
LIFE AND DEATH

ANDREA DWORKIN

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— FOR NIKKI CRAFT —

— IN MEMORY OF MY BROTHER, MARK, 1949-1992 —

In analyzing women's thinking about what constitutes care and what connection means, I noted women's difficulty in including themselves among the people for whom they considered it moral to care. The inclusion of self is genuinely problematic not only for women but also for society in general. Self-inclusion on the part of women challenges the conventional understanding of feminine goodness by severing the link between care and self-sacrifice; in addition, the inclusion of women challenges the interpretive categories of the Western tradition, calling into question descriptions of human/nature and holding up to scrutiny the meaning of "relationship," "love," "morality," and "self."

—Carol Gilligan, *Mapping the Moral Domain*

Let there be no mention of the war. If it were not for those few who could not repress their experiences, the victims themselves would have denied the horror.

—Aharon Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*

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PREFACE

I have spent the last twenty-five years as a writer, and during most of it I rejected first-person nonfiction writing by contemporary women. Even though I was riveted by, and learned much from, speak-outs, Take Back the Night rallies, and talks in which the point was first-person experience, in literature I regarded this as the back of the bus, for women of all colors. No woman had an “I” that swept up populations as Whitman's did, such that he could embrace them; nor did women have Baudelaire's cruel but beautiful “I”—so eloquent, so ruthless—which made God's world spoil in front of you, become ruined and rotting yet entirely new. The woman's “I” was trivial—“anecdotal,” as the guardians of white-male writing put it. The “I” of a woman said, “My husband likes his shirts ironed this way; my teenage son is sulking but I remember him when he was three; I am the second daughter of my mother's fourth husband; and on Sunday, after making love, my husband and I had croissants.” The “I” of a woman always had to be charming; the prose, feminine and without aggression; the manner of writing, gracious or sweet or unctuous. There had better be no hint of Whitman's grandiosity or Baudelaire's bitterness. Even if a girl could write “Spleen,” it could only be experienced as an appalling breach of civility. Women's writings—like women—are judged by the pretty surface. There is no place for the roiling heart.

Yet as I organized this, my third collection of writings—after *Our Blood* (1976) and *Letters From a War Zone* (1988)—I saw with some shock that my “I” is everywhere in these essays and speeches, referring directly and explicitly to my own life. The experiences I have chosen to write about are not polite—they include being raped, battered, and prostituted—and I have not been polite about them; although I hope that in my telling I have honored intellect, veracity, and language. Like many male writers from a previous time, I have used portions of my life for evidence or emphasis or simply because that's what happened, which must matter. Some autobiographical facts and events are reiterated, like a leitmotif pointing to a pattern, a theme with variations. In each context the events are refracted from a slightly different angle, with more detail or deeper knowledge or another pitch of feeling.

I love life, I love writing, I love reading—and these writings are about injustice, which I hate. They are a rude exploration of it, especially its impact on women. This is the “I” forbidden to women, the “I” concerned less with ironing (and I have ironed a lot) than with battery. It is an “I” indifferent to the passions of popular culture but repelled by this culture's insistent romanticization of violence against women. This is the forbidden “I” that names the crimes committed against women by men and seeks redress: the “I” male culture has abhorred. There is nothing trivial about it.

In the first section, “Origins,” I tell how I became a writer and why, and I say what I think my work is worth and why. I expect this autobiographical self-appraisal may be more accurate than that of critic, friend or foe. Mostly, of course, critics have been foes, too prejudiced against the reason I write to read with clarity or understanding, let alone to appreciate the writing itself. I'm the expert on me: not Freud, not *Playboy*, not *The Nation*, not *The National Review*.

In the next section, “Emergencies,” I write about crises, many of which stirred public feeling to a fever pitch—the abuse of Nicole Brown

Simpson, for instance, or Hedda Nussbaum, or the genocidal rape of women and girls by Serbian fascists in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here, too, I write about contemporary abuses of women that have been kept hidden—the attempted murder of Pamela Small by then House Speaker Jim Wright's top aide, John Mack, himself a formidable power and protected by both the political establishment and the media until Wrights fall on ethics charges. I suggest that the privacy of then presidential hopeful Gary Hart should not have been invaded by the press—but that John Macks should have been. I suggest that the values and perceptions of a younger generation of male journalists have been significantly formed by their use of pornography such that they are now mostly voyeurs, not heroes of democracy. And I report the stories of truly anonymous, unimportant, uncared-for women—those used in pornography, those on whom pornography was used in sexual abuse or battery or to push them into prostitution. “Emergencies” is about the day-to-day lives of ordinary women, their lives degraded or destroyed by exploitation or violence.

