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MERMAID SONG:
THE NOTEBOOKS OF THE WRITING WOMAN

by

GIANNA WARD-VETRANO

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2017

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Mermaid Song:
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by

Gianna Ward-Vetrano

Advisor: Wayne Koestenbaum

This thesis is built on the model of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, that is, it is a feminist project of holistic integration that does not reject fracturing, ambiguity, or contradiction, but aims to attain a more complex and thus truer portrait of the woman writing. Lessing's notebooks examine conflicts between communism and capitalism, racial conflict in Africa, conflict between men and women, and the conflict between the protagonist Anna Wulf's identity as a woman and her identity as a writer, each of which she then attempts to integrate into the singular golden notebook of the title. I propose to have three 'notebooks,' one on the subject of the home, both the site of refuge and the site of exile, of solitude and of isolation, the second on the subject of failure, which is simultaneously a necessary element of writing and its possible extinction, and the third on the subject of love, as both a liberating and an imprisoning emotion, both an incitement to write and the limitation of free autonomy. Each chapter uses a circular structure, in which the fragment, the poem, flash-fiction pieces, recipes, film scenarios and short stretches of autobiography mingle with passages of analysis of literature, film, and music in order to arrive at richer conclusions, creating the impression of a scrapbook or multivalent diary. The literary, cinematic, and musical sources are eclectic. The final chapter, or 'golden notebook,' then unites these threads, seeking to create a vision of the writing woman that negates neither her literary nor her feminine status. Both the form and the content reject the idea of an aspirational model of feminism, in which the female writer must be exceptionally talented, successful, and serenely happy, a utopian role model that admits of no uncomfortable truths. Also to be discarded is any notion of a monolithic and conciliatory conclusive statement about who and what the writing woman is that could be transformed into a prescriptive model for how to be a writing woman.

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I would also like to thank Nancy K. Miller, who graciously allowed me to experiment with the fragmented notebook form as part of my coursework for her class, and Patricia Clough, who introduced me to the work of Anne Boyer.

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I dedicate this thesis to Nonnie:
I'm certain your poems were better than they said.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Home: The Green Notebook	7
Chapter 2: Failure: The White Notebook	23
Chapter 3: Love: The Red Notebook	39
Chapter 4: The Writing Woman: The Golden Notebook	57
Bibliography	63

Introduction

“I’ll start a new notebook, all of myself in one book.”

-Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 607

In this thesis, I propose to address the question of what it means to be a writing woman. In so doing, I take for my model Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, and if I am successful, these linked notebooks that I write will together amount to a feminist project of holistic integration that does not reject fracturing, ambiguity, or contradiction, but aims to attain a more complex and thus truer portrait of the woman writing. Lessing’s notebooks examine conflicts between communism and capitalism, racial conflict in Africa, conflict between men and women, and the conflict between the protagonist Anna Wulf’s identity as a woman and her identity as a writer, each of which she then attempts to integrate into the singular golden notebook of the title. I propose to have three ‘notebooks,’ one on the subject of the home, both the site of refuge and the site of exile, of solitude and of isolation, the second on the subject of failure, which is simultaneously a necessary element of writing and its possible extinction, and the third on the subject of love, as both a liberating and an imprisoning emotion, both an incitement to write and the limitation of free autonomy. Each chapter uses a circular structure, in which fragments, poems, flash-fiction pieces, recipes, film scenarios, and short stretches of autobiography mingle with passages of analysis of literature, film, and music in order to arrive at richer conclusions, creating the impression of a scrapbook or multivalent diary.

In her introduction to *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing describes her project, and the parallel project of her protagonist, as a means of deconstructing in order to reconstruct. “[Anna] keeps four [notebooks], and not one because, as she recognizes, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness... from

their fragments can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*” (Lessing, vii). This enterprise evades utopianism, for it rejects the monolithic and absolute, and this rejection is, in essence, my own project’s *raison d’être*. Both the form and the content of this thesis reject the idea of an aspirational model of feminism, in which the female writer must be exceptionally talented, successful, and serenely happy, a utopian role model that admits of few, if any, uncomfortable truths. Also to be discarded is any notion of an unqualified and conciliatory conclusive statement about who and what the writing woman is that could be transformed into a prescriptive model for how to be a writing woman. For as Alice James so wisely observes, “Emotional expression is infinitely rich and varied of form – the moonlight causes a Yankee butcher to say to his wife – ‘It’s such a beautiful night I can’t lie still another minute for I must go out and do some slaughtering’” (James, 137)!

Further, this project is not an exercise in self-expression as therapy, “[a]s if the only possible reason for a woman to publically reveal herself could be self-therapeutic” (Kraus, 215). In so far as I am one of the subjects, one of the writing women, of these notebooks, whatever of a personal nature is revealed is laid bare in the interest of a wider understanding of who and what the writing woman is, for my own circumstances and conditions as a writing woman make me one of a community that, by virtue of our common project, demands at least a degree of self-analysis. “Subjectivity will be convulsive” (Boyer, 8) and it must be multiple. “To refuse a bookkeeperly transparency is to protect the multiplicity of what we really want. Like the body’s books, like the public’s records, literature is just left there, open, as if its openness, its transparency – the ‘anybodiness’ of its reader – is anything like the truth. But in conspiracy, veracity”

(Boyer, 36). I request collusion, on the part of the reader, in this refusal of straightforward argument, for you too are implicated, participatory, in this project.

In the final chapter, or ‘golden notebook,’ that pulls together and interweaves these diverse threads, I seek to create a vision of the writing woman that negates neither her literary nor her feminine status, but this figure is not to be a total representative. At the same time, she is not entirely particular either. By permitting the figure to be fractured, fragmented, contradictory, multiform, and various, she can occupy the space between the monolithic universal and the limited particular. Lessing writes that she understood “that nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one’s own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can’t be yours alone” (Lessing, xiii). Such an idea, expressed by a woman, has a radical dimension that it would lack if spoken by a man. “I see in you that part of me which is you” (Nin, 12). As a writing woman, what I am, who I am, cannot but coincide with what and who other writing women are. By approaching this figure slantwise, through the cracks and fissures that proliferate in the fertile spaces between notes, one spans the particular and the universal, the unique and the shared. The gulf is bridged: I neither universalize myself nor deny my commonality with others of my vocation and gender. Subject is equally object and object is equally subject; as in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, “we think we are looking ‘through’ her but then discover we are looking ‘at’ her” (Rhodes, 57), and vice versa. I am simultaneously myself and other, the writer and the written of, the author and the character, the looker and the looked at. You, too, the reader, are both yourself and other, the reader and the read of.

While John David Rhodes expresses the wish that his book on Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* "will explore, and, I hope, dissolve some of [its] mythic ambience" (Rhodes, 14), I resist and reject the impulse to dissolve any "mythic ambience," even as I embrace exploration. Within the mythical, mysterious, strange, irreducible, puzzling, weird, there is meaning and significance that is lost if those qualities are atomized in an analysis that makes no allowance for them; if one washes a red dress with bleach, the dress irrevocably loses its color. In seeking to explore, I do not seek to colonize a particular site of expression, but to find a sense of citizenship there, to belong equally with other writing women, even as we are different, even as we are the same, for "evidently, expressly of absurd contradictions is woven our most profound life" (Marghieri, 108).¹

This is a project that demands courage, for writing is revelation as much as creation and I am afraid of revealing myself, for "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (Lorde, 42). However, as a woman and as a writer, I can choose to write in secret or I can take the risk that these notebooks will give birth to yet more notebooks, that my voice will swell into polyphony, that one woman, acknowledging that she is both uniquely singular and one of many, will multiply. "In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation" (Lorde, 43). If my voice is vital, so is yours, and so is that of every

¹ "...evidentemente, proprio di assurde contraddizioni è tessuta la nostra vita più profonda" (Marghieri, 108). All translations from the Italian are my own and any errors or inaccuracies are, likewise, my own.

writing woman. A book is nothing if not a world, perhaps small or limited, but a world nonetheless, and to create a world is to fill a black void with riotous life.

Since I choose the form of a notebook, I choose open-endedness: I make no claims to have presented a work that exhausts the possibilities for exploration, analysis, and expression. A notebook is alive: it cannot be finished; it can only be set aside. My hope is to kindle a spark, to lay the foundation for a lifelong project of observing, reflecting upon, and writing about the significance of this still-strange identity: the writing woman. But further, it is in the form, rather than its contents, for which there are infinite possibilities, that the meaning is to be found. Just as Maya Deren believed that “the interest of a real work of... art... consists less in any set of contents that it contains, or any feeling it might convey, and more in the force of the artwork’s form” (Rhodes, 94), so I believe. Or, as Chris Kraus writes of Arnold Schoenberg, “When the form’s in place, everything within it can be pure feeling” (Kraus, 101).

The notebook, by its very nature, refuses linearity in favor of plethoric abundance. It engages in an alchemical process, for in its endless accretion of fragments, its perpetual open-endedness, it permits past, present, and future to coexist in a timeless space. This is the realm of the fleeting, the evanescent, the strange truths that can be seen only out of the corner of one’s eye, and yet it captures these ephemerality, preserving them as insects in amber. This magic quality of the notebook, this alchemy, consists in its ability to mingle the transient and the enduring. If we are all writing in the sand, those letters preserved in the pages of a book are those that will endure at least one passing of the tide. The woman writing, conjured in these pages, is a figure ancient and infantile, solid and intangible, particular and universal, creating, being created, having been created, about to

be created. Once these notes, written and bound together, come to be, “from their fragments can come something new” (Lessing, vii), my own golden notebook, and perhaps, *your* own golden notebook.

Go forth, little book,
And find others of your kind,
Find your sisters and mothers,
And to yourself them bind.

Hide in corners, and in closets,
Bureau drawers, and attic shelves.
Open up your secret pages
And be one with all their selves.

If you die, like a human,
You die still incomplete.
Be a comfort, but be ruthless,
Both mirror, but also sweet.

Whether a surrogate lover,
Or mother, or faithful friend,
In you, the limits are infinite,
As long as you refuse to end.

I. A Home of One's Own

With the changeable material of words arranged on a page, a home, where one may be lacking, can be built. "I remind myself all the time of a coral insect building up my various reefs of theory by microscopic additions drawn from observation, or my inner consciousness, mostly" (James, 109). This home is both fortress and wayside inn, for this home at least is impervious to the predations that may be visited upon the body, but it may also admit whoever its mistress chooses to admit. The caller at the door cannot force his way in. I speak not only of one's house, of the place where one lives out one's days, for a home is more than that. The home in its many meanings belongs to one "as the shell belongs to the mollusk that lives within it. You formed the shell with your secretions, carved in its folds there is your history, the house-shell wraps you, it's above you, around you" (Tamaro, 35).² Yet, is it so safe? There is a porousness in intimacy. Given the key once, a familiar might creep in unexpectedly and plunder.

