burnt
sienna or
ocher petals
parting the air
as if to say
make way for me,
I have crouched under
your wicker chairs
and heard you chirp
about meaning.
I've swallowed your dust.
All will be new now.

But that was not

the bulb she had
been given.
The one she held
had been frozen.
Its shoots would be
negligible,
any flower
nondescript and
likely to wilt
in hot morning sun.
Still, how she ached
to kneel and turn the earth.

A Meditation on the Wave
By Sarah Brooks

I was 19 the first time I glimpsed the ocean, and I didn't see it from the shore of my own country. An Iowa farm girl at an Iowa college, I'd applied to do my junior year abroad in Nottingham, England. My first view of the ocean, then, was from a United Airlines plane at 35,000 feet, in the middle of the night. I woke, peered out the window, and couldn't understand why the full moon floated both above and below the airplane wing, and then I remembered the Atlantic Ocean from maps.

It wasn't until a month after I arrived in England, when I took a train with a few new friends west to Wales, that I actually stood at the ocean's shore. I don't remember the name of the village we visited. We hiked up a narrow winding road lined with waxy green holly and found a clear lake, where we swam and then lay on the soft heather in the late afternoon light. Later, after dinner at a pub in the village, the four of us walked down to the ocean's shore.

I expected the ocean to look like an Iowa field. As we rounded the corner of the last building before the shore, I know I was imagining my family's acres of green corn and soybean plants rolling toward the horizon, the way the wind rippled silver in the tender leaves. How could I have been prepared for what the ocean actually is?

There was the sand beneath my feet, the smooth driftwood logs, the round gray stones. Above me, there was the gray sky and the clouds edged with pink. But ahead of me, there was: expanse. An openness so vast I forgot to breathe, dizzy with the being of the sea. I looked and looked and looked.

The rhythm of the waves was my heartbeat. The *shush* of each white crest coming in, the inhale of each curve going out. *Shush.* [inhale] *Shush.* [inhale] *Shush.*

I stood on the shore straining to understand what the ocean meant. At 19, a religion/philosophy and English double major, I was always asking about the significance of things. What did the unknowable depths of the sea say about me, about our failing farm, about my father sinking into a gambling addiction that summer, about my unwritten life? I asked to understand, but the waves insisted I listen. *Shush.* [inhale] *Shush.* [inhale] *Shush.*

The waves. Carrying newness forward, scouring the old away. The artist Cecilia Vicuna built her sculptures out of driftwood and stone below the tideline of the ocean, so that nothing she created was permanent, so that change itself became the point, not the interpretation of a sculpture's meaning. The wave didn't allow time for interpretation.

I want to write like that. I want to write the way I encountered the ocean twenty years ago. I want to slip around the corner of a new page and find that all my expectations for my words cannot describe their silvery presence in the sea of other women bravely writing. And of course, that is what I learned at AROHO: I do not write alone, though I thought for so long that I did.

Away from Ghost Ranch and the AROHO Retreat, I'm again the only one awake in my house, in my orange room of my own, writing. But listen: *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush.* [inhale] *Shush.* I fling these words to a world that needs them, and they'll glitter in the sunlight before they burst, brilliant! -- to rejoin the waves.

Against
By Vero González

I grew up on an island in the Caribbean. I learned to swim before I learned to walk, talk, read, or write. I remember my parents telling me not to swim against the current—not to even try. It was for my own safety. The implication being that the current was stronger than I was; that if it came down to a struggle between us, the current would win. As I grew, *don't swim against the current* became *don't act against the current, don't think against the current, don't write against the current*. The current became a symbol for society and my role in it as a woman. *Don't act on your convictions; don't think thoughts we haven't taught you; don't write unpretty, unrequested truths*. I was told it was for my own safety, but now I think maybe it was for the current's safety too. What would happen if I viewed myself the way I viewed the current—as an unstoppable force of nature, as a powerful being that knows where it's going? I cannot disregard the current in the same way it has disregarded me. I can only meet it and say, *I am stronger than you are; if it comes down to a struggle between us, I will win.*

Writing in Mothertime
By Geri Lipschultz

Ours is not the world of mothertime. We don't live there but some of us write there. Mothertime was never on the map, nor in a book. Unrecordable, its wave undetectable, its mouth knows when to stay closed. Mothertime exists in those moments that come in a flash and then disappear, never to return. You could stitch these moments together, and it would be a quilt of stars. Mothertime exists in a dimension not governed by a world of knowledge gained from analysis, which stands on an outer rim sending missiles into the interior. Mothertime lives outside of time, as does dream. Mothertime is like the violet flame whose source is somewhere directly inside the earth, its cleft deflecting all things borne of analysis. No explorer may arrive by sailboat or submarine and colonize its inhabitants. It resists invasion. Even from the long-toothed syringe. Writing in mothertime is climbing a mountain whose jewels remain intact. Nowadays, we must close our eyes to find it. Perhaps it was located inside the placenta, but it's not there anymore. Or, it is undetectable. Maybe it resists all tools carved to measure, to locate, to evaluate, to—in effect—know it. Maybe it was once located in an apple. All I know is that when I write, it's where I go. Maybe the words take the shape of a tremor or follow the flight patterns of some butterflies I've known, some hawks, my cats, an ant, a fly, or the gusting pattern of seeds from one dandelion or milkweed plant to their rooting places.