“Resistance” is a selection of six speeches, each taking a public stand out loud in a public place, often in the face of some tragedy or atrocity—for instance, the mass murders in Montreal of fourteen female engineering students by a man whose motives were both political and woman hating. Here the terrorism of male violence against women is reported as being far from anomalous; and the dynamics of aggression and violence in pornography, prostitution, battery, and marital rape are made palpable. The last speech in this section—delivered in Toronto as part of an endowed, public policy lecture series at Massey College (founded by the writer Robertson Davies, who attended)—offers a summary of what we have achieved and makes clear where we have failed. The “we” in these speeches is feminists, which many people in their hearts consider themselves to be.

Three speeches were given in Canada—in Montreal, Quebec; Banff, Alberta; and Toronto, Ontario—and three in the United States—Chicago, Illinois; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Austin, Texas.

This geography should give the lie to the notion—reported in dozens if not hundreds of newspapers—that my colleague Catharine A. MacKinnon and I are not welcome by feminists in Canada because of the Canadian Supreme Court’s Butler decision, which held that pornography violated women’s equality rights. Canadian feminists invited me to speak; the speeches were received with enthusiasm and a deep commitment to making women’s lives better. At least one was developed by Canadian feminists into a video project. By the same measure, the notion also fails that my feminist ideas are extreme or marginal: my work has been profoundly appreciated in the geographical heartland of the United States. Participants in the Texas event, for example, came from all over the state. “Resistance” represents the grassroots women’s movement, made up of ordinary, hard-working, committed women and men everywhere who want an end to injustice. I have never been alone in this. I know that for a fact because of the audiences. They and their love, respect, and desire—to know and understand and act—are what can never come through to the reader of these pages. Especially they are women, and they want relief from male violence.

Still on the life-and-death terrain of violence against women but now going deeper, searching for its

roots, is “Confrontations,” a series of essays on why and how the perception of women as subhuman evolves such that violence and exploitation become habits rather than crimes. Here I examine women’s exclusion from human status and women’s political subordination in the United States, in the public domain in most Western countries, in the relatively young state of Israel, in the sparkling new Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C. Here I also challenge women’s exclusion from the right of speech as such—not simply from personal expression, from art or culture, but from creating the political premises we take for granted. In each essay, the silence or invisibility of women’s experience and its meaning are shown as distorting, undermining, or destroying the political and moral integrity of a nation, an institution, a right, or an idea.

It is my hope that because of the political work of feminists over the last quarter of a century, these writings may at last be read and taken seriously. I am asking men who come to these pages to walk through the looking glass. And I am asking women to break the mirror. Once we all clean up the broken glass—no easy task—we will have a radical equality of rights and liberty.

—Brooklyn, New York

May 1995

ORIGINS

MY LIFE AS A WRITER

I come from Camden, New Jersey, a cold, hard, corrupt city, and— now having been plundered by politicians, some of whom are in jail—also destitute. I remember being happy there.

First my parents and I lived on Princess Avenue, which I don't remember; then, with my younger brother, Mark, at my true home, 1527 Greenwood Avenue. I made a child's vow that I would always remember the exact address so I could go back, and I have kept that vow through decades of dislocation, poverty, and hard struggle. I was ten when we moved to the suburbs, which I experienced as being kidnapped by aliens and taken to a penal colony. I never forgave my parents or God, and my heart stayed with the brick row houses on Greenwood Avenue. I loved the stoops, the games in the street, my friends, and I hated leaving.

I took the story of the three little pigs to heart and was glad that I lived in a brick house. My big, bad wolf was the nuclear bomb that Russia was going to drop on us. I learned this at Parkside School from the first grade on, along with reading and writing. A bell would ring or a siren would sound and we had to hide under our desks. We were taught to cower and wait quietly, without moving, for a gruesome death, while the teacher, of course, stood at the head of the class or policed the aisles for elbows or legs that extended past the protection of the tiny desks. And what would happen to her when the bomb came? Never, I believe, has a generation of children been so relentlessly terrorized by adults who were so obviously and stupidly lying. Eventually, the dullest of us picked up on it; and I was far from the dullest.

I remember trying to understand what the bomb was and how it would come and why. I'd see blinding light and heat and fire; and when my brain got tired of seeing burning humans, empty cities, burning cement, I would console myself with the story of the three little pigs. I was safe because my house was brick.