The woman who belongs to a family of writers can be impressed into the background, a font of literary wit, but one without substance or shape. "H[enry], by the way, has embedded in his pages many pearls fallen from my lips, which he steals in the most unblushing way, saying, simply, that he knew they had been said by the family, so it did not matter" (James, 212). Alice James, surely the intellectual equal of her accomplished brothers, serves as an unacknowledged source; Henry wanders, secure in the belief that he has a full right to be there, in the treasure caves of her imagination, plundering with impunity, just as he plunders his own. Were Alice to do the same, would

² "...come la conchiglia appartiene al mollusco che ci vive dentro. Hai formato la conchiglia con le tue secrezioni, incisa nelle sue volute c'è la tua storia, la casa-guscio che ti avvolge, ti sta sopra, intorno" (Tamaro, 35).

Henry have submitted with such sardonic grace? For a woman, this plundering is a time-honored tradition. If she is the property of her father, brothers, husband, then her claim to her thoughts, her speech, her written words threatens to be a weak one.

The home is a sort of condition; it is the situation and the bounded space of the woman writer at work, equally a cage and a portal to every outside there has ever been or ever will be. She is constricted, thrust into the home, and yet it is only there that the constraints under which she lives in the outside world can be wrestled away. “Her misery doesn’t require acts. Her misery requires conditions” (Boyer, 1). The pain of a woman, as a woman, just as the pain of a writer, as a writer, is not to be identified with the acts of being that define womanhood or the writer’s vocation. Rather, the actions taken are those that, from within the condition of the home, enable the person within the home to be a woman, to be a writer. As Virginia Woolf argued in 1929, if a woman is ever to attain the same freedoms and prerogatives of the male writer, she “must have money and a room of her own” (Woolf, 4), that is, she must have a home where she can let loose her mind.

To obtain these advantages – an income and a private space – does not equalize her position with men, for a man may walk out the door and write with impunity in public spaces, but a woman must think of her safety. Do I truly have the freedom to write if I am subject to lewd comments, groping, and far worse when I venture into a public space? The private space, that room, that *home*, is essential for a woman in a way that it is not for a man, for that space also functions as a safe space. Possessed of a home, the woman can unclench her grip, cease keeping watch. She can dismiss the sentries of attention that in most spaces she must rely on, merely to stay in one piece.

The home is the haven of dreams, dreams which are the close cousins, the incestuous parents of writing, for “dreams are more like writing than not writing in that they are not intruded upon in their moments by the necessities of all the paid work, care work, social expectations, romantic love or talking to people” (Boyer, 45). Yet, to dream, one must sleep, and to write, one must be permitted to occupy one’s own mind. True: there are those who have the rare ability to withdraw, to traverse their own imaginary amid the bustle and demands of the outside world. I do not argue that women should remain always in the home, but rather that the home serves as a singular place, if she may lock herself up in it, where the violence of the patriarchal world without cannot leer at her from every corner.

The home does not produce the writer, however. It must be an active, chosen occupation on the part of the woman driven to it. While the home provides shelter, privacy, solitude, it does not remove the stones from the path trodden through the wild lands of the imagination. Then there is the question of use, for it is easy to think that “it is probably more meaningful to sew a dress than to write a poem” (Boyer, 29), but it is also undeniable that such an idea takes on urgent dimension only when it is a question of whether it is more meaningful *for a woman* to sew a dress than write a poem. Of the man, such a query simply is never posed. Though few girls of the nineteenth-century could boast of the literary, philosophical, and ethical education furnished to the Alcott women and their fictional counterparts, the Marches, their accomplishments depended on their own efforts, and those efforts could fail. “In *Little Women*, even the meek and accommodating Beth admits in despair that her choice of a domestic life has resulted more from a failure of talent and imagination than a vision of fulfillment” (Matteson,

341). There is no question that a life within the home can stifle, as well as nurture, but that room of one's own for which Woolf argued is located within the home, a world within a world, an independent realm that lies, perhaps secret, in the domestic sphere.

II. Rabbit

Somewhere
in the great wilderness
I heard a rabbit shriek.
The sound
of smallness writ large.

That sound
(that shriek)
like an ax being sharpened;
and it glimmers
in the dark greeny purple
of this dense
wilderness.

The tingling, soft fur
may be harvested only
from soft
and moribund
flesh.

III. Home Movies

◆ *Meshes of the Afternoon* is a home movie, a film made within the confines of the home and out of the relationship of two people, bonded as a family, a wife and her husband. “The film seems to spring frictionlessly from a utopia of domestic creativity” (Rhodes, 47). It is rare for a film to be ‘written’ in the sense of *Meshes*, for it is rare for a film to emerge, a butterfly from its chrysalis, from the home, from the site of the domestic and private. Only two people, Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, created this film; even its distribution was handled by Deren, rather than a distribution company. In this sense, *Meshes* is as much domestic novel as experimental film. In this twentieth-century

iteration of the form, the reality of the home is magnified, amplified, rendered both mysteriously abstract and concretely specific; domestic realism transforms into domestic hyper-realism.

◆ It is from the home that stories emanate and it is from this site that women's writing has historically been anchored. Emma Thompson, both as the screenwriter and acting as the protagonist, Elinor, of *Sense and Sensibility* in a manner triangulates the story, drawing a direct line between the author of the story and the young woman at its center, for both Thompson and Elinor are the repositories for all of the other character's stories. It is to Elinor that Colonel Brandon confesses his love for Marianne and confides the true nature of Willoughby's villainy; it is to her that Marianne divulges her love for Willoughby and her despair over his infidelity; Mrs. Dashwood, Mrs. Jennings, Lucy Steele, all repose their trust in her discretion, thus depositing with her the stories of their lives. It is also Elinor who perceives the actual stories behind deceptions: she recognizes Willoughby's guilt when he claims to have urgent business in London, Edward's agonized determination to keep his word against his inclination, Fanny's avaricious control of John Dashwood, and Lucy's manipulative stratagems. Though Elinor is similarly discrete in Jane Austen's original novel, she does not play this central role of confidant, the one character who has a genuine understanding not only of what the other characters do, but why they do it. In this way, Elinor and Thompson in her role as the screenwriter merge and yet retain a doubled-ness that enriches the film and also makes Elinor, despite the fact that she herself is not a writer, a figure of the woman writer. From the confines of country estates and the chaperonage of Mrs. Jennings, Elinor perceives the threads that

bind those around her and those that pull them apart; from the home, the woman writer travels through the means of stories.

◆ In Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table*, Janet Frame's writing is both sheltered and limited by her home. Her family cherishes Janet's poetry, listening to her read with bright eyes; her father gives her a bound notebook when her teacher praises her poem; and when she is awarded a pass to the library as a prize, she brings home one book each for her family members, inviting them into the literary wonderland where she feels infinitely more comfortable than in the real world. Yet, at home, she has little privacy, sharing not only a bedroom but a bed with her sisters, who whine at her when she would rather work than have a lark; more importantly, staying at home permits her natural shyness to hermetically seal her inside of herself, and that same intense shyness that closes her off to other people as effectively as though she lived on the moon is portrayed, more than anything else, as the strangeness that leads to her eight-year stay in a psychiatric hospital. Without the anchor of home, Janet cannot write, but unless she leaves, she remains trapped in the same ensnaring Arcadia of her youth, literally bound to beds and chairs, suspended in an antiseptic space. It is one of the great pleasures of *An Angel*, in contrast to most portrayals of the tormented lives of poets, that the final frames are of a smiling Janet, home again, at her desk, having traveled away and returned, writing.

◆ Gull Cottage in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* welcomes Gene Tierney's young widow, beckons her in with its echoes of ghostly laughter and its flickering gas lights. The home is the site of creativity, for it is the site where the voice of the seaman whose fabulous life forms the basis for her "Blood and Swash" can be heard. A layer cake of homes: house, ghost lover, book, the sites of escape for Lucy Muir from the onerous demands of duty.

But is the sea captain real, or is he Lucy's character? Perhaps both. But, unquestionably, Lucy's escape from her nagging in-laws to the solitary seaside cottage enables her ability to write. While "Blood and Swash" is the story of Daniel Gregg's life, it is not the first story Lucy Muir has written. She has written before, as a girl, while still living in the shelter of her girlhood home. Once in her own house, whimsical and chock-full of nautical paraphernalia, Lucy takes up her pen and writes again, writes a novel that no one believes she could possibly have written. If Gull Cottage is a haunted house, it is haunted by a love that is as much story as emotion, as much creative endeavor as romantic dream.

◆ The home may also play a mystical role, without the gothic trappings of ghosts and blown-out candles, portraits that seem to move in the twilight and sad, moaning winds coming down the chimneys. In Sarah Polley's autobiographical documentary, *Stories We Tell*, the home is the epicenter of a familial volcano, long dormant. The cherished youngest daughter of a widowed father, Sarah is equally the unfamiliar, almost faceless child of her mother's abandoned lover. Within the confines of the house of her childhood, the tender skin of long-held secrets can be exposed, the onion can be peeled and not wither. A space opens up, where two fathers can both be fathers, both be the beloveds of Sarah's mother. The last traces of a vanished woman are hidden in the walls. The contraband child, hidden like a pixie's baby in the cradle, imbues the home with its story: without her need to tell that story, it remains a mere house.

IV. Memory Box

The memory is infatuated with narrative; it seeks out a pattern, a sense, an arc, to create order out of utter chaos.

I wonder what determines the *selection* of memory, why does one childish experience or impression stand out so luminous and solid against the, for the most part, vague and misty background? The things we remember have a *first-timeness* about them that suggests that that may be the reason of their survival (James, 127-8).

There are images that burn in a bright twilight and I cannot give the reason, only guess. The frozen corpse of a squirrel, exposed underneath the melting snow, its eyes strangely bright under a carapace of ice and its fur stiff and sparkling. The funeral rites held for it were unconsciously pagan. The burnt yellow of a honeysuckle, drooping in the heat; I squeezed its heart and dripped its sweetness into my mouth, and there were other children with me, one of whom is long dead now. Allegra's paw flared like a parasol, her claws like silver bangles that scratched from my forehead to my right cheek (this memory is soundless). Wooden knitting needles in my hands that I'd sanded and waxed myself, with blue knobs at the ends; from out of them with long labor I produced a pale purple hat with a dusty red pompom, a yellow and blue striped case for a flute, a scarf that ran pink and navy, and a collar for a stuffed pig from leftover yarn. The wool smelled of a hot, dry body. When I was two years old, a small chum asked me to marry him and gave me a plastic engagement ring from a cereal box, which I accepted and kept. I performed "What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor" for Papa, complete with music stand, though this was before I could read music, and hand gestures, and he didn't let me see him laugh. Wooden spoons, wooden shoes from Holland, the aroma of basil and olive oil, peonies covered with minuscule ants, the hard stickiness of rosin. I skated arm-in-arm with a girl just my height on a pond, our heads nodding together like two heavy, brown tulips. When

I was about nine, like so many young girls, I made a formal decision, recorded in my diary in pencil: I have decided that I will be a writer. A sentence that could prove either banal or prophetic, but in the moment I felt very grand, and serious, and grown-up. It didn't occur to me that such an ambition involved great difficulties, other than the one of transforming the scenes and stories and emotional rainbows of my imagination into words that had the magical capability of metamorphosing in the imagination of the reader.

Why these? And why do I not write down any others, for there are others, many of them, and I do not write them down. I craft a portrait of myself that opens larger chasms than I want to fill.

