

gaze upon it, I can hear Lindbergh's words of wisdom:

You will say to me "solitude." You will remind me that I must try to be alone for part of each year, even a week or a few days; and for part of each day, even for an hour or a few minutes in order to keep my core, my center, my island-quality. You will remind me that unless I keep the island-quality intact somewhere within me, I will have little to give my husband, my children, my friends or the world at large. You will remind me that woman must be still as the axis of a wheel in the midst of her activities; that she must be the pioneer in achieving this stillness, not only for [my] own salvation, but for the salvation of family life, of society, perhaps even of our civilization. (52-53)

To walk with Anne Morrow Lindbergh on the beach can be like my walk through life. Her book pointed out the need to see the beauty in the beach and in life, and the necessity to be patient, to be patient. *Gift from the Sea* served as my guide. From the oyster I learned that acceptance of changes can bring a new hope and patience for things to come. From the channelled whelk, I learned to look for simplicity and the way to accomplish it, and from the scallop, I learned the need and means to build inner strength by making a quest for solitude.

Thank my dear friend for giving me the book that revealed a way to look out of a slowly closing shell that was cutting off my vitality, my life, and my future. Without her timely present, Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*, I probably would not be as sensitive to the beauty of the sea and, even more importantly, the beauty of my life.

#### WORKS CITED

Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. *Gift from the Sea*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.  
Hassan, Lois. *The Silent Passage: Menopause*. New York: Pocket Books, 1993.

## SPEAKING ACROSS BOUNDARIES AND SHARING THE LOSS OF A CHILD<sup>1</sup>

MELODY GRAULICH

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.—Isak Dinesen

### I. Just a Different Kind of the Same Thing

In Susan Glaspell's feminist classic, "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917), Mrs. Hale tries to imagine the isolation and silence of Minnie Wright's life by wondering "how it would seem . . . never to have children around?" (377). Minnie is not there to answer, but Mrs. Peters is: "I know what stillness is. . . . When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old—and me with no other children then—" (378). Later Mrs. Hale sums up this moment: "We live close together, and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren't—why do you and I *understand*?" (378).

This essay is about women who know stillness and loss and from that knowledge reach out to understand other women. It is about going through different kinds of the same thing. And about the consolation of knowing that other women can understand, despite often living far apart.

### II. How Is the Truth To Be Said?

In 1988 I wrote a poem called "Grieving For Something Stillborn." The poem was about a love affair that never came about. The title was, I thought, purely metaphoric.

"Both of your fallopian tubes are blocked," the doctor told me in January, 1989, after the tests, after the fertility drugs, after months of trying to get pregnant. "Unless you have major surgery, you will never have a baby. If you have surgery, if it is successful, if we don't find anything else wrong, if we can provoke you to ovulate, then you might

have a fifty percent chance of getting pregnant in two years—if the tubes don't re-scar."

The next several months of my journal are filled with my despair and grief. Numb, I struggled to find the "right" tone, the right voice, to write about what I called "the worst thing that has ever happened to me." Lines like that led me to question every thing I wrote, every phrasing: "I can't be melodramatic. And that's not simply pride. I don't want to be false about this" (January 30, 1989). Some entries are defensive, filled with bitter humor.

Last week I wrote Bill, a brief letter about my . . . I can't find a word for it. Barrenness is too ironic, too defensive; infertility too sterile. . . It is too easy for me to joke. "Problem" has lost its humor. Maybe naming it would be claiming it. What is most comfortable is too long, "my inability to have a baby." Is there an acronym? MINTHAB. INFERT. I did refine it from "inability to get pregnant," that not being the point. Ah. I've got it. My block. That story I wrote once, "Building Blocks and Bridges." My block. I like it. (Feb. 22, 1989)

Sometimes I did melodramatize: "I am a quiet, empty place" (February 25, 1989). In other entries I tried to find a way to accept feelings I had spent my life controlling:

And I would have been a good mother. Thinking that, I almost censored it. You're being self-pitying, yelled one of my voices, and I started to cry. But I can't censor all my self-pity, or I can't grieve at all. I don't think I'll be a mother, and I do feel sorry for myself, and I want a baby, and I feel the loss. And sorrow. (March 1, 1989)

And in others I howled my outrage at the doctors at the University of Virginia student health center who in 1973 had refused to renew my prescription for birth control pills, telling me that an IUD would be much safer. And so they inserted a Dalkon Shield. After surviving a whole year crippled with cramps, I returned to Student Health:

And [Dr.] Van Slyke, I go in there crying and saying I hurt, I hurt, and I don't know what's wrong with me, and I'm bleeding, but I know something's wrong, something's wrong. And he looks at me, all pus-y from infection, and he says, "Don't you wash before you come in here?" and stomps out

of the room. And tears come into my eyes and the nurse puts her hand on my arm and says, "I'm sorry. He shouldn't have said that. It's okay."

