build again. And again. All the while knowing that deeper meaning will rise to the surface like the form in a piece of stone, or the grain of a polished wood, if I have faith in this knowledge inside me. If I keep working. And over and over the words do not fail me. Over and over I come to a clarifying end. A circle is made. A pattern of sense is given to those words I loved for no apparent reason. I trust my own heart again. *This experience renders a precise meaning.*

ALICE WALKER

One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)

Someone asked me once whether I thought women artists should have children, and, since we were beyond discussing why this question is never asked artists who are men, I gave my answer promptly.

"Yes," I said, somewhat to my surprise. And, as if to amend my rashness, I added: "They should have children—*assuming this is of interest to them*—but only one."

"Why only one?" this Someone wanted to know.

"Because with one you can move," I said. "With more than one you're a sitting duck."

In the work of this essay, and beyond this essay, I am indebted to the courageous and generous spirits of Tillie Olsen, Barbara Smith, and Gloria Steinem.—A.W.

The year after my only child, R, was born, my mother offered me uncharacteristically bad advice: "You should have another one soon," said she, "so that R will have someone to play with, and so you can get it all over with faster."

Such advice does not come from what a woman recalls of her own experience. It comes from a pool of such misguidance women have collected over the millenia to help themselves feel less foolish for having more than one child. This pool is called, desperately, pitiably, "Women's Wisdom." In fact it should be called "Women's Folly."

The rebellious, generally pithy advice that comes from a woman's own experience more often resembles my mother's automatic response to any woman she meets who pines for children but has been serenely blessed with none: "If the Lord sets you free, be free indeed." *This crafty justification of both nonconformity and a shameless reveling in the resultant freedom is what women and slaves everywhere and in every age since the Old Testament have appropriated from the Bible.*

"No, thank you," I replied. "I will never have another child out of this body again."

"But why do you say that?" she asked breathlessly, perhaps stunned by my redundancy. "You married a man who's a wonderful fatherly type. He has so much love in him he should have fifty children running around his feet."

I saw myself stamping them out from around his feet like so many ants. If they're running around his feet for the two hours between the time he comes home from the office and the time we put them to bed, I thought, they'd be underneath my desk all day. Stamp, Stamp.

My mother continued: "Why," she said, "until my fifth child I was like a young girl. I could pick up and go anywhere I wanted to." She *was* a young girl. She was still under twenty-five when her fifth child was born, my age when I became pregnant with R. Besides, since I am the last child in a family

of eight, this image of nimble flight is not the one lodged forever in my mind. I remember a woman struggling to get everyone else dressed for church on Sunday and only with the greatest effort being able to get ready on time herself. But, since I am not easily seduced by the charms of painful past experience, recalled in present tranquility, I did not bring this up.

At the time my mother could "pick up and go" with five children, she and my father traveled, usually, by wagon. I can see how that would have been pleasant: it is pleasant still in some countries—in parts of China, Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico, Greece, etc., etc. A couple of slow mules, ambling along a bright southern road, the smell of pine and honeysuckle, absence of smog, birds chirping. Those five dear little voices piping up in back of the wagon seat, healthy from natural foods: Plums! Bird! Tree! Flowers! Scuppernongs! Enchanting.

"The other reason I will never have another child out of this body is because having a child *hurts*, even more than toothache (and I am sure no one who has had toothache but not childbirth can imagine this), and it changes the body."

Well, there are several responses from the general supply of Women's Folly my mother could have chosen to answer this. She chose them all.

"*That* little pain," she scoffed. (*Although, from her own experience, which, caught in a moment of weakness for truth she has let slip, she has revealed that during my very own birth the pain was so severe she could not speak, not even to tell the midwife I had been born, and that because of the pain she was sure she would die—a thought that no doubt, under the circumstances, afforded relief. Instead, she blacked out, causing me to be almost smothered by the bedclothes.*) "That pain is over before you know it." That is response #1. #2 is, "The thing about that *kind* of pain is that it does a funny thing to a woman (*Uh-oh, I thought, this is going to be the*

Women's Folly companion to the 'women sure are funny creatures,' stuff); looks like the more it hurts you to give birth, the more you love the child." (*Is that why she loves me so much, I wonder. Naturally, I had wanted to be loved for myself, not for her pain.*) #3. "Sometimes the pain, *they say,* isn't even real. Well, not as real as it feels at the time." (*This one deserves comment made only with blows, and is one of the reasons women sometimes experience muscle spasms around their mothers.*) And then, #4, the one that angers me most of all: "Another thing about the pain, *you soon forget it.*"

Am I mistaken in thinking I have never forgotten a pain in my life? Even those at parties, I remember.