Indeed, one would have to know me well, to have an intimate enough knowledge of these small insignificances of my life to recognize them as *my* memories. They are distinguished by their setting: they are American memories, of my life in America, where I have, since birth, been recognized always as the Italian girl. I have dwelt in those betwixt-and-between, liminal spaces since I woke up to myself. As a woman, I am split, as much object as subject. Just so, in America, I feel an alien; in Italy, where I feel at home, my fellow creatures know me as *l'americana*. If I tried to write about home, I could never stop, for the first breath of air in my lungs in the country of my family's blood, the fragments ceased to be fragments and were one.

V. Recipe for Tomato Sauce

Two cans whole, skinned tomatoes
Olive oil, about a jigger-full
Garlic, three cloves, sliced
Sugar, according to taste
Salt, according to taste
Basil, one bunch

Tomato paste, if necessary, for thickening

Put oil and garlic into a pot on medium heat and allow garlic to brown. In the meantime, put the tomatoes in the blender and blend until smooth. Put the tomatoes into the pot.

Wait until hot, then add sugar and salt, tasting as one goes, until the sauce has the desired flavor. Add the basil and stir into the sauce. If the sauce is too thin, add tomato paste to thicken it and stir in well. If the sauce is too thick, put a lid on the pot. Allow sauce to cook on low to medium heat for about an hour, stirring occasionally.

VI. What I Am Not Writing (After Anne Boyer)

I am not writing a manual entitled *How to Be a Woman*, nor *How to Be a Writer*, nor *How to Be a Woman Writer*, because I am not so much interested in how as why, and not so much interested in why as ??? I want to ask the question that slips in between these letters like an eel. I catch the spark it leaves as it swims on, electrifying.

But, I am not writing that question because that question cannot be written, but I can still try to write it even as I know the task is worthy of Sisyphus, except I require the feminine version of this name, which I do not know. Sisyphisia, perhaps.

I am also not writing a story about women who want to escape, or women who want to stay home, or women who succeed, or women who fail, or women who love men, or women who hate men, or women who were not born women, or women who love women, or women who do all these things or don't. I am not writing a memoir, I am not writing a trauma narrative, I am not writing a to-do list, though in some ways that may be closer, because I want YOU to write in this book too.

So, I've admitted I'm writing a book, but I'm not writing an essay, not all the time, and I'm not going to explain the nature of time, or memory, or homesickness, or desire, and I'm not going to propose a theory that can be tested. There are no hypotheses here: only shards of a fractured prism that I smashed so that I could look at the pieces from ever more facets and faces. And it would please me hugely if YOU too would consider smashing a few of these shards, so that we would have yet more shards, and then your shards could get smashed by me, or someone else.

What I'm not writing is a definition, or a peroration because I will not offer absolutes, not to myself, not to YOU, not to anyone. I'm not writing a love letter either because I don't love myself and I'm writing to myself as much as I am to YOU, and I'm also not sure if I love YOU, but I am fascinated by YOU, and maybe YOU are fascinated, just a little, by me too.

VII. Literary Laboratories

The trope of the young woman writer, sprouting her literary wings, is ubiquitous in girls' novels. From the sanctified space of a garret or an isolated bedroom, she scribbles away on scraps of stray paper, or if she is lucky, a bound notebook, staining her fingers with ink and emerging with cobwebs in her hair and in an elated, or ruffled state, depending on the successes and failures of her scriptorial sojourn.

Jo March, of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, is surely the most famous of these heroines. "Every few weeks she would shut herself in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and 'fall into a vortex,' as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace" (Alcott, 342). Jo approaches her task with a steely professionalism. Her room becomes a literary

laboratory, she dons her writerly uniform, “on which she could wipe her pen at will” (Ibid.), and though “her mother...always looked a little anxious when ‘genius took to burning’” (Alcott, 346), Jo works like a Spartan. Lucky, like her creator, to have a family that encourages her pursuits, Jo is able to transform her home, converting her room into a study and her dress into a uniform. When she tries her wings in New York, still, she feathers her homey nest, “...a funny little sky-parlor... so I can sit here and write whenever I like... I took a fancy to my den on the spot” (Alcott, 431). Though Jo may rebel at the usual domestic tasks, only slowly reconciling herself to those domestic exigencies visited upon her by her gender, in her room she hollows out a new, and transgressive space, that expands the realm of housewifery to include both the literary and the professional.

L.M. Montgomery’s Emily Byrd Starr is a more melancholic creature, as stubborn as Jo, but far less confident in her own abilities. While Jo revels in playing the villainous Sir Hugo in high boots and painted-on moustache, Emily lacks the transgressive confidence of a woman prepared to emulate a man. She seeks out guidance and approval, choosing for her lodestars cultured men. In *Emily’s Quest*, her ambitions are nearly annihilated when she mistakes Dean Priest’s bitter and vicious assessment of her first novel as an honest appraisal of its literary merit rather than a fit of possessive jealousy. Protesting that he tells her the truth for her own sake, he tells her, “‘It’s a pretty little story, Emily. Pretty and flimsy and ephemeral as a rosy-tinted cloud... Fairy tales are out of fashion...How could you write a real story? You’ve never *lived*’” (Montgomery, 51-2). It is the usual objection to women’s writing: it’s just too *imaginative*. Dean gives himself away, though Emily is too hurt to notice immediately, for he claims that “‘Everything has

already been written” (Ibid.). His dislike of the novel is not aesthetic; he dislikes her writing because it takes her away from him. When she writes, she is inaccessible, locked in her room. “The fact that she has written [her novel], has been rapt and remote from him during the six weeks that she wrote it, attests to the strength of her own voice” (Rollins, 185). For Emily, home is a fortress. Ironically, the very ‘flaw’ that Dean finds in her work – the fact that she hasn’t ‘lived’ – permitted her to write in the first place. By ‘living,’ Dean could indicate the sort of things closed to Emily because of her gender, experiences found only outside the confines of the home, but given his aims, it seems more likely that he actually intends ‘living’ as a synonym for loving, and for loving, specifically, Dean, the man who would forbid writing just as he would anything else that detracts from her focus on him.

Yet, this lesson, cruel as it may be, does not bar Emily from writing; rather, it ultimately enforces in her the realization that she is a better judge of her own work than someone who views it as a frivolity and distraction. It is worth noting that she sends out her book to three publishers who refuse it, before she turns to Dean as an arbiter of its worth. “Montgomery makes Emily’s writing success an invitation to her female readers to strive for their own goals” (Epperly, 206). The novel is a rebuttal to those who insist that women’s stories are mere fairy tales, fluff and fantasy and ethereality. Emily perseveres and “*The Moral of the Rose* was a success from the start. The first edition exhausted in ten days – three large editions in two weeks – five in eight weeks” and her friend Miss Royal assures her that she “could never have written [it in New York]. Wild roses won’t grow in city streets” (Montgomery, 178). Emily’s book provides a portal into a world accessible only from within the confined space of a home; her unique access to it

is testament both to the boundlessness of her imagination and the boundedness of her condition as a woman who, in male estimation, hasn't 'lived.'

Grazia Deledda's *Cosima*, in the spare and unadorned house of an uncle, a priest, finds the ideal place to write. "What mattered the humility and the rough welcome of the hut? It served as a refuge only at night, and for *Cosima* in the hours of her writing" (Deledda, 73);³ the house allows her the freedom to seclude herself, while she need only unlatch the rude door to wander in idyllic woods. Simplicity, solitude, beauty, feed the artistic ambition that, surrounded by relatives as dour as a cloud of crows, risks destruction when she publishes a short story in a magazine. Her illiterate aunts descend "to precipitate into the evilly augured house, strewing there the terror of their criticisms and the worst prophecies" (Deledda, 63).⁴ Confined to an attic, dependent on her brother Andrea for her paper and pens, *Cosima* yearns to escape the demands of her overbearing family and interfering community not to leap into the heady cosmopolitanism of a great city but to find a home where she can write without being subjected to those demands. Her story ends, yes, in a city, but she is safely ensconced in a new home, from which she observes "the children, in the still white street, play the game of the ambassador come to ask for a bride" (Deledda, 132).⁵ She escapes to a new inside, from which she can look out on new scenes, but her vantage point remains cloistered in a home, this time, a chosen one. The arrival of flowers from an admirer punctures her contentment, a wafting in of the outside world that threatens to invade the hard-won home; a thorn pricks her and she

³ "Che importava l'umiltà e la rozza accoglienza della capanna? Serviva di rifugio solo alla notte, e per *Cosima* nelle ore delle sue scritture" (Deledda, 73).

⁴ "...precipitarsi nella casa malaugurata, spargendovi il terrore delle loro critiche e delle peggiori profezie" (Deledda, 63).

⁵ "I bambini, nella strada ancora bianca, giocavano al gioco dell'ambasciatore venuto a domandare una sposa" (Deledda, 132).

“thought that life even under the illusion of the most beautiful and rich things hides inexorable claws” (Ibid.).⁶

Though Prue Sarn harbors little professional ambition, Mary Webb’s heroine, more impoverished than her literary sisters, illustrates the power of the pen for an individual who, as a woman and a ‘disfigured’ woman at that (Prue has a cleft palate), chooses to insist on an expression of the self that is wholly her own, un-linked from her duties to parents, brother, farm, community, or church. Written in the dialect Prue speaks, *Precious Bane* is her truth, a humble reckoning and confrontation with her own self. “As soon as I could write, I made a little book with a calico cover, and every Sunday I wrote in it any merry time or good fortune we had had in the week, and so kept them. And if times had been troublous and bitter for me, I wrote that down too, and was eased” (Webb, 5). While the other young women of Prue’s tiny rural town spin and sew, wash and cook, find sweethearts, marry, and bring children into the world, often as not seeing them out of it again, Prue begs an education of Mister Beguildy. Though she hires herself out to write letters for those that can’t, far more important for her is the expansion of her experience into something lasting, books that, even if they are not published, enshrine something of who she was, and mirror the incredible beauty of a woman scorned, disrespected, and in the end nearly lynched for witchcraft on account of “a hare-shotten lip” (Webb, 50).

For each of these young protagonists, the room of their own, the space out of which they can liberate their minds, is anchored in the home. Their bodies remain sheltered, and thus they are freed to write, and freed to write *professionally*. Even Prue Sarn earns a bit of money for the letters written for those who can’t write. It is not merely

⁶ “...pensò che la vita anche sotto l’illusione delle cose più belle e ricche, nasconde le unghie inesorabili” (Ibid.).

privacy, not quiet, not respite from chores and children, that enables this freedom; it is the having of a choice to enter and exit that room as one can and must, to choose when to seclude oneself and roam the wilds of the imagination and when to emerge and gather precious new materials. The woman must hold the key to the lock on her door; chosen solitude is freedom, but imposed solitude is imprisonment. It is the hand that bars the door that determines whether the home is a castle in the air or a fortress under siege.

Failure: The White Notebook

I. The Writing Hour

At five o'clock in the morning, A.'s alarm went off and she dragged herself out of bed, down the hall, and into the kitchen to the coffee-maker, a negative magnet drawn irresistibly to a positive one. The thwack-bang of a metal garbage can thrown back to the pavement and the growl of the truck as it inched up the street drowned out the first raspy purrings of the machine. Febrile sunlight at the narrow window, dry dust in the basil pot on the sill, the basil long since withered and dead, wet grounds spattered over the stained porcelain sink. In the apartment above, the muffled step of a foot in a slipper.

