



FINDING A FEMALE LANGUAGE FOR POWER

Naomi Barber

Narrative: 1971-1991



ENDING SADNESS IN SPITE OF SORROW

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Narrative: 1992-2013



Finding a Female Language for Power – Part I

Ending Sadness In Spite of Sorrow – Part II

...whole hearted and half-sure (Sharon Welch)

Talmudic renderings
Bending and genuflecting
Davening and wailing
Rap rant cant
Shout out
A yawl a squall
Light possibility
Crushed pebbles under feet
Young voices
Call out
Indignant and suffering
Cut cut cut
Cut it out!

Naomi Barber

*I would stand close with a child in each hand.
How deeply we took in the transfigured expression from the tortured face.
How intensely the tiny cheeks basked in the glow of justice, attained at last and then already fading.*
(Franz Kafka)

*Mothers burning inside the risen suns of their children
(Karen Russell, Swamplandia) ... filling in the blank (Marius Petipa)*

*This eye
Is not for weeping
Its vision
Must be unblurred
Though tears are on my face
Its intent is clarity
It must forget
Nothing*

Adrienne Rich The Prison House 1971

*"Do you think about these things?
Do you think about how little you think about these things?"
David Foster Wallace*

*Love and Work
Work and Love
Love and Work
Work and Love
Coffee black
Dark roast
Love and Work
Work and Love
How when where
Leagues years
Foundered
Love and Work
Work and love
Annotated years days
Conscripted faltered
Love work
Work love
Granules of time
Run out
Love and Work
Work and love
And...
NB*

"I WANT AN ACCESS TO THE WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE."

Malala Yousafzai, Age 14

Pakistan, Advocate for Education for Girls

Shot in neck and head Tuesday October 9, 2012

Finding a Female Language for Power

Prelude

Back then: This is me a last chance story writing itself born in 1940 a war roaring incantations of Jews calculatingly being incinerated yet five overheard. There is no chronology I move through time as recollections come to me elliptical time torque time twisting time hold me in sway irreverent reckless dissonant counter voices made mute. I am here full blown stills moments in time projected on a vast wall nothing censored expurgated death scans the stills as I think back reclaiming resurrecting rallying desirous of being fully visible in the moment of last breathes.

Taking the inevitable long look back having recently arrived at the advanced age of seventy-two aware fully as Mark Twain once said of himself, *the older he got, the more clearly he remembered things that had never happened*. It is in the spirit of Mark Twain that I recount from the beginning how I found a *female language for power*. Warning of time sequencing now scattering and bunching up tides tugged this way and that by the cycles of the sun. My heart has been full of weeping for as long as I can remember tucked into my young life feelings of isolation and dislocation. Consciousness often exceeds vocabulary and I was from the first at odds with what lived external to me the only Jewish child in a public school of six hundred felt always an oddity. Stripped down to nerve and desire to drifting fingers in little ant mounds of sand driven to find something deep in archetypical space. A place in my mind and heart beating through fingers heated by the sun little solar panels early on throbbing with grief for a world without an end to sadness the sand inscribing the overspill of my bursting heart. Too soon my innocence was overwhelmed by a mother who had run to the sanctity of a pathological *Bipolar Narcissism* bereft unable to recognize the child she had born as separate and distinct but rather a vessel way to recoup the childhood she had lost in the garbled *Yiddishkeit* of new immigrants. Faces stuck in an *Edvard Munch Scream* the scent of those left behind incinerated flesh never leaving their nostrils.

Time capsule 1945: at a sleep-away camp where my mother was the nurse I remember gathering the bugle call signaling the end of the War a rainbow above the lake where we all crossed hands near the flagpole and gently cried. I had just turned five the sweetness in the air covered my slight shoulders like a shawl. It is a feeling I sometimes still get sitting in the quiet of country sunsets as the crispness of September nears. It is ineluctable. It is a sensory history that courses through me one of my body's lasting and best memories.

I was a child born into the crèche of Nazism. My grandmother, my mother's mother, brought *green cousins* over from the old country. Black trains at midnights took, stole people out of their beds, dragged them, clubbed them and shoved them in like limp slaughter-ready cattle. Rough hands and mouths shouting words garbled orders rolled over cheeks stuffed with marbles, guttural sounds that bayed forth like sow herders in they threw mothers and fathers heaped like bales of hay. When they could not dump another body into these cars, they sped them off to ovens that looked like to my five year old mind like the furnace in my basement but larger. What was left were gauged eyes staring out, eyes sucked out and little balls of gold rolling like marbles on the ground, they came from teeth. I sat in the plump winged-back chair in my parents room refusing to sleep so that I could watch so that none of these boot-stepping growly men would come club my parents, drag them out, and pack them into a train chugging and whistling off like a hurricane wind into the night. Flinging my mother and father like rag dolls, like *Raggedy Ann and Andy* into ovens blazing like hell where their eyes would roll off their heads and stare out at me pleadingly, angrily, betrayed because I didn't save them, didn't keep them safe. They had no gold teeth in their mouths.

The extended family gathered at my maternal grandmother's house after Saturday Sabbath sundown over meals of traditional Jewish delicacies brisket fresh *Challah Kreplach* mouthfuls contrapuntal to onerous descriptions of what was happening with the Jews in the old country brought by the newest *green cousin* seated around the table. However disjointed I the youngest understood as real as Grimm's Fairytales as menacing dream to wakefulness one stream of time people our relatives were grabbed up in a giant's fist flung into a gobbling flame scorching sky. Raw bits of our family had immigrated to this country but our souls crossed back over the giant ocean to encircle the scabrous the sacrilegious the insane picking off of Jews depleted by the degradation and cruelty too fatigued to fight or believe what would be their near fate. Death's contagion caught up so many family members left behind while the big *THEY swore they didn't know* as we did every gulp of *matzoth ball soup* every bite of *Challah* bread a sob and the clinking of change in the *Pishka* to bring more *green cousins* over. I became frenzied at the thought of my parents being dragged off the disappearance the extreme exquisite abandonment. I pleaded begged to stay to keep vigil in my wing-backed

watchtower. I watched for Nazi's I watched to protect I watched and waited Nazi's and sleek trains moving through the darkness filled my nights. Affirmation of my childhood inclination and fears came from reading, Philip Roth's, *The Plot Against America* the little boy in the novel was also a child on the look-out for Nazi's in Newark, New Jersey in the 1940's.

Sub-text: Now looking back at the expanse of seventy years and with Freud nudging me was I waiting to see if and make sure that my parents not touch each other in salacious and forbidden ways thereby my father betraying me. I was a wide-awake hearing the wail and animal-like cries of my mother as she nightly fled the stairs to shove her head in the furnace of our two-family home. Was this they're love dance their crisis driven foreplay? In the crazy patch of recollection it is not weird or strange to have a soupcon of this unconscious collection of remembrances bundled together.