It is that feeling of my brain meeting the world around me that I remember most about being a child. The feeling was almost physical, as if I could feel my brain being stretched inside my head. I could feel my brain reaching for the world. I knew my brain did more than think. It could see and imagine and maybe even create something new or beautiful, if I was lucky and brave. I always wanted engagement, not abstract knowledge.

I loved the world and living and I loved being immersed in sensation. I did not like boundaries or wide distance from what was around me. I saw adults as gatekeepers who stood between me and the world I hated their evasions, rules, lies, petty tyrannies. I wanted to be honest and feel everything and take everything on. I didn't want to be careful and narrow the way they were. I thought a person could survive anything, except maybe famine and war, or drought and war. When I learned about Auschwitz my idea of the unbearable became more specific, more informed, sober and personal.

I began to think about survival very early, because we were Jewish on the heels of the Holocaust;

because of the ubiquitous presence of those Russian bombs; and also because my mother was ill with heart disease. She had scarlet fever when she was a child, and in her family, big and poor, both parents immigrants, one did not call the doctor for a girl. The scarlet fever turned into rheumatic fever, which injured her heart long before there was open-heart surgery. She had many heart failures, maybe heart attacks, and at least one stroke before I became officially adolescent. She would be short of breath, maybe fall down; then she'd be gone, to a hospital, but Mark and I never really had any way of knowing if she had died yet. We would be farmed out to relatives, separated most of the time. This could happen day or night, while doing homework or sleeping. We'd be told to get dressed fast because Mother was very sick and we couldn't stay here now; and Dad was at work or at the hospital and he would explain later: be quiet, don't ask questions, cooperate. We never knew anything we could count on. I usually didn't even know where Mark was. Or she might be sick, at home but in bed and off-limits, maybe dying. Sometimes I would be allowed to sit on her bed for a little while and hold her hand.

She was Sylvia, and I loved her madly when I was a child, which she never believed, not even by the time she did die, in 1991 at the age of seventy-six. I did stop loving her when I was older and exhausted by her repudiations of me; but it would not be wrong to say that as a child I was in love with her, infatuated. I remember loving her long, dark hair, and the smell of coffee, which she drank perpetually when she was able to walk around, and the smoke from her cigarettes. Maybe it was my child's fear of death, or her sudden, brutal absences, that made me adore her without ever flinching when she pushed me away. I wanted to be around her, and I would have been her slave had she been generous enough to accept me. She was my first great romance.

But I was the wrong child for my mother to have had. She preferred dull obedience to my blazing adoration. She valued conformity and never even recognized the brazen emotional ploys of a child to hold on to her. My emotions were too extravagant for her own more literal sensibility. One could follow her around like a lovesick puppy, but if the puppy peed on the floor, she thought its intention was to spite her. She saw malice in almost anything I said or did. When I would be stretching my brain in curiosity—and dancing my brain in front of her to dazzle her—she thought it was defiance. When I asked her questions, which was a way for me to be engaged with her, she considered the questions proof of rebellion, a wayward delinquency, maybe even treason to her authority. I could never excite her or make myself understood or even comfort her. I do remember her reading to me sometimes at night when I couldn't sleep, and I remember feeling very happy.

She often told me that she loved me but did not like me. I came to believe that whatever she meant by love was too remote, too cold, too abstract or formulaic to have anything to do with me as an individual, as I was. She said that a mother always loved her child; and since this was an important rule in her world, she probably followed it. I never understood what she meant even when I was fully grown up—which feelings this generic and involuntary love might include. But to the extent that she knew me, there was no doubt that she did not like me, and also that I could not be the child that she would find likable. I wasn't, I couldn't be, and I didn't want to be. She understood only that I didn't want to be.

I had to be independent, of course. I had to learn to live without her or without anyone special. I had to

learn to live from minute to minute. I had to learn to be on my own, emotionally alone, physically alone. I had to learn to take care of myself and sometimes my brother and sometimes even her. I never knew what would happen next, or if she'd be sick or dying, or where I'd be sleeping at night. I had to get strong and grow up. I'd try to understand and I'd ask God how He could make her so sick. Somehow, in stretching my brain to beat back the terror, I'd assert my own desire to live, to be, to know, to become. I had many a Socratic dialogue in my head before I ever read one. I had a huge inner life, not so strange, I think, for a child, or for a child who would become a writer. But the inner lives of children were not an acknowledged reality in those days, in the fifties, before I was ten and we moved to the suburbs, a place of sterility and desolation where no one had an inner life ever.