Motherhood as pond, as sinkhole, as swamp, as quicksand. A state of being you never fully escape. Tainted you are by motherhood, just as you are tainted by writing. You are guilty as charged, with a belly and wounds, with pain to come, with reminders immortal—hydra-like, and if, god forbid, your manuscript never turns up on the shelves of a library, your reminders are still there, in a dark light, in the dungeon of grief, the key held by memory, with a dark prayer that someone will burn every scrap of every journal you ever wrote. Writing and motherhood are both messy work, both of them taking place in a parallel dimension, the way music is other, the way great loss is other, the way you are tainted when you mourn, when you have slept with someone for the first time, or when you have committed adultery, when you have injured someone and have witnessed the injury, have witnessed the healing, have witnessed the scar. Both writing and motherhood have you take a walk through the house of death, because while you don't remember your own birth, you witness the birth of your child, and knowing birth, you know death. Unspoken suffering they have in common.

My body in motherhood walked me into the pond, and now and forever, that pond will always be in me.

Motherhood opened my third eye by way of the hips.

Pollination
By Barbara Ann Yoder

Monday after the AROHO retreat I woke up early, came into my kitchen and looked at the sun—almost an eclipse behind bay fog—then tasted the sweet tang of Meyer lemon, the first fruit borne by my four-year-old tree. I watched a spider tiptoe up my bathroom wall, as if she too had just awakened, her legs as delicate as eyelashes, her eyes bulging to take in as much of the world around her as she could see, a world I thought she might have forgotten to look at during all those years of writing in her quiet, compulsive way. At my desk I noted that she was a spider, not a writer, and that I was an *almost* awake woman, up and journaling first thing in the morning, breathing in the moist bay air I had missed during my week in the desert, my lips sunburned, my mind filled with love and the humble, bright possibility of being who I am in the world among the women on the mesa under the moon at Ghost Ranch … even while sitting here, at my desk, back at home, the morning after.

All week brilliant, creative women talked, walked, observed, studied, laughed, counseled, wrote, read our work aloud, cheered each other on, made new friends, cherished old friends, and on the last night, danced in jubilation. In her small group Janet Fitch taught us how to be children again in a curious, engaged, unselfconscious way, to go into the world with senses heightened, and to describe our impressions. I learned to touch plants to get a feel for their texture, to smell leaves, to look at the way light shines on them.

As soon as I got home I went into the garden to water, prune, and harvest. The corn I was worried about before the retreat had come in while I was gone. I had not been sure that it would, because the tassels had emerged before I saw any sign of ears, and the silk and tassels must be present together for corn to be fertile. I was surprised to find that this corn, which I had grown from seed, had produced. The color of its silk surprised me too, its rhubarb blush reminding me of a doll I possessed when I was young, a doll whose hair could grow and was somehow—maybe like Rapunzel—a key to her being. I was suddenly curious about this doll, so I went straight from the corn silk to my computer, to a morning of research and writing that brought me memories and story lines I'm eager to explore.

It is good to go to an AROHO retreat to bask in the wisdom, generosity, and creative work of the women there and to dance with them in the waves of moonlight. It is good to come home again and to wake up the morning after, more yourself than you used to be.

Last Class
By Shawn Lacy

Close your eyes, she says; it won't hurt you, at least not in this form–tactile prompt, giggles around the room, word association, trust, faith, reliance, friendship, back to trust.

Not yet feeling that I have any tips to give to a soul about writing, I decide to go for the "close your eyes and hold out your hands for the object," a sugar cube. One is often taxed with the reality of going through this existence in a fog–taking all things for granted. Not today, though. The past weeks have initiated a gentle push towards the "what if" fear. What if it all goes wrong? What if all that you know suddenly shifts like a tectonic plate resulting in a tsunami of unfortunate and unexpected occurrences: what if at the last minute there aren't enough credits for her to graduate and she slept through that part of the lecture in spite of her OCD and anxiety disorder; what if she goes to the Outer Banks for Beach Weekend and there is a maniac in the midst, or she gets careless; what if the Chester County Court system is as merciless as is rumored; what if this fifth bout of bronchitis in as many months is caused by mold in the basement; what if there are spores spreading their moldy tentacles in the lungs? What if you can't make payroll? What if you don't have all of the answers? What if you just walk away?

Back to trust, faith, reliance, friendship, trust; what if all of those things make it all ok. What if? The reflection at this last class is the trust that I feel when I pull up outside and know that whatever I bring, as I sit in the chair in the group of those who also strive to express all or nothing, I know that it will be handled with care and sensitivity. I know that whatever I choose to reveal will be carefully poured from palm to palm, examined with a keen eye filled with kindness, and given back as a gift reminding me that no matter what I am not alone with all of the what ifs. So, I close my eyes and feel the sugar cube. How bad can "what if" be?

She's Got Some Nerve
By Janet Fitch

It takes some nerve to be a woman writer. In the Mae West film *Night After Night*, a coat check girl exclaims, "Goodness! What beautiful diamonds!" West quips, "Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie." The same is always true with writing. Putting our thoughts on the page, making people see the world from our point of view, has nothing to do with being good, following the rules, kissing anybody's derriere. Nipping it maybe, but not kissing it.

Many women play it safe in life, and I understand. Who wants to make a mess of her life? But this urge to safety can be so ingrained it continues on the page, producing something I call 'lady writing.' This isn't *women's* writing, *women's literature*, it's a particular pallid, toothless affair, the one with the soft-focus cover. Yes, I know, that's the publisher's choice, but the problem is the soft focus between the covers.

Sometimes the writing can be pretty accomplished, but what it is, always, is boring, superficial, and *nice*. *Lady writing* is about being safe, being acceptable, and waiting to get a gold star for it. It's what the poet Wanda Coleman called "fitting a 300-pound woman into a size ten life." As women, we spend so much of our lives trying to fit into that size ten—careful, fair, asking for other people's opinions—that we've forgotten how to speak out, how to be authentic, to speak our own truths. To—as Breena Clark said earlier this week—*represent*.

