

Three

*When Sleeping Beauty wakes up
she is almost fifty years old.*

—MAXINE KUMIN

ONLY IN THE LAST THIRD OF the twentieth century have women broken through to a realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives. Women poets of one generation—those born between 1923 and 1932—can now be seen to have transformed the autobiographies of women's lives, to have expressed, and suffered for expressing, what women had not earlier been allowed to say. The constraints on women's writing the truth about their lives were lifted first by women poets, sometimes in their poetry, sometimes in essays, books, and interviews. These women, all of them middle class and white, simultaneously dismantled the past and reimagined the future. They found a way to recognize and express their anger; harder still, they managed to bear, for a time at least, the anger in men that their work aroused.

Had I been writing about fiction, and the outstanding examples of new narratives of women's lives available there, I would have had to write chiefly about the works of black women writers. The novelists Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, among others, have more profoundly and dazzlingly discovered new narratives for women, and new ways of understanding old nar-

ratives, than any other contemporaries I can name. My decision not to examine fiction in this book excludes analyses of their novels, but the brilliant criticism already written and being written on them excuses me here, as it has in the discussion of other fictions. What it is important to note for my purpose is the difference between the lives of "my" generation of poets and the lives of black women. Toni Morrison enunciates this with great clarity:

It seems to me there's an enormous difference in the writing of black and white women. Aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure. They don't see conflicts in certain areas as do white women. They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both. We don't find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive. That's one of the differences. White women often find if they leave their husbands and go out into the world, it's an extraordinary event. If they've settled for the benefits of housewifery that preclude a career, then it's marriage *or* a career for them, not both, not *and*. [122]

Morrison has remarked that "it's not so much that women write differently from men, but that black women write differently from white women. Black men don't write very differently from white men" (122). I think that in the generation born between 1923 and 1932, white women began to write more differently from white men in ceasing to accept the place to which white men had assigned them. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has observed the "gap between black women and the dominant [white] model of womanhood" (176), but that gap is likely, in future years, to be less obvious because of the changes in white women's ideas about womanhood.

The generation of white women poets I refer to lived through World War II (as I did). Jane Cooper, born in 1924, sets it for us: "World War II was the war I grew up into. I was fourteen

when England and France declared war on Germany; I was seventeen at the time of Pearl Harbor; the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and peace treaties were signed, just before my senior year in college" (33). For most of us, the men we loved and/or married were of the generation that fought in that war. And here, in a stanza, Maxine Kumin describes those war years in retrospect, exactly as I remember them:

She
remembers especially a snapshot
of herself in a checked gingham outfit.
He is wearing his Navy dress whites.
She remembers the illicit weekend
in El Paso, twenty years before
illicit weekends came out of the closet.
Just before Hiroshima
just before Nagasaki
they nervously straddled the border
he an ensign on a forged three-day pass
she a technical virgin from Boston.
What he remembers is vaster:
something about his whole future
compressed to a stolen weekend.
He was to be shipped out tomorrow
for the massive land intervention.
He was to have stormed Japan.
Then, merely thinking of dying
gave him a noble erection.

It is in the same poem, "The Archeology of a Marriage," that Kumin writes what appears in the epigraph to this chapter: "When Sleeping Beauty wakes up / she is almost fifty years old." That's a slight exaggeration—such is the way of poets—but it does indicate that these poets were at middle age, if they were not yet fifty, when they began their marvelous disman-

ting. These poets, all American, are (in the order of their birth): Denise Levertov, Jane Cooper, Carolyn Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath. Plath, the youngest, did not live past the dismantling.

And here, now, is what people in the social sciences call a control group. In 1976 Philip Appleman, noticing how many poets as well as himself would turn fifty that year, wrote a delightful pastiche or multiple parody he called "A Questionnaire to the Poets of 1926." He answered the "questionnaire" as each of his fellow poets born in 1926 might have answered it; there are eleven of them, including W. D. Snodgrass, who was to have a great effect on Sexton and Kumin. (Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke, were, alas, born too soon for Appleman's poetic purposes on that occasion: chronology is rarely tidy.) His covering poem began: "Born in the year / Rilke died, you are all / creeping up on death . . ." And the "Snodgrass" poem starts: "So what did you expect, / To get younger every year? / As everything else went sere / and yellow, we'd resurrect?"