And he yanks it out, and I gasp and yelp. And I'm still afraid because he's pinched my ovary and said it's twice its normal size and there might be a cyst. But in a few days I'm better, and I can stop clutching my stomach all the time, and I stop bleeding so much, and I don't double up in bed. And though I can't stand the thought of his touching me again and though I know he doesn't give a fuck whether I'm okay or not, I go back. And maybe I don't see him, maybe by then I've learned to go when I know he's not there or to ask the nurse if I can see one of the residents. But they look at me and they feel around and they say my ovary is okay. They say I'm okay. But I'm not. I'm scarred. I'm scarred by a stupid plastic spider that my body tried to reject for a year before I got "help." And I'm scarred by being abused and mistreated and made to feel dirty and disgusting. By being treated roughly and pinched and prodded. . . .

I don't want to think about this anymore. It hurts me. (March 15, 1989)

Looking back, I can see that I trusted my angry voice a lot more than my "hurt" voice. I questioned my very ability to know what was in my heart. "Maybe you are not being honest with yourself about your unbaby. Or maybe you are finding out something important about your heart and what's in it" (March 3, 1989).

My journal represents my effort to find a voice I could trust to write about a loss. I never found it.

Looking inward only further depressed me, and so I looked to others. I have spent my life trying to find what's in the hearts of characters in literature, hearts that can tell me things about my own. Trying to understand how to mourn for my "unbaby," for a child who had never been, I remembered a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks called "The Mother":

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,  
The singers and workers that never handled the air.  
You will never neglect or beat

Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.  
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb  
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.  
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,  
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim  
killed children  
I have contracted. I have eased  
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.  
I have said, "Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized  
Your luck  
And your lives from your unfinished reach,  
If I stole your births and your names,  
Your straight baby tears and your games,  
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages,  
aches, and your deaths.

If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.  
Though why should I whine,  
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—  
Since anyhow you are dead.  
Or rather, or instead,  
You were never made.

But that too, I am afraid,  
Is faulty: oh what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?  
You were never born, you had body, you died.  
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you  
All. (1945)

Like Brooks, I felt as if I were tangled in "faulty" thinking, whining, struggling to discover "how is the truth to be said?" And of course he gave me some answers. Her poem expressed and paradoxically eased the hunger I felt; it now had words: "You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh, / Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye." Like her, I wanted to make absences into presences; he gives the children lives so as to more fully grieve their loss. The

poem is not about guilt but about regret. I felt a similar kind of bitter regret for accepting the Dalkon Shield, a choice with consequences, something I had done, to myself and my unborn children.

Of course I thought about the differences between me and "The Mother." Brooks's speaker faced a far more complex emotional decision than I confronted, whether to have an abortion; she "knew" her children, "though faintly." Although the poem has no obvious racial signifiers and Brooks gives no causes for her mother's decision, Brooks commonly writes about African-American women like herself, often from poor families, women who could not afford another child, women for whom abortion was perhaps less an option than a necessity. A middle-class white kid, I used my resources at a prestigious university to delay childbirth until I had established my career; ironically, my privilege did me in. The historical context in which Brooks wrote about female experience is best conveyed by what the speaker does not have to state: in 1945 abortion was illegal. While my experience—and the daily experience of workers at women's health clinics—certainly suggests that women's bodies are still at risk, I write at a time when women are speaking with unprecedented freedom about what used to be called "deeply private matters." While we both mourned the loss of children who had not come into being, these differences helped determine the different choices and lives we had to live with.

Yet across those boundaries, and as I write now, Brooks helped me recognize and express my own feelings, a fundamental truth of feminist criticism: one cannot fully claim one's own experience without seeing it—or variations of it—explored in literature. Reading other women writers, I realized that though we were going through different kinds of loss, some much worse than others, I was not alone in struggling to find a voice to express my grief.<sup>2</sup> Like Brooks, women who write about lost children often listen for "the voices" of the "children" or of other women before writing. The theme crosses racial, class, ethnic, even historical boundaries, suggesting that such a loss—and the fear of it—is one of the most fundamental female experiences. Listening to the echoes reverberate across the gulfs between us, I felt immeasurable consolation. Extending my sorrow from my own life to the lives of other women, whose circumstances were often so much more desperate and entrapped than my own, freed me to learn how to feel it. Contrary to the image of the isolated artist, over the years I have learned that I write better in relationship, as I try to understand others: as a literary critic, I write *with* others, in connection with them. If I can't find my voice alone, I can find it together. As I write this essay. . .

### III. Entering into Her Feelings Considerable

In 1849, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the following passage in a letter to her husband:

At last it is over, and our dear little one is gone from us. He is now among the blessed. My Charley—my beautiful, loving, gladsome baby, so loving, so sweet, so full of life and hope and strength—now lies shrouded, pale and cold in the room below. . . . He has been my pride and joy. Many a heart-ache has he cured for me. Many an anxious night have I held him to my bosom and felt the sorrow and loneliness pass out of me with the touch of his little warm hands. Yet I have just seen him in his death agony, looked on his imploring face when I could not help nor soothe nor do one thing, not one, to mitigate his cruel suffering, do nothing but pray in my anguish that he might die soon. I write as though there were no sorrow like my sorrow. . . . (qtd. in Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis 76–77)

Stowe records a common occurrence in nineteenth-century women's lives, the loss of a child. "Women had, on the average, seven live births in the course of their lives; a third or a half would not survive to the age of five" (Ehrenreich, 185). Women responded to these losses with a host of artistic forms to remember the dead: mourning pictures; hair wreathes and jewelry; consolation poetry; memorial quilts; photographs of the dead in their coffins. These often formulaic popular arts were so widely known that Twain could satirize them in his portrayal of Emmeline Grangerford in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, who draws pictures of dead birds with titles like "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas."