"I remember every moment of it perfectly," I said. "Furthermore, I don't like stretch marks. I hate them, especially on my thighs" (which are otherwise gorgeous, and of which I am vain). Nobody had told me that my body, after bearing a child, would not be the same. I had heard things like: "Oh, your figure, and especially your breasts [of which I am also vain] will be better than ever." They sagged.

Well, why did I have a child in the first place?

Curiosity. Boredom. Avoiding the draft. Of these three reasons, I am redeemed only by the first. Curiosity is my natural state and has led me headlong into every worthwhile experience (never mind the others) I have ever had. It justifies itself. Boredom, in my case, means a lull in my writing, emotional distance from whatever political movement I am involved in, inability to garden, read, or daydream—easily borne if there are at least a dozen good movies around to attract me. Alas, in Jackson, Mississippi, where my husband, M, and I were living in 1968, there were few. About the draft we had three choices: the first, C.O. status for M, was immediately denied us, as was "alternative service to one's country," which

meant, in his case, legally desegregating a violent, frightening, rigidly segregated Mississippi; the second was to move to Canada, which did not thrill me, but which I would gladly have done rather than have M go to prison. (Vietnam was never one of our choices.) The third was, if M could not become twenty-six years old in time, to make of him "a family man."

My bad days were spent in depression, anxiety, rage against the war and a state of apprehension over the amount of rainfall there is annually in Vancouver, and the slow rate of racial "progress" in Mississippi. (Politicians were considered "progressive" if they announced they were running for a certain office as candidates "for *all* the people;" this was a subtle—they thought—announcement to blacks that their existence was acknowledged.) I was also trying to become pregnant.

My good days were spent teaching, writing a simple history pamphlet for use in black day-care centers in Jackson, recording black women's autobiographies, making a quilt (African fabrics, Mississippi string pattern), completing my second book, a novel, and trying to become pregnant.

Three days after I finished the novel, R was born. The pregnancy: the first three months I vomited. The middle three I felt fine and flew off to look at ruins in Mexico. The last three I was so huge—I looked like someone else, which did not please me.

What is true about giving birth is . . . that it is miraculous. It might even be the one genuine miracle in life (which is, by the way, the basic belief of many "primitive" religions). The "miracle" of nonbeing, death, certainly pales, I would think, beside it. So to speak.

For one thing, though my stomach was huge and the baby

(?!) constantly causing turbulence within it, I did not believe a baby, a person, would come out of me. I mean, look what had gone *in*. (Men have every right to be envious of the womb. I'm envious of it myself, and I have one.) But there she was, coming out, a black, curling lock of hair the first part to be seen, followed by nearly ten pounds of—a human being!

Reader, I *stared*.

But this hymn of praise I, anyhow, have heard before, and will not permit myself to repeat it, since there are, in fact, very few variations, and these have become boring and shopworn. They were boring and shopworn even at the birth of Christ, which is no doubt why "Virgin Birth" and "Immaculate Conception" were all the rage.

The point is, I was changed forever. From a woman whose "womb" had been, in a sense, her head; that is to say, certain small seeds had gone in, rather different if not larger or better "creations" had come out, to a woman who had "conceived" books in her head, and had also engendered at least one human being in her body.