But that's exactly what the women of that generation did: resurrect, move toward rebirth and beyond. Appleman's poets commented on the world, a mess, and the loss of youth, a sorrow, but they neither dismantled the past nor considered restructuring the future. In contrast to the men in Appleman's poem, this remarkable generation of women poets is a watershed. They found a frankly autobiographical, "confessional" mode for their poetry and discovered a form for their uninhibited autobiographical impulses. These clearly outspoken autobiographical efforts offer details of personal rebellion and sudden, dazzling recognition of too easily accepted female servitude with a forthrightness that would have been unthinkable two decades earlier. It is, one might add, happily ironic that women poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were given

"permission" for their new frankness about their personal lives by the confessional poetry of male poets W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell. Encouraged originally by that example, women began to seize upon their own stories, and to tell them with a directness that shocks as it enlightens. It certainly shocked James Dickey, who, reviewing poetry by Anne Sexton in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1963, wrote: "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience, as though this made the writing more real, and it would also be difficult to find a more hopelessly mechanical approach to reporting these matters than the one she employs" (quoted in Sexton, 166).

In recent years, two collections of autobiographical essays by women have been published—*Fathers: Reflections by Daughters*, edited by Ursula Owen, and *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write About Their Work on Women*, edited by Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick—which exemplify how far women have come in their perceptions of, among much else, the role of parents in their lives. Following in the path opened by the women poets of "my" generation, the writers in these collections examine with new awareness the hitherto mutely accepted constraints on their lives. Their parents and other male and female figures are seen with sharp distinctions. One can generalize from these essays with minor, if any, exaggeration that fathers, as representatives of the patriarchy, are the pivot on which, usually in memory, the new awareness turns. Mothers have no obvious role in this change, but some other female mentor or figure, often not even known personally, most often dead, operates in the new female plot to enhance the reaction from the father and encourage or inspire the awakening. Mothers may come to be recognized with a new, loving perception,

but it is not mothers who free women from their fathers. They leave their daughters as yet unawakened.

Fathers have so clearly represented the patriarchy to newly awakened feminists that in 1983 Sheila Rowbotham felt the need to defend the individuality of fathers: "Because we were not dealing with abstractions of a vaguely defined 'patriarchy' but talking about actual men, a complex picture began to emerge of 'manhood' and 'fatherhood' and our contradictory needs and images of both. Because these were men with whom we were connected passionately and intimately, however painfully, it was impossible to settle for an oversimplified stereotype in which they could be objectified as 'the enemy' or even 'the other'" (quoted in Owen, 213). Such a statement, amounting to forgiveness of the father, or at least an understanding of him, which almost all women autobiographers seem eventually to reach, must not be allowed to obscure the great difficulty women have in coming to terms with this figure. As Maxine Kumin has said, the poem about her father was "the hardest poem I ever wrote." She wrote it originally in syllabics and rhyme, using these as a defense between her and the material of the poem: "That's how terrified I was of writing it" (1979b, 27).

This terror of analyzing one's relation to the father, as Kumin describes it, in no way denies that, until recently, confronting the relation to the father was the only way to female self-realization. As Adrienne Rich has observed: "It is a painful fact that a nurturing father, who replaces rather than complements a mother, *must be loved at the mother's expense*, whatever the reasons for the mother's absence" (1976, 245). The essays in *Between Women* demonstrate further that when a woman sought a female model for self-realization and achievement, she had to find it in a woman who had died (this is true of almost all the essays in the book), and she was enabled to find it, as the ages of the contributors testify, only with the

encouragement of the current feminist movement. Without these dead women, and without the feminist current bearing the lonely female swimmer along, the discovery and use of a female model would have been impossible. Maxine Kumin writes: "I began as a poet in the Dark Ages of the fifties with very little sense of who I was—a wife, a daughter, a mother, a college instructor, a swimmer, a horse lover, a hermit—a stew-pot of conflicting emotions" (1979b, 106).