The Same Sky

Above the same sky

Oh how my eyes have aged

No illusions left

For clouds to shape

No God

With my father's face

Not even a wish to make

Fearing words

Failing dreams

Pitying myself

Looking back to the small girl

Alone by the sand box

Naomi Barber -1970

And in the hot sun of summer days in Newark, N.J. strapped in a halter and tied to the garage door with only enough lead to sit by the sandbox. My small fingers deftly moving through the tiny sparkling particles of sand my face turned toward the tufted white clouds passing by my mind shifting in and out of somber and precocious Goth-like thoughts. Over stimulated over-exposed the ominous and foreboding overtaking me. Visits to the recently arrived *green cousins* situated in walk-ups on the Lower East Side set in me a longing a yearning an existential inclination pumped like fuel into my future self, a desire to find my way to New York City even the harrowing trip through the Lincoln Tunnel breath held until the light peered in near the exit did not diminish this longing.

Seeds

You drew pictures of life
with your words.

I listened and ate the words you said
to grow up strong.

Like the trees, I grew,
branches, leaves, flowers and then the fruit.

I became the words I ate in you
For better or worse

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Jawaka Steptoe, In Daddy's Arms I am Tall

Running away: I ran way to Branch Brook Park. I sat at the duck pond's edge dribbling my fingers in the slowly drifting currents reflections of the little ringlets enveloping my face like a princess's tiara. She, my mother, said my hair was straight, tried to pull it so with a brush moving through the curls persuasive like a beating. It stayed curly. It looked curly in the little rivulets of water at Branch Brook Park. I had slipped the lead that held me in place and raced off, a blur of a child, at a clip swift and soft so as not to be discovered. A wisp of a girl driven to the pond's edge so I could be discovered by the local police who would take me by the hand scolding me gently to my father's desk in his music classroom at Barringer High School. This was wartime nothing like this seemed a little bizarre when everything normal was so distorted. There a little desk some crayons and paper awaiting me. The students looked at me sitting there up front posing looking as if a golden German *Fraulein* a little *Aryan* poster girl my eyes high beams searching their faces as I scanned their strangeness separating enemies and friends.

My father put his finger to his mouth asking for *pianissimo* and went on talking about music and clefs and sharps and flats and great masters.

For Bach, he had told me, *we do it because of Bach*, when I asked him *Why* as we sat hands clasped listening to *Bach's B Minor Mass* tears gliding our faces gentle rain. I was five, six, or seven. As often as I could Houdini fashion escape my captivity I dashed off to Branch Brook Park crossing a highly trafficked street running away with a deliberate wildness experiencing what would grow into defiance and solitariness. My thoughts were giants I could barely contain in my brain. My little soul ached with what it knew. Books were yet to comfort me with the knowledge that I was not alone. I was yet to read. The desire for *the other* was born holding information too weighty troubled waters coursing through my body looming a dark cloud warning of mounting, impending danger.

As he spiraled his way to death he told me without self-pity *I'm a reduced person. It is hard when you are talented to suffer these kinds of losses*, he added. His legs wobbled he shuffled to and from the bathroom in obsessive semi-circles. He played *Yankee Doodle*, *Silent Night* or *My Country T'is of Thee* over and over and over on the keyboard lent him by his twenty-eight-year-old granddaughter. He was aware that we had heard him knew he was locked in an irrevocable groove. He was nearly eighty-four and existing somewhere between dementia, small and less small strokes, and knowledge that death was somewhere not so far off *the end is near* he told me. *I wish I had conducted and composed more*, he said simply quite near the end instead *I became a teacher*. It was shared without remorse or regret but as a lesson as he stared down the cold neck of final chances for self-evaluation, self-revealing truths. Circumstance, poverty the particularities of time were no longer relevant. He was not a man who notched his past with prideful sacrifice the very irrevocableness of his words resonant with an existential brutality, a hard-edged forthrightness re-encountered innocence.

1940-45: Nights, midnights found me on a slim cot in a room of army surplus cots lined up like summer rows of corn stalks. We were the children of defense plant workers. My father did not go to war because he was a teacher. Nights he made weapons and daytimes he was the loved neighborhood high school music teacher. As music teacher he formed a swing band with a group of his students, *The Blue Jackets* as they were called who came regularly midnights to serenade the weary workers many of these assembly plant warriors were parents or family members. These people served their country making the bullets for their fellow countrymen while they themselves remained out of the reach of menacing and violet deaths. *Oh where are you legs that used to run? Where are you eyes that used to see that no longer will look at me? You look so queer Johnny my dear I hardly even know you*, this the anti-war rendition of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *My Country T'is of Thee*, *American the Beautiful*, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*

The Glory, Amazing Grace, John Browns Body, It Don't Mean a Thing, Solitude, Caravan, Don't Get Around Much Anymore, Sophisticated Lady, Satin Doll, and Take the A Train the mad mixed ebony tinted repertoire performed midnights by this youthful swing band.

Their leader my father played bass with Duke Ellington when he came to NYC and the band's bass player was out, he was a proud member of the Local 16 Musicians Union and thus in the draw. Father knew Bach, he knew Ellington he knew anti-war songs he trained the *Blue Jackets* to play pure Dorsey swing patriotism. *Where are your legs...* sentiments that spoke of war's ravages this was wartime of explicit mission and menacing enemy. *Gabriel's* assorted horns sang out beyond midnight the flag unfurling as my father's family vanished into the bowels of furnace gases he'd stop to kick off the heat of torment with rhythmic tempos of patriotism. The assembly workers were extended family, the family of America the vanguard the home front. Women and men, side-by-side molding weapons along the assembly belt to the rallying beat of the *Blue Jackets* patriotic medleys. My father was a hero. He kept the workers singing in wartime. Nights my mother pinned on her neatly starched white nurses' cap with its thick black stripe draped the red satin lined navy cape over her pristine white, starched uniform and headed off for her shift at the VA hospital.