Mockery and accusations of sentimentality and ghoulishness have been common responses to these popular art forms: acquaintances commonly respond to the hair wreath on my wall—made by a nineteenth-century woman from the hair of departed loved ones—with an "Ugh, you're kidding."<sup>3</sup> Although the mourning arts are generally seen as a mawkish nineteenth-century women's tradition, dismissed by elite culture, they continue to offer modes of self-expression for ordinary women (and men) and women writers into the twentieth century, as do quilting and other traditions.<sup>4</sup> Women often use this intensely private art form to cross from the private to the public. Mourning literature has provided women with a way to reach out to

other women and to recognize commonality. As the impoverished childless poet of Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Poetess" (1891) says when writing a consolation poem about the dead child of a middle-class woman, "I guess I can enter into her feelin's considerable" (187).

Indeed women have consistently extended the boundaries of mourning literature to recognize how women go through "different kinds of the same thing." When I began to think about how women were using the conventions of mourning literature to explore different kinds of losses, I was amazed at how often variations of the "lost child" theme recur in women's literature. The loss of a child—through death, abduction, miscarriage, adoption, abortion—is one of the most widespread themes in women's literature and art, continuing into the twentieth century in works by white middle-class authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Austin, and Jessamyn West; working class authors like Edith Kelley, Meridel LeSueur, and Harriet Arnow; American Indian writers like Beth Brant and Leslie Silko; African-American writers like Brooks, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison; and Asian-American writers like Sui Sin Far, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan. As I read these and other works, I was reminded that a literary tradition is a mighty comforting thing.

One day as I read "The Mother" with a class as an example of a mourning poem, I found myself unexpectedly telling my mostly twenty-year-old students about the many women of my generation I know who are struggling to get pregnant and about my own infertility; feeling like Cassandra, I predicted that women would adapt mourning conventions to a new kind of loss, babies never conceived. (I did not offer to share my journal with them.) I recognize that many women of my generation did not have the resources or desire to delay childbearing; I also recognize the dangers of embodying my infertility in my "unbaby," the dangers of overlooking the fact that watching a child die or be taken from you is *not* really the same thing as mourning a child that never was. Yet the mourning tradition is a welcoming one. It is filled with texts where women reach across various boundaries to offer understanding to other women.

Asked what led her to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Stowe replied that the "book had its root in the awful scenes and bitter sorrow of that summer" when she lost her child:

It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her. In those depths of sorrow which seemed to me immeasurable . . . I felt that I could never be consoled for it

unless this crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others. (qtd. in Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis 178)

Stowe described herself as having "spent many a night weeping, the [new] baby sleeping beside me as I thought of the slave mothers whose babes were torn from them." These lines provide a context for the last line of her letter, "I write *as though* there were no sorrow like my sorrow" (my emphasis). Stowe well knew that her "sorrow" was widely felt, by many other women, and she used her own experience and the available convention of mourning literature to imagine the loss of slave mothers, to cross the boundary from the personal to the political in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with its repeated passages of babies being torn from mother's arms.

Of course, losing a child to a "natural" occurrence, death, is very different from losing a child to an human-created institution, slavery or boarding schools, from being denied one's fundamental right to one's child. We cannot speak across boundaries by denying their existence. Solaced by her Christianity, Stowe did not have to feel the same anger she gave to her character Cassie, whose "master" silences her "curses" and makes her "as submissive as he desired" by threatening to "sell both the children, where you shall never see them again"; tired of her, he keeps his promise (Vol. 2, 207). Nor would Stowe be forced to kill her own child rather than allow it to be sold like an animal. Yet Stowe and other mourners provide a model for imagining, for entering, the feelings of the "other"; they are examples of the feminist approach described by Peggy McIntosh where "the Other stops being considered something lesser to be dissected, deplored, devalued or corrected. The Other becomes, as it were, organically connected to one's self. Realities, like people, seem plural but unified" (19). Stowe knew mother love, worry, anguish, helplessness, sorrow, loss, grief, emotions she recognized as human, belonging to slave women as well as white women; caught up in our debates about essentialism, it is difficult for us to remember just how radical that belief was in 1850. But in creating Cassie, Stowe also recognized differences; she saw the inevitability of a black woman's rage and accepted, without judgment, her sexual negotiations and her decision to kill her child; Cassie is a remarkable creation from a woman so caught up in middle-class domestic ideology.

African-American women writers certainly did not need a white woman to show them the horrors of slavery, yet as Elizabeth Ammons has demonstrated, their work often has "strong affinities with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" ("*Stowe's Dream of the Mother Savior*" 177). A few years

after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Francis Harper wrote two poems in response to the novel, "Eliza Harris" and "Eva's Farewell," as well as "The Slave Mother" (1854), a poem which echoes with "shrieks" of loss.

