

THE FEMALE CREATOR

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Graduate College of the
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In partial fulfillment of
The requirements for
The Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
May 2007

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank everyone on my dissertation committee for all their contributions to my education--my poetry professor and advisor, Lisa Lewis, my early American literature professor and mentor, William Decker, my fiction professor and committee member, Toni Graham, and Professor Frederique Knottnerus for kindly agreeing to be my outside committee member.

I also want to express my appreciation for my daughter, Sarah; my granddaughter, Arabella; my son, Jason; my son-in-law, Jeff; and last but not least, my friend Duke.

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I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Under patriarchy, human reproduction (always by women) in the private sphere and artistic production (usually by men) in the public sphere are often separated to the point of mutual exclusivity. A mainstream domestic ideology that tried to limit women to the private sphere was most effectively challenged by the emerging women's movement in the 1960's. This new movement valued female individuality and independence. This has caused contemporary American female writers, including poets, to have various reactions to motherhood. On this subject, they have continually, both as a group and as individuals, "celebrated, rejected, and reevaluated" (Forcey and Orr 580) motherhood under patriarchy in Western culture.

As defined in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, patriarchy is "a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions." In addition, it is pointed out that "the concept 'patriarchy' is crucial to contemporary feminism because feminism needed a term by which the totality of oppressive and exploitative relations which affect women could be expressed" (159). Patriarchy has tried to silence the woman's and the mother's voice and keep it out of the public sphere. According to Adrienne Rich, "Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men . . . determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (57). Furthermore, "the systems men have created are homogeneous systems, which exclude

and degrade women or deny our existence, and the most frequent rationalization for our exclusion from those systems is that we are or ought to be mothers (Rich 210).

Feminists, including Rich and Mary Daly, as well as those that came before and after them, have worked hard to implicate patriarchy and its negative effects on women.

Another important feminist project is naming women and telling their stories, including one's own. For me, and other women, this ties into the feminist belief that the personal is the political. According to *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* "Names have a mythic significance, to be nameless is to have no identity, no selfhood, no power" (605). Furthermore, Daly argues that "for what women who have the courage to name our Selves can do is precisely to act on our own initiative, and this is *profoundly* mythic" (47). Daly has made it her project to reclaim the power of naming for feminist women. Naming and telling the stories of women, especially those who are acting outside of their stereotypical social roles, is a form of female empowerment. Moreover, Daly claims that "only when women dare . . . to see/name our Selves," (21) will they be able to realize the falsehoods in male myths of patriarchy. As a student of theology and philosophy, it makes sense that her foremost examples would be between Christian and Greek myths. She sees "patriarchal myths as reversals and as pale derivatives of more ancient, more translucent myth from gynocentric civilization" (Daly 47).

My story, the story of other women, the story of other peoples, and the names and stories of great goddesses are all part of my dissertation. The last stanza in the very last poem in the collection refers to naming, and the poem is titled "Bella," a word that means beauty in Italian, and I chose this title partly because it is my granddaughter's name. This paper also intends to show how my collection of poetry is an extension of the on-

going feminist project of expansion of subject matter and subjectivity in American lyrical poetry by 1) telling my story as a woman, using the first-person, in my own voice, and 2) learning and using new poetic techniques to write about the world, including the lyrical form of the dramatic monologue 3) telling the stories of other females and cultures—both human and divine (often using third person to talk about something or someone grand). In this collection of poetry, my story starts when I have already passed through the active phase of mothering, and I am trying to find an identity that is not centered on being a wife and mother, though while I was writing this dissertation, I became a grandmother. It is my story of change and growth--emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. As part of the spiritual aspect of my identity crisis and search, this critical introduction also brings up the matter of the male patriarchal god as well as conducts an exploration of myths and stories for creator goddesses and striking grandmother figures in order to speak their names and tell their stories.

Daly's scholarship is a way to get to the myths of the feminine divine by looking through, or deconstructing, the male Christian patriarchal myths. She shows how "patriarchy perpetuates its deception through myth" (44) in her book *Gyn/Ecology* (1978). Her unflinching and convincing radical feminist analysis explains how gynocentric culture, including goddesses, can be found in reversals of christian and other myths. Although Daly calls what she does "un-theology" and "un-philosophy," (xiii) she is a scholar in those fields. She herself realizes that it takes a "cerebral spinner . . . [to] criticize patriarchal myth and scholarship because she knows it well. She must not only know the works of The Masters; she must go much further. She must see through them and make them transparent to other Voyagers as well" (xiv). Rich and Daly's work is

pivotal to other feminist scholars such as a less radical feminist storyteller and Jungian psychoanalyst, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, who later wrote a book that expands the search for the original myths about powerful female divine, specifically a protector goddess, with various names including La Loba, Lo Que Sabé and Wild Woman, that can help women know their true selves. Estés work can be put into the category of primitivism. In some ways, their projects are very different, particularly their opposite opinions about the value of traditional psychology—with Daly seeing it as an instrument of patriarchy and Estés seeing Jungian psychology as a starting point to create a new female psychology. Nonetheless, both take a look at myths and their meanings.

I did not encounter feminist theory in a formal manner until after more than a decade of mothering, which, in my case, had isolated me from both feminists and the academy. I had my own unspoken ideas about marriage and motherhood as it existed for me, but I did not know that many women not only agreed with me, but some had dared to write about patriarchy in general and formulate distinct theories about the relationship between patriarchy and motherhood. I was briefly introduced to these ideas beginning in 1988, when I began the M.F.A. program at Vermont College, but it all came into clear focus when I took a Feminist Theory class at the University of Vermont in the early 1990's as part of my M.A. degree.

Simone De Beauvoir of France was one of the first to take on women's issues in her groundbreaking book, *The Second Sex*, published in 1952. As De Beauvoir put it, “man intentionally deprives women of their opportunities” (239). Another one of the instrumental women in bringing about the second wave of feminism was Betty Friedan of the United States. In *The Feminist Mystique*, Friedan wrote about “the problem that has

no name” (57). She condemned the negation of a woman that took place when she existed only for her family (husband and/or children). As Friedan explained, “Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (57-58). Of course, femininity had been defined by the institution of patriarchy, and it was what men wanted women to be. Her book first came out in the early 1960’s and helped launch the women’s movement that would fight for women’s rights.

Ultimately, by the end of the 1960’s, an examination of marriage and motherhood caused some feminists, either temporarily or permanently, to reject marriage and/or motherhood within patriarchy. I, too, considered this Plan A. It was at about that time that I started telling my own my mother that I was NEVER going to get married and have kids. This was a form of matrophobia, defined by Mary Daly, not as the fear of the mother, but as the fear of being treated like your mother, i.e., as a second or maybe even third-class citizen all the way to complete loss of the self. My rejection of marriage and motherhood proved to be short-lived, due to an unplanned pregnancy and marriage at the age of nineteen. After that, I lived in active motherhood for the next twenty years. Some of my earlier poetry, written before the collection in my dissertation, described both the difficulties and joys of marriage and motherhood.

Second wave feminists responded to various criticisms including the charge that it was “not only a white middle-class movement, but a white middle-class daughter’s movement” (Hansen 21). They tried to become more inclusive and aware of race, class, sexual orientation, and they took another look at motherhood. “The re-examination of motherhood was a major development of the women-centered analytical work of the

1970s” (159). After an initial rejection of motherhood at the beginning of the second wave of feminism, the feminist “axiom that motherhood and freedom were in diametrical opposition was challenged by . . . Adrienne Rich,” among others. To be more explicit, Rich’s feminist theory includes a “rigorous and interdisciplinary analyses of the mother in culture. Rich . . . presents an intensive review of the social construction of motherhood in patriarchy” (Forcey and Orr 582). In my opinion, Rich’s groundbreaking work in *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which first came out in the mid-1970’s, is still the best analysis of the relationship between patriarchy and motherhood. She sets out “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other”:

- 1) the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and
- 2) the institution which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control (13).

Rich show that “the mother serves the interests of patriarchy; she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions.” In addition, not only does the institution of motherhood harm society, it also harms individual women because mothers under patriarchy are seen as “a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification . . .with [her] children, . . . [and endure] isolation” (Rich 22). And the most damaging ideal of all is that mothers “should be, quite literally selfless” (Rich 22). Feminists see the need to change this definition of motherhood.

Before the women's movement of the 1960's, marriage and motherhood were inextricably linked, and this caused some young women to reject both. Furthermore, based on what they had seen happen to their own mothers, the mother became the enemy too. In other words, for many feminists, the mother stood "for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (Rich 236). Rich's work goes beyond blaming and hating the mother, as she explains how "patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence imprinting . . . patriarchal values." It demonstrates that mothers too have been oppressed by patriarchy while being culturally conditioned to teach "the small female her expectations" (Rich 243). The patriarchal system wants complete control of all creation, including human reproduction by women. However, Rich's examination of the patriarchal roots of the institution of motherhood, the disparities between the experience and institution of motherhood, and the potentially subversive position of the mother—these developments in feminist theory paved the way for the mother to become a speaking subject who could speak for herself. In Section One of my dissertation, I am a mother or grandmother speaking for myself and telling my story.

The first section of my dissertation is a group of lyrical poems, about the personal loss of a family and end of a marriage, beginning with the experience of empty nest syndrome, eventually a divorce, then grieving the end of a twenty-eight-year-long marriage, and the loss of the last creature who shared my home, my cat. In almost every poem there is an I and/or we in the poem, and often a you, and the speaker is not very distant from the psyche of the poet herself. The raw emotion of the speaker in these poems comes from a woman's and a poet's heart. It is the work of feminists before me that has given me the courage to speak about these things and shown that these female

experiences are worthy of talking about. To be honest, it is also the facts of my mother's passing, my father's dementia, my children growing up, and my husband leaving me, that allow me to move beyond cultural conditioning and write as a person—a whole woman, capable of both good and evil, with all human desires and needs.

The collection of poetry in my dissertation begins after my children had gone off to college. Each lyrical poem paints a picture, and if you put them all together, they tell a story—a story I might not have dared to tell if modernist and contemporary female poets hadn't paved the way. A story I might not have dared to tell in the first person if my parents were around to read it, if my husband hadn't left me, or if my children were too young to understand. The speaker and subjectivity are clear here. A middle-aged mother with grown children covering subjects that mothers aren't expected to talk about let alone experience—change, growth, experiences of both the mind and the body, even sexuality. Like other lyric poetry, these poems are often short, subjective, and personal. These poems in Section One end with a lyrical form, the elegy, for my cat, who died last November. Ironically, I had decided to get a cat when my children turned into pre-teenagers—when they became less interested in their parents and more interested in other kids.

The first poem, “A Long, Lonely Day,” is about absence—absence of both mother and daughter, not to mention husband and son: “Today is my/daughter's 18th birthday/. . ./And the second anniversary/Of my mother's death.” Furthermore, the speaker tells of what she feels forced to do to please her father, “For my father's sake/I went to Mass.” Though I am literally going to church because it will make my father happy, it also suggests a larger meaning of both religion and patriarchy, two of the major

sources of the idea that women are inferior to men. Going to church is something I do not do “except in cases of marriage or death.” It is not by accident that I connect marriage and death in this poem. We learn little about my mother except that she has passed away, but we learn more about her nurturing spirit in the next poem in Part One, “Clipping Coupons,” which expresses both a long-time domestic chore, which my mother taught me to do well, i.e., grocery shopping, as well as a way to connect with and care for absent children. However, there is also the longing for something new in the speaker’s fantasy to take a trip to the moon. Nonetheless, some leftover “matrophobia” can be found in my poem “Clipping Coupons” within the statement, “Uh oh, I must be turning into Grandma.” That poem was written long before I was a grandmother myself.

By the third poem, the geographical and emotional distance has grown between husband and wife. I have moved to Oklahoma for graduate school, which precipitated a job search and a great job offer for my husband in Kansas City, some three-hundred miles away. However, this poem speaks both of distance and connection between these two people through the use of the second person—we, our, etc. By the fourth poem, the I is exploring her new surroundings, using the natural American landscape, sometimes as symbol, as female poets all the way back to Dickinson and Bradstreet have done. In Poem 5, “Not Wanted in Several States,” the social ramifications of divorce are considered by the I in the poem, through the use of colloquial language, in the emotional question being asked and answered.