My father's civic mindedness extended further into the community as he conducted the summer evening concerts in the band shell of Branch Brook Park dressed in a white tuxedo jacket and black tuxedo pants. The audience drawn from the neighborhood sat on folded chairs breath heavy many hands clutching clumps shreds of weep-drenched telegrams informing of the dreaded ennobled death of a son or brother or uncle. Others' hands waiting expectantly for the knock on the door, the intractable word the end of never to see again Johnny or to see Johnny whole or intact again. And every family had a Johnny. Daddy filled the Northward of Newark with music I was never far from his side watching. The music in the park, the band midnights at the assembly plant held a sobbing neighborhood together with song children serenading their parents while their parents' hands shaped the tools of assault and revenge. At eighteen I never wanted to go to college. I wanted to write poetry, play the cello and have many lovers who were famous men. I wanted to spread my life over the bloodstained battlefields of Europe. Were these the impulses, the dreams, the impetus shaped by the midnight beat of the *Blue Jackets*, the summer songs at Branch Brook Park where *Blue Danube* waltzes swept over shoulders like intricately laced shawls of about to break apart darkening clouds. Were the desired lovers famous men the phantoms of a dream gone badly for a father who at the end regretted without self-flagellating remorse not to have composed and conducted more?

Summer Band Concerts

My father conducted the orchestra

He wore a summer tux

Hundreds of people sat in the Park

He climbed the podium

The baton a thin reed

A magic wand

My father's hair was white

I was four

On summer nights

I danced under starlight

I watched my father's baton

To move my feet right

They danced on thick grass blades

Under moon light

My father wore white

His hair was white

I sang along with the orchestra

My heart was like a thick bouquet

Of splendid summer flowers

Mother sat tight on the bench

And watched,

She sat tight and closed on a bench

And watched the million other eyes

Watching him, their shoulders

Like the breeze swept grass

Or the night clouds

Floating gently over me

I danced so she couldn't see me

The only time Daddy and I

Could be alone without her

Piercing cacophony and agony

Was when he conducted the orchestra. Naomi Barber - 1974

Little Jew

God's body is what I have in my mouth! God's body!

What are you eating before lunch? You know you are not supposed to eat before lunch.

Jesus' body is in my mouth. I can't chew it. It's got to melt.

Little Jew you are a little Jew you cannot eat Jesus' body we don't believe in Jesus.

Judaism was a struggle from the start. First the Nazis came and stole your parents and stuffed them into a big black train and then they threw them into big ovens like big loaves of bread. My grandmother who saved the *green cousins* was a baker who slipped from view beneath a linen shawl as she rocked the daylight into a Sabbath Friday evening the sweet smells of freshly baked *Challah* like first blossoming lilacs.

Grandma

Rolling, shaking

White muslin

Delicate old lace

Her face

Thick, knobbed hands

The dough

They handled, replaced

Friday evening

No light yet

Tallow prayed

To old flickering

And God said

Let there be...

And there was

Grandma

Long braid

Teeth in place

The baker's wife

My mother's mother

Remembering God

*Assuring Him
In His words
Of her love
I watched
She never asked me to join
Never explained what
She was doing
Or why
Grandma, I know now
Who you were.*

Naomi Barber –

*Published in the Forward December
1982*

Catechism: Mondays were marked by turmoil as my friends marched home in flank from catechism chanting, *you killed Christ, you killed Christ!* My nights blunted and like a traveling star shot down at me, marrying my nighttime darkened reveries, my bedtime vigilance staving off savagery. Killing was not new to me. But that was at night when reality was transformed into the uncanny, the unfathomable, the indefinable that evil is.

You know you killed Christ. This from Patty and Dorothy and Whitey who scampered endlessly about with me in the vacant lot two doors down now that I was no longer tethered to the garage door and could roam freely within a three-house radius. And then bursting forth from Whitey's fist a discus shaped rock, tears spitting out of his eyes as he screamed his frantic accusation, *Jesus killer!* I dropped felled heaped in a lot's weeds stunned the feeling of heartbreak and shock with the sickening sensation betrayal brings in its wake. Whitey died dead on the lot one day soon after that as I watched. The boys were playing baseball and the ball hit him in the temple. He fell to the ground like crinkled paper. I just watched and couldn't believe he wouldn't get up again. Still unable to grasp that this was death, dying. Nothing, nothing could bring back the motionless body swelling apparitions of death waiting to grab me.

I was the only Jew in an elementary school of 600 students. Italians and Irish filled the neighborhood red brick two family houses. Scents from the nearby Chunky chocolate factory wafted over the neighborhood porous with the fragrance of sweetness. Girls in white dresses and lacey veils filled the neighborhood Saturdays Chagall angels circling a *Shtetl*. Satin prayer books and tiny beads of

rosaries held tightly in their six and seven-year-old fists the *Holy Grail*. Enamored enticing the onerous yearning of an outsider to join to belong to the mystery the diaphanous fairy tale paraded often by lacey veils and impeccable white dresses. Complying with pleaded request made without compunction I asked and was instructed in the *Catechism* by my understanding young contemporaries. And one day when the *catechism committee* the little randy group of vagabonds said I was ready and on the way to the Saturday Matinee at the Ampere Theater I went to *Confession*. I knew what to do and say. I was well rehearsed. Entitled because of my tolerance for their erratic and accusatory ways both as slayer of *Christ* and as friend a young neighborhood oddity I was accompanied up to the booth and repeated the confession I was primed to give. And the next day I went in flank down to receive *Holy Communion* at St. Rose of Lima Church, which was moments from my house. The *body of Christ* did not have time to dissolve before I arrived home at the requisite demonically instituted time for Sunday lunch. *Nope I am not Jewish. I don't want to be Jewish. I will not be Jewish.* I protested loudly emphatically when my totemic and blasphemous act was revealed.

Flicking time frames: To this day, I squirm when I am called upon to confront my Judaism. When confronted reminded of being Jewish I fall into quipping something like *hello I'm Jewish I'm guilty* this a playful threat played on throughout my life and very fast forward when living in London with my then husband who surrounded himself with British aristocrats who overtly held Jews in great disdain *but we needed one for the bank* said not even a guarded veiled reference to *Shylock's* infamy. Perhaps my unremitting drive to live in New York City resulted from a need to live in a City about which it was said *here everybody is a Jew*. Marrying a man I barely knew happened perhaps when he said over coffee after midnight at the Hayes Bickford in Harvard Square *when I am finished* (with my Ph.D.) *I want to live in New York* where he had grown up my current and real boyfriend wanting to work at a University in the West or Midwest. I am a creature born out of Jewish verisimilitudes.