Heard you that shriek? It rose  
So wildly on the air,  
It seemed as if a burden'd heart  
Was breaking in despair. . . .

She is a mother, pale with fear,  
Her boy clings to her side,  
And in her kirtle vainly tries  
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore  
For him a mother's pains;  
He is not hers, although her blood  
Is coursing through his veins.

He is not hers, for cruel hands  
May rudely tear apart  
The only wreath of household love  
That binds her breaking heart. . . .

They tear him from her circling arms,  
Her last and fond embrace.  
Oh! never more may her sad eyes  
Gaze on his mournful face.  
No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks  
Disturb the listening air;  
She is a mother, and her heart  
Is breaking in despair.  
(quoted in Ammons, "Profile of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper" 65)

Like Stowe, Harper saw herself as a political activist; like Stowe, she recognized that the repeated line, "She is a mother," could speak across racial boundaries and engage the emotions of a white audience familiar with mourning literature; white women who had experienced Stowe's feeling of helplessness at being unable to protect their children from pain could be encouraged to mourn the black woman's helplessness to avert an even more painful and bitter loss.

Cassie, of course, ultimately rejects submissiveness and helplessness and refuses to allow her third child to be sold away from her. Stowe illustrates the tragic parameters in which she can act: "What better than death could I give him, poor child," Cassie asks (Vol. 2, 210). Until I began to think more deeply on the lost child theme, I had always been surprised at Stowe's apparent confidence that her audience would extend their empathy and understanding to Cassie's decision that because she loved her baby so much she could not allow him to "live to grow up" in the world of slavery. Even Toni Morrison, whose Sethe in *Beloved* (1987) commits the same desperate act, imagines Sethe's black community as judging her action. Yet many women from diverse backgrounds have felt Cassie's and Sethe's desperation; the theme of killing a child or allowing a beloved child to die crosses racial boundaries but is rooted in powerlessness and poverty. In 1909, Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote an eerie story which seems to anticipate today's custody fights, "Old Woman Magoun," where an elderly grandmother seeks to protect her granddaughter from sexual abuse; she allows the child to eat deadly wild nightshade berries rather than turn her over to the father. In 1912, Chinese-American writer Sui Sin Far published *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, which contained the story "The Wisdom of the New," in which an isolated Chinese immigrant woman, Pau Lin, caught in a culture clash, fearing she has lost her increasingly Americanized husband, kills her young child rather than lose him to an American school. Variations on the theme abound. Thinking about her abortions, Brooks's "The Mother" speaks to her "killed children" and questions, "why should I whine/Whine that the crime was other than mine?" Many working class writers describe women unable to feed and care for children in the midst of poverty. In Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* (1974, but written in the 1930s), for instance, Anna accepts a miscarriage gratefully for she cannot adequately care for the children she has.<sup>5</sup> These women struggle painfully with their love for their children and their own feelings of guilt and responsibility over their ability to give life, as we can see in Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923):

As Judith sat by the bedside of the sick child that she had begrudged the life before it was born, her heart failed her at the thought that the little one might die. . . .

And yet at the same moment that she yearned over the sick child, another set of thoughts, strange and sinister, came . . . thoughts that had come to her at other times and before which she had quailed, as, in the darkness of a wakeful night, one quails before thoughts of approaching death.

Of what use after all that this baby should live? She would live only to endure, to be patient, to work, to suffer; and at last, when she had gone through all these things, to die without ever having lived and without knowing that she had lived. Judith had seen grow up in the families of the neighbors and among her own kin dozens of just such little girls . . . [to pass] quickly from that into . . . the . . . burdens of too frequent maternity. . . .

Sitting by the sick child through the long vigils . . . the mother dwelt upon these thoughts. . . . And following them out to the end they brought her relentlessly to the conclusion that it would be better that the child should die. . . . No, she could not have her baby die. She must not die. . . . The mother shrank and quailed, feeling her burden greater than she could bear. (quoted in Olsen 104)

Like Cassie, Old Woman Magoun, and Pau Lin, Judith bears her burdens alone, struggling to answer "of what use" is her daughter's life—and her own.

It is difficult, impossible, for me to imagine living with Judith's burdens as she mourns her child's stunted life. Yet I recognize her desperation by the loss she is willing to consider. Reading Kelley, I think again of Stowe's line, "I write as though there were no sorrow like my sorrow" and of her feeling that consolation for her sorrow could only come about through attempting to understand and articulate the even greater sorrows of others. I think about my grandmother, isolated, battered and poor, whose toddler died of an accident while she was caring for him; I try to imagine the stories she never told. I think about how self-discovery and self-expression often begin with establishing a relationship between your own experience and someone else's, with looking out, not in. I think about writing as braiding.

#### IV. Braided Stories: A Place of Power

Like Judith, Leslie Silko's Ayah feels a pain greater than she can bear, a pain she carries in her belly like a child. She imagines singing a lullaby to her lost children, kidnapped by a white legal system and sent to boarding school, denied of their family, their traditions, and their identities "for their own good."