In Greek mythology, there was an innkeeper, Procrustes, who boasted that his bed always fit the guest perfectly. It did because it stretched the guest who was too short, and if too tall, cut their legs off. Ladylikeness is a Procrustean bed that lops off what's *too personal, too disturbing, too challenging, too playful, too difficult, too angry, too hard, too passionate, too opinionated, too smart. Too strong.*

We try so hard to be fair. To think of the other guy. Not to make judgments, not to upset people. We learn to doubt ourselves; we're always asking *what do you think*? We want to be thought caring. We want to be thought good. We think it will protect us from criticism. Do what you like in life, but on the page, you need all your parts.

What we look for in writing is strength. Strong voices, strong opinions, strong work. We say work is 'good' or 'bad,' but it is only strong or weak. Evil on the page is what's bland, predictable, pallid, and timid. It's writing with no views, no take on life. What are we going to learn from a writer like that? Strong writing makes no apologies. There's authority to the writing, someone who's going to tell you what it is. There's no timidity, there's no hiding behind attributions. We cop to how we really think and open ourselves to what comes.

What does 'lady writing' look like on the page? First–no conflict. Nobody gets hurt in a lady book. Ladies pull their punches. Someone rides in and saves the day just before the brawl. Strong writing lets the blows land. Let us feel it, the unfairness, the cruelty of it all.
Second, ladies never stand alone. Lady writing always has characters running to someone else and hashing out problems. Strong writing has characters who think and react without advice. If they get advice, it's usually wrong.

Most of all, ladies don't own their own opinions. They don't want to be held responsible for their ideas. They ask, *what do you think* and avoid making declarative statements.. So go ahead and make a bold statement. That's what's called *authority*. It's the necessary quality of this thing called *author*. This is your world, it reflects your views. Your writing is where you get to have your own say.

My teacher Kate Braverman used to say, "You can have your character eat dinner and think about dinner, or eat dinner and think about God." Lady writing goes to the market and thinks about canned goods. I suggest you try moving towards bigger issues in your work. Consider the implications of what you've already written and reach for a larger thought. Ladies rarely talk about Life, God, Justice, Mercy, and the nature of Evil. They leave that work to the real women.

Here's an exercise. List 20 things you know for sure and 20 things you don't know anything about. People turn to literature to understand what it means to be alive, to be human. So give us some insights. Nobody's going to send you to your room.

Weak, lady writing can be detected in the sentences. The language has no power, it's afraid to be strong, to be specific. If your verbs are "one size fits all'—*was* and *look* and *see* and *went*—if your nouns don't declare themselves—if your sentences are riddled with *seems* and *usually* and *maybe* and *sometimes*—get in there and whip it.

My final point is about play. Lady writing is conventional. You never see those books playing with form. Play is dangerous. Nobody will give me a star on my chart if I try something really different. They're going to punish me. I won't be able to sell it. But writing isn't about becoming Miss Perfect Posture, and play IS the creative spirit. *You* make up the game. *You* make up the rules. Nobody's going to punish you. I promise you–in writing, the worst thing you can do is be boring.

So play. Make up rules and then follow them. Be a trickster—don't always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Surprise us. If there's an expected answer in a bit of dialogue, don't give it! If we expect a character to react in a certain way, have them do something else. If we can already see the end of your book/chapter/scene when we're only halfway in, that's already a problem.

If I were your Mae West fairy godmother and could give you three gifts, I would give your writing the gifts of strength, meaning, and play—and the courage to use them.

And keep that *lady* out of the writing room!

Retro Causation
By Peggy Dobreer

If you are alienated in your own house
how can your wings ever unfurl? –Maxine Hong Kingston

She's got some nerve. Some call her the maker
of the Procrustean bed, hospital corners.

Don't be too smart, too strong, too epiphanied.
Temporary infertility is to be expected in art.

She had the bad itch. Was restless as water but
looked cool as can be to the outside.

Inside, sharp as a shark's tooth and arrogant as glory
on Sunday morning in the front pews.

How can the moth of your flurried past shield
the shape of your history from your future?

An act of love today can save a single life on a long
lost battlefield in a country as yet unnamed.

Fragments of Anna Dickinson
By Sarah Hahn Campbell

In response to your inquiry. . .

. . .This is a photograph of Anna Dickinson in 1862. Anna stands behind the carved chair in which the great Susan B. Anthony poses with one hand in her lap, the other holding a quill over a sheaf of paper at a desk. Anna's plain black Quaker dress buttons up her neck.

. . .In this photograph, Anna stretches naked on a large white bed, her dark hair loose around her head and shoulders, her mouth curved into a secret smile. On the back of the photograph, Susan B. Anthony has written: "1863. My beloved Anna Dickey Chickadee."

. . . In this photograph, Anna stands in pantaloons flanked by two men. All three lean grinning against an enormous boulder on a mountain summit. Someone has scribbled at the bottom of the photo: "Anna. Boulder-rolling. Colorado Rockies."

. . . And in this photograph, Anna in her Quaker dress faces a crowded hall from a podium, papers in one hand, the other hand outstretched to the sky palm up to invoke God. On the back, the inscription: "1875. America's own Joan of Arc."

What She Was Not

Anna Dickinson was not a man. She could not wear pants or shirts that did not constrict her breath. She could not own property or inherit money or vote in any election. She could not marry a woman she loved.

She was not beautiful. She was not dainty and she was not gentle. Her eyebrows were not fine and her nose was not small. When she stood to speak, her voice was never soft. On her way from climbing Long's Peak to climbing Pikes Peak, she did not ride *inside* the train to Colorado Springs, but perched like a goddess on the cattleguard, the wind in her hair.

Anna Dickinson did not love men as lovers and she did not love women as mountain climbing companions. She never slept with a man and she never slept with just one woman. When she wrote love letters to Olive or Susan or Sarah or Lou, she was not shy. She was never satisfied that she had done or seen or heard or loved enough.