With the slightly iron taste of the coffee seeping into her teeth, A. stood under the shower and rubbed soap over her shoulders. Half-dressed, her skin feels taut against her flesh. A glance at the clock: she has an hour before she should be out the door. Cross-legged on the bed, A. flips open the notebook she keeps on the nightstand. The scrawling of her recorded dream is illegible, skittered pencil zagging across the pale blue lines. A page before, in ink, a mass of disjointed sentences, responses to each news article of the day before. She checks her phone and ignores a text from her mother – Did you hear yet? – since she hasn't.

It's the lone hour before she's sucked up into the metropolitan vacuum, and the minutes are creeping away from her, malevolent creatures making off with the hoarded treasures stolen from sleep before she can eat them up herself. They crawl up and down her bare arms, scavenging crabs, pincers brandished. She tosses the notebook aside and it skims over the comforter down to the floor. She leaves it there, roots out a pair of socks,

speckled with cartoonish quill pens, a gift from her sister, and crouches down to pull them over her gelid feet.

Only a half hour of her time is left. A single, abstract thought squats in her mind, a quivering drop of black ink. She flips to the front of the notebook: a poem, a sketch of Jude Law, a mass of phrases overheard in a café, a tea stain. The weird vertigo of seeing a page of her own writing without remembering putting the pencil to paper, a preview of the posthumous thrills of a ghost.

She will walk out her door, a breathing prison for stories, stories that on that day will not affect their escape. Even as they will rattle at the bones that bind them captive and press against the spongy walls of muscle, pull at the ligaments that hold them fast, the stories will not be released and must bide their time and wait until tomorrow morning when the doors in the tips of her fingers open and are again unbolted for an hour.

II. Liberation of the Creature

Without failure, there is drought. Anaïs Nin writes, in her first book, *House of Incest*, “Every thought or impulse I have is chewed into nothingness. I want to capture all my thoughts at once, but they run in all directions” (Nin, 46). Thoughts are by nature unruly, unbridled, the liberated, sprinting, feral horses of the island of the mind. If one leaps onto the back, without being thrown, even of only one thought alone, something is lost: the wildness, that free unburdened joy. To capture them all at once, to somehow tame them all, is an impossibility, and if it seems possible, it is either the miraculous arrogance of the untried or else that herd of horses was born tamed. And yet, there is no sharper longing than to somehow harness the thought, be one with it, in riding it partake of its strength, its swiftness, its agility. “I want to tell the whole truth, but I cannot tell the

whole truth because I would have to write four pages at once, like four columns simultaneously, four pages to the present one... I would have to write backwards, retrace my steps constantly to catch the echoes and the overtones” (Ibid.).

One must begin somewhere, and yet the greatest fluency hardly confers a perpetual ease. Familiarity with words fails to render them docile, amenable, easily led. “It often happens that after having written a great deal, I myself cannot figure out what I believed myself to be expressing... I start over, I do no better, and yet I go on” (Graffigny, 81-2). There is always a leap forward, and always a miss. That failure deadens and enlivens at once, a will-o’-the-wisp beckoning onward, dangerous, but also the guide to fairy-lands otherwise forever proscribed. To write is to not to withdraw, but to lean into living. “I feel myself being brought back to life by this tender occupation. Restored to myself... I would like to inscribe [this sentiment] on the hardest metal, on the walls of my room, on my clothes, on all that surrounds me, and express it in all languages” (Graffigny, 80). Instead, she recreates the walls, the clothes, and all that surrounds her; she builds up a twin world, which stands as long as her words endure on some page somewhere. That fragile permanence is not perfection, but endurance.

For a woman, it remains a profoundly radical choice to place the expression of one’s self at the highest priority and yet to demote that expression below even the worthy demands of children, partners, and the obligations of existing in a world still hostile to a woman’s voice requires a contortion of the self, a making smaller. In 1889, Alice James wondered when women would know the same liberated sense of self as that taken as a matter of course for a man. “When will women begin to have the first glimmer that above all other loyalties is the loyalty to Truth, i.e., to yourself, that husband, children, friends

and country are as nothing to that” (James, 60). The writer, even if what she writes is of a fictional nature, expresses the psyche, that fleet-footed, evanescent creature, within her. The liberation of that creature is a never-ending and delicate process, one that at times must subsume all other duties, but still we imagine the woman’s psyche is a more docile, retiring animal, more easily resigned to its chains. If a father (writer) neglects his children, forgets birthdays, and remains chained to his desk, then he is not such a good father, but the books, if good enough, make up for the loss. If a mother (writer) neglects her children, sends them to school with a latch-key, and closes the door against them, she is an evil monster, a twisted ogress. Yet, are we not all “[c]reatures born with no chance, as if made of the scraps left over in the great human factory, and thrust forth weaponless to fight in the hideous battle”? (James, 76). No mother, no matter how prepared to sacrifice, can fight that battle for her child, but the attempt, demanded by a society that confuses mother with Madonna, could cost her the voice that bridges the inner self and the body.

Thus, there is nothing for it but to continually try or fall back into shadow, even as we fail, and fail, and fail.

It is precisely this comedy that I don’t know how to act anymore, I come out from it each time mortified, frustrated, discouraged; it’s perhaps because of this, that, for years, I don’t go ‘out and about’ precisely to avoid putting on a mask, if not falsified, certainly limiting; and I seek avidly a truer, more courageous, more intimate colloquy (Marghieri, 164).⁷

⁷ “È proprio questa commedia che io non so più recitare, ne esco ogni volta mortificata, frustrata, avvilita; sarà per questo che, da anni, non vado più <<in giro>> proprio per non portarmi addosso la maschera, se non falsificatrice, sicuramente limitatrice; e ricerco avidamente un colloquio più vero, più coraggioso, più intimo” (Marghieri, 164).

Without failing, we cease seeking, and writing is nothing if not a quest after some as yet unexpressed thing. Success is static; failure goads one onward. Yet, there is always a risk in failure, a risk that one will not merely stumble, or fall, but be swallowed up. If failure were simply a prod, a burbling brook to lightly leap across, deprived of its danger, it would cease to push one forward, for it would be too easy to laze on the shore. Without a mountain to climb, one cannot get any closer to the sky.

There has been a broad consensus in the feminist community that it is essential to raise up one's voice and speak in whatever mode is most germane to the speaker and the occasion. In this collective speaking we are meant to create a sense of communion, of solidarity. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" (Lorde, 41). In speaking up, in breaking silence, Lorde found herself cradled by other women. What is one to do when that community fails us? Or rather (let me speak for myself), what am I to do while that community fails me? There is an artificiality in the common lot of women; solidarity is born of the very conditions which feminism aims to dismantle. The community may materialize, or it may not, but until the need for such a community disappears, women who write inevitably are perceived as speaking not only as a woman and for herself, but as a representative of all women and for all women. One can only fail. Even Audre Lorde could not speak for half of humanity.

There is a terror in speaking out that constricts the wind pipes. It still strikes me as an act of derring-do to use the first-person, for, in a stunning observation, Chris Kraus points out that the third person is "the person most girls use when they want to talk about themselves but don't think anyone will listen" (Kraus, 229). Audacity marks the writing

of a woman, for it is a public revelation of herself, and for centuries it has been her task to efface herself, to make herself small.

The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in [the woman's] case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing? (Woolf, 68)

If she fails, she has humiliated herself; her sincerest efforts are met with ridicule and disdain. The punishment for failure, inevitable as it is, ripples out with the impact of a meteorite, for if she is not only herself, but a representative of her gender, her failure implicates both her individual self and the entirety of her gender. Though I may shake my fist and raise my voice, the echo still reverberates, and reverberates further still when the community of women remains silent. The woman writer has only her own voice, though she may master ventriloquism or various accents. Even when the choral surge is lifted up, there is resentment that it is needed, that so rarely can a female voice be heard as singular, unique, representative of one rather than many. At the same time, a woman's universality is always qualified: she might represent half, but never the whole, of humanity. Even if she makes the leap, attempts (as so many men have done) to speak with the voice of the human being, she strikes into a wall that men can skip over as though it were nothing more than a short step. She is always Woman, but never Human.

One writes reality into being, but for a woman, reality has a prismatic quality. If I make an attempt to state something, to say that something is absolutely true, whatever statement or fact that has issued from my pen retains this prismatic quality, as long as my

gender is known. Still, most “people together... believe a human sentence – one spoken by a man and heard by a woman – can commute the blueness of the sky itself” (Boyer, 49). If one reverses the terms and it is a woman who speaks to a man who hears, then the sentence’s power is fractured apart by virtue of the listener’s refusal to universalize the feminine. If a woman says that the sky is not blue, then she is perhaps mad or perhaps, according to her purely individual perceptions, the sky appears not to be blue; the sky remains blue. If a man says the sky is not blue, the sky has ceased being blue.

III. Rendezvous with a Camera

The WOMAN (in long-shot, in tinted blue and white) stands on a beach at low tide. She wears a black dress that falls to the knee. Her feet are bare and her arms are straight at her sides, her eyes downcast. Two shadows appear on either side of her, tall figures that may be human or inanimate. The shadows disappear. The woman gazes into the eye of the camera. Behind her, in the distance, sea gulls and sandpipers peck at the sand for crabs.

The woman’s feet (in close-up). Her toes clench in the sand.

The toes clench in the sand (pull-in).

The woman (in long-shot), her eyes downcast, raises her right arm, straight, in front of her. Her fist is clenched. She turns it upward. The shadows reappear on either side of her, and wink out. She gazes into the eye of the camera.

The woman’s fist (in close-up). She opens her palm; her fingers are without tension, like the petals of a flower.

In the woman’s palm (pull-in) a solid circle of flame ignites. The fire burns, untouched by the wind. The woman closes her fist. She opens her fist and etched into her

palm is a scar, its edges uneven and still raw, an image of a peony, full-blown. She closes her fist.

The woman (in long-shot), gazing into the eye of the camera, her arm outstretched towards it, palm open. Her shadow can now be seen behind her, wavering against the water. The tide has begun to come in and the edges of the waves lap at her feet.

The woman's feet (in close-up). The waves lap at her ankles.

A peony blooms. At its heart is seen a human palm, on it a scar in the image of a peony. The petals fall through nothingness and land on foamy water.

The woman's face (in close-up), her eyes downcast, underwater. Her hair flows behind her, as an unseen current presses against her.

The woman's feet (in close-up), under the water, clench into the wet sand. She takes a step forward, towards the camera, and a second, third, fourth, fifth step.

The woman's face (in close-up) under the water, is engulfed in flames. She smiles and looks into the camera. Her eyes are crinkled and half-closed with her smile.

The woman (in long-shot), under the water, smiling, holds out her arms to the camera, as though to embrace it. From out of her palms, tiny and then growing to fill the frame, two burning orange birds spread their wings and fly. Red-orange feathers fill the frame. Black.

IV. Mandala

This is fertile ground I walk,
loamy.