By Poem Six, “The End of the Beginning,” there is a turning outward of the I, and the changes foretold in “Long-Distance Marriage” are coming into play. Intersecting place and people in the next few poems, they cover the story of an affair, a guilty

conscience, a lover who turns abusive, a fight with a son, possible loss of an unborn child and the lover's lack of response in "Miscarriage," and finally the payback by the husband in the poem "Revenge," and then the speaker's suspicions as she moved to Kansas to try to save a marriage in "On the Drive Home." This first section wraps up the story between my husband and me, with the dramatized final act of the split between husband and wife in the next to last poem, "Thundersnow." This "I" had a story to tell, about a wife and mother, who needed to let go of the past and grow as a person. It is the sad story of a breakup of a family, and by the end, even my pet, who was like my third child, is gone. The last poem is a lyrical elegy to my beloved feline friend, Duke. Although my poetry tends more toward flat, colloquial language, by the end of the last poem about Duke at the end of Section One, the final stanza contains more elevated, decorative language, which is typically part of lyrical poetry. This last poem, like many other lyrical poems, shows deeply felt grief, due to loss of some kind. Thus ends the first section about the emotional journey of a woman who is a poet. This emotional lyrical poetry adds another voice to women writing everywhere.

The second section of this collection is about growing as a poet—using new styles and techniques. I construct poems relating, praising, and/or critiquing a wide variety of people, situations, and value systems. I think I draw on Whitmanian free verse and colloquial style, but structurally my poems are more like Dickinson—shorts lines, small poems, short stanzas like the quatrain, and we both like to use dashes. Thus, in terms of higher-level language, I show lyrical development in the poems I wrote most recently, such as the elegy for Duke and some of the poems in Section Three, but it is an area that needs improvement. I think various modernists, such as the imagists and William Carlos

Williams, did and still are (though less so) influence my form in terms of the way the poem looks on the page. I've also been influenced by confessionalists Sexton and Plath in terms of subject matter formerly not spoken of by women, and I like the poetry of Lucille Clifton and Gwendolyn Brooks, who speak from a more marginalized place than I do, but share the tendency to write short poems and short lines. Several contemporary writers, including Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich with their long history at the forefront of feminism, and their willingness to reexamine issues that keep coming up, such as maternity, have been very inspirational to me as well.

However, I owe much of my growth to what I gained from my professors and fellow students at Oklahoma State University while on-campus pursuing my degree. The first poem in Section Two was inspired by a fellow student in one of my poetry workshops. He had written a poem that played with the various meanings and spellings of the word "weight." I ended up using a thick dictionary in the creation of "I'm talking gold . . .," which is word play about a variety of things which incorporate the use of the word gold, covering power relationships, including that of economics. This poem is loosely connected in a "leaping poetry" kind of way—a series of thoughts, not linear, but using associative logic. Robert Bly coined the term "leaping poetry." Additionally, this poem, probably more than any other, is based on elevated, decorative language.

The second poem, "Noodling," is one of my rare monologues, where the speaker is a mid-westerner, one of a small group of people who carry on the tradition of fishing for catfish by hand. It is intended to be a somewhat humorous and informational poem about an interesting and unusual kind of fishing I was unaware of—i.e., both an entertaining and educational poem. Returning to the topic of female/male relationships, I

use satire and dramatic monologue in the poems about evenings in the Zodiac Bar, i.e., the challenges of meeting people to date. And in “The (Perfect) Wedding,” the speaker uses irony to satirize the event of the wedding as a symbol of the institution of marriage for the bride. “Fairy Tales” is a cynical look at the whole happily-ever-after scenario. Both the prose poem “The Nature of Things,” which also uses the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated subjects and images, and the poem “Gotham Lite” are tongue-in-cheek.

On a more serious note, there is a poem entitled “Heroes in an Unjustified War,” which is ostensibly about a woman in the United States Army, who is hurt and captured during combat. It does show a woman in the unusual role of warrior. Despite the fact that the speaker in this poem is a cynic about the war and the media coverage of the war, there are real heroes in this poem--the Iraqi citizens, Mohammed and his wife, who not only risked their own lives but the life of their daughter in order to save someone else’s daughter. There are acts of violence and humanity on both sides of any war. Another serious poem, “Central Avenue” tries to give a voice to a group of forgotten prostitutes in Kansas City. “Millenniums” looks at the timelessness of nature and how that compares to the brevity of a human life. “Frida Kahlo: A Brief Portrait” is one artist looking to another artist for inspiration. It draws upon a series of photographs and paintings of Kahlo. Interestingly, it is the only formal poem in the collection—each five-line stanza has the identical number of syllables in each line. Both Kahlo and the international art and literature movement of surrealism have always interested me.

“A Spectrum” is a poem that explores colors as the site of cultural difference. The next few poems attempt to honor various Native-American cultures, and their

inclusive attitude towards every creature on earth as important and equal. As do native cultures, these poems put a great deal of emphasis on the natural world. For example, the poem “Algonquin Seasons” abounds in nature images: packs of wolves, trees, flowers, berries, the moon in several variations, as well as several animals and the sunset.

“Scattered Words” is much like a transcription of another’s words who has a poetical voice and style, and the reader is informed of this. However, in the poems “Hiawatha” and “Hiawatha’s Daughter” I am questioning the male/female division of labor within Native American culture. It’s hard to know if there were overlays of white, Christian ideology on top of the version of the legend I read. My best guess is that there are, and they may have influenced the gender roles or at least the idea of gender equality within Native American culture after contact, but even before contact, there was a clear division of labor between males and females among indigenous peoples. In this two-sided poem, I wanted to give the silent unnamed daughter of Hiawatha, sacrificed for the common good, a chance to say her piece. It is an imaginative speech for I cannot know if this person/goddess existed or what exactly she thought. This is one attempt at her voice. And in “The Shape of Harmony,” it was a purposeful choice to give the mother the speaking voice. The Christian overlay here may be in the virgin status of the unwed mother, but she plays, arguably, the most important role in the story. If it weren’t for the mother who cared for the child under all sorts of difficulties, and for what the mother taught her son, he would not have grown up to be a visionary peacemaker. In this poem, the grandmother is the enforcer of culture and tradition, and even tries to do away with her grandson. I was not yet a grandmother when I wrote that poem either, and I

portrayed the grandmother in the same way she was portrayed in the version of the legend that I used—from a local newspaper.

Section Two is where my dramatic monologues show up—“Noodling,” “What’s Your Sign [#1]” and “What’s Your Sign [#2]”, “Hiawatha’s Daughter,” “Scattered Words,” and “The Shape of Harmony.” Whereas my first group of poems tend to be inspired by and written about emotion, and it takes the entire group of poems to know the whole story, the poems in Section Two tend to be more intellectual, and they contain some narrative, including fictional, elements, and one poem alone might tell a story, especially, and not surprisingly, the ones that retell a legend. However, I want to point out that many of the poems in Section Two reflect upon social customs and traditions—comparing realistic outcomes to imagined happy endings. Certainly, “The Perfect Wedding” and “Fairy Tales” do this. “Central Avenue” shows one alternative to mainstream female life, the dangerous, difficult life of an inner-city prostitute, a kind of life that makes an imperfect marriage or even a divorce pale in comparison. I wanted to try to tell their story. I used a series of newspaper articles on prostitution in Kansas City in the process of writing this poem. My then husband also had contact with them because they hung around one of the concrete plants he oversaw. He had some interesting stories to tell. Several of my poems were inspired from information gained from a book, magazine, the newspaper, the internet, or some other kind of media. Some of my poems, like “The Nature of Things,” which was drawn from bits and pieces of newspaper columns, could be considered found poetry.

The next to the last poem, “Whispers,” is an attempt to get away from my usual style to write a poem with more mystery—with a more surrealistic touch. Once again, I

use the leaping poetry technique. The last poem is about a speaker who consults Chinese Astrology when regular astrology has failed her. This poem marks the turning back toward the self—the story of the doomed marriage comes back, the I that is close to the speaker comes back, and she attempts to learn about herself. It ends on an optimistic note, when the speaker realizes she needs to develop who she is: “Sooner or later, it will be the year of the rooster.” In this last poem of Section Two, “In the Year of the Goat,” the speaker finally decides it is time to strike out on her own, leaving behind the workaholic husband who doesn’t want her and the lover who can be abusive. While Section One examines loss, Section Two examines growth and ends on a note of hope for a woman who, in many ways, is just beginning life on her own. Thus ends the second section of this dissertation, which represents the artistic development of the poet.

With a different social situation (on my own for the first time) and more sophistication as a poet, I found the need to build a new identity, before I got lost in the role of (grand)mother. I also wanted to get rid of bitterness and to begin to think as an individual female, rather than as half of a heterosexual married couple or the mother figure in a nuclear family. Most of the psychological analysis I received trying to get over the divorce has not been very helpful (the one exception being a female counselor who took a more feminist approach), and I had rejected religion decades ago. Nonetheless, I thought I might find something to consider in the creation of the new me in feminist psychology and/or feminist spirituality. I turned to feminist scholarship on myths—scholarship by Daly, Rich and others, who examined aspects of female divinity and/or myths of female power. Daly and others point out false definitions of femininity left over from various patriarchal overlays, including the Victorian period, the era of the

domesticated woman with strict social rules of conduct. The core of this idea was that the woman belonged in the home, i.e., the private sphere. Women authors of that time (and earlier) usually started their piece of writing with an apology and/or explanation about doing something outside of their proscribed roles.

An interesting psychoanalytical approach to the idea of the mythic woman, of returning to the true female powerful self with a voice, can be found in Clarissa Pinkola Estés work. The feminist movement has made great strides in looking at new psychological approaches to what it means to be female. Estés pointed out that:

traditional psychological theory too soon runs out for the creative, the gifted, the deep woman. Traditional psychology is often spare or entirely silent about deeper issues important to women: the archetypal, the intuitive, the sexual and cyclical, the ages of women, a woman's way, a woman's knowing, her creative fire" (6)

Estés ties together two very interesting aspects of herself—she is both a Jungian analyst and cantadora storyteller. According to Estés, “women's vitality” can be restored through what she calls “psychic archeological digs” into the ruins of the unconscious. She defines the wild woman in the following way:

So, the word wild here is not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of control, but in its original sense, which means to live a natural life, one in which the criatura, creature, has an innate integrity and healthy boundaries. These words, wild and woman cause women to remember who they are and what they are about. They create a metaphor to describe

the force which funds all females. They personify a force that women cannot live without. (8)

According to Estés, “The Wild Woman archetype sheaths the alpha matrilineal being” (7). This shadowy force is meant for all women. Estés argues that we can not live without her, and she cannot live without us. As she put it: The great wild force of our own psyches means to place [the Wild Woman] . . . on our shadows, and in that matter she claims us as her own.” Once that happens, “we belong to ourselves again, we are in our right environ and our rightful home” (Estés 457). Estés work wouldn’t be possible without previous feminist work, and builds on the pivotal feminist theory of Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich, among others. Like Daly and Rich, she connects her concerns to women to concerns about nature/ecology: “Wildlife and the Wild Woman are both endangered species.”

Estés ideas resonant with me as a poet because Estés says the wild woman can come “though the written . . . word . . . sometimes a poem . . . [and it] is so resonant, so right, it causes us to remember, at least for an instant, what substance we are really made from, and where is our true home” (7). Also, these archetypes and myths are useful as sources of inspiration for poetry for me. Additionally, having some form of female divinity available to look after women is only fair.

Naming, telling a story, the personal is the political, all parts of the feminist project as I know it. As Estés explains, “story is far older than the art and science of psychology, and will always be the elder in the equation no matter how much time passes (19). Without her, women . . . [spend] large parts of their days . . . in a semi-paralyzing ennui or else wishful thinking . . . without [the wild woman] . . . they are silent (9-10).

Furthermore, “the archetype of the Wild Woman and all that stands behind her is patroness to all . . . writers . . . for they are all busy with the work of invention, and that is Wild Woman’s main occupation” (Estés 12). Moreover, Estés argues that “the remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories” (15). It is important, though, to get the real stories, not the ones that have been changed to suit other purposes along the way. Estés explains:

Sometimes various cultural overlays disarray the bones of stories. . . . This is how many women’s teaching tales about sex, love, money, marriage, birthing, death, and transformation were lost. It is how fairy tales and myths that explicate ancient women’s mysteries have been covered over too. Most old collections of fairy tales and mythos existent today have been scoured clean of the scatological, the sexual, the perverse, the pre-Christian, the feminine, the Goddesses, the initiatory, the medicines for various psychological malaises and the direction for spiritual raptures. (16)

Daly had brought up a similar idea: “Christian myth, like refined sugar, has been ‘purified’ of the cruder elements that were present before its processing. Just as refined sugar sweetly damages the body, purified myth seductively deceives the mind (74). Furthermore, Daly points out Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck,” which speaks of “the book of myths” (meaning male patriarchal myths) in which women, rarely, if ever, appear. Both Daly and Estés examine the problem with a variety of modern myths; however, Daly’s focus is on a thorough examination of The Trinity—both in current patriarchal Christian myths and in classical Greek myth. Estés does less deconstruction, but goes further in looking outside of traditional Western culture to find old myths and

stories that could be useful to contemporary women trying to find a way out of patriarchy or perhaps, more accurately, a way to live within it. Estés drew her stories from many places, including tribal lore from the southwestern United States and parts of Mexico.