Scenes from a Jew in the making childhood: Occasionally my mother would drive us to the Weequahic and Jewish section of Newark, *see there are Jewish children over there* she would point out. She never told me my cousins were Jewish. They squeezed in too close to her assimilation ambivalence. Judaism was one of the sites of her eruptions churning displeasure and antagonisms she was a torture chamber filled and layered over with her own denials. Almost with obligation she took me to a *Purim Festival* at some far-afield Jewish synagogue dressed like *Esther* adding rage to my turmoil, I, who refused to even wear Halloween costumes in the first grade. The children were all dressed as *Queen Esther* or *Mordecai*, *Esther's* father and swung discordant and strident noisemakers, a *Grogger*, when they screamed out the name of the bad *King*

Haman. If anything drove me like a yew fleeing a wolf out of the reach of Judaism this celebration did. I liked the purple and gold walls of the Church the rote nature of the Catechism the taking of the Christ body in my mouth the mystery the striking velvety sensations the shiny flat still faces of *Mother and Child* the solace the serenity the predictability the certainty in St. Rose of Lima against a backdrop of nighttime pending assaults the weary sentry felt at peace in the ineluctable coolness of the stonewalls holding solidly in place gilded fixtures.

Taking of the body of Christ in my six year old mouth was a defining act the aftermath the aftertaste lived on in me. spurts of rebellion would come and go ebb and flow but never sufficient to push the tide the course of my life. Recalcitrant acts were a tease a come-on from a coward the compliant being who lived inside me an angry unforgiving unrelenting devilish troll. I lived unable to attach myself connect with others being solitary *needing no one* a mantra the somber composition of an eleven-year-old. I was I am preternaturally always at odds neither here nor there. Rubbed down over time by the tides of my own longings and dissatisfactions. Commentary: *Now having run over the decade seventy I find myself in deep mourning not for my death not with regret but with a kind of irrevocable sadness at what lived parallel to my life all along for that which I could not have chosen it was on the other side of blank to me. On the first day of gay marriage in NYC, July 24, 2011, I sit in wonderment at the pleasure the ecstasy of the couples that will be able to say vows witnessed by a judge and stamped legitimate by the State of New York. How did they all find each other? Have someone to love and sleep next to life long? How did love happen for them? How did love happen for anyone? Why didn't I know it was a clear choice I could have made had I known?*

With the sediments the morsels of *Jesus* body still on my tongue a psychologist was called to my house that Sunday afternoon. Dr. Jonas asked me, *but why don't you want to be Jewish? Tell her she has no choice*, she my mother shouting out. He silenced her and repeated the interrogation. *But why?* The door to the dining room was a little ajar. *Because Jews can't be President!* I said with certainty emphatically categorically leaving him nothing more to say. And this was one of the many door slams on Judaism increasingly emphatic always searching for compounding reasons to shut the door. Without making the connection a counter voice lined my own sleep like velvet within the body the soft fleshy curve of a snuggling arm the long braid tucked in a bun teeth firmly in place a white cloth over a face held in dough rolling hands my grandmother with whom I was deposited Fridays in pre-school days she was the person with whom I melted merged dove into. Had anyone ever pointed out that her abiding love for me sprung deep from the well of Judaism that she was an observant Jew living life within the tenets of Jewish prayer I would have maybe even become a Rabbi but

my mother who so shunned her and had such contempt for her and her toxic way of life forced me into secret adoration for my grandmother not wanting to trigger further rage expressing my absolute devotion.

Black boots laced with gaseous fumes of chocolate and the chunking smells of cooking human flesh fill the memory nexus clog my sinuses with the detritus of acid reminiscences rotting like so many unburied corpses. Are these the shapers of my life? Is there a direct ascendancy from here to desire for radical activism to unwavering no compromises to being ethical principled in a world that is too often as distant from ethos as intolerant of a principled life as any instinctual barnyard hierarchy? *She brings an ethical presence to any work she does.* What are the shapers of life? What motivates one? Does memory exist is it like a barnacle on a crustaceous seabed? Was I over stimulated the repository for a sordid family history? Am I the repository for so many memories gone sour so many dreams that wafted putrid fumes belched like feathered stuffed clouds over the Old Country's soil? Do I carry the predigested stories like cud?

Tell me what are my origins? How did I arrive at all of this? I closed the public door on Judaism when at eleven I screamed out at the Rabbi. *You are a hypocrite and I hate you and I will never come back into a synagogue except for a family event.* This following a lesson from the text of *Ethics of Our Father's* the rabbi tanned with golf cart silken tie swag Charlie Rose purple label Lauren suit after my asking *could I bring friend who does not belong to our synagogue to the confirmation party* he responding gingerly with swirl of sneer at the curl of his lips *no we are not bringing friends to our celebration, no outsiders,* was he aware that this long-time childhood friend was African American the granddaughter of my father's closest music associate? That was it! Judaism forevermore tainted by this embarrassing doctrinaire response from the erstwhile religious leader still hovering the scent of ash and soot his Cadillac wheels tearing up pavement. The confirmation class consisted of a colony of feathery girls in Lord and Taylor sweaters who stood in sway mouths agape as I swore never to darken the carved sanctuary doors of any synagogue ever again. And I never did go back except squirming when making a command showing up at a family religious milestone.

Fast forward: And at newly minted seventy-two I still don't know what Judaism is or what it means to be Jewish except in my work I believe I got close to *Tikkun Olam –repairing the world.* My father was called a *Righteous Man* by a fellow musician and cantor at his non-religious memorial and my oldest son when thrown bodily out of a Hollywood Production Company the incident of which written up by *The Hollywood Reporter* saying something like *JB was tossed out of his production company yesterday but left with his integrity in tact.* Being principled being *righteous* having integrity immutable an inner core incapable of compromise a family legacy. But as for love, the jury is still out.

Out of context: When youngest and adopted son from Paraguay primarily Guaraní Indian with dashes of unknown other got catastrophically ill with a disease to the lower intestine known as ulcerative colitis and ultimately had to have his septic colon removed, all of it, my mother claimed finally accepting him if a little bit that ulcerative colitis was primarily a disease that affects Eastern Europeans and primarily Jews and with that *see I told you that a pintila yiddila (little Jew) lives within that boy*. In her will she left, after pressing from my brother and the trustee, him a far lower percentage than for all of the other grandchildren not even a kosher designation *pintila yiddila* got him more. He was left unaware of all of this his contact with her limited by me although he was stalwart and loving to my father in the last months of his life during visits bringing along *Marx Brothers* movies to share as they together pet the household dog. My father was moved out of the house my mother predatory at this time and living with an obliging friend who took in other friend's parents as well when their memories began to falter.

As my daughter was applying to graduate school in the field of clinical psychology my mother deigned to write a prototype essay in which she inserted in a closing paragraph that special consideration ought to be given, to this her granddaughter, because deep within was a *pintila yiddila* an unnerving test of madness here provoking gales of giggles and a loving gracious thank you never included but wondering always what Harvard would have made of such an assertion.