Well, I wondered, with great fear, where is the split in me now? What is the damage? Was it true, as "anonymous" —so often a woman with distressing observations—warned: "Women have not created as fully as men because once she has a child a woman can not give herself to her work the way a man can . . . etc, etc?" Was I, as a writer, *done for?* So much of Women's Folly, literary and otherwise, makes us feel constricted by experience rather than enlarged by it. Curled around my baby, feeling more anger and protectiveness than love, I thought of at least two sources of folly resistance Women's Folly lacks. It lacks all conviction that women have the ability to plan their lives for periods longer than nine months, and it lacks the courage to believe that experience, and the

expression of that experience, may simply be different, *unique*, rather than "greater" or "lesser." The art or literature that saves our lives *is great to us*, in any case; more than that, as a Grace Paley character might say, we do not need to know.

I was, suddenly a mother. Combating the Women's Folly in my own head was the first thing. The urge was primal: the desire to live and to appreciate my own unique life, as no one other than—myself.

It helped tremendously that by the time R was born I had no doubts about being a writer (doubts about making a *living* by writing, always). Write I did, night and day, *something*, and it was not even a choice, as having a baby was a choice, but a necessity. When I didn't write I thought of making bombs and throwing them. Of shooting racists. Of doing away—as painlessly and neatly as possible (except when I indulged in kamikaze tactics of rebellion in my daydreams) with myself. Writing saved me from the sin and *inconvenience* of violence—as it saves most writers who live in "interesting" oppressive times and are not afflicted by personal immunity.

I began to see, during a period when R and I were both ill—we had moved to Cambridge for a year and a half because I needed a change from Mississippi—that her birth, and the difficulties it provided us, joined me to a body of experience and a depth of commitment to my own life, hard to comprehend, otherwise. Her birth was the incomparable gift of seeing the world at quite a different angle than before, and judging it by standards that would apply far beyond my natural life. It also forced me to understand, viscerally, women's need for a store of Women's Folly and yet feel on firm ground in my rejection of it. But rejection also has its pain.

Distance is required, even now.

OF A GHASTLY YET USEFUL JOINT ILLNESS, WHICH TEACHETH

OUR PILGRIM THAT HER CHILD MIGHT BE CALLED IN THIS WORLD OF TROUBLE THE LEAST OF HER MYRIAD OBSTACLES

Illness has always been of enormous benefit to me. It might even be said that I have learned little from anything that did not in some way make me sick.

The picture is not an unusual one: A mother and small child, new to the harshness of the New England winter in one of the worst flu waves of the century. The mother, flat on her back with flu, the child, burning with fever. The mother calls a name someone has given her, a famous pediatrician who writes for one of the largest of the women's magazines—in which he reveals himself to be sympathetic, witty, something of a feminist, even—to be told curtly that she should not call him at his home at any hour. Furthermore, he does not make house calls of any kind, and all of this is delivered in the coldest possible tone.

Still, since he is the only pediatrician she knows of in this weird place, she drags herself up next morning, when temperatures are below zero and a strong wind is blasting off the local river, and takes the child to see him. He is scarcely less chilly in person, but, seeing she is black, makes a couple of liberal comments to put her at her ease. She hates it when his white fingers touch her child.

A not unusual story. But it places mother and child forever on whichever side of society is opposite this man. She, the mother, begins to comprehend on deeper levels a story she has written years before she had a child, of a black mother, very poor, who, worried to distraction that her child is dying and no doctor will come to save him, turns to an old folk remedy for his illness, "strong horse tea." Which is to say, horse urine. The child dies, of course.

Now too the mother begins to see new levels in the stories

she is at that moment—dizzy with fever—constructing. Why, she says, slapping her forehead, all history is current; all injustice continues on some level, somewhere in the world. "Progress" affects few. Only revolution can affect many.

It was during this same period when, risen from her bed of pain, her child well again and adapting to the cold, that the mother understood that her child, a victim of society as much as she herself—and more of one because as yet she was unable to cross the street without a guiding hand—was in fact the very least of her obstacles in her chosen work. This was brought home to her by the following experience, which, sickening as it was, yet produced in her several desired and ultimately healthful results—one of which was the easy ability to dismiss all people who thought and wrote as if she, herself, did not exist. By "herself" she of course meant multitudes, of which she was at any given time in history, a mere representative.