It was worse than if they had died: to lose the children and to know that somewhere, in a place called Colorado, in a

place full of sick and dying strangers, her children were without her. There had been babies that died soon after they were born, and one that died before he could walk. She had carried them herself, up to the boulders and great pieces of the cliff that long ago crashed down from Long Mesa; she laid them in the crevices of sandstone and buried them in fine brown sand with round quartz pebbles that washed down the hills in the rain. She had endured it because they had been with her. But she could not bear this pain. She did not sleep for a long time after they took her children. . . . She carried the pain in her belly and it was fed by everything she saw: the blue sky of their last day together and the dust and pebbles they played with; the swing in the elm tree and the broomstick horse choked life from her. The pain filled her stomach and there was no room for food or for her lungs to fill with air. (46)

Ayah's grief echoes throughout American Indian literature, which is filled with stories of lost children. One of the most poignant mourning stories is by Mohawk writer Beth Brant. Brant tells what she calls "A Long Story" to draw parallels between the "legal kidnapping" of Indian children and of contemporary children of parents deemed "unfit" by the courts or social services. By braiding together the two stories, Brant erases the boundary between the injustices of the past and the present: when the government disapproves of a woman's behavior or wants to eradicate her way of living, it takes her children. She also braids together the strands of her own history and identity.

"A Long Story" alternates two stories, labeled only "1890. . . ." and "1978. . . ." The 1890 story is narrated by an unnamed American Indian woman, called "Annie" by the whites; I will call her by her children's name for her, "Nisten ha," mother. She remembers how her two children, She Sees Deer and Walking Fox, were taken from her:

[I see] my son and daughter being lifted onto the train. My daughter wearing the dark blue, heavy dress. All of the girls dressed alike. Her hair covered by a strange basket tied under her chin. Never have I seen such eyes! They burn into my head even now. My son. His hair cut. Dressed as a white man, his arms and legs covered by cloth that made him sweat. His face, wet with tears. So many children crying, screaming. . . . The women, standing as if in prayer, our hands lifted, reaching. The dust sifting down on our palms. Our palms making motions at the sky. Our fingers closing like the claws

of the bear. I see this now. The hair of my son is held in my hands. I rub the strands, the heavy braids coming alive as the fire flares and casts a bright light on the black hair. They slip from my fingers and lie coiled and tangled on the ground. I see this. My husband picks up the braids, wraps them in a cloth; takes the pieces of our son away. . . . I see this. (78)

Throughout the story Brant focuses on identity, language and self-expression. The children turn into strangers called Martha and Daniel, who are "learning civilized ways" and who send her a letter written "in their hateful language" (80). Nisten ha's brother, who "understands their meanings, . . . pretends to be like those who hate us . . . [and] gets more and more like the child-stealers," reads her the letter. But she rejects her brother's assimilation and tears up the letter, burying "the names Martha and Daniel" (81). Changing from the "dead woman" who had "stopped talking," having "used [her] sound screaming their names," she talks to the children because she can hear them crying and "howl[s] at the sky every night" (77, 80). Her brother says that she is "crazy" and "bring[s] shame to [the] clan," that she "should accept the fate." But she knows that evil and witchery are abroad and continues to howl her challenges: "Why do they want our babies? . . . They want our power. They take our children to remove the inside of them. Our power" (84). In Nisten ha's dreams she hears the screams of wounded people and watches the earth soaking up blood. "What is left?" she asks? "I am a crazy woman. That is what they call me." As the story ends she still hears the children "crying for [her], though the sound grows fainter" (84).

Although Nisten ha and Mary, the narrator of the 1978 sections, live in very different worlds, Brant constructs her story, which is actually quite brief, around concrete parallels between the two women's stories. Mary also has dreams. Her story begins, "I am awakened by the dream. In the dream, my daughter is dead. Her father is returning her body to me in pieces. He keeps her heart. I thought I screamed . . . Patricia!" (78) She too sees her daughter taken away, her "face looking out the back window of his car. Her mouth forming the word over and over . . . Mommy Mama" (79). She too receives a letter, apparently dictated by the father, which she tears up; like Nisten Ha, she knows her daughter will be taught to hate her. Facing silence, she too "howls" her grief. She too is the victim of language used against her:

The word . . . *lesbian*. Lesbian. The word that makes them panic, makes them afraid, makes them destroy children. The

word that dares them. Lesbian. *I am one*. Even for Patricia, even for her, *I will not cease to be!* (85)

Both Mary and Nisten ha reclaim the language, express their pain in strong, rebellious voices and remain true to who they are, but there is one crucial difference in their lives. Early in the story Mary raises the central question of all mourning literature: "How is it possible to feel such pain and live?" (79). Like other mourning stories, "A Long Story" pays tribute to the consolations of sharing pain with another woman, but it focuses on a specific kind of relationship, a lesbian bond. While Nisten ha is unsupported by her husband and brother, and no women friends are mentioned, Mary has a lover, Ellen, whose "mouth is medicine" (83). The two of them "share" the "heartbreak" by making love. Their "hair braids together on the pillow . . . [and they] move to [their] place of power" (82). While Nisten ha defiantly accepts that she is alone and "crazy," Mary's place of power sustains her and helps her to accept life; instead of Nisten ha's vision of the earth soaking up spilled blood, Mary "feel[s] the blood pumping outward to [her] veins, carrying nourishment and life" (85). Ellen's profession elliptically suggests the role women play in the lives of children and each other: she is a nurse. Recognizing the importance of braiding women's lives and stories, "A Long Story" is a healing story.