Section Three of my poetry is based on upon my search for the original stories about strong women and fierce Goddesses. However, the beginning of Section Three returns again to the effects of the divorce in a deliberate pattern which tries to invoke the way it keeps coming back to haunt the speaker. Her recovery is slow, and it's often one step forward, two steps back. Nonetheless, the main purpose of Section Three is an examination of the role of myth, archetypes, and female divinity in order to further deconstruct the binary oppositions of reproduction and artistic production to show that they are culturally produced differences, not a matter of biological determination. This is important in creating an identity for myself as a woman, mother and grandmother. This is part of my spiritual search.

I didn't find much in terms of writing by grandmothers or even the portrayal of grandmothers within writing by white women. "Writers with tribal roots give her precedence . . . Elsewhere in American literature, women writers generally have followed the patriarchal norm that defines the grandmother only in biological terms, and relegates her to the personal realm, almost out of sight" (Awiakta 363-364). Rich's early poem "Grandmothers" is a lament of lost possibilities for her own two grandmothers. Of course, she questions what they could have been under different circumstances, i.e., not in a patriarchal society. The three-part poem is written from the point of view of the granddaughter, who realizes that there may have been more to tell, if the grandmothers had broken their silence to talk about their own lives. Part one is about her maternal

grandmother, part two is about her paternal grandmother, and in part three, the granddaughter says:

easier to invent a script for each of you;
myself still at the center,
than to write words in which you might have found
yourselves, looked up at me and said
“Yes, I was like that; but I was something more . . .”

Rich recognizes the silencing of the grandmother by cultural forces, even when she is doing it herself. Rich, herself, did not become a grandmother until the early 1990’s.

However, I did find a short lyrical poem about grandmothers by African-American Lucille Clifton. This poem is an offering of respect and thanks for what she learned from her own grandmothers Harriet and Isabell:

Harriet

Harriet
if I be you
let me not forget
to be the pistol
pointed
to be the madwoman
at the rivers edge
warning
be free or die
and Isabell
if I be you
let me in my sojourning
not forget
to ask my brothers
ain’t I a woman too
and
grandmother
if I be you
let me not forget to
work hard
trust the Gods

love my children and
wait

Clifton is careful to name both her grandmothers, and show them as powerful women trying to effect change. It is also interesting that she mentions God in the plural. Coincidentally, my mother's name was Harriet, and I'm sure that was part of the attraction of this poem for me.

Interestingly, the entry on "Grandmothers" in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* (1995) by Marilou Awiakta started with questions--some of the same questions I have about myself: "Who is the grandmother [of today]? What does she signify—to her community and to the writer?" The way these questions are written seem to exclude the idea that the grandmother may be the one writing about her or the world. Awiakta argues that "she is shaped primarily by culture, concepts vary widely. Although there is a common understanding of the grandmothers as a source of survival wisdom—spiritual strength, endurance, heritage and continuity—her place in literature, as in life, depends on whose relative she is." It seems like it is time to change that. It seems like it is time to write from the grandmother's point of view—time to make her a speaker with her own subjectivity. Awiakta points out that:

in literature as in life, the grandmother is ingeniously resilient. If the indigenous definition of her is applied to American women's writing, strands of thought that have seemed related but separate connect in a web: Feminist theology, ecology, archaeology, and anthropology, for example; and searches, for the goddess, the other female mythology; and for matrilineage—both familial and literary—are present in these

representations. It is evident, that as Native people have long been saying,
“The Grandmothers are coming back. (364)

I hope this is correct. As we have seen in this paper, feminists are examining these issues in many different fields. I can only hope that my collection adds a little bit to the web in the area reserved for literature. If leftover matrophobia or any other feminist ideologies, as well as remaining patriarchal ideas, are trying to keep the white (or any) grandmother under wraps, then this dissertation can be a voice against the idea that being a mother or grandmother makes you any less, or any more, able to be a poet, to be able to create art (in addition to producing children).

I never really knew my maternal grandmother because she died when I was two, but I was told she was a poet. My paternal grandmother died long before I was born. I had seen my mother and mother-in-law act as good role models under the patriarchal definition of grandmother, but I am in the position of being a grandmother and trying to start a career as a full-time professor at the same time, so they are not the right role models for me. Something was missing in my life, but as a poet and a woman, I thought perhaps I could begin a spiritual search to replace the rejection of the all-powerful, hierarchal male Catholic God, rather than remaining an agnostic, leaning toward atheism. To put it another way, when it comes to any supreme being(s), I tended to be a cynic-- perhaps because I hadn't found any of the female myths yet. Therefore, it seemed worth a try to find an admirable goddess or grandmother figures in myth, as well as in life, as a way to celebrate who and what I am, rather than to long for an idealized past, while remaining a victim of a divorce I didn't want. My goal, to put it in Rich's and Margaret Atwood's words, is to become a creative non-victim.

Although I had in the past retreated from exploration of myths due to the danger of essentializing women, I now see how this would be a way to look at the full humanness of women, at their capability for both good and evil, and the “potentialities for creative and destructive energy” (Rich 283). Or as Daly so eloquently puts it at the end of her book in which she refers to the feminist journey as spinning: “Spinning is celebration/cerebration [spinsters is one of the groups she has refigured with positive connotations] spin all ways, always. Gyn/Ecology is Un-Creation; Gyn/Ecology is Creation” (424). Although they may use or examine different myths in different ways, many feminist critics, including De Beauvoir, Daly, Rich, Estés and Orenstein “think myths are keys to defining women’s experience” (Humm 45).

As someone who turned away from the Catholic religion at sixteen, I still am wary of any institutionalized or even organized religion; however, I wanted to search for the female divine. Not only is there a deep inequality in the lack of female divinity available to us today, it would be a step for equality (rather than a way to become the oppressors) to find some female myths to balance out our society’s view, with few exceptions, of God as male. In my case I take the early Roman and ancient Greek myths and Native American myths as a model for the female divine. I found deconstruction of Christian myths by Daly very persuasive, and it is comforting to think *Lo Que Sabé* (she who knows) is available to me, and all women, when I need her and vice versa, but my search to find female creators, a female god if you will, not only helped me move on, they also gave me plenty of inspiration for poems—both ones I have written and ones I have still to write. Personally, I found the creator goddess in all her forms the most interesting, as can be seen by the fact that I wrote poems to and about “Gaia/Gaea” in

“Patriarchy Unleashed” and “The Primordials,” and I wrote a poem as an ode to Native American female creators called “Native Wisdom.”

Daly demonstrates that the original creator was female through her deconstruction of the Holy Trinity as it exists today. What is now the male father, male son, and non-specific Holy Spirit came from the Triple Goddess of old. Daly says that her purpose in examining the trinity is to “point out parallels/sources in chronologically antecedent androcratic myth, but also to uncover clues to the Chrono-logically antecedent myths and symbols, which have been stolen and reversed, contorted and distorted, by the misogynist Mix-Masters” (75). This quote is also an example of the way she plays with language. According to Daly, the irony involved in “this . . . assimilation can be better appreciated if we are aware of the omnipresence of the Triple Goddess in early mythology” (75). Daley goes on to point out the many examples: “Athena . . . had been the Triple Goddess. Moreover, Plato identified Athena with Neith, who was the skin-clad Triple Goddess of Libya and who belonged to an epoch in which fatherhood was not recognized” (75-76). Daly also brings up “the pre-Hellenic Triple Goddess is sometimes identified as Hera-Demeter-Koré” (76). It is notable that the grandmother figure is usually left out of the Demeter-Koré story, even when being examined by feminist. Other examples that Daly points out are The Triple Goddess in Irish myth and the Triple Moon Goddess in Hellenic mythology. As Daly explains, “the basic pattern was, according to some, Maiden, Nymph, and Crone, and according to others, Maiden, Mother, and Moon” (76). It is also interesting to note that “this threefoldness” can be interpreted as older and younger forms of the same person. This threefoldness is by no

means a mere family model. It has temporal, spatial, cosmic meanings.” (76). Thus we can see where the holy trinity originated and that it was female, not male.

Moreover, as both Daly and Rich point out, first came patriarchy, then came the change in focus in religion/divinity from women to men. Daly argued that “as patriarchy became the dominant societal structure, a common means of legitimization of this transition from gynocentric society was forcible marriage of the Triple Goddess, in her different forms, to a trinity of gods. Thus Hera was taken by Zeus, Demeter by Poseidon, Koré by Hades” (76). In this process, women lost their female gods, and within humanity itself, the male line became more important than the female one. As Daly would put it, the Triple Goddess fell into the Background, which is the sacred place feminists need to find. Rich backs up Daly’s argument that patriarchy changed the religions of the world. According to Rich, “Monotheism posits a god whose essential attribute is that he is *all-powerful*” (66). She points out that “he calls himself ‘Father’—but we must remember that a father is simply a male who has possession and control of a female (or more than one) and her offspring” (67). Thus, “it is not from God the Father that we derive the idea of paternal authority; it out of the struggle for paternal control of the family that God the Father is created” (Rich 67). Religion followed in the footsteps of patriarchy.

However, Daly has done much to refigure the crone/hag, which is one of or one aspect of the Triple Goddess, into a powerful old woman or the powerful part of any woman. Not only has she done through puns and other word-play, i.e., through language itself, she argues that “Women can carry out the re-considering process by refusing steadily to allow the fact of struggle between the sexes to be camouflaged, that is, by denying false ‘harmony of mankind.’ This means living in a state of ultimate risking.

Breaking away from the false harmony, women begin to hear the healing harmony of Hags, the cacophony of Crones” (56). As part of my attempt to be a radical grandmother figure, I want to hear and be part of the Hags/Crones as defined by Daly. Daly has done much to promote strong grandmother figures. Gloria Fenman Orenstein also changes and improves the image of the Crone in her book, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (1990). Orenstein argues that “In a culture that mocks and rejects aging women, that rapes the Earth, and has arrogantly posited the locus of wisdom in young, middle-class white males, the most threatening site of women’s power is that which is located in the Crone, the Elder.” That is a very empowering picture of the crone, for the crone not only has the earth-mother’s wisdom, but in the form of Gaea, the crone is the earth itself (121).

Another area of feminist study has been about the loss of the mother/daughter connection. In *Of Women Born*, Rich has argued that the mother/daughter cathexis is of utmost importance. Daly offered a similar argument when she wrote that “the Fundamental lost bonding, as Furious women know, is the bond between mothers and daughters (346).” Both Rich and Daly refer to the Demeter-Koré (Persephone) story as the key myth about the importance and depth of the mother/daughter connection, and both indicate that “much has been written about the theft of Mother –Right through the establishment of patriarchy (Daly 346). My poem “Mother and Daughter Bond” explores the weakening female roles in the myths as told in Greek and Roman society. The myths were already subject to changes even before Christianity, and its male god. Thus, the accompanying “patriarchal myths contain *stolen* mythic power (Daly 47).” In addition to the female-male reversal in the Christian myths, Daly also argues that the Sumerian female creator name Iahu was appropriated by the Jewish religion when they named their

one male god Yahweh (76). Furthermore, she suggests that the prohibition on saying the name of God, i.e., Yahweh, out loud was a way to prevent people, especially women, from recognizing the connection between the two gods/names. Rich also refers to power stolen from myths about female goddesses that was transferred to the male-dominated Christian-Judeo religion and traditions.

To find the powerful female divine within the Western tradition, one has to go far back in history or maybe pre-history—all the way back to the ancient Greeks and what influenced them. When I read first a later Greek version and then the Roman version of one of the most famous mother-daughter myths (Demeter and Persephone), I could see the both versions, but especially the Roman version, had changed the myth. In both versions the mother desperately searches for her lost daughter, and has to appeal for help to a male god. However, in the Greek version, the daughter is a more compelling figure:

The risen Persephone is no longer a maiden. Fully developed, she presided over all three realms: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Through Zeus's decree she is awarded Olympian stature. Through the birth of her child she becomes a mother herself, intimately bound to her own mother and the earth's nature cycles. Finally, through her marriage [to the king of the underworld], Persephone becomes queen of the dead. ("Myths" 603)

In the Roman version of the myth, Proserpina is also returned to her mother for part of the year, but her role is less powerful and more socially acceptable, as the beautiful goddess of corn. As can be seen in my poem "Mother Daughter Bond," in later Greek and then Roman retelling of myths, the goddesses were aligned with the earth and

fertility (the power of reproduction), and their attachment to the intellectual and artistic (the power of production) was severed. As Mary Daly explains, it is a trick of patriarchy and men to honor goddesses for the attributes they want in the female, and then call those culturally-constructed attributes feminine. Today, traditional women's roles remain devalued, with one day a year to honor mothers for what they are expected to do without complaint, not for any special power or knowledge of sacred mysteries.