Our young mother had designed a course in black women writers which she proceeded to teach at an upper-class, largely white, women's college (her students were racially mixed). There she shared an office with a white woman feminist scholar who taught poetry and literature. This woman thought black literature consisted predominantly of Nikki Giovanni, whom she had, apparently, once seen inadvertently on tv. Our young mother was appalled. She made a habit of leaving books by Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Nella Larson, Paule Marshall, and Zora Neale Hurston face up on her own desk, which was just behind the white feminist scholar's. For the truly scholarly feminist, she thought, subtlety is enough. She had heard that this scholar was writing a massive study of women's imagination throughout the centuries, and what women's imaginations were better than those

displayed on her desk, Our Mother wondered, what woman's imagination better than her own, for that matter; but she was modest, and as I have said, trusted to subtlety.

Time passed. The scholarly tome was published. Dozens of imaginative women paraded across its pages. They were all white. Papers of the status quo, like the *Times*, and liberal inquirers like the *New York Review of Books* and the *Village Voice*, and even feminist magazines such as *Ms.* (for which our young mother was later to work) actually reviewed this work with various degrees of seriousness. Yet to our young mother, the index alone was sufficient proof that the work could not be really serious scholarship, only serious white female chauvinism. And for this she had little time and less patience.

In the prologue to her book The Female Imagination, *Patricia Meyer Spacks attempts to explain why her book deals solely with women in the "Anglo-American literary tradition." She means, of course,* white *women in the Anglo-American tradition. Speaking of the books she has chosen to study, she writes: "Almost all delineate the lives of white, middle-class women. Phyllis Chesler has remarked, 'I have no theory to offer of Third World female psychology in America. As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had.' So am I: the books I talk about describe familiar experience, belong to a familiar cultural setting; their particular immediacy depends partly on these facts. My bibliography balances works everyone knows* (Jane Eyre, Middlemarch) *with works that should be better known* (The Story of Mary MacLane). *Still, the question remains: Why only these?"*

Why only these? Because they are white, and middle class, and because to Spacks, female imagination is only that—a limitation that even white women must find restrictive. Perhaps, however, this is *the white female imagination, one that is "reluctant and* unable *to construct theories about experiences I haven't had." Yet Spacks never*

lived in nineteenth-century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontës?

It took viewing The Dinner Party, *a feminist statement in art by Judy Chicago, to illuminate—as art always will—the problem. In 1973* when her book Through the Flower *was published, I was astonished, after reading it, to realize she knew nothing of black women painters. Not even that they exist. I was gratified therefore to learn that in* The Dinner Party *there was a place "set," as it were, for black women. The illumination came when I stood in front of it.*

All the other plates are creatively imagined vaginas (even the one that looks like a piano and the one that bears a striking resemblance to a head of lettuce: and of course the museum guide flutters about talking of "butterflies"!). The Sojourner Truth plate is the only one in the collection that shows—instead of a vagina—a face. In fact, three faces. One, weeping (a truly clichéd tear), which "personifies" the black woman's "oppression," and another, screaming (a no less clichéd scream) with little ugly pointed teeth, "her heroism," and a third, in gimcracky "African" design, smiling; as if the African woman, pre-American slavery, or even today, had no woes. (There is of course a case to be made for being "personified" by a face rather than by a vagina, but that is not what this show is about.)

It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go.

However, to think of black women as women is impossible if you cannot imagine them with vaginas. Sojourner Truth certainly had a vagina, as note her lament about her children, born of her body, but sold into slavery. Note her comment (straightforward, not bathetic) that "when she cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus" heard her. Surely a vagina has to be acknowledged when one reads these words. (A vagina the color of raspberries and blackberries—or scup-

pernongs and muscadines—and of that strong, silvery sweetness, with as well a sharp flavor of salt).

And through that vagina, children.

Perhaps it is the black woman's children, whom the white woman—having more to offer her own children, and certainly not having to offer them slavery or a slave heritage or poverty or hatred, generally speaking: segregated schools, slum neighborhoods, the worst of everything—resents. For they must always make her feel guilty. She fears knowing that black women want the best for their children just as she does. But she also knows black children are to have less in this world so that her children, white children, will have more. (In some countries, all.)