### V. I Thought She Was Talking about Herself

In 1899 Mary Austin wrote a story about how the act of mourning a child brings together a group of women across both racial and religious boundaries. "The Castro Baby" describes a "bazar" held in a small western town, Maverick, to raise money for a protestant church. When a traveling photographer offers a free set of photos "as a prize for the handsomest baby," "Maverick . . . had a baby show," the voting "paid for at the rate of five votes for two bits" (*Western Trails*, 224). Balloting is brisk, with the "plumpest" baby of a respected man in the community well in the lead when Mrs. Castro, a poor Mexican woman from an outlying district, arrives with her "pitifully quiet" baby with its "wasted little face" dressed in its "best frock" (225-66). The doctor cannot understand why she's walked in the "blazing sun just to show off her kid, when it won't live a week at the outside, and she knows it" (226). But as the narrator says ironically, "feminine instinct comprehends even that which is beyond the wisdom of doctors," and even the childless young beauty, Miss McCracken, recognizes that Mrs. Castro thinks her baby is beautiful and wants a picture of it. The women of the town

flock to Mrs. Castro to admire her baby. The woman in the lead, the unnamed wife of the mine owner, has a particular reason for reaching out to Mrs. Castro. She has recently lost her own child, and until Mrs. Castro's arrival, has sat watching "the mothers of children" in the baby show, "and her heart was very bitter" (225). Her comment that the baby is very pretty causes a "thin smile" to break across Mrs. Castro's face and lifts her own bitterness: "And the fairer woman smiled back understandingly, as she lifted the child with a thrill of aching remembrance at its feather weight." All of the women want to hold the baby, but when Mrs. Castro gives it to the mine owner's wife, "they understood that also" (226). By the day's end, Mary Carmen Mercedes Castro has won the prize and been photographed. The story concludes a few days later when the whole town turns out for "the burial of the Castro baby" (227).

The kind of story that is often labeled "slight" or "sentimental," despite its ironic tone, "The Castro Baby" chronicles a moment of understanding in the face of difference, a recurring theme in Austin's work. It expresses a woman's need for other women to acknowledge her as a good mother, to support her, to understand her loss. Read psychologically in the context of Austin's life, it is a deflected plea for women to reach across other kinds of boundaries to offer compassion and understanding—to herself and to her friend.

During the 1890s two young women who would become celebrated writers became friends as each struggled with a decision about "giving up" her child. The author of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman had just made the decision to send her young daughter Katherine to live with her father. Like her new friend, Mary Austin had also gone through a difficult childbirth and postpartum depression, with poor medical care, and when she met Gilman, she had begun to acknowledge that her daughter Ruth was severely retarded. Years later in her autobiography, Austin recounted how she defended Gilman against charges that she was an "unnatural mother": "I don't know what else . . . could have been done about the little girl. Charlotte had no way of making a living except by lecturing, to which she could not drag the girl about . . . I was for her, and for the freedom from convention that left her the right to care for her child in what seemed the best way to her" (*Earth Horizon* 293). In defending Charlotte, she also defended herself, for almost everyone, including Austin's own mother, had blamed her for her child's problems. Ultimately, with the encouragement of a young woman doctor who began to practice in the region and perhaps thinking of Gilman's right to care for her child in the best way, Austin made the difficult decision to institutionalize Ruth. In the



autobiographies the two women wrote many years after their friendship began, their pain at "losing" their children still remains fresh. Describing the difficult decision to send her child to live with her former husband, Gilman concludes "this seemed the right thing to do":

No one suffered from it but myself. This, however, was entirely overlooked in the furious condemnation which followed. I had "given up my child."

To hear what was said and read what was printed one would think I had handed over a baby in a basket. In the years that followed she divided her time fairly equally between us, but in companionship with her beloved father she grew up to be the artist that she is, with advantages I could never have given her. I lived without her, temporarily, but why did they think I liked it? She was all I had. (163)

After describing her attempts to smile cheerfully as her daughter departs on the train, Gilman says:

That was thirty years ago. I have to stop typing and cry as I tell about it. There were years, years, when I could never see a mother and child together without crying, or even a picture of them. . . .