Counter Voice: Jewish Who? Why? Dislocation pre-occupied my friend who had been the editor-in-chief of the *Crimson* when at Harvard and who went on to spend a life scrutinizing the Jewish intellectual community pre-occupied with his own and other's inescapable state of *dislocation* he growing up in an orthodox and observant family his father's daily ritual prayer wrapped in *Tallis* affixing *Tsfillin*. He wrote that Judaism was not just a religion but a way of thinking a way of living scholarly secular questioning life challenging the existence of God. He died in his early '60's of Lou Gehrig's disease surrounded by wife and son and with the approbation of his colleagues at the University of Chicago and in New York. Ours a Diaspora from Newark and the Weequahic section found us all wondering what Judaism was what being a Jew meant we were out in a world in which we never felt at home.

Growing up within the pillars of counter voices weekends spent with two Grandmothers on Friday and Saturdays with the observant grandma my mother's mother and Sunday's with my father's mother and father. My parents constant growling and sniping in rousing upbraiding ways my mother a ferocious unstoppable torrent of rage a tornado ripping through our lives at odd moments rising up without warning springing forth a breach with an old and ancient sacrament and my father draped arms out stretched feet poised in one atop the other as if awaiting his crucifixion and release from this marriage filled almost entirely of an ongoing barrage of assaults.

Our Father, Our God

*Bound and gagged a noose of respectability
Hungering for juicy bits of other lives
To make ours right an edict of fear
The boundaries of our boundaries
Kept clear of all trespassers
Until our province was secured
Order and obedience to your law
Self-proclaimed a God you were our All
In awe of your holiness
We held to your robe the fabric folds our home
Rigged to a passage among threads and whipcord
We the ornaments the jewels
The signs of legitimacy for your rule
Oh Poppa, you Jesus Christ us to death
We so believed your goodness needed your strength
Dazzled by your power you even prowled shadows
When we climbed the wall to peek outside
Your law absolute our habit
Now that The God has been revealed
We remain fixed to your cloth.*

Naomi Barber - 1970

My father worked weekends as a bass player at weddings and other such events becoming increasingly distrustful of my mother and fearing that I might be swept up and smashed to unrecognizable pieces during one of her rampages deposited me every weekend in Passaic, New Jersey. Both sets of grandparents lived there albeit at opposite ends of the Park one within walking distance of the *Shtelt* synagogue the observant part of town and the other in a building facing the Park where on the Sabbath contemporaries would more often be on a park bench rather than in *Schul*. In both neighborhoods Yiddish was the dominant language English spoken with a thick overlay of the *old world*. My mother's mother kept me close to her side,

stroking my thick curls holding me on her lap tucked snugly next to her in bed or our hands together full of flour kneading the dough for Sabbath Challah always feeling close to my grandfather in his wheel chair leg amputated from life threatening diabetes often pulling me onto his lap for big life-sustaining hugs. The very nature and constancy of their warmth to provide countervailing balance although never spoken of to the abusive and cruel treatment the tyranny visited upon me by my mother and their daughter. I was between the ages of two and seven for these weekly sojourns, which stopped when my brother nearly eight years younger arrived but never once did anyone, utter a word about my distraught and frightening mother.

At Twenty: It wasn't until I got much older after my mother's parents deaths that I came to see that the heat of a baking oven the sweet scents of warm Challah the intense and extra tight embraces were my maternal grandparents' way to counter-balance the torment and torture they new I experienced at home. Although at seventy I still recreate moments when I am filled with their tenderness I harbored the belief clear into my twenties that I created this monster mother with my birth it being impossible that such a mother could have come from their buttery deeply loving and kind essential natures she turning vampire-like when at birth I ripped through her. Encouraged by a psychiatrist when I was twenty to interview members of my mother's family including her twin brother about her behavior while growing up. Enlightened too late for the information needed growing up that her entire family feared her constantly barraged victimized by her threats and temper tantrums relieved to see her off and married never a hint that she was troubled and potentially dangerous to others and herself. Upon learning she was pregnant with me three months into the marriage she beat herself raw pounding her stomach and within it her now fetus bearing uterus. My father stood witness aghast and it was then that his eyes were forever tainted with a scrim of irrevocable sadness.

Fuck you fuck you Guttersnipe

*Fuck you fuck you
Guttersnipe
Goldilocks curls
Jewish hair
She tugged on
Incessantly to get straight
Fuck you fuck you
Guttersnipe
As she vacuumed
As she did often
Cleanliness
An obsession
I waved my
Fuck you finger
Wildly in the air
Right at and behind
Her back
Like grass lands
Tree benders
Blasts of
Torpedo winds
Fuck you fuck you
She never knew
Guttersnipe
Word picked up
At five or six
Didn't know
What it meant
But had a sense
It was lethal
Finally
After listening
To her berate
Her mother my grandmother
Castigating spewing hatred
Drum roll thick
Grandma queer strange
Imperiled assimilation
Her curdling Yiddish accent
I shrieked sob spitting
You are a guttersnipe
You are a guttersnipe
My mother gasped
Chased me
Chastening a six-year-old
Mouth split open to wash out*

*Those words
Archery lances
More desperate
More defiant
Mother blotted out
The old country as if she
A found baby swaddled
Astride the Hudson River
Crazed hand washing
A girl with no past
Politically correct
Off balance always
Search for assimilation
Too life defining desperate
Attempts to kill off her mother
Each phone call
To erase telltale traces
Of the old world of Silesia
Unkempt meant revelation
Emanating telltale
Vapors lifting off swamp rot
Ears splitting to frenzy
Guttersnipe, guttersnipe
I spit out
To protect her prayerful
Sabbath observant mother
A baker of Challah breads
Who held me close
Did she know
How I deflected
Poison arrow words
From her daughter
Her thick hand
On my head
Buried in her
Floury lap told me so – Naomi Barber - 1970*

Sunday mornings: Leaving my mother's parents behind I was taken to my other grand parents house, my father's parents, by my mother's brother an indulgent uncle playful to excess eliciting unleashing in me unfettered wildness and mischievousness. Looking back I now see he wanted to mitigate against the cruelty he believed his sister and my mother was visiting on me this being so contrary to the way he was in the world particularly with his wife and his daughters. Nothing in his demeanor would lead me to believe that he too had been victimized by my mother's nearly depraved and ruthless craziness. Compensating lifelong my mother's attentive twin brother driven

by her to being tongue-tied and a school failure ultimately becoming a very successful businessman found his way to me whether Zurich London Paris or Cambridge the night before I gave birth to my first child he took my husband and me to the *best sea food restaurant* in Boston. Never questioning his hand and heart opened to me no matter the circumstance mediating his twin's impact with a loving respect and honor resonant still. Back then Sundays my uncle would drop me off at the other grandparents quickly with a few perfunctory courtesies as if these very secular Jews were as dangerous *verboten* as mixing meat and dairy.