I have idyllic memories of childhood in Camden: my brother, my father, and me having tickling fights, wrestling, on the living room floor; me in my cowgirl suit practicing my fast draw so I could be an Amerikan hero; a tiny sandbox on our front lawn where all the children played, boys and girls together, our Eden until a certain year when the girls had to wear tops—I may have been five but I remember screaming and crying in an inarticulate outrage. We girls played with dolls on the stoops, washed their hair, set it, combed it out, dressed the dolls, tried to make stories of glamour in which they stood for us. I remember being humiliated by some girl I didn't like for not washing my dolls hair right—I think the doll was probably drowning. Later, my grandfather married her mother across the street, and I had to be nice to her. I was happier when we moved from dolls to canasta, gin rummy, poker, and strip poker. The children on the street developed a collective secret life, a half dozen games of sex and dominance that we played, half in front of our mothers eyes, half in a conspiracy of hiding. And we played Red Rover and Giant Steps, appropriating the whole block from traffic. And there was always ball, in formal games, or alone to pass the time, against brick walls, against the cement stoop. I liked the sex-and-dominance games, which could be overtly sadomasochistic, because I liked the risk and the intensity; and I liked ordinary games like hide-and-seek. I loved the cement, the alleys, the wires and telephone poles, the parked cars that provided sanctuary from the adults, a kind of metallic barrier against their eyes and ears; and I loved the communal life of us, the children, half Lord of the Flies, half a prelude to Marjorie Morningstar. To this day, my idea of a good time is to sit on a city stoop amid a profusion of people and noise as dark is coming on.

I would say that it was Sylvia who started fighting with me when I was an exuberant little pup and still in love with her. But eventually I started fighting back. She experienced my inner life as a reproach. She thought I was arrogant and especially hated that I valued, my own thoughts. When I kept what I was thinking to myself, she thought I was plotting against her. When I told her what I thought, she said I was defiant and some species of bad: evil, nasty, rotten. She often accused me of thinking I was smarter than she. I probably was, though I didn't know it; but it wasn't my fault. I was the child, she the adult, but neither of us understood that.

Our fights were awful and I don't doubt that, then as now, I fought to win. I may have been around eight when I dug in; and we were antagonists. I may have been a little older. Of course, I still wanted her to take me back and love me, but each crisis made that harder. Because of the wrenching separations, the pressing necessity of taking care of myself or Mark or her, the loneliness of living with relatives who didn't particularly want me, I had to learn to need my mother less. When we fought she said I was killing her. At some point, I don't know exactly when, I decided not to care if she did

die. I pulled myself away from her fate and tried to become indifferent to it. With a kind of emotional jujitsu, I pushed my mother away in my mind and in how I lived. I did this as a child. I knew that she might really die, and maybe I would be the cause, as they all kept saying. I also knew I was being manipulated. I had to make a choice: follow by rote her ten thousand rules of behavior for how a girl must act, think, look, sit, stand—in other words, cut out my own heart; or withstand the threat of her imminent death—give up the hope of her love or her friendship or her understanding. I disciplined myself to walk away from her in every sense and over time I learned how. She told me I had a hard heart.

I made good grades, though I had trouble conforming in class as I got older because of the intellectual vacuity of most of my teachers. I followed enough of the social rules to keep adults at bay. There weren't therapists in schools yet, so no adult got to force-fuck my mind. I was smart enough to be able to strategize. I wasn't supposed to take long, solitary walks, but I took them. I wasn't supposed to go to other parts of our neighborhood, but I went. I had friends who were not Jewish or white at a time when race and religion lines were not crossed. I knew boys who were too old for me. I read books children weren't allowed to read. I regarded all of this as my private life and my right. My mother simply continued to regard me as a liar and a cheat with incomprehensible but clearly sinister tendencies and ideas.

When I was ten we moved to Delaware Township in New Jersey, a place New York Times writer Russell Baker described in a column as “nowhere along the highway,” after which the outraged citizens changed the name to Cherry Hill. It was an empty place with sporadic outbreaks of ranch-type and split-level housing projects. There were still wild cherry trees and some deer. With the deer came hunters who stalked them across flat fields of ragweed and poison ivy. It was virtually all-white, unlike Camden where the schools were racially and ethnically mixed even as residential blocks were segregated according to precise calibrations: Polish Catholics on one block, Irish Catholics on another. It was intellectually arid, except for a few teachers, one of whom liked to play sex-and-seduction games with smart little girls. It was wealthy while we were quite poor. We moved there because my mother could not climb steps and the good Lord had never made a flatter place than Delaware Township/Cherry Hill. I lived for the day that I would leave to go to New York City, where there were poets and writers and jazz and people like me.