Anna Dickinson was not a man. And yet when she spoke against slavery on the Lyceum stage, the newspapers said she was not demure enough to be a woman. When she played Hamlet in New York in 1881, her harshest critic wrote, "We always knew Anna Dickinson was actually a man."

Once, she wrote to her lover Olive Logan, "Someday, some of us will become so overcome with passion that we will *become* men, and we will make furious love to our beloved women, and then we shall be married, and live happy forever more."

Anna. Ms. Dickinson. American Maid of Orleans, bearer of the fleur de lis. I am not a man. I am a woman, and *I* am your vision.

Anna. If I write your story now, will you hear it one hundred years ago?

Terrible Girls
By Jennifer Patterson

Inspiration moves between their bodies and mine. We try to catch it, trace its lines on paper.

Petra Rowan Rhines brought me to Helene Cixous and one time, from an airplane, she texted me a long passage from Cixous. I imagined her, Petra, peering out of her window trying to find me below the cloud cover in a valley between two mountains. (Always in between.) She is very good at finding me there.

Cixous speaks of the *three steps on the ladder of writing*(1), the three bodies, and one of them is dead. We are always writing from inside a death, or before or after a death, always writing from these dead bodies. I go towards these bodies, the ones consumed by fire, the writer as witness to fire and also the dead body, I write from the rubble and ash.
Helene Cixous brought me to Clarice Lispector and Clarice Lispector doesn't want to bring me anywhere except everywhere. She is man and woman writer at the same time, sometimes: *(w)ho hasn't ever wondered am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?*(2)

I think of the monsters we find in ourselves, in our writing, of those writers who write into the terrible places, the dangerous places. Liz Latty writes towards and then into monsters: writes as a *terrible girl*(3) as a failed girl as a failed body as a survivor body, like mine and also not like mine. She gives language to the embodiment of our messy masses. She and I, a different kind of similar, a kind of mirror and I'm always looking for a mirror. Holding hands with old failed bodies, trying to slip into new.

A past lover, with their healing hands, bringing me into a new way of knowing my body, a way of knowing pleasure and pain, supporting me as I move through trauma, through traumatic release. Writing me letters and notes to keep me moving along the path, reminding me that I have already fought the dragons and won. Being both muse and teacher, holder and healer. Showing me how to be both *with and without* them. We are still before the time where it hurts more than it heals but that time is indeed on the horizon. Some of this gratitude will turn to fire burning up a river with no end.

My favorite beautiful failed burning bodies and now I'm thinking of other *terrible girls* who are also wildly full of light and heat. I'm thinking of an old friend. A beloved. How I can find her words in my mind many days but can't always find her in books, can't always find her body in the current mainstream feminist conversation. How she strings together words in a way that doesn't always make other people comfortable but helps other people feel loved and seen. I feel loved and seen when I read her words or when we share a tiny backyard pool and we are just talking about our bathing suits. How our bodies are always colliding into each other and also slipping past each other. How I can't know my body my survivorhood if I don't also always look for her hand, if I'm not burning my body to the ground so that I can dig through the rubble to find hers.

Now we are distant, in each other's pasts. The bodies no longer colliding but only slipping past. Time wears on connection, on relationships. The change that sometimes arises when we get too close, see too much. Lose each other or leave each other.

Lines upon lines of *terrible girls* holding hands. And what is a girl but a rupture. A fracture into something else and we don't always know the shape of them but we know her when we see them. And what is a girl but not always a girl either. The binary erases.

Inspiration flows this way, in between bodies and mountains, settling into hands and valleys, starting fires and putting them out too. Ruptures and repairs.

I want to burn into a pile of words, a pile of rubble holding my *terrible girls'* hands as we rise into a bigger badder new body.

(1)Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*
(2)Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*
(3)Liz Latty's Goddard College MFA thesis title

What It Takes
By Karen McElmurray

Recently, I was part of a panel discussion on strong women called "Kiss My Grits: On the Badass in Appalachian Literature." It was easy to think of any number of strong women who are badass in the books I love most from the mountains. Gertie Nevel in Harriet Arnow's *The Dollmaker* came to mind first, followed closely by other strong women characters like Carrie Marie Mullins in Mary Ann Taylor Hall's *Come and Go Molly Snow*, Serena Pemberton in Ron Rash's *Serena*, or most recently, Dawn Jewell in Robert Gipe's *Trampoline*. But as days passed and I thought more and more about what I'd say about strong women characters based on the place I'm from, it was the word "badass" that tripped me up again and again and I did the thing I encourage my writing students not to do. I went to look up that word in the dictionary.

I told myself I was being really hip by choosing a funny, badass even, dictionary that would give me a fun spin on our topic—Urbandictionary.com. This what I found. *Badass.* The epitome of the American Woman. She radiates confidence in everything she does, whether it's ordering a drink, buying a set of wheels, or dealing with men. She's slow to anger, brutally efficient when fighting back. *The badass.* She carves her own path. She wears, drives, drinks, watches, and listens to what she chooses, when she chooses, where she chooses, uninfluenced by fads or advertising campaigns. *Badass.* A style that is understated but instantly recognizable. Like a chopped Harley or a good pair of sunglasses. *Badass.* Simple, direct, and functional.

This definition made me flinch, not because I don't like the idea of confidence and radiating it on my own chosen path in life while sporting leather pants and a nice dew rag, but some of the other language? *Brutally efficient. Simple. Direct.* Functional even. Sounds too much like Biker Barbie for me. So I went back to the drawing board, Wikipedia this time, and found a shorter definition. *Badass.* Tough, uncompromising, intimidating. I liked that one a little better. There was something called The Free Dictionary, which described a tough or aggressive person. The meanest badass in town. A badass rock band. A real badass watch. And Merriam Webster, the one I always had my students avoid? *Badass.* Ready to cause or get into trouble. Mean. Pretending to be a badass gunslinger. Of formidable strength or skill.