Then my paternal grandpa in a perfectly tailored suit brought together by a ruby-eyed fox tiepin would escort me proudly to the park across the street. Parading by all of the mostly women out for their daily restorative he had a word for each playful flirtatious introducing me as if I was Shirley Temple we had the same curls and the ladies would clasp their hands together with exaggerated awe and delight. He would follow the greeting often telling an off-colored joke drawing flushed cheeks and girlish laughter requesting *Goils pull down your shades* meaning pull down your seductive skirts all this in a thick Yiddish-English. On this side of the Passaic the residents were primarily secular trying to remove themselves as far as possible from the old country religion being part of its ominous burden and the reason for their flight. My grandmother would stand at the window watching all of this with upheavals of disgust she seemed repulsed by her husband and filled with hatred and contempt for the women with whom he swapped exchanges. My grandmother listened to opera and would tell me how she was a better cut of greater intellectual standing pointing out what she referred to as *Treif the dirty Jews on the park benches* as she looked out from her third floor window. As time went on I learned that my grandma had multiple boyfriends when her three sons were young and would without flinching brazenly take off on weekends with one or the another as her husband stood by and watched she bringing back fine clothes for her sons one of whom, the eldest suffered from progressive blindness, my father the middle son.

Sunday in the late afternoon after my father had finished his club date he and my mother would come to fetch me. Always waiting a Sunday dinner of boiled brisket with full trimmings my grandpa and I playing casino while he had a shot or two of schnapps. Within minutes of walking in my mother and my grandmother would be like two cats in heat howling at each other my mother trigger-hair her most outrageous behavior coming barreling out. The two

women were flint for each other and disposed unguarded splattering deep gruels of wrath at each other. It was quite a spectacle two women spitting fire venom across a table set with china and silver tureens of vegetables a bowl of applesauce and a platter of boiled brisket my grandpa eyes twinkling at me and my father with his look of deep and looming perplexity. Storming vented siphoned as was the skimmed gravy the mood becalmed we would sit together and eat our meal. The women as if in the flush the aftermath of heaving orgasm or limp and relieved as children after tantrums these two Sunday warriors sitting down with gentility and civil conversation as we proceeded to eat. Knotted stomachs soured by the pre-meal fury in my father grandfather and I knowing that these two clamoring battlers could not feel or comprehend our drenched and sated states in the aftermath. My mother behaved well at her mother's house aware of the wariness of her siblings usually present when she would visit me in tow. It was on her daily phone calls with her mother that she *roared her terrible roar and gnashed her terrible teeth she was an original Wild Thing.* (*Where the Wild Things Are, Maurice Sendak*)

Grand sweeping explication: The seeds of anxiety around Judaism as well as my bouts of surging indignity around what I found to be unjust were built by stockpiled moments and connections never in a straight line colliding elements convoluted emotions spilling free fall from I know not fully where. My life experiences salted by a world in a free fall tumbling splintered fractured references to all things past offshoots and digressions found people and banished people held together by rage and submissiveness of *too good and not good enough.* *No poems at my funeral* my mother ordered loosely translated *do not write something to read at my funeral* extracting a promise from me as we left my father's mother's funeral hearing my coming out oratory and which when the time came so many years later I did abide.

Poet Out loud: At my father's mother's funeral I walked up to the front of the chapel beckoned by the Rabbi at my request following his requisite if perfunctory remarks knowing us not all which was fortunate for the person he was praying for had spent her life hurling Jew hating cat calls if behind a closed window at generic neighbors stragglers all from the *other side.* Seeing me my mother's eyes popped out a startled expression filled with fear and warning. A calm swept over me and hands that usually shook as if palsied were steady my expression serene my voice firm dramatic and self-assured and I began to read from the typewritten sheet in front of me. Glancing up I caught my uncle, my father's youngest brother his eyes brim with tears leaning in as I continued. Remembering what Anne Sexton once said to assembled

groupies at a party I attended *no one remembers what it is you say but how you say it go for the drama!* Grandma was so raw and clearly drawn that those who knew her gasped spasmodically as I read my words. I spoke of her love affairs, of her discontents, of her regal stance as she shouted profanities near the window. I spoke of her deep pride and even deeper sense of *dislocation*.

She had come to the new land twice once as a child and once alone as an eighteen year old the first time the family had been sent back having spent all their money to get here and finding the sponsors without adequate funds to take them in. The children danced on the deck to collect some pennies while their mother swollen with child gave birth as they arrived back at the *old country*. Defiant rebellious leaving everyone and everything familiar behind she returned this time and was allowed to stay. Very soon into her arrival she found my grandfather his name given by a neighbor villager. He was waiting for his true love to arrive and was overtaken by the sheer force of her will seduced into marrying her enduring a more than sixty year reign of marital terror. At their sixtieth wedding anniversary party in the company of the immediate and extended family she uttered following a toast, *Isidore, for me you don't exist!* My grandfather so delicate and petit never became more than a *small man* in her mind. This shadow of a girl this granddaughter preferring to remain invisible as I grew into my teenage years muffling sorrow in proportion to the constant boil over upbraiding by my mother a stagnating incompleteness resulting braved asking the Rabbi to speak on my grandmother's behalf surprising the assembled. Passion pushed the words forward rough hewed outpourings from a well-meaning heart the story told a ripened honesty honed in one immigrant's dislocation.

Sarah Weiss
(My father's Mother)

Sarah dressed beautifully
I saw it in a picture
With her boys
Sarah your end so cold
Sarah your boys learned lots from you
Fine things!
Only some didn't know this
But I do
Your love of music
Is in my soul
Sarah immigrant lady
Dreams too big
For the first go around

*The land broken in three times now
When your face looks down from heaven
You can see my Jeremy, my Rebecca
All you dreamed or wanted to be
Sarah you escaped the Holocaust on the high seas
How did you know to leave your family?
Know that at least one life had to be retrieved?
Sarah my grandmother
I see you always as you were to me
Spilling your heart
In thick prose
If anyone was my authority
On the rights and wrongs of things
You were Sarah grandmother
But not in conventional ways
Your disdain for conventionality
Dug into the core
Of what's important not just what's acceptable
You were always out of place
Me too grandma
I am your maverick granddaughter
You helped point the way
Clothed in shabby dresses
Behind a candy store counter
As if you were at Henri Bendel's
Receiving grand service
Grandma you converted a small hole in the wall
Into something majestic
Is that why you were bitter
When you had to scoop a ball of ice cream
Into a sugar cone?
As if you would have been contaminated
By contact with your mean reality?
Grandma you stood apart
Some said you turned down your nose and sneered
I say you dreamed
And stayed there
Grandma, Sarah
Dead gone now
Heaven sent I'm sure
Tied down to our earth in the end
In restraints
You wound up Sarah
Inaccessible to us
Sarah she left off us
Years before
Conversations run
Only in celestial tongues. Naomi Barber - 1974*