Harry, my daddy, was not a rolling stone. He wasn't at home because he worked two jobs most of the time and three jobs some of the time. He was a schoolteacher during the day and at night he unloaded packages at the post office. Later he became a guidance counselor at a boys' academic high school in Philadelphia and also in a private school for dropouts trying to get their high school diplomas. I don't know what the third job was, or when he had it. My brother and I would go stretches of many days without seeing him at home; and when we were in other people's houses, it could be weeks. There were times when he would go to college classes on Saturdays in an effort to get his Ph. D. degree, but he never had the time to write a dissertation, so he never got the degree. My dream was that when I grew up I would be able to give him the money to write his dissertation; but I never did make enough money and he says he is too old now anyway (though he still goes to the library every week). He was different from other men in how he acted and how he thought. He was gentle and soft-spoken. He

listened with careful attention to children and women. He wanted teachers to unionize and the races to integrate. He was devoted to my mother and determined that she would get the very best medical care, a goal entirely out of reach for a low-paid schoolteacher, except that he did it. He borrowed money to pay medical bills. He borrowed money to take my mother to heart specialists. He borrowed money for professional nurses and to get housecleaning help and some child care and sometimes to hire a cook. He kept us warm and fed and sheltered, even though not always at home or together. He was outspoken and demonstrative in expressing affection, not self-conscious or withdrawn as most men were. He was nurturant and emotionally empathetic. He crossed a gender line and was stigmatized for it; called a sissy and a fairy by my buddies on the street who no doubt heard it from their parents. He loved my mother and he loved Mark and me; but especially me. I will never know why. He said I was the apple of his eye from the time I was born and I believe him. I did nothing to earn it and it was the one great gift of my life. On Sundays he slept late but he and I would watch the Sunday news shows together and analyze foreign crises or political personalities or social conflicts. We would debate and argue, not the vicious arguments I had with my mother but heightened dialogue always touching on policy, ideas, rights, the powerful and the oppressed, discrimination and prejudice. I don't know how he had the patience; but patience was a defining characteristic. He enjoyed my intelligence and treated me with respect. I think that to be loved so unconditionally by a father and treated with respect by him was not common for a girl then. I think he kept my mother alive and I think he kept Mark and me from being raised in foster care or as orphans.

He was appalled by the conflict between me and my mother, and certainly by the time I was a teenager he held me responsible for it. He knew I was adult inside. He let me know that my mother's well-being would always come first with him. And I remember that he hated it when I would cry. He must have thought it cowardly and pitiful and self-indulgent. I made many eloquent but to him unpersuasive declarations about my right to cry.

I trusted and honored him. I guess that I trusted him to love me even more than to take care of us. In an honors history seminar in high school, the class was asked to name great men in history. I named my father and was roundly ridiculed by advocates for Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon. But I meant it—that he had the qualities of true greatness, which I defined as strength, generosity, fairness, and a willingness to sacrifice self for principle. His principle was us: my mother, Mark, and me. When I was an adult we had serious ruptures and the relationship broke apart several times—all occasions of dire emergency for me. I think that he did abandon me when I was in circumstances of great suffering and danger. He was, I learned the hard way, only human. But what he gave me as a child, neither he nor anyone else could take away from me later. I learned perseverance from his example, and that endurance was a virtue. Even some of his patience rubbed off on me for some few years. I saw courage in action in ordinary life, without romance; and I learned the meaning of commitment. I could never have become a writer without him.

I wrote my first novel during science class in seventh grade in the suburbs. My best friend, a wild, beautiful girl who wanted to be a painter, sat next to me and also wrote a novel. In the eighth grade, my friend gone from school to be with a male painter in his late twenties or thirties, I wrote a short story for English class so disturbing to my teacher that she put her feelings of apprehension into my permanent record. The ethos was to conform, not to stand out. She knew the writing was good, and

that troubled her. There was too much vibrancy in the language, too much imagination in the physical evocations of place and mood. Highly influenced by the television series *The Twilight Zone* and grief-stricken at the loss of my soulmate girlfriend, I wrote a story about a wild woman, strong and beautiful, with long hair and torn clothes, on another planet, sitting on a rock. My story had no plot really, only longing and language. I remember getting lost in descriptions of the woman, the sky, the rock, maybe wind and dirt. In formal terms, I believe I kept circling back to the woman on the rock through repeating images and phrases that worked almost like music to my ear—a way of creating movement yet insisting on the permanence of some elements of the scenario. I had a picture in my mind, which was involuntary. I don't know why it was there or how it got there. The picture was stubborn: it didn't move or change. I could see it as if it were real with my eyes open, though it was conceptual and in my head. It wasn't in front of my eyes; it was behind them. I had huge emotions of pain and loss. I had the need to keep moving through life, not be held back or stopped by anything I felt. I remember finding words that resonated with the emotions I felt: not words that expressed those emotions or described them, but words that embodied them without ever showing them. It was the unrevealed emotion—attached to the words but invisible in them, then used to paint the picture in my head in language that was concrete and physical—that gave the prose an intensity so troubling to my teacher. Was she troubled by the homoeroticism of the story? I don't believe she recognized it.