Strength was at least something I could get my teeth around, the self I had always wanted most, and above all the definition I could lay hands on when it came to some of the women I grew up around. My great-aunt Della, my mother's aunt, fixed brakes, changed oil, fried eggs, paid the bills. It was the 1960's. When I was little we'd drive home to Eastern Kentucky and sit in the booths at Della's place, a service station and diner called the Black Cat. A photograph I have of the diner is of a shelf full of cartons of Winstons and Salems with my great-grandmother seated at a booth. That great grandmother, Beck, lived in a room off that diner until she passed. Della. Her sun-browned face and her sad, fierce eyes. Della, they said, was odd-turned. *Contrary*. I've written stories about her, her big hands, black-streaked and strong from the hard work they did. I imagine her reaching down into some vat of soaking spark plugs, some geography of wires and hoses. Later, when I learned to gap plugs and change my Dodge Dart's oil, I thanked my memories of Della. She was strong enough to run a business, skilled enough to manage a garage and a restaurant. Strong enough to lock the doors when my uncle Russell came home drunk. He fell asleep one winter night with his truck's engine running and they found him dead of carbon monoxide fumes that early morning.

I remember other strong, skilled women in my family. There was Rita Wallen, a cousin and niece of Della's, from up toward Pikeville. I didn't spend much time with Rita when I was

growing up, but she was someone I heard a lot of stories about. Rita, they said, had book smarts. She did good in high school, even better in college, went on to some school up north and became, so the family said, a Big Lawyer, though she didn't come back home much over the years afterwards. Another woman of strength and, they said, dubious skills, was Betty, my Uncle Roy's first wife. Roy and Betty lived in a brick house he built down in the bottom land below my grandparent's house, and they raised a garden, had a little girl, but Betty hankered after something she didn't have. They said it was more of this, more of that, a new couch, a sip of whiskey on the sly, but the Betty I remember styled her hair in a frosted shag. She bought shiny white go-go boots and took off for Ohio in the middle of the night, became a dancer in a juke joint and never came back again.

I could go on all day remembering other women I grew up around who fit the definition of badass as someone strong and also ready to cause trouble or get into it or maybe just survive it. I could tell you about a great grandmother who smoked a pipe and survived two husbands, one killed by, so the stories go, a Floyd county gunslinger. I could tell you about a grandmother who hoed an acre big garden, an aunt who worked triple shifts at the Double Kwik to take care of her family, a cousin who drove an hour a day there and back to go to community college to become a social worker. All those stories of perseverance and strength and, okay, badassery. But the more I thought about definitions, the more I kept coming back to something quieter, another word in our panel description. *Unseen.* Invisible, even. The kind of strength you see if you look at the eyes, at the palms of the hands. The kind of strength you see in the ripped and mended places in the spirit. That kind of badass.

There is a phrase that comes to me again and again about certain women I have known, been friends with, kin to, akin to, is something like this. She is, I will think to myself, someone who someone has done something to. That's a terrible thing to know in your gut when you meet or spend time with someone. There's the cousin I'll call Kristine, the one who had her first baby when she was sixteen, and everyone knew Kristine's child belonged to her own daddy, who ended up in prison for statutory rape. You know she had to do something to bring that on her own self, my own grandmother said, and I bit my tongue to hold back from saying something, saying, look at her, just look. Look how she had that baby, and then walked on from there, went back to school, became a hairdresser, had other babies. I wish I could tell you more about her life, but I only know that when I see her, her eyes are steady, her voice one of the calmest I have known. There's my cousin Jenny, dead now, but her story too is one I walk around with. Jenny, weighing in at three hundred pounds, then down to one fifty, back up again so big that time she had to ride a motor cart when she went to Walmart to buy her packs of powdered sugar donuts, the ones she loved so much. Her mother, my aunt, schizophrenic, living in a home for the disabled, the differently abled as they say it now. Her daughter, Michaela, wild as a hare, bipolared out, dead at twenty, a suicide. But Jenny picked up, packed up, moved to Cincinnati. Is that running away? Is that strength? To leave behind a state, a county line, a town, a house, to move somewhere where the streets were clean and clear, unhistoried, there to find love, watch it settle in her own two hands, even if her body gave out, that last time, when the weight came back and her face blossomed, that time with happiness.

A couple years ago, when I was teaching in a low residency program in Western Kentucky, a colleague and I were talking about memoir. I had just quoted, in a talk, a favorite author of mine, Dorothy Allison, who said this: "I believe the secret of writing is that it never exceeds the reach of the writer's courage. The best writing comes from the place where our terror hides. Until I was writing about exactly the things I was most afraid of and unsure about, I

wasn't writing worth a damn." My colleague, a novelist, as we chatted that evening over wine, said that she, too, likes memoir, but she called such works "narratives of victimhood." Maybe this is a matter of semantics, but as you know from my experiences with definitions, I took this definition on too. Victimhood. Narratives. Of. Stories of victims. Victim. A person who has been attacked, injured, robbed, or killed by someone else. A person who is cheated or fooled by someone or something. One that is harmed by an unpleasant event. Well, all of that is true. Kristine. Jenny. Michaela. All of them harmed, injured, robbed even. Still, I do not like the words in my mouth. Narratives of victimhood. I prefer, I find, to come back to our original word for this panel. *Badass.*

Sunday mornings I often read the latest issue of *Brain Pickings Weekly*. A few weeks back I read a piece by a woman named Caroline Paul, from her book called *The Gutsy Girl: A Modern Manifesto for Bravery, Perseverance, and Breaking the Tyranny of Perfection*. Caroline Paul takes on the idea that one must be perfect and error-proof in every way in order to live a daring and courageous life. She talks about her many missteps in her own life, and she assures her readers over and over that owning up to mistakes isn't an attrition of one's courage but an essential building. I quote, "After all, the fear of humiliation is perhaps what undergirds all fear, and in our culture of stubborn self-righteousness there are few things we resist more staunchly, to the detriment of our own growth, than looking foolish for being wrong. The courageous, Paul reminds us, trip and fall, often in public, but get right back up and leap again."