Better then to deny that the black woman has a vagina. Is capable of motherhood. Is a woman.

So, Our Mother* thought, cradling her baby with one hand, while grading student papers with the other (she found teaching extremely compatible with child care) the forces of the opposition are in focus. Fortunately, she had not once believed that all white women who called themselves feminists were any the less racist, because work after ambitious work issued from the country's presses, and, with but a few shining examples (and Our Mother considered Tillie Olsen's *Silences* the *most* shining) white women feminists revealed themselves as incapable as white and black men of comprehending blackness and feminism in the same body, not to mention within the same imagination. By the time Ellen Moers's book on great *Literary Women* was published in 1976—with Lorraine Hansberry used as a token of what was not to be included, even in the future, in women's literature—Our Mother was well

* *I am indebted to the African writer Ama Ata Aidoo for my sense of the usefulness of the phrase "Our Mother," after reading sections of her novel, then in progress,* Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint.

again. Exchanges like the following, which occurred wherever she was invited to lecture, she handled with aplomb:

White student feminist: "Do you think black women artists should work in the black community?"

Our Mother: "At least for a period in their lives. Perhaps a couple of years, just to give back some of what has been received."

White student feminist: "But if you say that black women should work in the black community, you are saying that race comes before sex. What about black *feminists?* Should *they* be expected to work in the black community? And if so, isn't this a betrayal of their feminism? Shouldn't they work with women?"

Our Mother: "But of course black people come in both sexes."

(Pause, while largely white audience, with sprinkle of perplexed blacks, ponders this possibility.)*

* (*In the preface to Ellen Moers's book* Literary Women: The Great Writers, *she writes: "Just as we are now trying to make sense of women's literature in the great feminist decade of the 1790s, when Mary Wollstonecraft blazed and died, and when, also Mme de Stael came to England and Jane Austen came of age, so the historians of the future will try to order women's literature of the 1960s and 1970s. They will have to consider Sylvia Plath as a woman writer and as a poet; but what will they make of her contemporary compatriot, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry? Born two years before Plath, and dead two years after her in her early thirties, Hansberry was not a suicide but a victim of cancer; she eloquently affirmed life, as Plath brilliantly wooed death.* Historians of the future will undoubtedly be satisfied with the title of Lorraine Hansberry's posthumous volume (named not by Hansberry, but by her former husband who became executor of her estate), *To Be Young, Gifted and Black:* and they will talk of her admiration for Thomas Wolfe; but of Sylvia Plath they will have to say "young, gifted, *and a woman.*" [Italics mine].

It is, apparently, inconvenient, if not downright mind straining, for white women scholars to think of black women as women, perhaps because "woman" (like

OF OUR MOTHER'S CONTINUED PILGRIMAGE TOWARD TRUTH AT THE EXPENSE OF VAIN PRIDE, OR: ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS

It was a river she did not even know was there. Hence her difficulty in crossing it.

Our Mother was glad, during the period of the above revelations—all eventually salutary to her mental health—to have occasion to address a large group of educated and successful black women. She had adequate respect for both education and success, since both were often needed, she thought, to comprehend the pains and anxieties of women who have neither. She spoke praisingly of Black Herstory, she spoke as she often did, deliberately of her mother (formerly missing from both literature and history); she spoke of the alarming rise in the suicide of young black women all over America. She asked that these black women address themselves to this crisis. Adddress themselves, in effect, to themselves.

Our Mother was halted in mid-speech. She was told she made too much of Black Herstory. That she should not assume her mother represented poor mothers all over the world (which she did assume) and, furthermore, she was told, those to address were black men; that, though it appeared more black

"man" among white males) is a name they are claiming for themselves, and themselves alone. Racism decrees that if they are now women (years ago they were ladies, but fashions change) then black women must, perforce, be something else. (While they were "ladies" black women could be "women," and so on.)