Adrienne Rich, whose autobiography is to be found not in a single book but rather in her poems and in diverse parts of her prose works, has nevertheless done more than anyone else to revolutionize women's autobiography. Rich records how she sought again and again to identify herself in new ways, ways guaranteed to be upsetting to the neat, orderly world from which she came. Her most fundamental struggle was to recognize herself as a poet, and to mean by this that the quality of what she felt impelled to say in poetry was not diminished because it was thought to be female, political, and offensive. Rich, like all of her class and generation, grew up with anthologies of poetry we were convinced represented a "universal vision." "I still believed that poets were inspired by some transcendent authority and spoke from some extraordinary height." Although she had been born a woman, she "was trying to think and act as if poetry—and the possibility of making poems—were a truly universal—that is, gender-neutral—realm. In the universe of masculine paradigm, I naturally absorbed ideas about women, sexuality, power, from the subjectivity of male poets." Of course she was told that her sort of poetry, "that is, writing from a perspective which may not be male, or white, or heterosexual, or middle-class," was grinding a political ax, that what she was writing was "bitter" and "personal" (1986a, 175, 179, 180).

Rich has written, in both poems and essays, of many women

who preceded her, from Emily Dickinson to the Russian women's climbing team that perished. But, while in the creation of her autobiography Rich writes with loving attention of her female predecessors, it is her father with whom she has had to come to terms; it is her father who is the pivot upon which her autobiography ultimately turns. And, like Woolf, she is over fifty when she finally comes to terms with him in print, and identifies herself: she knows that in the rest of her life, "every aspect of her identity will have to be engaged. The middle-class white girl taught to trade obedience for privilege. The Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile. The woman who first heard oppression named and analyzed in the Black civil rights struggle. The woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence. The woman limping with a cane, the woman who has stopped bleeding, are also accountable. The poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful" (1986a, 123). One can scarcely imagine a woman so identifying herself in print two decades ago: it is Rich who best demonstrates the new autobiographical form which permitted, indeed demanded, that such a statement be openly made.

Rich began her prose writings in the autobiographical mode in her profoundly important and shocking book, *Of Woman Born*. Her honesty in this book, her admission that women might at times hate their children, might even have murderous thoughts about them, so shocked the women who were its first reviewers that the book was denied much of the publicity and exposure that had, before the reviews, been offered. Rich wrote at the beginning of that work: "It seemed to me impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without often saying 'I.' Yet for many months I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for the plunge into areas of my own

life which were painful and problematical" (1976, 15-16). Rich asserted here, as she had previously, her belief that it is only the willingness of women to share their "private and often painful experience" that will enable them to achieve a true description of the world, and to free and encourage one another. Feminist theoreticians like Elaine Showalter have, since then, defended this female mode, despite efforts to dismiss it by calling it confessional. "In comparison to this flowing confessional criticism," she wrote, "the tight-lipped Olympian intelligence" of writers such as Elizabeth Hardwick and Susan Sontag "can seem arid and strained" (1982, 19). They can also seem self-protective, and too readily conforming to the male model of distance and apparent disinterest.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich spoke many hidden truths. That only when visibly pregnant did she feel, in her whole adult life, not-guilty. That, like so many women with "male" dreams in childhood, she had set her heart on a son, and had felt triumphant over her mother, who had brought forth only daughters, at the birth of her "perfect, golden, male child." That her husband's "helping" was unusual in the 1950s, but there was no question that the major career was his, all the initiative for domestic responsibilities hers. She reports what she wrote in her journal in those years, the despair, resolutions, self-hatred, anger, weariness, bouts of weeping characteristic of so many women's journals. Nor was she willing to dismiss her despair during her children's early years as "the human condition." As she noted, "those who speak largely of the human condition are usually those most exempt from its oppressions—whether of sex, race, or servitude."

By then (1976), Rich's poetry had already broken through the barriers of impersonality and the lack of tolerance for autobiography in women's poetry. Contemporary male poets, principally Robert Lowell and W. D. Snodgrass, had chosen

the same path. But it is chiefly in Rich's generation of women poets—Plath, Sexton, Kumin, Kizer, Cooper, Levertov—that T. S. Eliot's ban upon the personal was defied. These same women—certainly Plath, Sexton, and Kumin—began, like Rich, to explore in other genres their previously hidden resentments and experiences, guilts and sufferings. Novels, interviews, letters all served this impulse. But it is Rich alone who, in writing an essay devoted to her father, practiced the new female autobiography directly, in prose.