The courageous, to me, don't just trip and fall. They have gotten back up and walked on. They are not victims, but keen and strong survivors. They are vulnerable. We see their experiences, an almost map on their skin, a sometimes weary fire in their eyes, a keening undercurrent in a voice in an empty room, a voice in a car down a road heading out, a voice on a page. In the end, that to me is the definition of badass. Courage, hidden, invisible maybe, but sharp as a blade, a fine-honed bone feather, a will not just to survive, but to live. Those are the women I long to read about, write about and, most importantly the kind of woman I want to become.

Snatch
By Christine Wade

A woman invented and named an art form while she was sleeping. It is called the Snatch. It is a short piece of writing, usually one page. It is many words strung together. A Snatch is not rarified like a poem. But sacred, none-the-less. Nor is it a fairy tale. Although it could be an old wife's fable . . . it could be a birth story. A Snatch smells sweet and is under the word count. Sometimes it is an invocation. It is not pornographic, pedantic or propagandistic. It is not linear, nor is it a segment of something linear.

A Snatch is a lift in which a barbell weight is brought in a single motion from the floor to an arms-extended position overhead. A Snatch has velocity. It is sudden and can be pre-emptive. A Snatch is sometimes heavy, like water. Sometimes dark, like the night. A Snatch can make you laugh out loud or entice you to sit quietly and notice your breath brushing up against your ribs.

A Snatch is a place where you put things, tuck them away in secrecy and safety. Sometimes you don't want to share what you snatch. Other times you want the entire world to see your Snatch. You want it to be reviewed in a newspaper. To infect like a disease. To burst and bellow on the internet.

To snatch is to make a sudden effort to seize something, as with the hand. It may also be possible to snatch with your teeth. Or a net. A snatcher is someone who takes. You may have to pull the wool over to snatch. To snatch is to grab without permission, ceremony or right. Then you have to hold on with everything that you have got. Then you have to let go.

Re-interpreting the Carved Revenge on Your Own Back
By Shauna Osborn

In the White Tigers section of *The Woman Warrior*, we bear witness to a short-lived family reunion before our warrior heads off to battle. Her parents carve oaths on her back, making her body a text where genealogical memory is visible and an emotional connection to the family's interests are made physical: "Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice," said the mother. "And you'll never forget either," (41).

The female body is a most exploited target—physically, mentally, culturally, and economically. From the moment of birth, a body is named and mired with social crisis. To confront the female body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history. Our bodies are subjected to legislation that goes against our well-being. They are common sites of physical and sexual abuse, are paid less for work, and are objectified to sell everything from ab machines to zoo memberships. We are told our bodies are failures if we do not embody unrealistic standards of beauty starting when we are infants. We are taught to hate, abuse, and/or fear our own bodies early.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helen Cixous suggests that if women are forced to remain in their bodies, then they can do one of two things: 1) remain trapped inside that body or 2) use the body as a medium of communication.

> "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her… Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time." (880)

When you have ownership of your own body, the world is a drastically different place. As feminist creators, our projects help us to reclaim our voice—to reclaim our own bodies. A woman without her body cannot be as powerful as one that knows herself.

Kingston's woman warrior spent fifteen years learning how to use her body. She could not be a great warrior unless she had connection to her muscles, reflexes, and the strength within her flesh. She finally gained this knowledge and her autonomy to be abruptly reminded that she is not the only one who feels an ownership of her skin, her body. She belongs to a family, to a lineage, to a community, to a country. She is one specific part in a larger whole. The project of knowing her body and gaining battle prowess were not completed in a vacuum. What is the point of becoming a great warrior if there are no battles to fight? She did not learn these skills just to protect herself. She learned them to defend her community, which is the purpose of all great warriors. The woman warrior's parents carved oaths and names into her back so she will never forget her connections again. Once the carving is over, the woman warrior says, "I saw my back covered entirely with words in red and black files, like an army, like my army," (42). Her connections to the world, those grievances on her back, add to her strength.

A woman's body is a physical text—our families, lovers, and communities carving into our flesh whatever they wish for us to remember when we head into battle. What messages were carved on your back? Do they add to your strength?

I am a product of warring tribes from different continents. My mother's people are from the Comanche Nation. My father is from Franconians and Bavarians of Germany. Two extremely different battle strategies and cultures brought together as one with my birth. Both sides brutal, both full of survivors. Growing up, my parents claimed that the Comanche/German temperament could be the world's undoing. That it was a gift, a weapon their children would have to learn how to wield appropriately. There are several family members who did not wield their parts of this temperament with any skill—my parents among them. The battles they fight, the revenge they sought, are of little interest to me. The messages they carved on my skin are not my strength. They are only scars.

A snake sheds its skin as it grows. We go through a similar process–restructuring old, artificial and outgrown forms of self in order to heal and restore what is true within our nature. Yet, deep scars rarely heal to be invisible. There is always a faint reminder of the damage we have endured. Can you spot someone else's scars? Are they celebrated as trophies from the battles survived? Are they beautiful or hideous?