In the eighth grade, of course, I did not have any consistent internal standards for how prose must be or what prose must do. But I did know much more about what I wanted from language when, thirty years later, I brought that same picture, the same wild woman on the same rock, into my novel *Mercy*, first published in 1990 in England.

The rock was Masada: a steep, barren mountain surrounded by desert, a refuge in ancient Palestine for a community of Jews known as zealots who committed, as the traditional story goes, mass suicide rather than surrender to the occupying Roman army. Ten men used their swords to slit the throats of everyone else; then one man killed the nine men and himself.

Mercy's narrator is a contemporary figure who in one of the novel's endings (it has two) sees herself as the wild woman on Masada at the time of the so-called suicides: "A child can't commit suicide. You have to murder a child. I couldn't watch the children killed; I couldn't watch the women taken one last time; throats bared; heads thrown back, or pushed back, or pulled back; a man gets on top, who knows what happens next, any time can be the last time, slow murder or fast, slow rape or fast, eventual death, a surprise or you are waiting with a welcome, an open invitation; rape leading, inexorably, to death; on a bare rock, invasion, blood, and death. Masada; hear my heart beat; hear me as the women and children were murdered. "

I wasn't missing my old girlfriend. I didn't have the same picture in my head because I was feeling what I had felt in the eighth grade. In my experience nothing in writing is that simple. Both memory and consciousness are deeper and wider than the thinking mind, which might find meaning in such a facile association.

I felt, certainly, a much larger abandonment, a more terrifying desolation, essentially impersonal: ho

the lives of women and children were worthless to men and God. In the despair of that recognition, the barren landscape of the rock became a place to stare men and God in the face, and my wild woman the one to do it. When the picture first came into my head, I dismissed it but it would not go. When I started to work with it in words, I saw Masada, I saw her, and I saw the murders. I, the writer, became a witness. Real history out in the world and a picture etched in my brain but forgotten for three decades converged in words I felt compelled to keep bringing together. Each word brought with it more detail, more clarity. My narrator, who is a character in my book, knows less than I do. She is inside the story. Deciding what she will see, what she can know, I am detached from her and cold in how I use her. I do not ever think she is me. She is not my mouthpiece. She does not directly speak my views or enumerate my ideas or serve as a mannequin in words displaying my wounds of body or soul. I am more than the sum of all her parts; and she can live in the readers mind but the reader's mind cannot know me through knowing her. I have never been to Masada. However dull it may seem, I am the person who sits at the typewriter writing words, rewriting them, over and over, night in and night out (since I work at night), over months or years. Mercy took three years to write.

In using the picture in my head from my eighth-grade story, I broke the picture open into a universe of complex and concrete detail dreadful with meaning, in particular about incest and the power of the father—the patriarchal right of invasion into the bodies of women and children. At the end of writing Mercy's Masada chapter, I felt as if I had finally seen that earlier picture whole. When I was younger I could only see a fragment, or a line drawing, but now I had seen everything that had been implicit in the picture from the beginning, from its first appearance in my mind, as if I had uncovered something pre-existing. It was always real and whole; what I had done as a writer was to find it and describe it, not invent it. In the eighth grade, I had not known how to use my mind or language to explicate the picture in my head, which was a gift or a visitation; I couldn't see the human destiny that had been acted out on that barren rock. But the time between my childhood and now had collapsed. The time between Masada and now had collapsed.

This strange but not unusual aftermath of creating helps to explain why so many writers disclaim responsibility for their characters and ideas. The character made me do it, most writers say. But the truth is that one starts out with a blank page, and each and every page is blank until the writer fills it. In the process, the mind uses itself up, each cognitive capacity—intellect, imagination, memory, intuition, emotion, even cunning—used to the absolute utmost, a kind of strip-mining of one's mental faculties. At the same time, with the mind as scavenger and plunderer, one cannibalizes one's own life. But one's own life for the writer includes everything she can know, not just what happened to her in the ordinary sense. If I know about you—a gesture, an emotion, an event—I will use you if I need your gesture, your emotion, your event. What I take will seem to me to be mine, as if I know it from the inside, because my imagination will turn it over and tear it apart. Writers use themselves and they use other people. Empathy can be invasive. Friendship is sometimes a robbery-in-progress. This omniscient indifference takes a certain coldness, and a certain distance, which writers have and use.