As a feminist grandmother, I also want to be part of the positive psychic energy that Rich wants to flow from one woman to another. The more a mother passes on to her offspring about patriarchy, the better things will be. Perhaps this kind of sharing and teaching can prevent my experience--the generation gap between my mother and I came about due to the conflict that arose between us as I began to take on, as I had the opportunity to take on, more than my mother did. In terms of the generation gap that I experienced as a daughter, it was about the "mother/daughter conflict . . . [that happened] when the daughter moves [away from the mother] into what is culturally the male domain" (Awiakta 364). For me as a mother, there was conflict between my teenage daughter and me that had to do with parents representing the status quo (which seems to be part of American life), but it did not happen between my daughter and me in the same way because I was a vocal feminist working in the public sphere. (However, I should also note that to a certain degree, it was my mother's choice to be a housewife. She had worked for seven years as a high school teacher, and for most of her life she was brought up by a single working mother, and I truly think it was her dream to stay home when she had children. Free choice for women is vitally important; however, despite her happy consent, she was acted upon by patriarchal forces.)

I believe it is important for the mother and grandmother to be an example for and open to her (grand)daughters' dreams and supportive of each of them in their right to choose their own kind of life. I also want to give my son this kind of support—including my approval if he wants to be the one to stay home and take care of the children. In contrast to the traditional role of the grandmother figure, she can be, and continue to be, a vehicle of change for equality between the sexes. My Catholic background has provided many stories about God, the father, and God, the son. In my search for spirituality in the myths of old, I want to include stories of the lineage grandmother, mother and (grand)daughter, which offer personness and subjectivity (a voice) for all three as well as other female children down the line. Unfortunately, religion is one of the largest patriarchal forces operating to keep women as submissive, silent, and second-class citizens, whose primary role, or in some cases only role, is reproduction.

An examination of the earliest Western mythology shows that “dual conceptions of motherhood exist[ed]” (Forcey and Orr 580). In this version of the myth, as well as even earlier versions, Gaea is the primal mother and Earth goddess, who gives birth to Mnemosyne, goddess of intellect and artistic production. Mnemosyne, in turn, gives birth to the nine muses. “In this early incarnation, the two maternal identities [body and mind] coexist harmoniously” (Forcey and Orr 580). Only later did patriarchy change the myths after subjugating women into limited roles, usually within the domestic sphere.

One of the stop of my spiritual quest happened in New Orleans, where I became fascinated with a powerful woman who operated within a fusion of the Voodoo and the Catholic religions. This subject is explored in the poems “Voodoo Museum,” and “Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen.” Since honored women in Catholicism are saints or the

Virgin Mary, I was amazed at Marie Laveau's activities and her opinion of her self. The second poem reads, "Even the Catholic Church/feared Madame Laveau. She was allowed to hold/rituals behind the church/where she attended Mass Every day./She anointed herself the Pope of Voodoo." Madame Laveau broke many taboos when it came to female social roles including the fact that she was a naked priestess in an annual "orgiastic" ritual where a "snake [was] sliced/into three pieces representing the Trinity/in a ceremony of feasting, singing, swimming/and a sermon followed by sex." This ceremony goes all the way back to indigenous peoples of Africa and Haiti, back to a time when women, apparently, got to lead divine ceremonies.

When the ancient goddesses were forgotten and powerful myths were changed to accommodate patriarchal religions that posited one male deity, the roles and lives of women continued to be limited and limiting as well--woman became the property of man, shrouded in some sort of domestic ideology which placed her solely in the private sphere. My poem "Vesta" explores the incongruity of the what goddess Vesta symbolizes and the role her priestesses have to play under the Roman Religion, and the end of the poem marks the end of public pagan worship, and the unofficial adoption of Christianity by Rome, in the fourth century A.D.

On one hand, the poem "Patriarchy Unleashed" laments how Gaia changed under the aforementioned influence of patriarchy and Christianity. On the other hand, my poem called "The Primordials" accounts for an ancient Greek myth, which was influenced by earlier mythologies, showing Gaea in all her glory, as the creator and a destroyer. Not only does my poem name and describe the awesome Gaea, it names and describes her daughters and her granddaughters as well. In "Borders," I touch upon my uneasiness

with institutionalized or organized religions, draw strength from the ideas behind Wicca, but ultimately decide I want to remain “on the margins” working with other subversives who want all people to be free of negative labels, even though they may be different or may think differently.

My interests in Native-American culture, goddesses, and strong grandmother figures link up well in this dissertation. Female deities can also be found in Native American origin stories that are still part of their culture today. There are several tribes in the southwest United States that posit a female (or androgynous) creator. These tribes include the Laguna Pueblo, the Acoma, and the Hopi. “The Laguna Pueblo creator is Tse che nako, Thought Woman, who has the power to make whatever she thinks, and who in early versions of the myth, possesses both male and female characteristics,” (Brown Ruoff 603). In this creation story, it is interesting to note the emphasis of thought, rather than emphasis on the body, is given to the creator who is all or part female. Like the ancient Greece and older myths, there is no division between the acts of creation and reproduction.. According to the Native-American writer Paula Gunn Allen, Thought Woman (also known as Spider Woman) “sang and wove the universe” (Orenstein 169). It is also interesting to note that Thought Woman creates females first, i.e., “her sisters, Naotsete and Uretsete, to whom she gives the responsibility for forming the earth and preparing it for human habitation” (Brown Ruoff 603). As Allen puts it in her novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), Thought (or Spider) Woman seeded the sacred female twins Uretsete and Naotsete, who then “would create all people from spirit” (Orenstein 169). Allen believes that Thought (or Spider) Women’s has a song which is the song of “the women who made all that lives on earth. Who made the world. Who

formed matter from thought, singing” (qtd. in Orenstein 169). The Acoma creation story is similar. These ideas could be an impetus for future poetry for me.

Another clear example of a female deity still believed in by some contemporary cultures can be found. When it comes to the Hopi pueblos, their “genetrix is Huruing Wuhti, Hard Beings Woman” (Brown Ruoff 603). In her case, she unites heaven and earth. Although “she is of the earth, Hard Beings Woman lives in the heavenly world, where she owns the moon and the stars”. The Hopi associate her “with shells, coral and turquoise, she is responsible for the substance of the earth” (603). In her case, she can create all by herself, specifically, no male contribution needed. She created “Muingwu, god of the crops, and Tuwa bontumsi, Sand Altar Woman or Childbirth Water Woman, the goddess of human procreation” (603). While Thought-Woman chose to create twin females, Hard Beings Woman created both a male god and a female goddess. According to Orenstein, yet another example of a Creation story and an original Goddess figures is Copper Woman, found in an ancient matriarchal, matrilineal society on Vancouver Island (Orenstein 170-171). These stories and female deities are also subjects I could write poems about.

In at least one other Native American myth, the female creator tends to align more closely with the stereotypical female associations of “fertility and fecundity” (Brown Ruoff 603) like the Roman version of the Demeter-Koré myth. Nonetheless, she is important to point out as “the source and sustenance of all of life on earth” (603). Her name is Axdzaaaa Nadleehe, Changing Woman or Earth Woman. She is “impregnated by the sun, she bears the hero twins, Monster Slayer and Child-in-the-water, or, in other versions of the myth, the original members of the basic Navajo clans” (603). Clearly,

without her, or at least without the myth about her, the Navajo would be a different people with a different mythos.

Most cogent to my exploration of the voice of the grandmother is the Shawnee female deity. The Shawnee tribe, originally of the southeastern United States, believed in a “deity called ‘Our Grandmother,’ [who] created the universe and everything in it. She watched over all the Shawnee, especially the women” (603). A female creator who looks after females first can be very empowering for women. Furthermore, in equating the universe or earth with the grandmother figure, “and in remembering that we derive our existence from Her, in personifying the Earth as our earliest ancestors did, we align ourselves with our forebears, we reactivate an animistic view of nature, we restore the animal/soul to the plant . . .and we breathe life into a matristic Creation story once more (Orenstein 25). This ecological orientation runs through all the feminist analysis that I have drawn upon here. There is another similarity between Estés’ protector goddess, the Triple Goddess as explained by Daly, Demeter as explained by Rich, and the Native-American goddesses such as the Shawnee female deity, in that each of these female divine figures protect and save other women.

Another role model can be found in the “Spider Woman [who] is a secular figure frequently found in Southwestern myths who is indispensable to the survival of gods and humans alike. She weaves her webs to rescue those in trouble, gives food to the hungry, and provides the information necessary to survive or to conquer enemies” (Brown Ruoff 604). Moreover, “Grandmother Spider also appears in Choctaw and Cherokee mythology. In one story, she steals the sun and brings her people fire. She also teaches them the art of pottery” (604). In addition, “Native American oral literatures are filled

with grandmother figures that nurture children, especially orphans. Often these children become culture heroes.” Although tending along the lines of typical female roles, Spiderwoman and Grandmother Spider clearly are afforded more power and respect than is usual in most Western societies, both past and present. Also, as indicated earlier, some Native American mythologies elevate her to the position of the Creator.

My poem “Grandmother Spider” explores both the secular figure, an animal that talks and is endowed with other human traits, and what she has done for humans themselves. For example, “she steals . . . fire from an island” or “the sun” from “the other side of the world.” The poem covers all aspects of the “Spider Grandmother,” ranging from a secular figure capable of what no other can do to “The Creator” herself. To avoid appropriation of native culture, I have chosen to keep this poem in third person. “Native Wisdom” could be considered a free-verse lyrical ode to Spiderwoman, including her role as Grandmother. “Stories about mythic goddesses and legendary woman . . . empower women by suggesting apatriarchal psychological possibilities for women’s lives. They evoke women’s inner strengths in response to patterns of behavior that are radically different from the gender norms of twentieth-century American patriarchy,” according to Annis Pratt in the overview for “Myths” in *The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States*. If any of the poems in Section Three or Section Two of this collection can do that for me or others, it can only be beneficial. However, in the end, in my poem “Bella,” I ultimately return to the human to find an inspirational link between three generations. For it was my daughter (and son) who were there after my divorce, and they, along with my granddaughter, gave me reason to continue to live and love. And the next generation seems to live in a world in which women and men (such as

her husband and brother) seem closer to seeing each other as equals, both in and out of the home, i.e., in both the public and private spheres, than generations that came before her, including mine. I'd like to think that as their mother, I had something to do with that.

There are many patriarchal forces that have tried to silence women. They include the idea that women are not rational or are too emotional or not intelligent enough. Patriarchal ideology almost always dictates that it is important for women to stay home with the children, and there are a few feminist ideologies that take women's way of knowing or doing too far by assuming the cultural traits are inherent rather than constructed. As Rich argues in her new 1986 foreword to *Of Women Born*, some feminist theory argues that mothers have a special capability for peacemaking, and this actually reinforces the cultural definition of femininity, rather than allowing women personness, with the ability to make peace or fight back, to create or destroy. Despite these stereotypes, which try to force the cultural definition of femininity upon women, an American tradition of personal lyrical poetry by women and mothers can be found in the poetry throughout the history of America. Female American poets are both part of and resistant to mainstream poetics, and they have contributed to women's empowerment through knowing as a woman and/or a mother. From indigenous myths to the published poems of Puritan Anne Bradstreet, from the poems of Emily Dickinson, who was unrecognized in her own time (she had her own form of Plan A), to the poems and prose of contemporary poet and feminist theorists, including Adrienne Rich, women have made an impact.

By the end of my story in this collection of poetry, I have become a grandmother. I want to imagine and then live as the best grandmother I can be without becoming a representative or enforcer of tradition. I did that as best I could as a mother, and I want to continue this new model as a grandmother as well. Just as my daughter does not question her natural right to be in both the private and public spheres nor even the natural duty of her husband to be an active participant in their domestic world, I want to be a good, even revolutionary, example for my granddaughter as well. I want to grandparent as a subversive woman, from a place of power through knowledge, by studying feminist theory and scholarship. During this process, I have also been inspired to write some poetry.

These strong, wise grandmothers may not be available to me in person, but I can find role models for living in their writing about myths, as well as tell their stories in my poetry. Moreover, I owe a debt to Daly, Rich and others, for I have learned a great deal from their writing. Like other feminists, including Rich and Daly, I think I write prose in a style that combines theory and autobiography—that combines the political and the personal. Furthermore, I find Rich’s poetry similar to mine because we attempt to interrogate patriarchal values, such as the social norms for women and mothers, as well as deconstruct patriarchal binary oppositions, such as the idea that physical reproduction precludes creative production, and, ultimately we try to give all women, and humans everywhere, a voice. As I add my small contributions to reconstructing a different and equal world, perhaps I can contribute even more in the future. I don’t claim to be the poet or theorist that Adrienne Rich is, but I thank her for serving as a model to me in many ways. A grandmother can, like any other woman or person, be subversive and have

a voice—for me, the most important way is by writing feminist prose and poetry, and hopefully, getting it published. As an academic, I can contribute as a teacher—even if it is only one class or one person at a time. As a single woman activist, I can live a full life in the public sphere fighting for the causes I believe in, which could serve an example to those around me.