Awam Amkpa writes in "A State of Perpetual Becoming,"

> "Your body is a social text. It is spoken for by the legal infrastructures of society… In a highly socialized space, what then happens …is a hyper-consciousness of the textuality of these bodies and a consciousness about breaking down those bodies so that in their fragmented mode, they actually express their opposition to domination."

How do you fragment your body? How do you use those fragments as part of your battle strategies? What are the ways we can piece ourselves together again? What should we carve into our skins to remind ourselves?

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Against My Own Current; Out in Plain Air
By Lisa Lutwyche

I haven't worn a swimsuit in over fourteen years. I've walked on a beach or two, sat by swimming pools watching other people swim, but always wearing shorts and a tank top myself. The only people to see my torso uncovered, or barely covered, have been medical personnel, my husband, and my brave, then fifteen year old daughter, right after my mastectomy.

Mastectomy. There's that word, the word that looks so clinical and simple, so final and unemotional. Most of the time, I'm able to forget about it. I mean, it's not painful, although it's often actively uncomfortable. I had a complicated reconstruction. I thought age 46 was too young for a flat amputation. Reconstructed or not, though, it's not really all that nice. I had more surgeries after the initial reconstruction, which didn't help; more scars, extra flesh under my arm because I had living tissue fished under my armpit.

My right "breast" is referred to as a "result" by the surgeons and doctors who still look at it.

I usually hide it, even from myself. Until AROHO 2015, and Shauna Osborn's "Carved Skin" workshop.

It wasn't water that got me to open up and show myself. It was the desert.

In Shauna's group, we were all able to "bare" ourselves, bodies, stories, and souls in a way that was pure AROHO, a safe, spiritual experience for all of us. I was frightened to see the photographs of myself, standing in the sunlight, stripped to the hips, but I finally looked at them.

They're beautiful.

Even before Shauna transforms them with text, even before they become a piece of art, those photos have shown me something I've needed to know for a decade and a half; something my sweet husband tries to make me believe – I'm still me, and I have more beauty left to show than I'd have dared to dream. Dreaming is what we do at AROHO, a place made safe by a group of women daring to dream together.

The Task
By Alison Hicks

Late at night into the time before dawn is best.

Too easy to put off in the afternoon—
how long until cocktails, a swim, dinner?

Salvage enough to approach sideways, crab-like.

Lighted by what you wanted,
present what you've lifted proudly,
though it might be refused.

You could be drinking, pouring a mug
to really twist you up.

Instead you're here.

When it is dark it seems like darkness
will go on for a long time.

Even when you go out on the porch to look at the stars.

All of this supposing, of course,
that you are not required to rise early.
Mornings you'll need sleep.

Erotics of Making
By Barbara Rockman

The woman brings her body to the page
the way a climber clamps her thighs to the rock face
the way a lover drops the last garment
the way a girl crawls into a copse and, singing, arranges acorns and logs
the way a mother skips away from the departing school bus.

What is arousal?

Words at the pen tip, ink rich as clotted blood.
Hairs lifted and sinew flexed.
Grip the lid, release vinegar, cut lemon.

Row out into ooze, lean beyond the oar, raise the leg to climb over
into the silt lake bottom, toes sucked down, fear of disappearing.

Kiwi's furred cheek. Rotting peach eaten anyway. Cuticles burnt by salt.
Aged breasts relinquish what's been missed.
Blackened lilac slumped to elegy. Aretha's dropped fur.

I'm in love with women who liquefy my pen, who swing my arms out from my sides. It happens when I enter their poem, etching, collage, teabags hung from the spine.

One says, *After months, inspiration came*. Her face beatific, saint of the uncensored.

One says, in my studio, *Deep in the making of, I am orgasm*. She swells rice paper into garment, each gesture a seduction.

One settles by a meadow, her soft body bent to *click click*, crow call. A deer stares. She is so away into; she is invitation. And I am, *yes*. Without lifting from tap and wonder, lost in dream time, she beckons. Teacher/student? Elder/youth? No. Women.

Another's name like a razor cuts me limb from history, tugs my fingers out and rearranges them into a new appendage. She makes of me a placard that screams
*Violence to save the female rac*e. She introduces me to her friend, Clarice.

And the long armed sister of a past life who understands addiction to doubt throws
Best Of by men across the room. Pages flail like wings of a dying breed. She takes my hands across a table scattered with scratched out words, whispers,
We must create a new country. She works her fingers into my tangles.

These women raise a mirror, burn through glass. A marbling of inkblots and burst meteors. When a silver surface is stripped, a black pool gushes.

Theorist and artist, mother and lover, mentor and apprentice, marriage bed, ocean edge: the hundred seductions, the thousand spent bodies.

Aftermath: bliss.
I have made this; I have read you; you have listened.
We sleep the sleep of each other's dreams.
We become the tale, *Lost in the woods*. But
we return home. Purpled dusk, hour of sap.
We grip oars. We climb over the lip.

Gratitude to Ann Laser, Cynthia Fusillo, Carole Maso, Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector, and Marie Howe, mentors, friends and fellow travelers, and to all the women whose creativity fuels my own.

Counting and What's Counted On
By Robyn Hunt

"Nothing thicker than a knife's blade separates happiness from melancholy."
(Virginia Woolf, Orlando)

I know for sure: 1 I am married. 2 I own a home. 3 I write poetry - creating metaphor where others claim they cannot. 4 I have a daughter; she lives elsewhere now. 5 My grandmothers, both storytellers, lived well into their nineties, and in one case, to be 104. 6 I can give myself permission to do and be all things. 7 My hair is turning grey. 8 My sense of direction is reliable. 9 My upbringing included prayers and hymns, neither of which I can recite entirely now from memory but recognize at times when others arrive, singing. 10 There is more inside of me that desires to be written. 11 I am capable of juggling many things. 12 I don't always trust others. 13 My writing life was once torrid. 14 I love shades of pine or fern, turquoise or cyan, resembling the wave of the earth around me. 15 My daughter is learning so many things as an adult. 16 My husband gets irritated but we sort it out. 17 I am more often doing what others are not. 18 This latter is both exhausting and exhilarating 19 I can dance.