In any case, Moers expects "historians of the future" to be as dense as those in the past, and at least as white. It does not occur to her that they might be white women with a revolutionary rather than a reactionary or liberal approach to literature, let alone black women. Yet many are bound to be. Those future historians, working-class black and white women, should have no difficulty comprehending: "Lorraine Hansberry: Young, Gifted, Black, Activist, Woman, Eloquent Affirmer of Life," and: "Sylvia Plath: Young, Gifted, White, Non-Activist Woman (in fact, fatally self-centered), Brilliant Wooer of Death."

women than men were committing suicide, still everyone knew black women to be the stronger of these two. Those women who committed suicide were merely sick, apparently with an imaginary or in any case a causeless disease. Furthermore, Our Mother was told, "Our men must be supported in every way, *whatever they do.*" Since so many of "our men" were doing little at the time but denigrating black women (and especially such educated and "successful" black women as those assembled) when they deigned to recognize them at all, and since this denigration and abandonment was a direct cause of at least some of the suicides, Our Mother was alarmed. Our Mother was furious. Our Mother burst into tears (which some around her thought a really strong black woman would not do).

However, Our Mother did not for one moment consider becoming something other than black and female. She was in the condition of twin "afflictions" for life. And, to tell the truth, she rather enjoyed being more difficult things in one lifetime than anybody else. She even regretted (at times) not being still desperately poor. She regretted (at times) her private sexual behavior was so much her own business it was in no sense provocative. She was, in her own obstacle-crazed way, a snob.

But it was while recuperating from this blow to her complete trust in *all* black women (which was foolish, as all categorical trust is, of course) that she began to understand a simple principle. People do not wish to appear foolish; to avoid the appearance of foolishness, they were willing to remain actually fools. This led directly to a clearer grasp of many black women's attitudes about the women's movement.

They had seen, perhaps earlier than she (she was notorious for her optimism regarding any progressive group effort) that

white feminists are very often indistinguishable in their attitudes from any other white persons in America. She did not blame white *feminists* for the overturned buses of schoolchildren from Baton Rouge to Boston, as many black women did, or for the black schoolchildren beaten and spat upon. But look, just look, at the recent exhibit of women painters at the Brooklyn Museum!

("Are there no black women painters represented here?" one asked a white woman feminist.

"It's a *women's* exhibit!" she replied.)

OF THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONALISM, ALIGNMENT WITH NON-AMERICANS, NON-EUROPEANS, AND NON-CHAUVINISTS AND AGAINST MALE SUPREMACISTS OR WHITE SUPREMACISTS WHEREVER THEY EXIST ON THE GLOBE, WITH AN APPRECIATION OF ALL WHITE AMERICAN FEMINISTS WHO KNOW MORE OF NONWHITE WOMEN'S HERSTORY THAN "AND AIN'T I A WOMAN" BY SOJOURNER TRUTH

There was never a time when Our Mother thought, when someone spoke of "the women's movement," that this referred only to the women's movement in America. When she thought of women moving, she automatically thought of women all over the world. She recognized that to contemplate the American women's movement in isolation from the rest of the world would be—given the racism, sexism, elitism, and ignorance of so many American feminists—extremely defeating of solidarity among women as well as depressing to the most optimistic spirit. Our Mother had traveled and had every reason to understand that women's freedom was an idea whose time had come, an idea sweeping the world.

The women of China "hold up half the sky." They, who once had feet the size of pickles. The women of Cuba, fighting the combined oppression of African and Spanish macho, know that their revolution will be "shit" if they are the ones to do the laundry, dishes, and floors after working all day, side by

side in factory and field with their men, "making the revolution." The women of Angola, Mozambique, and Eritrea have picked up the gun and propped against it demand their right to fight the enemy within as the enemy without their countries. The enemy within is the patriarchal system that has kept women virtual slaves throughout memory.