Promises Kept: At a simple memorial service for my mother in her living room some forty years later attended by the offspring of her brothers' children all observant Jews I asked my daughter to read some remarks and anecdotes suffering a terrible bout of bronchitis they were light hearted and spirited and spoke of a woman so familiar to the assembled if not to me or my brother. At her request cremated precluding a reverent word from her Rabbi and a strong proclamation of her final rupture a breaking off with requisite observant Judaism. Honored in death anecdotes and not a poem or more soulful reflection. Finally our lives with our mother ended she being ninety-three and as we tossed her ashes as she requested in the Atlantic Ocean off a jetty in Long Branch New Jersey. I mumbled to myself as much as to my brother *she was a rotten mother and as a daughter I hated her and found her as a person a force to be reckoned with* he shook his head to agree, as he made sure the plastic baggie was empty.

ART: Crazy frenzied destructive as she was my mother found a space in which the brutish furies within could anchor she lived within the molten meadow of Hieronymus Bosch triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* a catatonic gaze fixed on El Greco *Christ with the Cross*. For weeks we lived within a hologram of prints of the most notable paintings of El Greco on loan from the Newark Museum as she prepared for her turn at hosting the *Art Group*, six couples who met over a twenty-five year period. Perhaps to keep her volcanic tempers in check and to show me her *better angels* she would place *World Famous Paintings* edited by Rockwell Kent on my six and seven year old lap telling me *to look closely at the paintings for they told the story of life and the world*. This lap-crushing book became a sanctuary from bedlam the paintings became like second skin I moved to the interior of each work each a contemplative world. Balancing the weight of this book involved a series of physical gyrations and logistics even now I can call up particular paintings: stopping always at the *Courtyard of a Dutch House* by De Hooch longing to be the small girl hand in her mother's finding an arc of loving gaze, and *Le Benedicite* by Chardin with a gentle soulful mother bringing food to the table her daughters in an unquestioned sanctity of *home*, entranced by the expression of the *Girl with a Cat* by Perroneau her deft beauty caught me in perilous fantasy, and *Madame Vigee Le Brun and Her Daughter* by Le Brun held me in a heated state of longing, *The Music Lesson* by Mueneir expressing bliss playing the piano

perfectly as the father looked solemnly on. Those early years of art browsing bring me even now repeatedly to the Met when unnerved or unsettled finding there a deep sense of connection and inner calm as if reunited again with old friends.

My mother and I would often climb on the Number 107 bus and head for the Museum of Modern Art Modern Art. At six or seven I watched my mother undergo an eerie transformation almost as if she felt at home finding an inner peace among the works of art no matter how unsettling. Our first stop always *Guernica* by Picasso where she would point to various parts of the very large painting dreading even a quick glance at the image of the open mouth with the tongue lifting up lashing out fearing to be swallowed if we stayed too long. Picasso among her museum favorites *Woman Ironing* and *The Boy Leading a Horse* and then there was Jackson Pollock Monet Manet and de Kooning the twisted transmogrification of women within thick globs of paint shuddering I could feel the peeking of her lunacy. At each encounter she would share *these paintings always remind me of the girl at Graystone I took care of as a student nurse she lived in a padded room we put her food under the door she would bang against the walls and wipe her feces everywhere* this a strange testimonial she was haunted by these de Kooning paintings.

Her disturbed and distorted connection to art had her place just above my bed when I was just five or six a large print of *The Sleeping Gypsy* by Henri Rousseau this a dark gypsy sleeping next to her mandolin a lion looking over at her the moon as full and white as his gazing eye the heat of which pierced any attempt at a complacent sleep. I who already feared the rumblings of Nazi trains and the storming of SS Officers coming to snatch my parents listened before midnights to her shrieking threatening to kill herself as my father pulled her back from the open oven door. It was only when I heard the click closing their bedroom door that I tried to sleep. Where were the fairies the angels the frills the pink posies the *Nasturtiums* the petals of childhood the coveted place for little girls to grow and bloom my dreams percolated on images gothic deadly precociously sensual.

Political Indoctrination: My Mother the Fabian Socialist

I was the daughter
Of a *Fabian Socialist*
Who at five
Refused to remove
Her winter coat
In kindergarten
Reason
The man who
Makes the coats
Has not a coat
For his own children
I had coats galore
We all had coats galore
And then more
And through a lifetime
Of children
And grandchildren
The coats came
Avalanching each winter
And anticipating
Each season
Spring coats winter coats
In-between coats
They were picked out
They were particular
Each had a story
Of a sale and
What they are all wearing
And fur coats
Although disparaged
Were purchased
Almost by the pelt
Worn only
In the company
Of the mink set
Primarily cousins
Diamond and mink clad
At some family
Usually synagogue
Related event
Not to witness
We were often excluded
The *Fabian socialist*
My coat-crazed mother
Depression baby
Making up

For having
To go thread bare
In hand-me-downs
Childhood winter times
This as a backdrop
For the winters
Of my discontent
At eighteen
I just went coatless
For an entire winter
Defiantly surly rebellious
Not a coat worn outside
Revenge for the fiasco
Of the blood red coat
Shopping meant in tandem
She foisting clothes
I would have to buy
This time with money earned
Working stooped shoulder
In a bargain clothing store
I bought by myself
On sale
A fabulous fitted
Fierce red winter coat
It had the exquisite
Tailoring of couture
I walked in
Tried on the coat
And the fire was lit
You are a whore
A prostitute
Tasteless
You cannot
Walk out of the house
In that
Only trash wears that
And with that
She pulled it off me
And tossed it out
Or so I thought
Like many mad people
Blowing off
Her memory erased
Blotted out
Frequent episodes
Of explosive behavior
Wintertime the following year
And what should appear

My mother in that coat
Or a close facsimile
Even the same distinctive buttons
She didn't recall
That I had bought
One just like it or it
And that she had gone
On a viral rampage
I foreswore off coats
That wintertime
Suicidal thoughts held off
By the cold storage
Of this rebellious act
At her death we found
Her coats lined up like soldiers
Scarves and matching hats
Ready to be taken
From her closet
And about which
She could recount
When she bought it
And for how much
And how long she had had it
And that although
By a famous designer
She bought it off the rack
Hoard hauls many more
Coats than a Goodwill store
Looking back I know
Traumas last don't pass
Coatless I tolerated the cold
Better far better than the chill
Life in the perpetual conditional
And the castigating
And the recriminations
And the reincarnated red coat
Subsequent generations
Lives beyond ours
Anger hatred rage
Live in perpetuity
Balanced hopefully
With joyful reminiscence
Will my children have
Wells of relief beyond
The resentments and rage
Or will forgiveness as with me
Find no rightful place – Naomi Barber