The earth impressed into the web
of lines
that cross and counter-cross
my skin.

Terra fantastica, where I hold
citizenship,

but cannot hope to govern,
where
I'm as like to reap chaff
as wheat.
Like Krishna, I open my mouth:
inside,
gaze on the world that grows,
a drop
of teeming universes suspended
within.

V. Subject/Object Swirl

◆ Fantasy and fact are as beauty and ugliness. It is true that within the beautiful there is much that is false and deceptive, just as within the ugly there are depths that hide the strange unseen, that, once sought out, reveal an exquisite hideousness. An education might be as much a gathering stupidity as a growing intelligence, for “who would ever give up the reality of dreams for relative knowledge?” (James, 66). Through dreams, knowledge can be approached at oblique angles, but the bracing light of knowledge is too often fatal to the ethereal dream.

◆ I desperately need “to keep unfashionable experience alive” (Boyer, 72).

◆ Why write? I must. “And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had I maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die” (Lorde, 43). The living body that fails to speak is no more than a ghost.

◆ “If I hadn’t written [this letter] at all then it’s true that my existence would have truly been a failure” (Tamaro, 168).⁸ If one puts words on the page, something that otherwise risks a sudden total erasure, a snuffing out, curtails that risk. A precipice mollifies its steep cliff into a gentle slope that with time may rise again. If one believes that “the only

⁸ “Se non l’avessi scritta per niente allora sì che la mia esistenza sarebbe stata davvero un fallimento” (Tamaro, 168).

master that exists, the only true and believable one, is one's own conscience," (Tamaro, 170),⁹ if one writes, even only to oneself, one can converse with one's own ghost. The words transform into an imperfect twin, an evanescent and yet more enduring replica. I can speak to this twin: she speaks back.

◆ Why write? My voice is soft and hard to hear over the din, but my words on a page are as loud as any others' words. I feel "this incredible urge TO BE HEARD" (Kraus, 91). Maybe, too, I want to complain.

◆ I no longer want to be on a leash, and yet it seems that every object in my hand, that touches my body, transforms and anchors itself, for I am "not a woman without a strap over [my] shoulder or a clutch in [my] hand" (Boyer, 47). Even the pen seems to take root in my desk, the page sticks firm to its fellows. Still, I feel too much akin to objects.

◆ Maybe, too, I don't want to be trapped "between two states of existence, sleep and work," as Sybylla complains in Judy Davis's buttery voice, brooding over the cow's dirty udders, regarding a servant's future when she'd promised herself her brilliant career.

◆ The woman who writes is split and this split is perceivable. It is also thought to be a form of deception, while in fact it is the result of conditions that forbid our viewing subject and object at once, in the same frame. If there are "two different Anne Boyers, one like a cop, the other writing her name at a table" (Boyer, 67), then it is simply because women must, and have become adept at, being both the writer and the figure who stands watch.

◆ In *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley unwinds the gnarled ball of familial truths. Dipping into the past, the nib of her story wakens a whirlpool and suddenly, by looking back, she has fractured apart time itself. It has swirled together. What was true is true and will be

⁹ "L'unico maestro che esiste, l'unico vero e credibile è la propria coscienza" (Tamaro, 170).

true, but the things that were, are, will be true, cannot be true at the same time. But they are. And they are also all lies, too. The small blonde girl builds a snowman that stands perpetually melting.

◆ When I write, I turn to the past and I run forward, my heels the only parts of me that touch the future before it melts. Ink is the blood of the future spilled open on the page.

VI. The Heroine Has It All

To write the perfect heroine one must insist that she, so perfect, and complete could never lose the battle all must fight or love a man who isn't perfect too. But flaws! She must have flaws to spare, or else the reader won't relate, will feel that she's no good, not nice or beautiful. If she's a racist, cast her out, and crush her like a gnat, and if she fails to leave the lover whose bruises adorn her back, let her be killed and serve as warning grim. She hates her corset, wields a sword, insists that (like Calamity Jane) without him she can do. And yet, at the close, she lies in arms that hold her fast because, if not, utopia is dead, and she has failed to have it all. Her capabilities include a flair for repartee. She reads, succeeds, each part she plays she acts with cool aplomb; her gifts are many, her failures few, her waist petite, her brain acute, but not so much that men might find her smarter than themselves, but most of all, *she must be strong*; yes, that's the main idea: so strong that neither age nor death can tear her from her fate as paragon.

VII. A Taste of Humble Cake

M. was cross, out of sorts, and feeling as though the very daisies bloomed to mock her. She had received her twentieth rejection letter the day before, another tepid missive, blandly thanking her for her consideration and primly withdrawing the

magazine's. She lay in the hammock in the backyard, counting the days left before she would return to her cramped apartment and fill her hours with the mundane tasks her employer assured her were essential to the working of the company, the aims of which were, as far as she could tell, to ensure that its employees worked very long hours. That was not fair, she thought to herself. Whatever resentments she nursed she ought to direct at herself, not the people who cut her paycheck. It was hardly the fault of her boss, or her boss's boss, that her stories didn't sell.

The gate creaked and she lifted her head. N. strolled in, hands in his pockets, face sunburnt. She dropped her head and closed her eyes.

"Why do we come back here every year, anyway?" he asked, seeming to marvel at the foolishness of characters on a stage. She didn't answer.

"You've been in a fine mood the past few days. Mind telling a fellow why?"

"Why should I?" She opened one eye to glare at him.

"Because I'm your brother, for one."

"Bilge."

He made a lunge at her foot, she twisted away, clinging to the hammock with her hands. He tumbled over her and landed on the grass. With a sinuous movement she had mastered after twenty-one years of having a brother, she flipped back into the center of the hammock. She peeped over the edge, one eyebrow raised in the expression an old drama teacher had referred to as 'the ruminating villain.' N. laughed and, throwing his arms behind his head, stuck his tongue out at her.

"Very well, then, mum's the word. Though you'll start caterwauling later if you don't let it out now, like a sensible girl."

“Bilge. I don’t caterwaul.”

“You most certainly do. Heard you last night through the wall.”

“Damn.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Well, I wasn’t caterwauling. And if you insist on knowing, another magazine rejected my story.”

“Well, try and try again. Someone’s sure to take it eventually.”

M. sighed. N. sat up and stuck his chin on the edge of the hammock, sighing dramatically and rolling his eyes. M. pushed him over. Lounging on his haunches, he contemplated her.

“It’s not a joke,” she said. “I’ve poured everything into it, and…”

“Well, not everything.”

“What do you mean?” She sat up.

“I mean, everything you write is about people and things you don’t know. You never write about this town for instance, or the family, or anything *real*. It’s all made-up make-believe stuff, all romance and tragedy and derring-do. Nothing you write has anything of *you* in it.”

“That’s the point,” she said. “I don’t want to write about myself. I’m quite boring, and so are moms and dad and you and my friends and everyone else I know. Our lives are just ordinary, workaday lives.”

“But that’s what you *know*.”

“You wouldn’t read that tosh.”

“Course not, but you know the sorts of things I like to read.”

“Yes, I do. You like to read about things you’ve never experienced and never will experience, flights round the world and explorations in the jungle and shipwrecks and so on. You do realize that the men writing those books haven’t actually done all those things?”

“Plenty of them have too.”

“Well, what if I wrote a sea-faring adventure?”

“Ha! You don’t know the difference between a jib and a bowsprit.”

“Neither, dear brother, do you.”

“Be that as it may, I’m not trying to write a novel about it, am I?”

M. slithered out of the hammock and kicked at the dirt. N. leapt up, threw himself headfirst into the hammock, flipped over, and landed on the ground.

“Serves you right,” she threw back, as she headed into the house.

The house was old, and dark on the ground floor, and in the hall, one could believe the world had fallen under a perpetual twilight. M. trudged up the stairs, skipping the creaky step that made an ominous popping sound if her foot landed in the middle of it, and went to the childhood bedroom that her mother was slowly and inexorably converting into a second attic. A stack of kitchen chairs glowered at her next to the bed, blocking what little light arrived from the window. She sat at her desk, pulled out a notebook, and set to work.

That night, long after everyone else had gone to bed, M. slipped the notebook under N.’s door, with a note appended to it. “All about *me*,” was written in loopy letters on it.

The next morning, M. had a slight headache from lack of sleep. Sitting at the breakfast table late, she poured coffee for herself and her brother, who appeared, tousled and tripping over himself, with the notebook tucked under his arm. He tapped it and winked at her, pulling the coffee, the bread loaf, the jam jar, and the sugar towards him with a speed that belied the sleepiness of his expression. As he ate and read, M. tied the curtains back from the window, and a few shy rays of sunshine meandered in.

With a loud yawn, N. shut the notebook and held out his coffee cup to his sister with exaggerated puppy-dog eyes. She held the pot up in the air.

“This was your idea in the first place. Tell, and I’ll pour.”

“All right, then,” he said, gazing lovingly at the stream of coffee filling his cup. “I would bet you could sell this to a women’s magazine.”

She stared at him. He stuck half a piece of bread into his mouth.

“Is that all?”

“I mean, I liked it. But I’m a man, sis, and that sort of thing, well, it’s for women. What I mean to say is, it’s sellable, probably a sure thing I would bet. Wholesome.”

“What you mean is, that it reads like an essay for school.”

“It *is* about your childhood.”

“So you agree it’s boring.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, but that’s what you meant. And I agree. I wouldn’t want to read that stuff, and neither would you. Furthermore, I don’t see what good it does me to write about myself.”

“You took me too literally yesterday,” N. said, rubbing his nose and leaving a streak of jam across it.

“Or maybe I talked to the wrong person,” she said and sashayed out into the yard. She knew that N. was hardly her ideal reader anyway, but she couldn’t quite stick her finger on what irked her so in his advice, the same advice so often given to the young heroines of the books she had idolized as a child. Yet, writing from her own life seemed only to overburden her life, like adding extra layers of heavily sugared icing to a plain loaf – made the whole thing saccharine and rather nauseating.

Looking over the typed pages of her story, her prodigal child sent out and returned so many times, she saw that there were flaws in it: phrases that wouldn’t quite express what she wanted, transitions that wouldn’t come smooth, an infelicitous but very minor inconsistency in one of the character’s motivations. Yet, she was convinced that her story, if not a masterpiece, was a good story. In any case, it was the story she wanted to write, not the life she wanted to live or had lived, but hers just the same. That afternoon, the story made a twenty-first journey to another editor’s desk.

VIII. Fulminating Gold

In dreams, I seek and find a door unlocked
through which I step and breathe the air so sweet,
as sweet as paradise. I wake, am mocked:
the door has shut, transformed to a wall – deceit
achieved, vertiginous, by a hunger, thirst,
an ache that shakes the bones until I’m spent
and sodden, chill with ruth, but from the first
I knew full well that dreams are pain un-pent.
What is that magic hue, that scent that gleams
as though in liquid form a yellow rose
became an ocean and I drowned. Such dreams
as these fragment the mind, and aimless glows
one piece, one shard, of all I lost: the home
that when I woke evaporated, foam.