What were those pious condemners thinking of? (163-64)

Writing about herself in the third person, Austin also focuses on misunderstanding, on pain and loss suffered alone:

It was not long after that she put Ruth in a private institution in Santa Clara where the difference between herself and other children, which was beginning to trouble her, would not be felt, where it would not be known. Here the inability of other people to bear her cross would not be taxed; where one could say if questioned, "We have lost her"; . . . where the pain could be borne alone, as it was for another twenty years. It is a relief to speak of it now, of the cruelty, the weight, the oppression of its reality, the loss of tenderness, of consideration, the needless blight and pain. (*Earth Horizon* 295)

Both women describe wounds which never healed, or even scarred; they remain fresh years later. Austin's friendship with Gilman and

their mutual support for each others' decisions must have greatly comforted both women. It certainly helped Austin to define the role of the woman artist: "to help other women to speak out what they think, unashamed" (*A Woman of Genius* 290). Austin beautifully captures the ways women express such support and understanding in another story, "Frustrate." Talking with a new friend who seems to understand just how she feels, the narrator says, "I suppose the writer woman must have seen how it was with me, but I thought at first she was talking about herself" (*Western Trails* 234).

Of course the writer woman *was* talking about herself; she recognizes the narrator's feelings and conflicts because she has gone through a different kind of the same thing. The narrator recognizes herself and her feelings in the writer's stories because, despite their real differences, their experiences overlap. The writer woman helps her to find a voice. Austin implies the universality of this kind of encounter by leaving both women unnamed. These are the moments I've tried to write about in this essay.

## V. Filling the Silence

Her love for the children she "did not get" makes Brooks's speaker "the mother," but I believe that she has heard not only the voices of her "dim killed children," but also the voices of living children; her "gobbling mother-eye" recognizes the details of mother love. Perhaps her understanding of that love makes the absences in her life all the more painful. The Mother crossed one of the most significant boundaries between women: she became a mother. I look back at my journal entries critically for if I thought I knew loss and vulnerability then, I know them in an entirely different way now, since I became a mother.

Five years ago I left the (male) gynecologist who had told me my tubes were blocked, who didn't return my phone calls, who never tried to explore the particularities of my case, who kept saying, "Let's just wait and see what happens." I began to see Dr. Susan Tredwell, who said, sympathetically, "It's so difficult to do an internal exam on you because you're so scarred. But it doesn't look so hopeless to me. I'm more of an interventionist; let's see what we can do." She called some specialists for advice and substantially upped my dosage of Chlomid. A few months later I settled my class action suit against Robbins, the makers of the Dalkon Shield, for \$750. I had a weak case anyway, my medical records "routinely" destroyed by Student Health at UVA. But I was glad to settle: I was pregnant. Four years ago I gave birth to my son Corey, a child Dr. Tredwell referred to as "the miracle baby." Like

Brooks's speaker, whose tender details of children's lives reveal her to be a mother, I had a child whose voice filled the silence.

Perhaps one miracle is all we're entitled to: I have been unable to conceive another child. But I am no longer mourning for myself. I now face a new challenge of reaching across boundaries as I try to imagine and share with the daughter I am about to adopt her South Korean birth mother's love for her and sense of loss, as I think about the circumstances in her life that forced her to this decision. There are some things I already know. I know that I need to listen, as undefensively as possible, to those who will think of me as one of the child-stealers. I know that my happiness grows out of her sorrow. I know that though I will probably never meet her or even know her name, our shared daughter will forever connect our lives. This essay is my beginning effort to reach out of myself to understand.

<sup>1</sup> Melody Graulich would like to thank the New Hampshire Council for the Humanities for a grant which helped her complete this essay.

<sup>2</sup> At the time I was thinking about my infertility and this essay, I did not know any literary explorations of infertility, one of the reasons I stretched across boundaries to look for women writing about similar kinds of experiences. While I've been writing the essay, two nonfictional books have been published where women talk about their infertility, *Dear Barbara, Dear Lynne: The True Story of Two Women in Search of Motherhood*, by Barbara Shulgold and Lynne Sipiora, and *Family Bonds*, by Elizabeth Bertholet. The few literary treatments I've discovered are generally not consoling. In Virginia Sorensen's *On This Star* (1946), for instance, the young Mormon heroine sees what she thinks of as her "sterility" as a punishment from God for having sex before marriage.

<sup>3</sup> For a sharply critical contemporary analysis of the mourning arts which seems to echo Twain's, see Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, especially the chapter entitled "The Domestication of Death." For a much more sympathetic study of how the popular culture forms of the mourning arts influenced a major poet, see St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture*, especially the chapter called "Dark Parade." For an excellent recent study of mourning in popular culture which includes many primary texts, see Simonds and Rothman, *Centuries of Solace*.

<sup>4</sup> Although the artistic traditions associated with mourning are generally created by women rather than men, I hope it is obvious that men also struggle to express their grief. African-American male writers have written especially eloquently about loss. In James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," the narrator reconnects with his brother after the death of his daughter. Several works by Charles Chesnut explore the loss of a child, notably his fine novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, which climaxes as two half sisters, one "white," one "black," provide a particularly ironic example of sharing the loss of a child.