My time of mothering children on a day-to-day basis has passed, and although I am happy to spend some time and effort being a grandmother, there is a great big imperfect world out there too. You won't find this grandmother at home baking cookies, but if you do find me there, I might be thinking and writing about how to dismantle patriarchy in order to improve the world—for me, my daughter, my granddaughter (my holy trinity), and the rest of women. (Ultimately, I believe it will benefit men as well.) This is an important task for as Rich explains, “Until a strong line of love, confirmation and example stretches from mother to daughter from woman to woman across the generations, woman will still be wandering in the wilderness” (246). Through writing this dissertation, I have found female role models, in addition to the strong, supportive women in my life, to help create a whole self, which contains, among other things, many aspects of creation, including mother and poet.

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II. SECTION ONE

How I Became Single

A Long, Lonely Day

Today in my
daughter's 18th birthday,
(she is not here—
she is in college
in Colorado)
and the second anniversary
of my mother's death.
I miss them both.
I am young,
relatively speaking,
at the age of 39.

For my father's sake,
I went to Mass
this morning
which, on principle,
I do not do,
except in cases
of marriage and death.

Clipping Coupons

I spend way too much time and energy
on an inescapable need to clip coupons.
I learned it from my mother.
I sent some to my children.
In the letters, I wrote, "Uh oh,
I must be turning in to Grandma!"
I gave the coupon for soothing
body lotion to my daughter;
I gave the one for mac & cheese
(his favorite food) to my son;
I kept the coupon for the pills
to relieve the heartburn
of their absence.
If I only
used those coupons,
maybe I could pay for a ride
to somewhere exciting, perhaps
all the way to the moon.

Long-Distance Marriage

Bound together by our children
and our vices, nights of drinking
and drugging ourselves into oblivion,
the only vacations we ever took.
the one exception a trip
to Disney World with your family,
bought and paid for by your parents,
just puppets on a string.

When I moved to Oklahoma,
and you moved to Kansas,
my best friend said
you kept the cat
just to make sure
I would come back to you.

Now we have nothing
but choices. Twenty years
of parenting moved us both
closer to the center, now
our natural inclinations take over,
I head left and you go right.

I'm in graduate school
studying Marxist-feminism.
Your new job—a big promotion,
I'm feeling very ambivalent
about being management's wife.

Your boss is a bastard (but
not to you) and an alcoholic.
His wife left him, took the kids
and moved away. Neither he
nor you seems to care.

The road before each of us
is an unknown one, no maps
to guide us, bumps, curves,
and strangers along the way,
I can't help but wonder,
if, when, where, how
it's going to end.

Here

I never thought of the pansy
as hardy until I came here,
where I saw them bloom all winter,
surviving even when it snowed.

The roses outside my window,
they flower twice in one year,
during the in-between seasons,
first in spring, again in the fall.

The blue sky is so perpetual,
I can even imagine a heaven,
and in the long summer heat,
I don't have to imagine hell.

It's common to see billboards
offering salvation, but it's hard
to find a sign for the bus station,
train, or the way to the airport.

I can't even find a bridge to jump
from. Rivers dry up completely,
leaving memories of orange water
and beds of copper-colored sand.

Here, I have found a horizon
unbroken by landmarks.
What direction am I facing?
I have no idea where I am.

Not Wanted (In Several States)

If I make
the decision
to go,
if I tell you
I don't need you
anymore,
I won't be wanted
in Kansas
where you live,
nor in Iowa
where your parents live.
And there's a
very good possibility
I won't be wanted
in Florida
where my parents live,
nor in Colorado
where our children live.
You'll be the good guy.
I'll be the bad guy.
If I say I desire
to be alone,
will I get
exactly
what I wished for?

End of the Beginning

Crunching leaves
mark my footsteps
as I walk someplace
I've never been
before. Starlit
ridden prairie sky
captures my gaze,
my feet unwary
of sliding shadows,
the cup in my hand
forgotten, spilling.
By Halloween,
I'm someone new.
Do you think
some crazy creator
generated this world,
then fashioned it
just for us?

Betrayal

I.

I'm the reincarnation
of Walt Whitman,
you say, jesting,
but not really.
Yes, you are,
I say, joking,
but not entirely.

II.

It must certainly be
a dangerous thing
to become the muse
in the process
of looking for one.
Can a woman be both
muse and poet?

III.

Last month you asked
me to marry you.
You slipped it in
right in the middle
of a speech
about a different subject.
I did not answer you.

IV.

How could I?
Not only was I
already married,
I wanted
to be
the next
Emily Dickinson.

I-35 Blues

Kansas City to Stillwater

It is early spring
as I drive back down
the divided highway
of my double heart,
listening to rock and roll,
heavy traffic for a Sunday,
moving quickly as city
turns to country,
the roadside dotted
with large vehicle graveyards,
no proper burial,
school buses, big trucks, vans,
cars, and concrete mixers
left to rust in the rain.
Emporia, then the flat plains
turn into the high rolling range,
nothing for miles, except
cattle pens and power lines.
passing by Lake El Dorado,
looks more like a small flood
on both sides of the road, filled
with drowning trees, barren trunks
and branches, reaching, straining,
unsuccessfully, for air. Wichita,
surrounded by matching service plazas
offering the usual food and gas.
Finally, the Oklahoma border,
purple flowering trees, green fields,
orange-red dirt, blood-red ponds, blue sky,
white clouds, the last fifteen miles
the road becomes
a two lane-highway,
turn into my parking lot,
three-hundred miles away
from where I began,
starting to feel like home.

Pain of Lessons Unlearned

In the beginning, it was exciting,
the way you cared so much.
during our first fight, I was
ready to bolt, until you said.
sit your ass down right now.
That should have been a clue.

Please be gentle when you hit me.
Do be kind when you call me names.

By the next argument, you were
blocking the door, saying,
All women are evil sluts.
I slapped you for that,
you kicked me, left a big
black and blue bruise.

In the next fierce battle,
you pushed me, I caught myself,
you shoved me, I fell.
I didn't hurt you, you little shit,
was all you had to say, as you
grabbed me and pulled me up.

The skirmishes continued. I refused
to either surrender or withdraw
until you threw the phone real hard
and it hit me right in the head.
You were screaming this time,
You're a dumb fucking bitch.

Please be gentle when you hit me.
Do be kind when you call me names.

I'll get you, you stupid cunt,
you yelled, as I tried to retreat
to the refuge of my apartment.
You followed, broke down the door.
I called 911 but warned you to leave
before the police showed up.

After I told the cops some lies,
I spent the next two nights
in a motel room hiding from you
while I listened to the messages
you left on my answering machine,
I love you, give me another chance.

Today you tried to fix things,
repaired the damage to my door,
made promises not to drink.
with each whack of the hammer,
the nails bit deeper into my flesh:
“I love you too, I’ll take you back.”

Prodigal Son

My 23-year-old son lives
on the top of a mountain,
high in the Colorado Rockies,
elevation above 10,000 feet,
in a town so small there is
no telephone, no internet,
no mail, or so I
imagine.

He thinks I was mean to him
at Christmas. I was mean to him
at Christmas. Since then,
he has been working
in a ski rental shop
at a ski area, and skis for free
a lot, or so I
would guess.

He does not remember,
apparently, that I worked two
crappy jobs, secretary and waitress,
to pay for an after-school learn-to-ski
program when was ten. I felt bad
that he was embarrassed
he had to rent,
because he didn't own,
his skiis.

I don't know if
he doesn't know,
(I tell myself that is the case)
or doesn't care
or really wants
to chill my bones with his silence,
that profound quiet of empty
ski-trails, after the ski-lifts
have all ground to a stop,
just before dusk
descends.

Miscarriage

Blood, so much blood,
too much, what is it?
Piece of overgrown
muscle, benign tumor,
gigantic blood clot?
Waste passing from
an aging womb??
Starfish, butterfly,
ghost edged in pink?
Lacy doily, flower,
snowflake, star?
Perhaps an abominable
snowman or Pillsbury
Dough Boy, more human
than not. You're
the only one I can tell, but
you say it couldn't
possibly be so.

Revenge

for WCW

The concrete-encrusted
grey wheelbarrow
waited
in the bed
of his new company
pick-up truck
parked
in his mistress'
driveway.

On the Drive Home

A snowy owl perched
on a bare branch, then another.
They've traveled a long way
south to the open plains
for the winter. Wide rounded
wings brought them far
from their summer home
on the tundra.

According to Creek legend,
a warning, a bad omen. *Beware!*
Things are not as they seem!
Round white face, black beaks,
yellow eyes, soft thickly
feathered tails--insulation against
the cold. Gray-spotted nomads,
like us, searching for sustenance.

What are they trying to tell me?
Unlike most of their kind,
they hunt during the day.
I'm sure you do the same.
You've always been
an early morning man,
I've always liked
to stay up half the night.

The owls left their nest
in the north where together they fed,
tended, and protected their young
fiercely, as we did.

Dire predictions have been made.
We are all in danger. Oil drillers
are destroying the owls' habitat,
owls are hunted for their eyes and feet,
sold on the Asian black market.

There are signs
of being phased out of existence.
Be careful! Be advised!
Someone is stealing my home
and your wisdom.

Thundersnow

The day after Christmas
my husband left me,
finally confirming my
lingering suspicions, at last
confessing his affair.
That cold night
I dreamt my feet
were covered
with hideous hair,
thick as twine,
long as jump rope,
dark and foreign
as the man
I thought I knew.
I searched frantically for scissors,
and at last my hand was poised
to cut it all off,
but before I could,
I woke
to an ice storm,
each tree an ice sculpture,
a scene of beauty
I couldn't bear.
The need to do
SOMETHING
made me run outside
where I stood
pelted by frozen rain,
waiting for it
to numb me
all the way through
to my heart.

The next day
large snowflakes
fell soft and slow
while thunder rumbled
in this unfamiliar place.
Next, a surprise appearance
by the pale winter sun,
then, a purple prairie sunset,
followed by the blackness
of a too quiet
winter evening.

On the third day,
I saw that our marriage
had been reduced
to nothing more
than a huge rotting pile
of lies, a heap of garbage,
my many unanswered accusations
buzzing around like flies,
his five years of denials--
devouring maggots.
I felt refuse, bugs, surrounded
by the stench of decay.

I didn't want to,
heaven knows I didn't want to,
but I had to, I had to do it,
I had to turn away.

After the Storms

Dedicated to My Ex

The world is covered with pure white snow.
Flocks of birds sit on snow-covered branches,
snow on the roof, snow on the balcony railing,
snow-capped mountains in the distance,
a foot of snow covering the car
and two-foot snowdrifts around it,
snow-packed parking lots, streets, sidewalks.
The governor and mayor both have pleaded,
“Please Stay Home.”

Yesterday, a last-minute
trip to the grocery store--
the produce aisles were bare,
no eggs, no chicken, low on milk,
a sense of urgency
among the crowd of people preparing
for another snowstorm—the second one
in two weeks.

You moved to Alabama,
where the weather is warm.
We no longer even have
weather in common.
We’ve stopped talking
on the phone.
We e-mail
sometimes.
You’ve been sick.
There’s nothing
I can do for you
from here.

Blizzards are lovely,
blizzards are lonely,
thick snowflakes falling,
soft snowflakes falling,
lots of time, lots of time,
and nobody but the wind,
the snow & me.

Getting through the Day

My husband
left me
and I was
kind of poor
again, I found
myself pawning
my dead mother's ring,
getting shady loans,
making monthly payments
at the rent-to-own store,
buying money orders
at the supermarket
to pay the bills,
resorting to internet dating--
meeting a bunch of yahoos.

It could be worse.

I work
in the basement
of a bank,
passing time and money,
Monday through Friday.
It's cold in there,
but the job is easy
and the people
are nice.
My cat
greet me
at the door
in the evening
when I get home.

An Elegy for Duke

We were together
for seventeen years
until death did us part.
You turned out more
loyal and faithful than
my father or husband.
Under the president's politics
we were natural enemies:
a Persian male
and an American female.
Under the president's politics
you were part of the axis of evil.

The first time I picked you up
in the pet store, you tucked your
head under my chin and on my
shoulder. I had to have you.
I hoped and prayed that you
would still be there when I
received my next paycheck.
You were, and though it equaled
a whole week of work,
you were worth every penny.