I. Deck Him Out in Feathers

◆ What does it mean when the muse jumps down from her pedestal and begins to sing for herself? The beloved's voice has a timbre of its own, not always, perhaps never, in harmony with that of the lover. Fanny Brawne says, I love you. Henriette Vogel says, I want to die. Charlotte Buff says, I love, but I love another.

◆ In *Eugene Onegin*, Tatiana stands onstage in her night-dress, her elated face lit by a wavering candle, singing aloud the drafts of her letter, a declaration of love for the dashing, cold Onegin. Her aria is composed of limpid furls of eighth notes, wave after wave of deep-black inkblots on a page and radiantly soaring into the air, bleeding together into tied whole notes on B ♭ (Tchaikovsky, 159). The oboe's sound shadow takes her voice's hand and they dance, exchanging the melodic line, echoing her, anticipating the wild rush of her ecstasies and despairs. The oboe summons Onegin, the lover imagined and called to life through her words. Onegin rejects her; in the moment of her writing, it hardly matters. In being written, her words, doubled, both letters written on a page and notes sung into the silence, call into being a living, breathing love, a creature of ethereal, painful beauty. If Tatiana is seemingly brought to life by her love for Onegin, it is only in the act of writing, of rendering that love real on the page, that she channels the full potency of what she feels and thus blossoms into a person in knowledge of herself. Not love, but written love, holds that vitalizing power.

◆ In Marcel Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Lisa Berndl, a heart-faced Joan Fontaine, in her final hours, writes a letter to Stefan Brandt, a sex-soaked Louis Jourdan, the man she has loved since she was a child. She is dying and she doesn't know whether

the letter will ever be sent, whether Stefan will read it, what he will make of it. This letter oozes fever, the sickly confines of the hothouse. She has lived her life in the hope that she will be the woman who never asked anything of him and now she writes – why? She wonders if “it may become clear that what happened to us has a reason beyond our poor understanding.” And so, she tells him how she worshipped him through the thin walls of their apartment building, listening to him play the piano, how they loved each other briefly, how she bore him a son he never saw, how, when they found each other again, he had become so lost in debauchery that he could no longer place her. He didn’t recognize her face, her voice, her slow and tender manner of speech, the white roses that he declared once to be her flower. He recognizes her only when she tells him his own story and thus recognizes himself. Love submerged surfaces and shows its unbearable face in words.

◆ “I cut the air with wide-slicing fins, and swim through wall-less rooms... Only a monster brought me up on the surface by accident” (Nin, 3-4); so writes Anaïs Nin in her first book, her first scream into the universe. In the final frames of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the man discovers the woman draped in tendrils of seaweed, a drop of blood at the corner of her mouth. Ada McGrath in *The Piano* hovers like a strand of wafting kelp, tied to her piano on the ocean floor. Mute for years, she emerges, and begins to speak. From out of the sea, the mermaid sings.

◆ Nin writes (to me), “THIS IS THE BOOK YOU WROTE/AND YOU ARE THE WOMAN/I AM” (Nin, 15). Yes, and you, too, are that same woman, and this, too, is your book, and what will you and I write in its margins, and what will be eaten up by Father Time and his gaping maw?

◆ A book takes the place of a lover, the mirror in which the woman who writes may gaze upon herself, as though it had eyes that could telegraph as much to her as she to it. “I think if I get in the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn’t happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me” (James, 25). One cannot be truly alone with a pen in one’s hand. The book talks back.

◆ Writing cracks open the suffocating carapace. Simone de Beauvoir “writes to plug the gap of absence and loss... Such a strikingly fetishistic notion of writing enables Beauvoir to see her writing as at once a consolation against the pain of solitude and lack, and a weapon against the power of the Other” (Moi, 144). The gaps are opened and riotously filled; a radical re-shaping of the interior that stretches out to meet the outer world.

Writing, one can love, one can be unloved or loved in return, without being toppled from the center of oneself. Writing Beauvoir can have Sartre, and eat him too.

◆ The beloved “can become a holding pattern for all the tattered ends of memory, experience and thought you’ve ever had” (Kraus, 23). Such an observation is utterly unproblematic when the lover is male, but when she is female, suddenly she is in thrall to misogyny, crushed, defeated, controlled. But does a male beloved addressed in words truly retain greater power than the female lover who narrativizes her love and thus becomes the god(dess) bending down to trace the arc of the affair? Men, too, can be treated “like a dumb cunt” (Kraus, 59).

◆ Sex and writing fulfill a similar purpose for the lover; this goes unquestioned when the lover is a man, when he is Dante, Petrarch, Goethe. They are acts of consummation. These lovelorn poets are not mad, but a woman who “project[s] a total fantasy onto an unsuspecting person and then actually ask[s] him to respond” (Kraus, 60), she, is insane.

Beatrice, Laura, Charlotte, can walk on clouds wearing angels' wings, but when Chris Kraus, with the same ecstatic deliberation, perches Dick on the same plane and decks him out in feathers... She is both "omnipotent and powerless" (Kraus, 61).

◆ When writing and loving intermix, it is assumed that man is first concerned with writing and woman first concerned with loving. The kidnapped Peruvian princess Zilia writes to her lost lover, believing that she finds succor in *his* wisdom, *his* comfort, *his* strength, but her own words turn back to her and she sees her mistake. "My letter is finished, and the characters composing it have been drawn solely for me" (Graffigny, 103).

◆ Yet, why should not a woman be granted the right to love, unrequitedly or mutually, on paper or in bed? If Simone de "Beauvoir's writing... represents a constant effort to fight off the death-dealing mermaid" (Moi, 236), surely there is meaning to be found in that struggle and its inevitable failure, for no one is an ideology. Beauvoir can't *be* feminism and there is a vein of misogynistic cruelty cutting through any feminism that demands she give up Sartre, give up loving. Dare we deny a woman the right to love a man even as the world demands she do nothing else?

II. Risorgimento

Where was I born? (Dove sono nata?) Stretched between two continents, the body is tugged down to the ocean floor, the flesh and the spirit (*la carne e lo spirito*), the body and the blood (*il corpo e il sangue*), torn apart by two earths. The mermaid that, like the anchorite, submerges herself down into the cool, dappled depths where you will find me – the spasmodic body twitches in the fractured water darkling below you. When I heave

myself out of the water and onto the glove-yellow sand, are you horrified? (...sei inorridito?)

Language remains the problem (la lingua rimane il problema). The leaves of my prayer float up into the sky-ocean above me, the oval mirror of my exile (lo specchio ovale del mio esilio). Silence (silenzio) is the taste upon my tongue, silence (silenzio) is the roaring in my inner ear, silence (silenzio) is the substance that my fingers palpate. Once or twice, in an imposed reverie, the bottom dropped out and the body floated in a strange nothingness that was inside and yet outside (dentro e tuttora fuori), as though encircled by a sightless sun.

I cannot take the Eucharist into my mouth (non posso prendere in bocca l'eucaristia), for I wallow in the waters where there are no churches, no priests, no prophets (nessuna chiesa, nessun sacerdote, nessun profeta). The hairy hand banishes me with a throttled fist, for I am bare and bare-headed (scoperta e a capo scoperto). Thou shalt not and thou shalt not (non e non) and down I sink into the kelpy forests where choruses of whales – brother sister anchorites – reverberate and incarnate until I can take them in my outstretched hand and eat of them.

The voices (i voci) – I hear them (li sento). They are of the denizens of the unrooted places, of the strange halflings that haunt the darkling realms and speak the languages of prayer only when they say good night (quando dicono buona notte), when they say goodbye (quando dicono addio), when they vanish into the glowing blue (quando spariscono nel blu raggianti). In the final spasm they are glimpsed (...visti di sfuggita).

In a square, I see Joan (vedo Giovanna), I see her suffer, wordlessly (la vedo soffrire, senz'una parola). Her pocked, sere skin, the flaking nails, the wisps of hair, the viscous tear: her body already begins to melt, though the fire as yet is a shadow that towers, and the leaves of her prayer hold fast to the clouds, clouds that pass, prayers pasted upon them, and hang in the ether where the oratorio of the mystics is sung, distant, far, remote from its object (distaccato, lontano, remoto dal suo oggetto).

Where, then, was I born? (Dove, allora, sono nata?) In the ocean, in the air, in the fire like an eft, but in the earth, no: the earth repulses, rejects. It loves only the tender flesh upon which it may feast, the bones and ligaments (le ossa ed i legamenti), the marrows and viscera (i midolli e le viscere), and above all the blood (e soprattutto il sangue).

With what curious grammar are they written, these leaves of prayer (queste foglie di preghiera). Look up – you will see them – all those specks upon the sky. From under the water, I see them quiver and dance, pleading and glittering. They are bright, empty worlds (mondi luminosi e vuoti).

III. Textual Penetration

Even the house-bound, ailing Alice James can have a love affair, pursued, exalted over, and abandoned, between the covers of a notebook. Upon reading the work of Jules Lemaître, she gushes over the ecstasy of finding a seeming kindred spirit in his words:

One's mind stretching to the limits of his, absorbing him with every sense, such a subtle flattery emanating from his perfection in 'putting it' as to make an

absolutely ignorant creature like me vibrate, as with knowledge, in response to the truth of the myriad of his exquisitely subtle perceptions (James, 30).

Though preoccupied with finding his portrait, so that she can see what he looks like, Alice submerges the body into the deeper recesses of the mind. The sexual is sublimated in the literary. She finds secret communion with him, finding in him, or rather his representation in his books, a man “qui me donne cette impression qu’il m’exprime tout entier, et me révèle à moi-même plus intelligent que je ne pensais” (James, 40). She addresses him and accuses him of giving into the temptation of a banality. “Your terror of *insisting*, Jules, has made you of all beings fall into the *banal!!*” (James, 38). Her indignation is tinged with a sense of injury, for this is no mere writer that has failed her; his failure of novelistic invention is equally a failure to accord with her golden image of him. This “flaccid virgin” (James, 36) enjoys her love affair until, alas:

The Comic [sic.] and the tragic alternate; picture my hearing that Jules Lemaître is not only vicious and repulsive in his ways, which one had taken for granted, but is so base and degraded in his life, that my feminine construction would prevent my ever having offered him again mental hospitality (James, 218).

Is such a betrayal ‘real,’ or merely the sad imagining of a lonely, sick woman? Her desire is no less real for being imagined, for being written, rather than consummated in the throes of physical passion. Indeed, Alice is virginal only in the most literal terms. Her sexuality is literary rather than literal, and it is she, and no other, who determines the terms and limits of such an affair.

The embrace of such freedoms, even privately expressed, illustrates the potency of the written as love experience. Similarly potent, though far more disturbing given how

it takes shape in the shared world, is Chris Kraus's intense love for Dick. Animated, brought to life, as a way "to turn our lives into a text" (Kraus, 34), this is a love that is realer on the page than in the body. Such a written love has deep roots in the literature written by men – neither Dante nor Petrarch can lay claim to a tenth as much intimacy with their beloveds as Chris can with Dick – but for woman to love not only unrequitedly and literarily, but *publicly* remains radical and rare. "When you're living so intensely in your head there isn't any difference between what you imagine and what actually takes place. Therefore you're both omnipotent and powerless" (Kraus, 61). What renders Chris's love especially unacceptable to men is precisely that Dick is forced, and not with a good will, to occupy the perch on the pedestal usually occupied by equally reluctant women. It is a profoundly uncomfortable position: bound, dizzily high, gagged. As a man, Dick is accustomed to exert control over how the narrative of his life is told; he is used to defining himself. Chris's love robs him of that autonomy, just as thousands, perhaps millions, of men through the ages have so robbed women of their power to narrativize their own experience.