A fine treatment of how a man and his wife grieved together over the loss of their children can be found in Johnsen, "'Our Children Who Are in Heaven': Consolation Themes in A Nineteenth-Century Connecticut Journal." Indeed, as one would expect, women writers often suggest that while women and men grieve differently, they can reach across these boundaries to share sorrow. See, for instance, Jessamyn West's wonderful story, "The Vase." For an interesting contrast, read one of the most famous poems about mourning a dead child written by a man, Robert Frost's "Home Burial," where the bereaved husband and wife are totally unable to console each other.

<sup>5</sup> While women could speak and write openly about the death of a living child, until recently miscarriage and infertility have been seen as embarrassing private matters, increasing the sense of isolation of women suffering from them. One example poignantly illustrates this point. The western writer Mary Hallock Foote published some twelve novels and several collections of short stories during a long and successful career, but none of them explore the kind of moving and personal matters she wrote about in her letters to her friend Helena De Kay Gilder, letters which she said contained "the cries one woman utters to another." "There is no one but a woman who can listen properly to this kind of talk," she wrote in 1884.

I have been ill again, a bad miscarriage from which I am very slow, I think, in recovering. This is my third week, and I can only crawl about from bed to chair . . . You know this time I had all the regular pains of childbirth, prolonged because there was no life to help itself out. And you know how sad it was to lie there and suffer and know it was all for nothing—all to end in loss instead of gain. I was an awful baby about it, and cried like one. (1884)

There is plenty of material for a whole essay on the often oblique treatment of miscarriage in women's literature. For moving contemporary examples, see Simonds and Rothman, *Century of Solace*, especially a poem by Barbara Crooker called "The Lost Children" (245).

#### WORKS CITED

- Ammons, Elizabeth. "A Profile of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper." *Legacy: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* 2 (Fall 1985): 61-66.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Stowe's Dream of the Mother Savior: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and American Women Writers Before the 1920's." *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. New York: Cambridge UP, 1986: 155-95.
- Austin, Mary. *A Woman of Genius*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist P, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Earth Horizon*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Western Trails: A Collection of Stories by Mary Austin*. Ed. Melody Graulich. Reno and Las Vegas: U of Nevada P, 1987.
- Bertholet, Elizabeth. *Family Bonds*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Boydston, Jeanne, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis. *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Brant, Beth. *Mohawk Trail*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1985.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. "The Mother." *The Norton Anthology of Women's Literature*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985.
- Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Avon Books, 1977.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara and Deirdre English. *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Books, 1979.
- Foote, Mary Hallock. Letters to Helena De Kay Gilder. Stanford University Library Collection.
- Freeman, Mary Wilkins. *Selected Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*. Ed. Marjorie Pryse. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1983.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
- Glaspell, Susan. "A Jury of Her Peers." *American Voices, American Women*. Ed. Lee R. Edwards and Arlyn Diamond. New York: Avon Books, 1973.
- Johnsen, Norma. "'Our Children Who Are in Heaven': Consolation Themes in A Nineteenth-Century Connecticut Journal." *The Connecticut Historical Society* 51 (Spring 1986): 77-101.
- McIntosh, Peggy. "Interactive Phases of Curricular Re-Vision." Delivered at the Claremont Colleges conference, "Traditions and Transitions: Women's Studies and a Balanced Curriculum," February 18-19, 1983.
- Olsen, Tillie. *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist P, 1984.

- Shulgold, Barbara and Lynne Sipiora. *Dear Barbara, Dear Lynne: The True Story of Two Women in Search of Motherhood*. Reading, MA.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1992.
- Silko, Leslie. "Lullaby." *Storyteller*. New York: Seaver Books, 1981. 43-51.
- Simonds, Wendy and Barbara Katz Rothman. *Centuries of Solace: Expressions of Maternal Grief in Popular Literature*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992.
- St. Armand, Barton Levi. *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Stowe, Harriet. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing, 1969.

## TRAILING WEST

SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape "knowing," I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. "Knowing" is painful because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before. (Gloria Anzaldua *Borderlands/La Frontera* 48)

In 1992, my first year as a tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, I attended a welcome party sponsored by a joint faculty-administration women's group. Formed to encourage professional mentoring among university women, this group took upon itself to introduce new faculty to experienced women, women who had negotiated the exacting topography to tenure and beyond. At this meeting, I was introduced as a "trailing spouse," a term, I then discovered, defining the spouse who follows along after his or her partner finds a teaching position. I had never trailed before, professionally. Through graduate school, first in Columbia, South Carolina, and then in Madison, Wisconsin, my partner and I had worked together to assure each other's success—until, of course, he finished his doctorate first and signed a contract to begin teaching geology in Nebraska. My decision to "trail" rather than commute has shifted my scholarly interests in serendipitous ways. Like the great Platte River Road itself, whose vestige wagon ruts braid across Nebraska, my personal and professional journeys have meandered, veered, and crisscrossed unpredictable terrain. At first I was a reluctant migrant, an accidental tourist. But I quickly learned to embrace the surprises along the trail. Adaptability, suppleness, bending to the conditions of Nebraska life, enabled me to shake the rigid mantle of graduate school and grasp the fluid art of improvisation. Moving taught me "knowing." Though introduced professionally as a "trailing" woman, I have come to redefine that label on my own terms.