The writing of this essay, "Split at the Root," seemed to her "so dangerous an act, filled with fear and shame," but nonetheless necessary. It is well to take these words at their face value. If women's autobiography has made a great leap, it has not done so without great pain and courage on the part of women like Rich. What became central to Rich's account of her father was not only what had been denied her as a woman but what had been denied her as a Jew. Her father's devoted belief in "passing," in making it into the gentile world by being so like gentiles that they would forgive him his Jewishness, is what she chiefly remembers and resents about him: "With enough excellence, you could presumably make it stop mattering that you were Jewish; you could become the *only* Jew in the gentile world. . . . I had never been taught about resistance, only about passing." And to pass meant to be the right sort of Jew, one who exemplified "achievement, aspiration, genius, idealism. Whatever was unacceptable got left back, under the rubric of Jewishness, or the 'wrong kind' of Jews: uneducated, aggressive, loud" (1986a, 110, 107).

To disconnect herself from her family, Rich married a "real Jew." Perhaps she was simultaneously rejecting her Protestant mother and attempting to transform, to humanize, her father. There may also be an indirect connection, for Rich suggests that the efforts of fathers to be accepted in the male world they

do not question or challenge are vitally connected with their efforts to imprison their female children, however talented and encouraged, in the conventions of femininity.

Anne Sexton once explained to an interviewer:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down. I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic breakdown and tried to kill myself. [1977, 399-400]

The importance of this passage lies in its truth, which women could not tell before. But there are two other points that Diane Middlebrook has clearly identified for us: that "Sexton experienced the home as a sphere of confinement and stultification," and that she escaped through the way of death (25). For Sexton and Plath, suicide became a part of life, so violent was the action necessary for rebirth and truth. As Carolyn Kizer puts it: "From Sappho to myself, consider the fate of women. / How unwomanly to discuss it!"

"White men have politely debated free will," she writes. "We have howled for it." But we have still been, as Kizer knows, "custodians of the world's best-kept secret: / Merely the private lives of one-half of humanity" (from "Pro Femina").

Until two decades ago, it was the world's best-kept secret, and women were its best custodians, speaking for men. Louise Bogan, in the early 1920s: "Women have no wilderness in them, / They are provident instead, / Content in the tight

hot cell of their hearts, To eat dusty bread." Until Sexton, Kumin, Rich, Plath, and the others burst from their tight hot cell, to invent a new form—woman's truth—she was right. Diane Middlebrook has said of Sexton's "rapid and improbable" success that, "like that of most writers, [it] resulted from a combination of talent, hard work and well-timed good luck."

The times helped. Women found the courage to demand what millennia had told them it was not reasonable to demand. As Kumin wrote: "I am tired of this history of loss / What drum can I beat to reach you? / To be reasonable / Is to put out the light. / To be reasonable is to let go" (from "September 22").

Jane McCabe tells us: "Through anger, the truth looks simple." We all know the truth of that. It appears, therefore, that women had not, until the 1960s, enough anger to see a simple truth, which must always precede complex truths. Plath saw it in the last year of her life; poems overtook her like a revelation. For the first time, it would seem, in the poets of that generation, there was an anger they could tap into, an anger they could not turn in upon themselves. Kumin and Rich, both Jewish, connect that anger with Jewishness, with the failure to recognize, in Hannah Arendt's words, that "if we do not know our own history, we are doomed to live it as though it were our private fate." Arendt never applied that lesson to women; she was content to be an exceptional woman "in the tight, hard cell of her heart." The group of poets I here celebrate learned, however, that they were living history as private fate, a lesson those who were Jews may have learned with particular pungency. Remember that Plath, who was not Jewish, saw herself, symbolically, as a Jew, not to claim suffering she had not earned, as Irving Howe thought, but precisely to recognize her suffering as connected—much as Woolf had told us a few years before her death—to fascism.