And of course, it's rather unjust, to be written rather than to write. As Chris's eventually exasperated husband Sylvère says, "It's so unfair. What has he done to deserve this?" (Kraus, 62). He has done nothing; rather it is Chris that has done something. She has fallen in love. And she has chosen to write about it, to render its meaning in words. "When women try to pierce this false conceit by naming names because our 'I's' are changing as we meet other 'I's,' we're called bitches, libellers, pornographers and amateurs" (Kraus, 72). When a man bares his heart to the world, he is a paragon of honesty, driven by the fervor of his overpowering emotion. When a woman

bare her heart to the world... she's crazy, she's a bitch, she's a man-eater. And no wonder, for loving someone is a form of power, and one that's been jealously guarded by male interest for many centuries. The text penetrates; it is "*the way in*" (Kraus, 132). To write of the beloved is to see oneself reflected in the other, to become bigger, grander, more powerful than the beloved that one exalts. "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf, 45). What a shock, then, for the man long accustomed to being the larger sex to be suddenly dwarfed by a woman's words.

To write of the beloved makes him present, a semi-corporeal ghost that hovers in the gaps and spaces between words, for to write at all is to literally alter reality, to create a world, and in that world, the writer can open any door she pleases through which the beloved may come and join her. "From now on it's the world according to me" (Kraus, 81). It is also true that the beloved is created by the lover. As seen through the golden film of adoring feeling, the beloved comes to "owe [the writer] everything," for while he may "flounder in [his] daily life," the writer builds him "up as a truly powerful icon of erotic integrity" (Kraus, 112). Out of love, twins are created; the beloved is split, and one assumes the two forms are identical, but the twins can never correspond completely.

To be both lover and woman; to be both writer and woman: it is as though one tried constantly to touch the north and south ends of a magnet, and yet one does, and at the moment of this impossible touching and joining, one sometimes accesses a bewitchment, an alchemy that intertwines two seemingly disparate modes of being.

I grieve and dare not show my discontent,
I love and yet am forced to seem to hate,

I do, yet dare not say I ever meant,
I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate.
I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned,
Since from myself another self I turned (Queen Elizabeth I).

Writing is a sort of mute speaking; it is loud and silent at one and the same time. But whereas a man is subject to this same law, that words on the page speak with a voice that is both the writer's ventriloquizing voice and that of an other, called up from nothing and animate through the words themselves, the woman is also subject to another, parallel law that tells her that in the field of love, she functions as the object, that her usurpation of the subject's place violates her status as a woman. She dare not love unless first she is loved; she dare not write unless first she is addressed. That "another self" from which she turns is both herself and her beloved; she cannot understand the strictures of their relationship in the simply hierarchical terms employed by the male lover, for, poetically speaking, she must negotiate from a site that is both feminine and thus coded as object and active and thus coded as subject. Queen Elizabeth, even had she forborne from the writing of poetry, knew already this strange state of being both one thing and its opposite, both woman and sovereign, both object and subject.

But to have a true career as a writer, to transcend the bounds of one's workaday life and expand the realm of one's lived experience far into the imagination, a woman for centuries could not marry, or had to marry late, or could be lucky and would turn out to have no children and a husband who saw no harm in scribbling; perhaps they "were noble and... childless, and... were married to the best of husbands" (Woolf, 79). Sybylla in *My Brilliant Career* must choose: marry or write. She chooses to write. But it is not the fact

that writing is forbidden her by her lover that impels her to refuse him, for he doesn't forbid it; rather, she knows that he would have the power to do so, and she cannot rely on his not making use of it. Writing heroines might be granted a fantastic match, a sort of dizzying perfect happiness, an apotheosis, such as Emily engaged to Teddy in L.M. Montgomery's *Emily* novels, or Prue Sarn to the weaver Kester in Mary Webb's *Precious Bane*, or a more staunchly pragmatic writer, like Alcott, might give her a sensible match, a partnership of equals, such as that between Jo March and Professor Bhaer in *Little Women*. But writing women, without a feminine authorial goddess to order their reality into a fairly utopian arrangement, must navigate without a promise that love won't doom them to a total split, a break between the writer and the woman. This is still true, though it's become a nihilistic statement in a feminist culture that values aspiration and optimism over reality.

IV. Letters from T., or a New Heloise

Dear S.,

Each time I write to you, it's as though it were you, and not me, tugging on the cord that binds us across this impossible distance. I'll admit that there are times when I want more than anything else to cut myself loose, but I'd bleed to death, which doesn't frighten me so much as it puzzles me. It's as though a wall falls down from the sky and lands an inch from my nose: where would you be if I were dead?

Morbid, you say (I can hear you say it), you are always so preoccupied with the melodramatic. You're right, but there's something so *real* in melodrama, it protects the fragile shell around the ego, forgoes easy mockery and swells up in big, sprawling

chords. I would be lying if I didn't act melodramatic, at least sometimes, at least once or twice a day. When you get defensive because you hate hurting me, even though you'd sleep around whether I was hurting or not, I can't help acting like the Marquise de Merteuil. It's melodrama or cruelty, take your pick. And I can only keep up cruelty so long.

I dream about you a lot (I just heard you sigh). I'm walking through the streets at home, it's summer and they're dusty or it's cold and the shutters are closed up, and the walls seem to drip with café au lait from the frost, and I'm looking for you. I go to your door, but you're not home. Wait, your mother says, and he'll come back. And you do, and you laugh in my face, go into your room, and lock the door. What do you think of this? I think you're embarrassed because you know it's not a wholly inaccurate representation of your possible behavior, and also indignant because you've never actually treated me that badly.

The other day, U. challenged me to explain why I love you. I should have just told the truth – that I love you, punto, the end – but instead I prattled on about how brilliant you are, how you wrote poems to me, and I don't know what else. God, you would have hated hearing it, almost as much as I hate that I said it. People seem to think that I've lost my independence because of you, but since I met you, I've done things my own way. I just like to know what you think too, and it's surely a little hypocritical of them that they think I should listen to *their* advice over *yours*.

Anyway, I love you. And I'll write you again tomorrow.

T.

Dear S.,

Three lines! That's all I get from you in a week. I know I haven't been around, you say. But I know you know it, otherwise you wouldn't feel that prick, prick, prick: that's what you feel when I tug at the cord and you don't tug back in answer. At the least, you could just tell me again that you're alive, that nothing's new, that you remember I'm over here, as I remember you're over there.

I'm having trouble making the rent this month. I won't get kicked out, but I feel as though gnome-like miniature landlords were crawling about underneath the floorboards and behind the plaster on the walls. The neighbor's cat ingested the rat poison left out in the hall and as they ran with it out the door, I guess to put it down, it yowled and hissed. Please tell me you're still feeding my cats, though I know you think I'm sentimental.

Have you seen *The Piano*? Probably not, I don't think it's your kind of movie, but I think you would get something out of it if you thought of me while you watched it. The woman in it, the pianist, doesn't speak, not because she can't but because she won't. She uses sign language with her daughter and plays the piano, and that's how she speaks. I wasn't sure about you when I met you, and I didn't talk much (I know, I can hear you saying, I remember everything), but when I did speak, I seemed to shock you. How long did it take you to realize that I thought and felt as much as you, within my smaller body that you can lift up so easily? Sometimes, I think you thought I was a lovely little doll and that was why it didn't occur to you that we needed two sets of keys. Maybe, if I'd spoken more, earlier, you would have seen it earlier.

Now, I think you think I'm difficult. Oh, dearest, *ditto!*

I love you,

T.

Dear S.,

I didn't tell you before, because it seemed selfish to worry you, but I had surgery three days ago and that's where I've been, or I guess what I've been, or something. Effect hasn't worn off yet. But I wanted to tell you, I'm alive, and when I was waking up, there was a moment when I thought I had flown into the sun, and it was freezing cold.

And also, I love you, and also, there are tulips by my bed, and the pink ones are phallic symbols, I'm pretty sure, so I'm pretending that you sent them. Amor vincit omnia.

Bye,

T.

Dear S.,

So, sorry about my last. I'm doing much better now, but you can imagine how I've been. You hid your annoyance well (I'm sure you were annoyed). Lying here, I've had time to notice how shabby this room is. I'd like to paint it a new color, something vivacious, the opposite of how I feel. I dislike that the ecru walls reflect my ecru mood back at me and I'd rather feel, I don't know, mint green, or bubblegum pink, or tiger lily orange.

In any case, I'd like to know more about what you're doing. I know you hate to reiterate the same things over and over, but I like to hear them and it would give me

something to brood over until the wound's healed enough for me to crack out the paint. I tried to put on my leggings this morning and I lost my balance, crouched on the floor, and cried. I try to gauge how you would have reacted, if you had walked in on me, half in my leggings, ugly crying, whether you would have picked me up, held me while I pulled up the leggings, and kissed the top of my head, or whether you would have rolled your eyes, told me to stop crying, and hauled me back on the bed. You're equally capable of both, and that's what fascinates and terrifies and hypnotizes me. I know what you're capable of, but I can't calculate the tiny permutations that lead you one way or the other.

I've been rereading the letters of Abelard and Heloise.

Will you call me tomorrow?

I love you,

T.

Dear S.,

Please read this, even if it does annoy you, and please don't be annoyed. I know you think it's silly to love, to love even when we know we can't be together, and won't be. But I'm not ready to let the cord go limp, it stretches tight and it hurts me when I move. Everything reminds me of you, I find I make my coffee the way you like it, and I've sold off the books you thought were trash. I'm trying to live the way you want me to, but if I do that, you've at least got to let me write to you about it.

You told me to stop relating to everything personally. That was a while ago, but I keep thinking about it and that we should talk about that. I'm not sure I see the point in reading books, or looking at art, and so on if you *don't* take it personally because the

reaction's all dry and sterile. You really can analyze something to death, but it'll live and survive if you keep it going with an infusion of emotion. I mean, really, what's the point of thinking if you don't feel something at the same time, if you don't actually *want to think*? If all you have is pure argumentation, pure analysis, unleavened, then you haven't arrived at any kind of truth. All you have is a conclusion, just hanging there in nothingness, in deadness. If it's going to come alive, you need to call up a world around it and you can't do that with statistics, or A leads to B thus C. You *need* adjectives or all you have is a skeleton unfleshed. I actually think you agree with me as far as this is concerned, but I know you want me to both be okay and not need you with me to be okay. So, you tell me to feel less.

I won't tell you I love you, since you don't want me to, but I will tell you that I wish to God you did.

T.

Dear S.,

I see we're not to evolve into a pair of chaste philosophers. But I'll keep writing you, in a notebook now, and someday, believe me, you'll want to read it. It will be waiting for you. Maybe I was wrong and it isn't love that will win, but words. Your face in my mind is blank when I tell you this and I can't tell if you don't care or if you are opaquely signaling that enough is enough, there's no use prolonging the suffering. Shoot the dying beast and put it out of its misery.