Facts and details are the surface. The writer needs the facts and everything underneath them. One wanders, bodiless, or goes on search-and-destroy missions using one's mind. One needs a big earth, rich soil, deep roots: one digs and pulls and takes.

But after, when the writing is finished, one looks at the finished thing and has a feeling or conviction of inevitability: I found it, not I made it. It—the story, the novel—had its own laws; I simply followed them— found them and followed them; was smart enough and shrewd enough to find them and follow them; wasn't sidetracked or diverted, which would mean failure, a lesser book. Even with nonfiction, which in the universe of my writing has the same cognitive complexity as fiction, in the aftermath one feels that one has chiseled a pre-existing form (which necessarily has substance attached to it) out of big, shapeless stone: it was there, I found it. This is an affirmation of skill but not of invention. At best, one feels like a sculptor who knows how to liberate the shape hidden in the marble or clay—or knew the last time but may not know the next, may be careless, may ruin the stone through distraction or stupidity. Once finished, the process of writing becomes opaque, even to the writer. I did it but how did I do it? Can I ever do it again? The brain becomes normal. One can still think, of course, but not with the luminosity that makes intelligence so powerful a tool while writing, nor can one think outside of literal and linear time anymore.

Writing is alchemy. Dross becomes gold. Experience is transformed. Pain is changed. Suffering may become song. The ordinary or horrible is pushed by the will of the writer into grace or redemption, a prophetic wail, a screed for justice, an elegy of sadness or sorrow. It is the lone and lonesome human voice, naked, raw, crying out, but hidden too, muted, twisted and turned, knotted or fractured, by the writer's love of form, or formal beauty: the aesthetic dimension, which is not necessarily familiar or friendly. Nor does form necessarily tame or simplify experience. There is always a tension between experience and the thing that finally carries it forward, bears its weight, holds it in. Without that tension, one might as well write a shopping list.

My fiction is not autobiography. I am not an exhibitionist. I don't show myself. I am not asking forgiveness. I don't want to confess. But I have used everything I know—my life—to show what I believe must be shown so that it can be faced. The imperative at the heart of my writing—what must be done—comes directly from my life. But I do not show my life directly, in full view; nor even look at it while others watch.

Autobiography is the unseen foundation of my nonfiction work, especially *Intercourse* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. These two nonfiction books are not “about” me. There is no first-person writing in them. Conceptually, each involved the assimilation of research in many intellectually distinct areas using analytical skills culled from different disciplines. The research materials had nothing to do with me personally. They were freestanding, objectively independent (for instance, not interviews conducted by me). Yet when I wrote *Intercourse* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, I used my life in every decision I made. It was my compass. Only by using it could I find north and stay on course. If a reader could lift up the words on the page, she would see—far, far under the surface—my life. If the print on the page turned into blood, it would be my blood from many different places and times. But I did not want the reader to see my life or my blood. I wanted her to see intercourse or pornography. I wanted her to know them the way I know them: which is deeply.

I'd like to take what I know and just hand it over. But there is always a problem for a woman: being

believed. How can I think I know something? How can I think that what I know might matter? Why would I think that anything I think might make a difference, to anyone, anywhere? My only chance to be believed is to find a way of writing bolder and stronger than woman hating itself—smarter, deeper, colder. This might mean that I would have to write a prose more terrifying than rape, more abject than torture, more insistent and destabilizing than battery, more desolate than prostitution, more invasive than incest, more filled with threat and aggression than pornography. How would the innocent bystander be able to distinguish it, tell it apart from the tales of the rapists themselves if it were so nightmarish and impolite? There are no innocent bystanders. It would have to stand up for women—stand against the rapist and the pimp—by changing women's silence to speech. It would have to say all the unsaid words during rape and after; while prostituting and after; all the words not said. It would have to change women's apparent submission—the consent read into the silence by the wicked and the complacent—into articulate resistance. I myself would have to give up my own cloying sentimentality toward men. I'd have to be militant; sober and austere. I would have to commit treason: against the men who rule. I would have to betray the noble, apparently humanistic premises of civilization and civilized writing by conceptualizing each book as if it were a formidable weapon in a war. I would have to think strategically, with a militarist's heart: as if my books were complex explosives, mine fields set down in the culture to blow open the status quo. I'd have to give up Baudelaire for Clausewitz.