Our Mother understood that in America, white women who are truly feminist (for whom racism is inherently an impossibility, as long as some black people can also be conceived of as women) are largely outnumbered by *average* American white women for whom racism, inasmuch as it assures white privilege, is an accepted way of life. Naturally, many of these women, to be trendy, will leap to the feminist banner because it is now the place to be seen. What was required of women of color, many of whom have, over the centuries, and with the best of reasons, become racialists if not racists themselves, was to learn to distinguish between who was the real feminist and who was not, and to exert energy in feminist collaborations only when there is little risk of wasting it. The rigors of this discernment will invariably keep throwing women of color back upon themselves, where there is, indeed, so much work, of a feminist nature, to be done. From the stamping out of clitoridectomy and "female circumcision" in large parts of Arabia and Africa, to the heating of freezing urban tenements in which poor mothers and children are trapped alone to freeze to death. From the encouragement of women artists in Latin America to the founding of feminist publications for women of color in North America. From the stopping of pornography, child slavery, and forced prostitution and molestation of minors in the home and in Times Square, to the defense of women beaten and raped each Saturday night the world over by their husbands.

To the extent that black women disassociate themselves

from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world. This is a serious abdication from and misuse of radical black herstorical tradition: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer would not have liked it. Nor do I.

From my journal: Jackson, Mississippi, June 15, 1972:

R said today: "I can cook soup, and eggs, and windows!."

She also said, while drawing letters on the kitchen table: "A, D, *and* O." *Then, "Oh-oh, the* O *is upside down!"*

I feel very little guilt (most days) about the amount of time "taken from my daughter" by my work. I was amazed to discover I could read a book and she could exist at the same time. And how soon she learned that there are other things to enjoy besides myself. Between an abstracted, harassed adult and an affectionate sitter or neighbor's child who can be encouraged to return a ball, there is no contest, as one knows.

There *was* a day, when, finally after five years of writing *Meridian* (a book "about" the civil rights movement, feminism, socialism, the shakiness of revolutionaries and the radicalization of saints—the kind of book out of the political sixties that white feminist scholar Francine du Plessix Gray declared recently in the *New York Times Book Review* did not exist) I felt a pang.

I wrote this self-pitying poem:

> Now that the book is finished,
> now that I know my characters will live,
> I can love my child again.
> She need sit no longer
> at the back of my mind
> the lonely sucking of her thumb
> a giant stopper in my throat.

But this was as much celebration as anything. After all, the book *was* finished, the characters *would* live, and of course I'd loved my daughter all along. As for "the giant stopper in my throat," perhaps it is the fear of falling silent, *mute,* writers have from time to time. This fear is a hazard of the work itself, which requires a *severity* toward the self that is often overwhelming in its discomfort, more than it is the existence of one's child, who, anyway, by the age of seven, at the latest, is one's friend, and can be told of the fears one has, that she can, by listening to one, showing one a new dance step, perhaps, sharing a coloring book, or giving one a hug, help allay.

In any case, it is not my child who tells me I have no femaleness white women must affirm. Not my child who says I have no rights black men or black women must respect.

It is not my child who has purged my face from history and herstory and left mystory just that, a mystery; my child loves my face and would have it on every page, if she could, as I have loved my own parents' faces above all others, and have refused to let them be denied, or myself to let them go.

Not my child, who in a way *beyond* all this, but really of a piece with it, destroys the planet daily, and has begun on the universe.

We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but *sisters* really, against whatever denies us all that we are.

For a long time I had this sign, which I constructed myself, deliberately, out of false glitter, over my desk:

> Dear Alice,
>
> Virginia Woolf had madness;
> George Eliot had ostracism,
> somebody else's husband,

and did not dare to use
her own name.
Jane Austen had no privacy
and no love life.
The Brontë sisters never went anywhere
and died young
and dependent on their father.
Zora Hurston (ah!) had no money
and poor health.

You have R—who is
much more delightful
and less distracting
than any of the calamities
above.

INGRID BENGIS

The Middle Period

Quite often, when I am living through one or another form of "hard times," I think . . . no, I don't want to be a writer anymore . . . no, I can't bear the isolation, the uncertainty, the financial insecurity, the constant wrestling with inner truths, the constant necessity for keeping my eyes open to life, the unabating pressure to push myself beyond what I have only just begun to master, the sense that there is, in this, the most unpredicatable of professions, no resting place.

When these thoughts and feelings come over me (and they arrive not infrequently), I am quick to invent a new career for myself: chef, psychotherapist, lobsterfisherwoman, diamond cutter, filmmaker, each of which, from a distance, appears to combine in its own way the intensity and symbolic weight and