Your wish is my command. BANG.

T.

V. Utopian Jazz

When Judy Garland sings “Never Will I Marry” live on *The Judy Garland Show*, she transforms wistfulness into zeal, melancholy into irrepressible exhilaration.

Introduced by the brass, alternately muted and blaring, she launches into an anthem of freedom. She rejects a languid slowness for a bouncy, ebullient swing. “Never, never, will I marry/Never, never will I wed/Born to wander, solitary/Wide my world, narrow my bed,” she sings, but while another singer might imbue those words with a yearning for a past, for a lost love, a lost home, not Judy: that full-throated voice manifests a high-spirited yen for adventure. Syncopating “solitary,” she confides, loud and confident, that she makes a conscious and joyful choice.

As a woman, that choice remains somewhat fraught. The protagonist of the song is throwing off a constraint, not resigning herself to wallow in lonely misery. She defines her liberty as having “No conscience, no care/No burdens to bear/No memories to mourn” and as she comes back to this refrain, one can hear her toss away these encumbrances of conventionality, of connectedness, that women still are expected to hold close. Goodbye to buttoned-up morality, goodbye to putting others first, goodbye to a past of pain. At the bridge, modulating up, Judy quickens the pace, as though spurred forward by a restless anxiety to set off on her wanderings, more frenetic and yet perfectly controlled, perfectly balanced on the tight wire, singing one sure note after the other. And yet one feels certain she could step off into thin air and walk on.

Is there an edge of pathos in knowing that Judy Garland the woman was anything but joyful in her own wanderings, tortured and clinging to unfaithful husbands, friends, lovers? Indeed, a cruelly sharp one. The thick cord of the microphone threatens to shackle

her to the floor. And yet, her joy too in the utter freedom of her jazzed up no-longer-ballad seems to mean all the more for being so utopian, so fantasized. Her voice declares that she is free, and for the brief few minutes when she sings, no love, no obligation, no constraint, holds her back. Judy is liberated, liberates herself, a skeletally thin body on a stage, but bigger in spirit, even on the tiny square of a television screen, than an exploding star.

The Writing Woman: The Golden Notebook

“Of what matter can it be whether pain or pleasure has shaped and stamped the pulp within, as one is absorbed in the supreme interest of watching the outline and the tracery as the lines broaden for eternity.”

-*The Diary of Alice James*, p. 231-2

When I was studying opera, there were certain pieces of music which, as demanding as they were, nurtured within me a sense of myself as an artist, however undeveloped. Most of the songs and arias spoke of love, unrequited or ecstatic, of prayer and worshipful desire for God, of the joy awoken by the beauty of a spring day, but Ned Rorem’s “The Silver Swan” was altogether different, hearkening to some deeper movement within my soul, a sense of estrangement and a melancholic sadness towards a world that seemed bent on its own destruction. Beauty in death, in finality, apotheosis. Despite the physical demands of the piece, my voice never failed to soar to the crystalline high C of the swan’s lament, half euphoric and half dismal, passing like a shadow into death. Though so often I struggled to sustain a clear, full voice across similarly limpid lines in Mozart arias, Rorem’s phrases, less rhythmically obvious, seemed to have no heaviness; singing Mozart, I was often caught in a mire, but singing Rorem, I felt liberated from the flaws of my vocal technique, even as it demanded everything from that technique.

Perhaps it’s no coincidence that the two art forms that have been most transformative for me and which I have pursued most seriously are forms that require a voice: singing and writing. They are art forms that require the practicante to break silence. The voice is a strange organ, for it cannot be seen or touched, but it is powerful, even when each and every part of the body is frail. That power, however, means that courage

is demanded of she who would make use of it, of she who would speak, or sing, or write. “My singing swelled the sails and ripped them; where they had been ripped the edge was burnt and the clouds too were ripped to tatters by my voice” (Nin, 19). Stranger still is the fact that when one neglects to make use of this ephemeral organ, something akin to an animating spark winks out. When Audre Lorde asks, “What do you need to say?” (Lorde, 41), it is not an idle question; need cannot be exchanged for want, or whim, or fancy. “I writhed within my own life, seeking a free avenue to carry the molten cries, to melt the pain into a cauldron of words for everyone to dip into, everyone who sought words for their own pain” (Nin, 18). The voice is literally a matter of life and death.

I have said that writing creates a new reality. When Prue Sarn in Mary Webb’s *Precious Bane* receives a compliment, an extreme rarity as she considered inescapably ugly due to her cleft palate, by writing it, she makes it real, recreates it, and thus preserves it, a glowing ember in glass. “So I went up to the attic and wrote in my book. But first I took a sheet of paper and put down in very neat writing – ‘A figure like an apple-blow fairy’” (Webb, 260). Here is a moment in which the strands are woven together. Prue repairs to the room she has claimed for her own, for her writing; out of the ashes of a thousand cruel insults, she calls up, phoenix-like, a compliment, a reflection of herself that echoes and mirrors the creature captured in her book but unknown to the people around her; these few words from the man she loves become real when she captures them out of the air and regenerates them on the page. Possessed, those words become her own, an expression of her own understanding of herself. Home, failure, love: these conditions triangulate and form the psychic space within which the woman writer

can be a woman writer. We are all “keeper[s] of fragile things” (Nin, 14); in writing, the fragile things of the present are lit with a fire, not impervious, but remarkably enduring.

Just as Doris Lessing’s notebooks are identified by color as much as by theme so are mine also marked by color: home is green, failure is white, and love is red. This synesthetic marking floods these psychic spaces, creating glitteringly deep and vividly hued oceans. Water creates open pathways where before there were none; water both fills and empties simultaneously; water is the breathable essence of the creature that is two things at once and yet not entirely either.

In the green ocean, I find myself constantly displaced, constantly seeking. I envy the other female creatures who nestle in their homes, who gaze out of windows onto beloved trees, beaches, streets. Somewhere between two continents, I have been searching out a home, and my restlessness, the natural state of a woman born of one culture and raised in another, is compounded by the feud between a yearning to be safe from harm and a desire to run free and unimpeded, a conflict potentially resolved by a home chosen of one’s own accord. L.M. Montgomery does not end Emily’s story with her rapturously enwrapped in Teddy’s arms; instead, the final wistful apotheosis of the novel is an ecstatic joining with the adored home for which she has worked, planned, and dreamed. “Before her on the dark hill, against the sunset, was the little beloved grey house that was to be disappointed no longer” (Montgomery, 228). The woman writer without a home lies exposed to the hostile elements, beached on quaking ground, yet the intoxication of the familiar and comfortable can prove a trap, as for Janet Frame in *An Angel at My Table*, whose terror of venturing forth nearly results in a lobotomy. The

indefectible home must have a door with a lock, not only to keep out danger, distraction, demand, but to permit free egress.

In the white ocean, I swim in failure, not a favorite subject for the feminist, for at times, it does seem that the history of women is a history of failures, of frustrations, denials, disappointments, and refusals. Yet, “when that project meets with failure, failure must become a subject too” (Kraus, 217). There have been moments, in writing these notebooks, when the white ocean threatened to subsume the green, the red, and even the golden, its startling blankness bleakly auguring despair, but I insist that that despair acts as the *prima materia* of writing, the substance that in sacred fire promises, if we are skillful, to yield a literary philosopher’s stone.

In the red ocean, I discover depths that frighten and seduce in equal measure. The ties that bind wind round the wrists and ankles and red love is tinged with the dyes of other oceans, turned a rich, loamy brown when love succeeds and bleached, at times to nothingness, when it fails, but, as Chris Kraus writes, “No woman is an island-ess” (Kraus, 257). Yet, the clamor to disavow a need, or even a strong desire, for love lies coiled in mainstream feminist ideologies; still, “women always have to come off clean” (Kraus, 211). This squeamishness towards love, so distressfully close to dependence, at times interchangeable with need, refuses romantic autonomy to women: they can love, but not too much, not to Werther-esque excess. Hidden in this declaration of a lack of need, one might find a terror of the humiliation of loving without being loved in return. The relationship of romantic love with literary enterprise where women are concerned is fraught, but richly so. Love as written experience, love as the sublime, love as abjection and domination at one and the same time, love that demands to be sung, shouted,

screamed, and published in letters a thousand feet high, such love ought not to be denied the woman writer in the name of any ideology. One need not reject love outright in order to leap down from the pedestal. Why should I not love, and why should I not write about that love? Why should I be forbidden from being consumed by love, if I so choose, if I am so compelled?

The juxtaposition of notes, whether fragments, essays, stories, poems, or any other form, insists on the significance of the unsaid, of the white spaces that both separate and bridge them. This structure is intended to have an effect similar to that the montage technique of Maya Deren in *Meshes of the Afternoon*: “it is the unprepared-for, the casual abruptness of these switches in point of view that make them so powerfully unsettling and engrossing as we are drawn in and then expelled from a subjectivity that we think we share” (Rhodes, 59). Two ghosts can hover in the same shared space and yet the inevitable jolts of unfamiliar images, words, sounds, emotions, provoke and stimulate a sense of difference in familiarity. You and I, flickering in and out of each other, members of the same species, yet endlessly at variance: you are me, and I am you, but we are never interchangeable.

Through this project, I have tried to continue a process that women writers before me have pursued, “[o]ne woman within another eternally, in a far-reaching procession, shattering my mind into fragments, into quarter tones which no orchestral baton can ever make whole again” (Nin, 9). I have attempted to practice the mermaid’s art, a singing that fractures the border between ocean and air and dwells in the liminal space that it opens like a wound. The pen bleeds upon the page.

Hence, I chose the form of a notebook, deliberately, for it served my purpose uniquely well. The notebook is an alchemical text, comprised of notes, of fragments, shards, splinters, particles: it is a fractured text. In the notebook, the writer does not reject fragmentation, rupture, ambiguity, or contradiction, but aims to attain a more complex and thus truer portrait of her subject. I seek “another veracity that includes conspiracy, corners, shadows, slantwise, evasion, unsayingness, negation, and under-the beds” (Boyer, 36). To understand a fractured text, to write about a fractured text, one must be willing to fracture. A shard, once broken from its whole, reveals new facets, new reflections. This fracturing, however, does not destroy; it frees and it creates. “At the fantasmatic level, writing is to endow the writer with a lovable *alter ego*; fixing the alienated image of the writer for all posterity, writing will allow her to remain in the imaginary forever” (Moi, 265). A ghost is conjured, a creature that in its very ephemerality and changeability achieves a certain *athanasia*. In the aftermath of the perishing of the body, the notebook persists in its strangeness, its refusal to be bent to the exigencies of the monolithic, linear, narrative.

The notebook has a talismanic function. It is in a constant state of process, of accretion. The hard stop of death does not close the notebook, but leaves it perpetually open, perpetually un-ended. In this way, a notebook is a text that acts as a timeless room, in which the reader’s mind communes with the writer’s mind in a state of an enduring present. Its openness does not cut off the past nor exclude the future. The form of the notebook allows me to commune with you, the reader, in a state of profound intimacy because within it there is endless space in which you, too, can write.

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