Not so sure about: 1 How to respond at times. 2 How to be silent. 3 The botanical names of so many trees. 4 How safe the water at the edge of the sea. 5 My memories. 6 If I were to color the shape of rain falling, would it be indigo? 7 Would you see its inky cloaks with me, such streaks? 8 Capturing the entire sensation. 9 How to sweeten the bitter/how to let the bitter remain. 10 Breaking the chain of more of the same. 11 History of continental invasions, and the politics of men. 12 Whether I can shift to another place, rooted in this high desert that I long for when away. 13 Direction back to the beginning where I swayed without limitation. 14 Sustaining confidence. 15 Scaling the wall and dropping. 16 If I can swim back, quickly. 17 How to tell my grandmothers' stories, evasive hummingbirds against the backdrop of piñon trees, for my daughter to truly witness them. 18 Handling the switchbacks up the pink mesa at this altitude (slowly and with intention). 19 Reaching the water in time. 20 Whether the waves will flood my home if I open the windows wide;

Know for sure: 20 The waves will flood my home; I will open the windows wide.

Unmaking the Form
By Marya Hornbacher

Professor Firchow was a giant even when seated, like a bear who towers even when on all fours, and he had enormous hands that gestured slowly, gently, as a bear might gesture if it did. He spoke to us softly of Modernism, and the end of narrative arc, and multiple selective omniscience, and the poetics of fragmented time. I was a snippet of a girl, not yet twenty, shy and a little stunned by the sheer joy and terror of existence and afraid of everything and very brave. I tied myself into a compact knot in my chair, scribbling notes and peering out from behind my limbs at the looming Firchow.

And now, he said with a sigh of contentment, we come to Virginia Woolf.

In those years I slept too little, smoked too much, ate canned potatoes, and fed the cat beans when I was broke. I remember the shadow of my hands turning the pages in the circle of light cast by the crooked lamp on the desk at the third-floor walkup where I was learning to live in a room of my own. And I remember Mrs. Dalloway, whom I referred to only by her proper name; it feels impertinent to call her Clarissa even now; and I remember the tremor I felt when I read the fragile, triumphant opening words: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."

"I am made and remade continually," Woolf wrote in *The Waves*, and in writing I find I am unmade and remade continually, again and again becoming a writer and a woman I don't always know. The practice of writing shapes and makes me just as much as I make and remake my work. In order to undergo the writing process, I must be willing both to explore, and to be explored. I must break through the crust of the self I know, and bore down into the strata of selves below. And I need to lay myself open to that excavation. If I am to slip into other selves, see from unfamiliar points of view, speak with new voices that have new things to say—I need to allow those deeper layers to be explored.

It probably was Virginia Woolf who showed me that the act of writing—not just writing of my own experiences, but writing at all—would require a kind of bravery I did not then possess. I still am unsure whether I have the guts to write. What I had, and have, what Woolf's work sparked in me, was the desire to write, the desire to tell stories, bear witness, give voice. I wanted to write about women, and as a woman. What I found in Woolf's work was precedent, evidence, that I could do that—proof that a woman's voice was enough, a woman's story enough, a woman in herself enough—I heard a voice that was witness to the worth of a woman's life. Woolf sees through the eyes of the kaleidoscopic self, looking out at the world as it appears for only an instant, before its fragments gather and scatter again. She moves fluidly between the shifting, uncertain selves she inhabits more than she creates. When I read *Mrs. Dalloway*, I was drawn into that habitation of other bodies, that perspective of minds not my own. I found myself not looking *at* Clarissa but out from *within* Clarissa, an experiential point of view that felt both faintly familiar to me and utterly unknown.

This novel, and Woolf's entire body of work, testify to the significance of tiny things—an instant, a passing thought, a single day—specifically, the significance of one woman's story, no matter how simple or brief. The interior monologue, the open plot, the infinitesimal, nearly invisible transformations that we undergo and create in our wake as we move—these were all things that James Joyce had, to an extent, explored in *Ulysses* a few years before *Mrs. Dalloway* was published; but it took Joyce really quite a lot of pages, and put Harold Bloom's average day on par with a Homeric epic. While I had wandered through *Ulysses* happily enough, it was Woolf

who pulled the thread and unraveled the rest, who made and unmade and remade the form, who undid narrative, story, subject, the sentence itself. Hers was not the first work to play with time or speak of war, not the first to explore the intimate connections and stark divides between human souls; but hers was the first work I had ever encountered that explored a woman's life from within; not her drawing rooms and manners, but the raw inside of her senses, and the cacophony of her mind.

And, for me, it was Woolf who toppled what I had been taught, who ruined what I thought you were supposed to write, and what you were supposed to write about—and whether *I* was allowed to write at all.

Recently I have found myself restless within the strictures of what I have been taught and trained myself to write. I am writing my way into forms I know nothing about. I don't know how to write anything I'm writing. I don't know what I'm going to write before I write it, or when it will be done. This is unnerving. But I know that when I am restless, I need to go where my feet want to go; when my voice and vision change, I must change with them; I must let form follow not from the forms I know, but from whatever form they find that fits; I must always remake the writing, and let the writing make and remake me.

In those simple rooms of my own, where I was that young woman, half a life ago, I sat alone: hesitating—faltering—writing—and I am still there. I am still her, hesitating, unsure, and secretly terribly brave. And sometimes, as it did with Clarissa, that enormous bravery rises up and crashes over me and I say: I will write the book myself.