Yes, okay, I will. Yes, okay: I did. In retrospect, that is just what I did: in *Mercy and Intercourse* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and *Ice and Fire*.

It was in Amsterdam in 1972 that I made the vow, which I have kept, that I would use everything I know in behalf of women's liberation. I owed the women's movement a big debt: it was a feminist who helped me escape the brutality of my marriage. Escape is not a one-time run for your life: you keep running and hiding; he shows up out of nowhere and beats you, menaces you, threatens, intimidates, screams a foul invective at you in broad daylight on crowded streets, breaks into wherever you find to live, hits you with his dirty fists, dirtied by your pain, your blood.

I left the marital home toward the end of 1971, some two months after I turned twenty-five. I fled the country in which I had been living for five years in November 1972. I have no continuous memory of the events of that year. Even with the events I can remember, I have no sense of their sequence. I was attacked, persecuted, followed, harassed, by the husband I had left; I often lived the life of a fugitive, except that it was the more desperate life of a battered woman who had run away for the last time, whatever the outcome.

I have written about the experience of being a battered wife in three nonfiction essays: "A Battered Wife Survives" (1978) and "What Battery Really Is" (1989), both of which are included in the U. S. edition of *Letters From a War Zone*, and "Trapped in a Pattern of Pain," published in the *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1994. I wrote "A Battered Wife Survives" to celebrate my thirty-first birthday. I still shook and trembled uncontrollably, but not all the time; had nightmares and flashbacks, but less. I had published two books: *Woman Hating* (1974) and *Our Blood* (1976). I had

survived and was not alone in a universe of pain and fear. The other two essays were written in behalf of other battered women: Hedda Nussbaum and Nicole Brown Simpson. I felt the need to try to make people understand how destructive and cruel battery is—and how accepted, how normal, how supported by society. With enormous reluctance, I revisited the site of this devastation in my own life. I had to say what battery was from the point of view of the woman being hurt, since I knew.

Everything I have written in these nonfiction essays about myself is true. It would be wrong, however, to read my fiction as if it were a factual narrative, a documentary in words. Literature is always simpler and easier than life, especially in conveying atrocity. As the infrequency of my nonfiction essays about battery suggests, I am extremely reluctant to write about it: partly because I can't bear to think about it; partly because I feel physically ill when I literally trip over absent memory, great and awful blank areas of my life that I cannot recover—I am shaky with dread and vertigo; and partly because I still hide.

But the year of running, hiding, to stay alive is essential to the story of how I became a writer, or the writer I am, for better or worse. He kept our home; I was pushed out. This was fine, since I just wanted not to be hit. I had no money. I was isolated as battered women usually are but also I was a foreigner with no real rights except through my husband. My parents refused to have me back. His family was his—I was too afraid of him ever to tell them anything, though I believe they knew. I slept first on the floor of a friend's room—his friend, too—with her two dogs. Later, I slept where I could. I lived this way before I was married but not with an assassin after me, nor having sustained such brutality that my mind didn't quite work—it failed me in everyday situations, which it no longer recognized; it failed me with ordinary people who couldn't grasp my fear.

A feminist named Ricki Abrams helped me: gave me asylum, a dangerous kindness in the face of a battering man; helped me find shelter repeatedly; and together she and I started to plan the book that became *Woman Hating*.

I lived on houseboats on the canals—a majestic one near the Magere Brug, a stunningly beautiful bridge, a plainer one infested with mice. I slept in someone's kitchen. I lived for a while in the same house as Ricki, a narrow, teetering building on a cobblestone street that ringed a canal in Amsterdam's historically preserved old city. I hid on a farm far outside Amsterdam with a commune of hippies who made their own cloth with a spinning wheel and a loom. I slept in a cold and deserted mansion near the German border. In one emergency, when my husband had broken into where I was living, had beaten me and threatened to kill me, I spent three weeks sleeping in a movie theater that was empty most of the time. Experimental movies were shown in a big room where I hid. The whole building was empty otherwise. On some nights small audiences of artistes would sit and watch formless flashes of light. When the avant-garde cleared out, I was allowed to open a cot. I lived in a state of terror. Every trip outside might mean death if he found me.

No one knew about battery then, including me. It had no public name. There were no shelters or refuges. Police were indifferent. There was no feminist advocacy or literature or social science. No one knew about the continuing consequences, now called post-traumatic stress syndrome, which has no nice dignity to it. How many times, after all, can one say terror, fear, anguish, dread, flashbacks,

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