I didn't buy you for show
although everyone agreed you could be
a show cat. Each day I would
wipe away the "black tears"
which collected on the sides of your nose.
You wiggled and twisted your head
like a toddler does when you wipe
his face, but you let me do it
because you loved me. You were
a shaded silver—white tinged with grey,
sweet, gentle, open face like a pansy,
large expressive yellow eyes, dark pink
nose edged with black, purple tongue,
strong body, endearing personality,
your skin a surprising light pink.
You didn't talk for the first few months
until I gave you turkey on Thanksgiving,
then with your quiet, pleasant, melodious voice,
you asked for more in a sentence.

You loved humans, but hated
other cats—liked to fight them.
Never won one fight. Did you
think you were a person? Sometimes
when I would chat on the phone,
you would start talking back,
sure I must be addressing you.
You did not like change.

You never bit me.
Instead you gave gentle warnings
by carefully placing your teeth
on my skin without biting.
The night you lay dying on the
bathroom floor, I lay by your side,
I moved you from the hard floor
to the thick dark blue bathmat,
I used a towel as a pillow for your head,
trying to comfort you by petting you,
and in the morning, when I took
you to the vet, she ended your suffering.

Your mother's name was Princess Penelope.
Though born in Vermont like me,
your heritage is ancient and royal.
As the dusty desert caravans
wound their way westward
from Iran, secreted
among the rare spices and jewels
on the basket-laden camels,
was an even more precious cargo,
an ethereal longhair cat.

III. SECTION TWO

Growing as a Poet

I'm talking gold

He's so goldbergian!
Whatever do you mean?
He's grotesquely complex,
you know, contrived
with inept and excessive
intricacy. Not to mention
his cousin is a goldbeater
who lives on the gold coast
of Chicago, very exclusive!

Even the gold-dust twins
wouldn't have been a match
for the golden horde, those
Mongols who governed Russia
for almost three hundred years.
My mother told me
to live by the golden
rule, do unto others
as you would have them
do unto you, or,
substitute, here, whatever
your first and guiding,
a.k.a. golden principle,
happens to be. Beware
the pawnbroker's
three golden balls.

Gold bugs supported
the gold standard,
gold democrats
were dissidents.
How about some
gold bullion stamped
with golden eagles, or,
perhaps, a golden goose
who lays golden eggs?
Golden hamsters love
golden hops at gold
bars in a gold age
with golden contracts.
Wishing you a happy
golden anniversary,
enjoy those golden
years, hope you

didn't forget
the gold clause;
i.e., a provision
requiring payment
to be made
in gold.

The goldeneye duck,
a large-headed, swift-
flying, diving duck,
dove right into the
golden mean, the way
of wisdom and reasonableness
between extremes--the happy
medium between excess
and defect.

The goldfish
swam right into
a golden fizz (made from
lemon juice, gin,
egg yolks, and sugar).

Golden rectangle,
width to its length
as length is to sum
of width and length,
golden section, a key
to the mysteries of art,
but not to the golden
olive nor the golden orange.
Tequila gold, golden poppy,
gold rush, gold therapy,
goldurn, goldarnit,
Goldilocks was not
a golddigger.

Noodling

Seek pleasure. Avoid pain.
That was the motto of the Greek
philosopher Epicurus. Shit, doesn't
he know they go hand in hand?
Hasn't he ever grabbed a big ol'
flathead out of its hole
in the riverbank? Ever since
my daddy taught me how, I've been
using my hand as pole and bait.

My father, Grandpa, and me,
we've all stuck our hands
in river-bank holes and hollow logs,
sometimes we found 'em under
brush piles or rocks, spent
our time wrestling the big ones.
Their first reaction is to start
rolling. Let go fast or they
will break your wrist.

Each ruby scar tells a story,
the biggest from a 60-pound catfish
that towed me a ways down
the river (as I held on to its lower
lip), the longest from a dying fish
who never did open its clamped jaw.
Rows of tiny teeth ripped the skin
from my hand, a fine example
of man to fish combat.

I still remember the day
I started, and be sure to tell
Epicurus, I'm hooked and
I ain't about to stop now.

What's Your Sign? (Or Another Evening at the Zodiac Bar)

I am Virgo the shy Virgin
whose purity is renowned
and whose frigidity is assumed,
or perhaps I am Virgo the Harvester
whose promiscuity is whispered
about and whose fruitfulness
is celebrated. I am an intelligent
virgin, or possibly, a naïve whore.

I must be allowed to express
myself in my own way.
Intellect is more important to me
than any kind of physical
beauty. The sign of craftsman
or critic--fertile, mutable earth sign.

I'm a reader, a writer, and
a perfectionist, but my greatest ability
is that I am a master fault-finder.
I'll analyze your finances, your ambition,
your organizational skills (or lack thereof),
your bad taste and all your other
shortcomings, faults, and normal
human imperfections.

People who are flighty annoy me.
People who are impractical
exasperate me. People who seem
illogical bother me. I can spot
a weakness or bad habit a mile away,
and I won't hesitate to tell you
all about it. Some would say
I have a tendency to be over-analytical,
even critical, but they're wrong.

I am a worrier and imagine all
kinds of mishaps, injuries, illnesses,
and ailments. I am often cynical.
It is important that you thank me
for the slightest favor. If someone
does me a wrong turn I am
not likely to forgive. I do not
like strenuous activity, and I always
prefer to sleep in my own bed.

I'm secretive, yet perverted and judgmental. I hold a grudge. I tend towards hypochondria. Last, but not least, I'm finicky and fastidious.

Hey, where are you going? Don't you want my digits?

What's Your Sign? (Or Yet Another Evening at the Zodiac Bar)

I am Scorpio the Scorpion,
I am filled with venom,
with an extraordinary ability
and desire to cause pain.
My passions are all-consuming,
reckless gambling, insatiable
drinking, jealous loving.

I am an arachnid
with short appendages
to tear up food for swallowing
and a hollow poisonous stinger
at the end of my tail.
My love is intense, exclusive
and seductive, but my hatred
is even stronger. I come out
at night to feed.
I use powerful pincers
to grasp my victim. Then I
immobilize you with a quick snap
of my stinger.

I am ruled by mysterious Pluto
with help from dynamic Mars.
Scorpio is the water sign
that seems like fire, symbolized
by the phoenix, a mythical bird
that periodically burst into flames,
then rises from its own ashes.

I am enthusiastic, a man of action
and depth of feeling, but don't forget
my need for control. Some of us
can do little to harm you, but others
are toxic and can cause you crying,
convulsions, black and blues, cardiac failure,
heartbreak, respiratory failure, and death.

Loving me is like a carnival ride,
usually thrilling, often unforgettable,
and a little bit dangerous. If you capture
or corner me and leave me with no one
to attack, I will become frenzied
and repeatedly sting myself.

The (Perfect) Wedding

Advice from the wedding consultant to the bride:

You must be
gowned, gartered, given,
veiled, perfumed, wear painful
shoes, stiff hair, too much make-up,
photographs to preserve you.
Roses, daisies, take your last
(baby) breaths, joined
by God in church, made
into ~~man~~ husband & wife,
love, honor, ~~obey~~, cherish.
Create a mood with music,
a (bad) band or (obnoxious) d.j.,
ring(s) of gold, cross your heart,
hope to die, if you lie
with another. Don't forget
to smile as you cut
the vanilla with vanilla frosting
wedding cake. Eat a lot,
drink too much, recover
on the (should be heavenly)
honeymoon.

Fairy Tales

When,
at long last,
Rapunzel was freed
from her tower prison,
it wasn't a happily-ever-after scenario,
in fact, there was a long and difficult
period of adjustment, including
bouts with agoraphobia,
for there were so many
things in the world
she knew so little about,
and she did not get comfortable
with a shorter style of hair.

Snow White
had her troubles too,
for she had become used to
the dwarves' personalities,
customs and habits,
and more than often not,
no one else would do,
so she was usually lonely,
sometimes sad,
and she frequently drank
too much apple wine.

Cinderella also had
problems adjusting,
for she was accustomed
to being busy, to hard work.
So soon after she moved to the castle,
she became terribly bored
and would try to join in
where princesses or women
were not wanted.
She fell into a depression
and when her foot would no longer
fit into the glass slipper,
she developed bulimia,
but occasionally
gained some satisfaction
from organizing, hosting,
and attending charity balls.

It could be argued
that Beauty's story
ends much better
for her mate is a gentleman
who both knows and loves her well.
Though she has learned
to delve beyond appearances
and that the personality makes
the man, every once in a while
she longs for
the beast.

The Nature of Things

In Memory of L.M. Boyd

The U.S. Air Force Survival School advises: Avoid all yellow berries. Avoid all white berries. And don't get over-confident about red berries. Half of them are poisonous and, furthermore, the French have twenty-four words for orgasm. The female praying mantis is militant about single motherhood: she can swivel her head so she is able not only to see the mating male behind her but bite off his head in the act. The stick bug, on the other hand, mates for seventy-nine days. The safest plane in the world crashed today, but Tiger said: "If given the opportunity to return to college to play football, the court system will never have to worry about me again." The AIDS epidemic and trafficking in women are driven by men's demands for sex; Ohio has more lawyers than Japan. He also promised to replace drinking and smoking with family, positive people, and the Word of God; while, elsewhere, there are those who are letting it be known that Spanish moss can now be found in a shampoo, not to mention Ovid was of the opinion that parade-watching was a great way to meet girls. Some say women look you in the eye when the telling the truth, men when lying. The octopus only mates once; however, the other woman is a social phenomenon of ancient origin; kangaroos used to be carnivores with long pointy front teeth on their lower jaw. I tell you what, the cows are lying down, the fish aren't biting, and the sky is weeping with me.

Gotham Lite

It was night,
I was lost,
almost out of gas,
somewhere
in the concrete bowels
of Kansas City,
on an elevated highway
with no shoulder,
no way down,
no way out,
surrounded by
looming monsters.
To my right, a building
constructed of huge, stark
steel windowless rectangles,
no visible doors.
To my left, an old abandoned
factory, broken windows,
jagged large pupils
in vacant eyes,
leering at me
in the dark.
In front of me
empty train tracks,
behind me, a frozen
deserted river,
and no sign
of Batman
anywhere.

Heroes in an Unjustified War

An Iraqi lawyer saved the life
of prisoner-of-war Private Jessica Lynch
after he witnessed a burly guard
slap her face, after he saw
her beaten and broken body
on a hospital bed. No one
had tended her wounds.

Mohammed could not just stand by
and watch her suffer because
he had a daughter. His wife, a nurse,
agreed. So he risked his safety—he
endangered his own wife and daughter.
He walked miles in the desert to find
some soldiers from the other side
to them where she was.
He and wife provided information
to the Americans, so the military could
figure out how to land on the roof
of the hospital in a helicopter,
large nocturnal insect savior,
bringing special forces
to the place where an injured
19-year-old Lynch was held,
according to the media,
against her will as an enemy
of the state.

Unlike some of her fellow soldiers,
she had survived an ambush,
as sudden as a car crash, as unexpected
as a blizzard in the desert. She crouched,
drew her gun, and fired back.

The story goes, supposedly, that
rescue mission officers convinced
an Iraqi doctor to lead them
to the girl under the blanket.
She kept the sheet over her head
until she heard the words
“We are here to take you home.”

Central Avenue

“Hey, baby” she hollers
and waves, lifts
a tattered blouse, then
her dirty skirt, grins
despite a missing tooth,
slit-eyed with wild hair.

It’s been years
since she escaped
from a father who raped her,
a mother who blamed her.
As a young run-away,
she’d trade a blow job
for a can of soup.

One of her friends
was strangled, then thrown
in the Missouri river.
They’ve all endured
rapes and beatings
by pimps and johns.
Some have had
abortions or miscarriages,
or worst of all,
children taken away.

Every day is the same.
Do the deed, feel real
bad, and then go get
high—a few moments
of euphoria.
When the veins
in her arms
are no longer good,
she starts using the ones
in the legs, or pulls
up one of her breasts
and shoot up there.

She’s ready to give you
a bargain, a hand job
for seven dollars.
Week after week,
month after month,

year after year--
she is lost
on a dismal street
in the middle of the city.

Millenniums

Three Great Lakes
froze over
for the first time
in a decade.
Ice clogs will delay
the shipping season
slated to begin
in three days.
The lakes don't know
about schedules
and time frames.
The lakes don't care
there is no hint
of the warming trend
normal for this time of year.
There is no animosity
in the crunching
chunks of ice
crashing into each other.

After a month
of below-zero
temperatures,
Lake Huron
Lake Superior
and Lake Erie
are covered
by their creator,
twenty-four inches of ice,
blanketed by their God.
The last retreating
glacier, heavy
and powerful,
carved out five deep
basins, then melting ice
turned to water,
filled the wounds,
and changed them
into lakes. What does
the passage of ten years
mean to a 20,000-year-old lake
that has neither will nor intent?