In the old style "autobiography," women never told of their love for other women. That love is various, wide enough to include all women, narrow enough to focus, for a lifetime or the life of a passion, on one other woman. It is this love, I am certain, this sense of identification with women alone, not as fellow sufferers but as fellow achievers and fighters in the public domain, upon which the success of the current feminist movement depends. Some of the poets we have been discussing moved in and out of marriages (Sexton, Rich, Plath, Kizer); or they stayed within a marriage and remade it (Kumin); or they never married (Cooper); or they discovered the love of women and the terrors of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich); or they found friendships (Kumin and Sexton). But above all, they thought of women as "we." They loved and respected one another, sharing and admitting one another to their fates. They learned that women cannot be alone, identified only with the men at hand. They learned that wherever they are, even in the White House (or No. 10 Downing Street), there must be other women with them as peers. Sexton and her friend Lois Ames wore gold disks on which they had had engraved: "Don't let the bastards win." They agreed to proclaim that together.

It was the task of this generation more to dismantle the past than to imagine the future. But Rich has never stopped trying to imagine it. "I think," she wrote, "women have a mission to survive . . . and to be whole people. I believe that this can save the world, but I don't think that women have a mission to clean up after men's messes. I think we have to save the world by doing it for ourselves—for all women—I don't mean some narrow, restricted notion of who women are, only white women or only middle-class women and only Western women" (quoted in Martin, 232).

Some years ago she wrote of "the leap we talked of taking," a leap that "my generation" took. But in the times that fol-

lowed, Rich recognized, she had lived that leap, "not as a leap / but a succession of brief, amazing moments / each one making possible the next." And in a later poem called "What Is Possible," she understands that the philosophical language we have inherited will not enable us to describe the future, or even to wish for what such a vision might foresee:

If the mind were clear
and if the mind were simple you could take this mind
this particular state and say
This is how I would live if I could choose:
this is what is possible . . .

But the mind
of the woman imagining all this the mind
that allows all this to be possible . . .
does not so easily

work free from remorse
does not so easily
manage the miracle
for which mind is famous

or used to be famous
does not at will become abstract and pure
this woman's mind
does not even will that miracle
having a different mission

in the universe.

In 1972, Anne Sexton inscribed a copy of *The Book of Folly* for her friend Maxine Kumin: "Dear Max—from now on, it's our world." Women would not have said that to one another before.

I have defined "my" generation rigidly, extending it only to include Plath, the youngest poet I've discussed, for whom nonetheless World War II was a source of profound metaphor. Had I chosen an earlier date, I might have encompassed other

important women poets: Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, May Sarton, Louise Bogan, Muriel Ruykeyser. I see a profound break in the poets of the generation I chose to define. Less defensible is my ending with Plath when, by reaching two years later, I might have included Audre Lorde (born in 1934). If Audre Lorde does not belong with the World War II generation, it is because she, her life, and her work have focused on other patterns and influences: the work of black writers not available, because of chronology or the narrowness of canons, to white women;* the influence on her of African writers and narratives; and her leap to outspokenness by which she appears, compared to the women of my generation, to have claimed identity sooner and more sharply, without the same struggle. She announced that she was a "black lesbian feminist warrior poet." Her struggle to become herself was different from the struggle of white middle-class women. She found African goddesses more empowering, perhaps, than a white woman poet would find goddesses from Greece or Christianity, though black women writers have written of these also:

I speak without concern for the accusations
that I am too much or too little woman
that I am too black or too white
or too much myself
and through my lips come the voices
of the ghosts of our ancestors
living and moving among us

and also,

* And perhaps even to black; Alice Walker reports that it was only in college that she first heard of Zora Neale Hurston, and then only her name. In a course on black writers she took at Jackson State College in Mississippi, black women writers "were names appended, live verbal footnotes, to the illustrious all-male list that paralleled them" [84].

I
is the total black, being spoken
from the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open
how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
how sound comes into a word, colored
by who pays what for speaking.
.....
Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am Black because I come from the earth's inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light.

By the time of *The Cancer Journal*, Lorde, writing of illness, woman as victim and survivor, and the sole saving grace of female friendship, speaks, across race, national, or class boundaries, for what is now *her* generation of women. Female friendship has been given its first and most compelling text by black women writers of this generation. Toni Morrison has said: "Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*" (118). It had not been depicted in an autobiographical work as a major focus of a woman's life before the work of Audre Lorde and her generation.