Frida Kahlo: A Brief Portrait

before
she turned twenty
she dressed like a young man
suit, vest, tie, as well as jaunty
striped cap

in a
wheelchair in front
of a portrait of her
doctor, she holds a palette, no,
a heart

a page
from her sketchbook:
Frida names Engels, Marx,
Lenin, Stalin, Mao, draws hammer,
sickle

in the
photos, she is
less bitter, much softer
than the heavy lines of her self-
portraits

it is
her severed head
being born out of a
bloody vagina on clean white
bed sheets

she sits
in front of a
Picasso, large feet, toes,
one raised bent knee, another mis-
placed head

necklace
of thorns, drops of
blood, dismembered hand as
earring, flowers embedded into
dark hair

A Spectrum

Blue evokes calmness and coolness—sky, water.
Pastel pinks suggest spring and helpless girls.
Yellow, as sunshine, generates optimism,
lifts spirits, offers hope and happiness,
but also depicts cowardice and defeat.
All shades of green represent nature itself,
grass, plants, trees, growth and renewal,
like spring and other new beginnings,
yet also stand for someone
naïve, inexperienced,
potentially envious, possibly jealous.
Red, possessed by conflict,
passionate love and violent war,
beating heart and bleeding wound,
Cupid and Devil.
In the East, brides dress in red
because it brings good luck.
Purple robes clothe royalty
and purple frocks cover priests.
Mysterious lavender, lilac and violet.
The refined woman in the purple gown
creates only if the mood is right,
but usually discord in the result
of her opposing bases of red and blue.
Bright orange stimulates the emotions
and even the appetite, also invokes
images of autumn leaves and pumpkins,
the color of change between the heat
of the summer and the cool of the winter.
Earth, wood, chocolate brown.
Gray cloudy strength.
Black and white exist as opposites
that share the attribute of neutrality.
To the young, black stands for rebellion!
For the old, black means serious, conservative,
conventional, and sometimes, sophisticated.
In the East, white is the color of funerals.
In the West, white is the color of brides.
Brilliant white causes headaches
for some—blindness from the light.

Algonquin Seasons

Deep drifts cover the frozen ground. Travel requires snowshoes and toboggans. Packs of wolves, hungry like us, howl at the moon.

The air warms and the ground begins to thaw. The night freezes form a gray crust on the melting snow. Tap the maple trees for sweet sap.

Pink wild ground phlox covers the earth. Birchbark canoes provide the way to catch the shad swimming upstream to spawn.

Green vines begin to produce, red, small, sweet strawberries for the women to collect. Later they pick blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries.

Deer grow antlers under the Full Buck Moon. Frequent hunting trips between the lightning, thunder, rain, sometimes hail, of strong storms.

When the full red moon rises in a sultry haze, it is time to gather plant roots and seeds, and it is the best season to fish for sturgeon.

Reap wild rice under the Full Harvest Moon, its light illuminating the autumn sky a few minutes longer than usual for three nights in a row.

Fallen leaves and empty fields make it easy to see both fox and deer. Just before dawn, just after sunset, the arrow will find its target.

Before the swamps freeze, trap beavers for fur: to make clothes, to build wigwams, to trade for food with other tribes, to prepare for winter.

Scattered Words

Much of this poem contains the words of Mvskoke elder Spender Franks from a speech he gave at the beginning of a Stomp Dance, held at the Creek tribal ceremonial Stomp Grounds in 1997. He is one of the last native speakers of the Mvskoke language. Translation by Ted Isham.

I will allow my words
to be recorded, translated.
I will speak about things that
should only be experienced.

Our elders stood like flowers.
The older people in the east,
strong in the caring structure,
each of the four directions.

Our elders were spread
to the black earth.
We are what death forgot.
Now we are but few.

We cannot do the things
our elders did, but we try
to follow the old ways
as best as we can.

North, south, east, west,
rising and setting sun.
The importance of four.
The four tribal town arbors.

We think of things
we do not understand and
all the things we should know,
our language almost gone.

There is hardly anyone
left to speak to us
and tell us the ways
of what we need to do.

But tonight, all our grounds
friends* have come to join us.
We have made agreement in speeches.
This dance links us to our ancestors.

Some day our children, grandchildren,
and great-grandchildren will listen to this tape
and they will remember what we did
as we gathered at the sacred grounds.

Everybody around!

*grounds friends – family, friends, clans members, and other tribal members often come from a long way to go to the annual festival (today, sometimes other tribes will join in as well)

Hiawatha

They started as one people,
then the gods told them that each group
should move to a new place,
and they would be given a special gift.
Senecas could outrun even
the deer, Cayugas were expert
canoe builders and travelers
by waterway, Oneidas crafted
beautiful baskets, blankets,
and weapons, Mohawks worked
the land and built the longhouses,
Onondagas possessed knowledge
and understanding of eternal laws
of nature. Hiawatha lived among
the Onondagas, built a white
stone canoe that could float
on invisible wings and visited
all the five nations, teaching
them to live in balance, according
to the universal truths.
But sorrow came from out of the north.
Hardships and disharmony come upon
the people. Hiawatha called
an assembly. For three days
a council fire burned
and on the fourth morning he came,
with his youngest daughter, the only
daughter still alive out of three.
A winged creature, one hundred times
larger than an eagle, swooped down,
picked her up and disappeared
into the clouds. Hiawatha sat
in silence for three days. Then he said:
You will reunite as brothers and sisters,
Onondagas as Warriors,
Oneidas as Counselors,
Senecas as Spokespeople,
Cayugas as River Guardians,
Mohawk as Nourishers.
And Hiawatha stepped
into his white canoe
and rose in to the sky, leaving
a peace that lasted over 300 years.

Hiawatha's Daughter

I had no voice,
I spoke no words,
I was silent (as
women so often are)
as I was sacrificed.
But don't get me
wrong, I wanted
to do it (as women
so often do) for I
was taught well.

Unlike Jesus,
I had no doubt,
I was sure
this detour
through hell
was the way
back home.

The Shape of Harmony

My widowed mother
was old and poor,
but my face was new,
pure and spotless.

There were no companions
around our fire, we had no
family, clan, or nation,
we depended upon the charity
of others. When I became
a virgin mother, my own mother
did not believe me, she berated me,
beat me, turned me out
into the night.

In a dream she learned I did not lie,
and it was revealed that the newborn
would bring down the old order.
So she cut a hole in the ice, thrust
He-the-Thinker under, yet my son
would not drown. We endured,
he and I, lonely, neglected,
persecuted. I was his teacher.

I believed in his divine mission,
I tried to infuse him with love,
gentleness, and a sense
of high destiny. He had visions,
he brooded. He was
very handsome--his face
reflected his great soul.
He had one imperfection.
He stammered.

This was his revelation: a tree,
its branches the sisterhood of humanity,
its roots the five tribes,
an eagle on top guarding peace.

Whispers

The spaghetti woman
is dancing with the award-
winning technical director;
the bride-of-Frankenstein
remains in the wings
waiting to give out
sexual favors.

*Everyone said
it wasn't their fault.*

I want to know how to dress
for a rainy day in the desert.

*After all, that's the way
it's always been.*

I want to know how to act
on a snowy day in the spring.

*So why should it be
any different now?*

I want to know what to think
about a power shortage
in California.

I've been forbidden
to open my windows and doors,
warned not to feed
the stray children
who fight
in the garden.

The king of wine country
made it perfectly clear
that he was the great
and powerful wizard
of Tornado Alley.

The big plate
was battling
the small plate,
until the bowl broke
in half, and said,

*Don't you get it?
You are both plates.*

Tell them
I was last seen
on the border
of the lone star state
and the land
of enchantment.

In the Year of the Goat

If you think you have an imperfect marriage,
Then you probably are . . . a perfectionist.
I'm Virgo, and the Chinese counterpart, a rooster.
Strutting peacock, quick thinker, logical,
practical, resourceful, keenly observant, picky,
critical, a consuming need to be in control,
hen-pecker. Double Virgo, that can't be good.
The Chinese elements consist of metal, water,
wood, earth, and what I am, fire. I feel restless
emotions, like the time I left the goat for the horse.
I fill with impulsive enthusiasm, like the time
I married the goat. Fierce charm makes me
as many enemies as friends. As a Virgo,
I am earth, but as fire, I dance and destroy
with delight. This eastern astrology advises
I should not be with the goat or the horse, for that
is like standing on a bog, spongy ground giving
way beneath my feet, strange beautiful plants,
big bugs, foreign territory found close
to the top of a mountain. It is said
I should be with an ever-changing snake
and advise him on where to invest his money,
or a patient ox who will join me in lifelong pursuits,
like a brook hike in the middle of the summer,
walking in sneakers down the creek bed, stopping
to swim in quiet, clear pools surrounded by rocks.
Sooner or later, it will be the year of the rooster.

IV. SECTION THREE

Looking for the Female Divine

The shrink says . . .

I'm supposed to write
away the pain.
Write you out
of my existence.
Write you out
of existence.
Isn't that
what she means?
I've already banned you
from every aspect of my life—
but my own thoughts
won't obey the edict.
As time goes by,
you are forgetting me,
us, our family.
And you don't mind.
That's what I imagine.
What else could I think?

So Long

Goodbye beloved husband,
as it turns out you are a mere
mortal, I thought you could
do no wrong, even when I did.
Our deceptions got the best
of us, now we're separate,
just me--and you and her.
Wanton women, perilous nights—
we both went down that road.
I yield to melancholy. I try to go
to sleep, perhaps to dream
of fate or fortune or discontent.
Or better yet, to not dream at all.

You have forsaken the vows we made.
She asked it. You did it. It is easier
to blame the wicked, vile, vulgar
homewrecker than you. Memory
of the part you played
is loathsome torture.

Ask no questions,
no answer will suffice,
cry, laugh, scream,
curse a lot, jest when possible,
seek grace, seek mercy,
quench envy,
give nothing to the
betraying villain.

He gave up a really nice family.

To Forgive Is Divine

Today I took
yellow sticky notes
and covered you over
each time you showed up
in the collage
of family photos
on my desk.
I will forget you.

Yesterday I switched
phone plans
from yours
to our daughter's.
I will be changing
my phone number,
and I don't plan
on giving
my new one
to you.
I will forget you.

It's been
a year and a half
since our divorce,
and I'm still
trying to move on.
Thirty years
is hard to forget.
But I will forget you.

You want
to be my friend
and her boyfriend.
It doesn't work
that way.
At least,
not for me.
I will forget you;
however, I will not
forgive you.
Everyone says
I have to forgive you
to forget you.
I don't know

about that.
We shall see.

Voodoo Museum

It was hard to find. My brochure
must have been out of date. It had moved
but left no sign behind at the old address.
My search ended at an ordinary looking door
in the middle of the French Quarter
marked by a small sign. The shabby lobby
had shelves of different-colored candles,
bags of herbal potions, old and new books,
a mixture of odd intriguing odors,
and lots of voodoo dolls for sale.
A blonde woman I'd swear
I'd seen somewhere before
sat behind a small rickety desk:
\$7 admission fee—cash only.
A portrait of the black voodoo queen
of New Orleans hung on the wall.
Madame Marie Laveau was beautiful
in African headdress, eyes wise and kind.
The voodoo priestess had three daughters
and gave them all her name, yet only
her second daughter followed her ways.
The museum halls were lined
with pertinent newspaper articles
and masks in the tradition
of an ancient African religion;
but New Orleans was the place
that invented the voodoo doll,
supposed to be used for good.
The museum was very narrow.
Two small rooms, one behind
the other, each contained altars
adorned with bones and skulls
of animals and humans. When I
arrived at the wishing stump,
I was instructed to write down
my deepest desire, fold the piece
of paper around a coin, drop it in,
knock 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3,
and imagine the wish coming true.
If it does, I must remember
to give a prayer of thanks.

The last room, full of straw baskets
for cash offerings, boasted a rare

blonde python, at least twenty feet long.
The snake was out of her cage
and her keeper was letting her bathe
in the puddle of rainwater
on the side of the courtyard.
She was newly molted,
a pattern of yellow gold diamonds,
like the color of the sun
in a child's drawing, dramatic
against the albino white skin.
The reptile performs dances
with a priestess
during ritualistic ceremonies
and, sometimes, represents
a serpent-god. The python resisted
being put back into her cage.
Voodoo is a religion that was born
from the brutal contact
between Africans and the French
in Haiti, a sacred hidden practice
among slaves who were persecuted,
maturing into a strange mixture
of the 6,000-year-old Vodun religion
and Catholicism. As I left,
a man asked if he could take a picture
of the portrait hanging in the lobby.
Then he changed his mind.

Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen

Marie birthed fifteen children.
Some say one girl
looked exactly like her.
Mother and daughter also
shared the same name.
Others say Marie used magic
to suspend age, appearing
eternally youthful, like statues
of saints and vampires. Some say
this daughter became a Voodoo
Priestess too; others whispered it
was the same woman all along
who could appear in more
than one place at one time.
It was rumored that she owned
the Black Mirror which allowed her
to travel back and forth in time
and that she lived for more
than one hundred years.

She was born either in Saint Domingue
or New Orleans, in the mid 1790's.
The illegitimate mulatto daughter
of a well-to-do white planter and
oppressed female slave
became a free woman of color,
in a segregated society,
with African, Indian, French and Spanish
blood in her veins. A hairdresser
to wealthy white women who told her
their intimate secrets and fears,
until, one day, she was asked to use
her powers to help a customer's son
escape an almost certain murder conviction.
She made a deal that if she successful,
she would get that family's mansion.
And in this way she did.

Her reputation and business grew--
adept with a variety of charms and potions,
such as a gold arrow that would cause
a person to fall in love, or a lead arrow
that would create hate. Her readings
became fashionable. Slaves and servants

brought her stories about their masters
out of respect. Even the Catholic Church
feared Madame Laveau. She was allowed
to hold paganistic rituals behind the church
where she attended Mass every day.
She anointed herself the Pope of Voodoo.

She idolized the Virgin Mary,
and performed acts of charity in her name,
visiting the sick in prisons, tending the wounded
during the Battle of New Orleans, assisting
in combating an epidemic, and helping
many poor blacks for free.

On the banks of the bayou
or on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain,
on the Eve of St. John's day,
men came to watch her dance naked
in the moonlight, with her snake,
Zombi, coiling around her.
Some said the reptile was the serpent-
God Damballah. She charged admission
to the orgiastic event that combined
Holy Water, incense, Christian prayers,
and a boiling cauldron of water, salt,
black pepper, a black cat, a black rooster,
various powders, a snake sliced
into three pieces representing the Holy Trinity,
in a ceremony of feasting, singing, swimming,
and a sermon followed by sex.

Vesta

Goddess of the Hearth,
symbol of the home,
never depicted, not even
in myths, the sacred flame
was the symbol of her presence.
Each city had a public hearth where
the fire was never allowed
to go out. For each new city,
the founders carried burning
coals from the public hearth
of their mother-city.
All newborn children
were ritually carried
around Vesta's hearth before
being received by the family.
Every meal began and ended
with an offering to Vesta,

The Vestal Virgins,
on the other hand,
were allowed neither
heterosexual romantic love
nor even the chance
to fulfill lust of any kind.
Drawn from the ruling class,
they had to be absolutely chaste
for thirty years. These priestesses
guarded Vesta's fire, lived together,
dressed simply at the *Atrium Vestae*,
and were legally emancipated
from their father's authority
so the church could take over.
There was prestige in having one
of the few full time positions
in Roman religion. But, if a
Vestal broke her vow of chastity,
she was condemned
to be buried alive
in the *Campus Sceleris*,
the Field of Wickedness.
Darkness, no way out,
running out of air, screaming
with no hope, just before
suffocation.

Every March 1, the *Vestales*
renewed the fire. Every June,
there was a week-long
celebration dedicated to Vesta,
center of atrium and home .
Vestalia was the only time
of the year the *penus Vestae*,
the curtained *sanctum sanctorum*,
of her temple was opened.
On the first day of the festivities
the women made sacrifices
not for the faint of heart,
removing the unborn calf
from a pregnant cow.
In return, Vesta gave omens
to women of Roman households--
when they threw offerings
into the fire, the women learned
of the future from the way
the gifts burned.

Vesta's fire burned
until 391 A.D.
when the Emperor
Theodosius I
forbade public
pagan worship.
The myths say that Vesta's
weakness was that
she couldn't fall in
love. I wonder why
they say it was
a weakness.

Mother Daughter Bond

“But, clearly, it is safer to subvert a myth that no longer compels belief.”
Sarah Way Sherman

In magical tradition,
I light white candles--
vanilla, cedarwood.
I eat bread and corn.

I read an ancient Greek story,
perhaps real, maybe imagined,
a matriarchal utopian myth:
Demeter and Persephone,
a dual protagonist
mother and daughter.
Persephone is almost
a woman, straying
as she picks flowers--
the god of the underworld's
chariot suddenly appears,
Pluto snatches her,
and descends.
While Demeter is on
a grief-stricken search,
harvests wither,
fertility wanes.
The gods appeal to Zeus,
Persephone's father,
Pluto's brother,
ruler of the gods,
and he convinces Pluto
to restore daughter to mother
for most of the year.

An offering
on Candlemas,
to celebrate
the Roman goddess, Ceres,
the earth and vegetation goddess,
the mother who illuminated
the darkness of Hades with candles,
searching for the king of the underworld,
god of the dead, in order to find the daughter
he had stolen and hid in his underground realm,
the young beautiful corn goddess, Proserpina.

He had tempted her with a pomegranate,
the symbol of eternal marriage.
During the time she searched, Ceres allowed
nothing to grow on earth. No harvests
until mother and daughter were united,
only then summer comes,
but Proserpina has to spend a third
of every year with Hades
as his wife; while Ceres mourns
her daughter, the barren seasons fall.

I burn the candles
to give the sun strength,
trying to chase away
the last dark clouds of winter.
Storms keep coming—snow, wind,
ice—every weekend for weeks.
But the groundhog has predicted
an early beautiful spring
and a mild, enjoyable summer.

I've been both,
daughter, mother,
repeating the cycle,
unbreakable love.

Patriarchy Unleashed

Oh Gaia, what have they done to you?
What have they done to me?
They've even changed the spelling
of your name. I refused those who
wanted to change mine at my wedding.
But the other changes, they came.
Patriarchy diminished us, fearful of
our powers of creation and destruction,
tried to limit us to our ability
to reproduce. They put one male
god in your place, and a world
of men trying to keep me down.

And what of our daughters?
Yours is hardly mentioned anymore
even though she, too, was a goddess,
in fact or myth, a titan of the mind.
Mnemosyne, inventor of words. Mine,
Sarah, has fared better, for some progress
has been made, and I have taught
both my son and my daughter
that men and women are equal.
But when I was three months pregnant
with her, I had to pretend I wasn't
to get a lowly job as a bank clerk.

Gaia, we share the role of grandmother,
for your daughter gave birth to the nine muses:
My one granddaughter, Arabella,
is a beautiful mixed-race charmer; I am her
white maternal grandmother; her paternal
grandmother is Taiwanese, goes by
the Chinese nomenclature, Ama.
Gaia, were you the one who saved Arabella
from possible infanticide? An American
future holds equal opportunity, if she can
push the inevitable sexism and racism aside.

You, mother earth, have been ravaged,
and now I fall into the pejorative category
of crone or hag: used up, by-gone, arcane
and archaic, just like they say about you.

But back in the day of your great power,
when the son you created became your husband
and displeased you by keeping you from your children,
you arranged for the removal of his genitals.
My husband fared better than yours for he
only has to give me part of his money each month.
Unlike the maimed Uranus, who took refuge
in the sky, my ex still gives his penis on occasion,
and his balls every minute of every day,
to his former mistress, now his girlfriend.

I am the one who is abandoned, I am the one
who bore his children that he begged me to have.
Though some say I have nothing left to offer,
oh Gaia, I refuse to believe any of them
and what they think about me, Nancy,
or what they think about you, Gaia,
Both divine and human females need to be
named, and telling our stories does matter.

The Primordials

All-mother, Universal Mother, Earth Mother, the eldest of all beings, Gaea emerged out of Chaos—out of the confused mass, darkness, and void, She arose, the goddess of all things, She who gives and takes lives. As She slept she gave birth to her son, Uranus, the sky god. Uranus gazed down upon her fondly from the mountains and showered her secret clefts with fertile rain; she bore grass, flowers, trees, and birthed a stunning array of birds and beasts to populate the earth. The rain also made the rivers flow and filled hollow places, which became lakes and seas. Then She mated with her son/husband, Uranus, the sky god, who denied his children birth with such an overwhelming embrace of Gaea, the earth, that she could not release her offspring. Gaea, as mother, could not stand it, and She had Uranus castrated; sky was separated from earth.

His blood fell upon her and she conceived The Furies, those who walked in darkness, avenging Goddesses, who pursue and punish evil-doers. Gaea later fought and lost the last philosophical war to reassert divine female leadership over the heavens as well as maintain matriarchy on the earth.

Gaea's daughter, Mnemosyne, goddess of thought, coupled with Zeus for nine nights to become mother of the muses, the source from which all human culture—art, history, and science—begins. At the Oracle of Trophonius, a spring was dedicated to Mnemosyne, the mortals who came to consult the Oracle had a choice afterwards, to either keep their memories by drinking from the spring of Mnemosyne, or forget their past by drinking from her sister's spring, the Spring of Lethe.

Gaea's granddaughters/Mnemosyne's daughters, The Nine Muses, were divine singers whose music delighted their father Zeus and the other gods. Not only artists, they presided over thought in all its forms: eloquence, persuasion, knowledge, mathematics, poetical faculty as divine gift. Each of the nine sisters have

a name: Calliope, Clio, Euterpe, Melpomene,
Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, Urania, Thalia.
muses of epic, lyric, love, and sacred poetry;
tragedy, comedy, songs and dance; history
and astronomy--all the arts and sciences.
The holy goddess Grandmother Gaea, She alone
was the awesome creator who also destroyed.
She, her daughters, her granddaughters,
inspire both adoration and terror.
Not limited to the body,
not only of the mind,
I go back to the original divine females
to call upon as muses.

Borders

At not-yet-fifty,
I have crossed
almost all the borders
within motherland—
daughter, mother, grandmother.
Patriarchally speaking,
maiden, mother, crone—
desirable, necessary, all used up.
But in Wicca,
all are good women,
becoming wise women,
bearers of an alternative
feminine tradition
of communal power,
feared by the churches of today.
Women goddesses
investing in close social
relationships, touching
the holy in the human bodies
of family, friends, even strangers,
making deep connections
with the natural divine universe,
flowers, trees, mountains, water,
every morning, sunrise
every night, sunset
the monthly re-appearances
of the phases of the moon
have yet to fail me.
I choose to partake
in the traditional wisdom
of this lost world,
yet I also want to be
an exception
to what is expected,
operating on the margins
of language and culture,
standing side-by-side
with those labeled as witches,
madwomen, hysterics,
or whores.

Native Wisdom

In these ancient myths,
when animals could talk,
the world was dark and cold.
It was Grandmother Spider
who brought light and warmth
to many tribes, including
the Cherokee.

There are multiple stories.
In some she is a water spider,
she can run on top of water
or dive down to the bottom,
black downy hair,
red stripes on her body.
In that story
she steals the fire
from an island,
in another the sun is on
the other side of the world.
In every story
she makes pottery
to keep the fire or sun
contained, and spins a web
so that she can get
back home. Just like
the place that she came from,
those in the places that she goes,
don't notice her. This is how
she succeeds, where others
have failed.

She was the first to volunteer,
but small and quiet,
her offers were ignored.
Others tried: the opossum,
the crow, the snake,
the owl, even the bear.
All were burned, turned
black, or had ruined voices.
The animals decided fire
was not for them.

Then the timid humans
offered to take the fire
if Grandmother Spider
agreed to help.
She taught them how to
feed the firesticks and wood
to keep fire from dying,
how to keep fire
in a circle of stone
so it couldn't escape.
She taught the humans
how to make pottery
of clay and fire,
and how to weave
and how to spin,
which Grandmother
was expert at.

And after this death-defying feat,
the Choctaw made a design
to decorate their homes,
a picture of Grandmother Spider,
two sets of legs up,
two sets of legs down,
with a fire symbol on her back,
so their children never forget
to honor Grandmother Spider,
Beautiful Firebringer!

In many native
religions and myths
Spider Grandmother
is creator of the world.
She also made the stars
in the sky. She took
a web she had spun,
laced it with dew,
threw it into the sky,
the dew became stars.

Bella

She is-----I love
daughter/mother.
Now another link
in the family chain,
granddaughter.
She is-----I love.
We're all different
and we're all the same.
In the name
of sisterhood,
I must warn them
being body can want,
I must keep reminding
them of the power
of their minds.
I work against the heft
of culture. We have
beauty of connection, that
is close to some
kind of truth, more
than a poem can tell.

I have a new name now,
it is Grandma (Call)--
because my mother
and my paternal grandmother
each took her husband's name,
and I did not,
I have inherited
my late mother's
and grandmother's
name.

VITA

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