I Become a Politician in my Own Right

Three husky high school
Football playing friends carried
The sousaphone
Onto the stage
At *Weequahic High School*
In Newark New Jersey
Famous for being
The point of departure
In Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus*
Recounting the enormous distance
And travails to travel to the suburbs
From Newark where a girl
Waited seductively diaphragm in drawer
Now not so many years
After Philip Roth graduated from Weequahic
I was running for student council office
For *OBA* Vice President (Orange and Brown Association - school colors)
The time came for campaign oratory
And as I got to the lectern
The hulking football players
Placed a sousaphone
Just over my shoulder
Advised by my musician father
Not even to peek at it or
The campaign could be jinxed lost
Referencing the dreadful glance back
When *Orpheus* lost his *Eurydice*
Taking to heart this literary warning
Deadpan as a Marx Brother
I began my well-crafted speech
My Dad my chief and sole political strategist
And this was not the only tickler
Devised to bring in the vote for weeks
There were posters everywhere
Simply stating *Nibs Because* (nickname)
In those self-conscious days
Of menstruation ads for a sanitary product
Read *Modess Because*
Giggles and blushes filling hallways
And if that were not sufficient
I donned a crown
Known in the school as Nibs
As in *Her Nibs Miss Georgia Gibbs*
A nickname given at birth
He and my mother agreed to Nancy

After her dead brother Nathan
And conforming to Jewish naming
In her labor room anguish and pain
Comforted and brought through it
By nurse Naomi there it was Naomi
As with anything biblical in particular
That could be construed as Jewish
His stomach turned like clotted cheese
So I became Nibs or Her Nibs
Until I turned twenty-one
At which time my first lover
Did not find it suitable for inamorata

But back to my junior year
Ready at the lectern crown in place
Poster affixed sousaphone just to the right
I began the room rustling with suppressed laughter
Finishing with the following words
As clear as if yesterday and sung acappella
Nibsie with her brown hair
And brown eyes so bright and gay
Nibs for OBA (Orange and Brown Association)
I sing this song
Even though I can't sing a note
Cause I want your vote, cause I want your vote
So remember when you're voting on the 17th of May
To vote for Nibs Weiss, Her Nibs for OBA
Needless to say
I won by a landslide vote
Thanks to strategist father
And grit at sixteen

Grit gone lost
In my early twenties
Or soon after I married and had kids
When my husband travelled which he did frequently
I would reemerge rambunctious playful a silly Momma

Naomi Barber

(You were on the public speaking team, and in student government and on the newspaper. You had power... this about Alexandra Robbins from fellow classmate. Popularity is a combination of visibility, influence and recognizability.) Quote: Alexandra Robbins

I Serve as Editor-in-Chief of my High School Newspaper *The Calumet*

At the time of the election to *OBA*
I was the editorial page editor
Of the student newspaper
The *Weequahic Calumet*
Editorials throwing
The principal into a frenzy
Caught in the crosshairs
Between freedom of speech
The first amendment
And in incautious student
Bringing up controversial
And problematic issues
As in the great *tracking* divide
High performing Jews (mostly or all)
In an honors *track* (*high level potent Ivy bound curriculum*)
Blue color mostly Italians
Stuck in a very pedantic basic and ordinary curriculum
And then on the other side of the tracks
Black students who made up thirty-five percent of the population
Were relegated or assigned
To take almost completely shop or secretarial classes
Exposing this inequity not realizing fully
What a contentious spot upon which I pressed
For I was one of the *fabulous twenty*
Honors students given overinflated privileges
Pardons for wrongs or missteps
Ivy bound we gave the school
Panache standing we were the Jews
Who didn't move out kept real estate viable
In a distant decade neighboring *Clinton Hill*
Was aflame with wild marauding and fierce riots
Forty years later the class of 1958
Became the subject of an anthropological study
New Jersey Dreaming by a *MacArthur* winning
Anthropologist classmate Sherrie Ortner
One acute finding Blacks died off younger
At a faster rate proportionately
Portentous a prayer and a prophesy
And a dead-ended apartheid curriculum
Of the miraculous twenty students
One a doctor severely impaired Alzheimer victim
Primarily suburban observant doctors and lawyers

The *tracks* still not easily crossed today
Borders stiffly drawn
Existential nausea melancholia and a reckoning
Polished up children crossing borders
Leaving their homes for a better world
Not yet in the Bronx not in Brooklyn
Not in urban public schools not hardly anywhere – Naomi Barber

Me and Emmett Till

When in the ninth grade
I was invited to join
The local youth chapter of the *NAACP*
Among the very few whites
If *Jewish* counts as white
I had written a letter
To the *Newark Evening News*
Which appeared on the front page
Threatening to hand in my American citizenship
If this America was the kind of place
That could do such an egregious
And terrible injustice to *Emmett Till*
We were the same age
His court trial struck such a plaintive chord
And dissonance within me
After the letter appeared
The *NAACP* invited me to join
As did the teacher advisor of the *Calumet*
Ask me to join the staff
Fearless outspoken then
Question?
How did a lonely girl living
With the tyranny of an
Outrageous crazed
Raging mother
And a shushing father
Live in those realms
And feel in public spaces so safe
Father supported my school life
As much as he cowered
When she bellowed and ranted
In our house behind the shut blinds
The cavern of our family demise – Naomi Barber

Not Wanting to be an American Anymore

Emmett Till got killed for allegedly whistling or casting a look at a young white woman wife of a *Klansman* whose teeth broke together his muscles bunching explosive with that deep *white supremacists* Southern murderous rage when black eyes were not decorous and cast downward in the presence of any and all white people. Armored with justification this force of men took Emmett Till from of the narrow bed in his uncle's cabin whom he was visiting from Chicago, where racial hatred was veiled and more guarded, savagely pummeling and drowning him in nearby shallow estuary. Foraging clansmen scoured the countryside midnights to find black victims to menace in commonly held midnight runs.

A neighborhood friend and classmate and I were thirteen, Emmett Till was exactly our age we were flabbergasted when we heard about his murder and the subsequent trial compelled to sit down and compose a joint letter to the *Newark Evening News*. *What kind of a country is this? What about the Constitution? What about all those lessons about liberty, freedom the end of slavery the abolitionist movement?* We were students in the upper academic track and therefore permitted class time for discussions of current events led of course by a teacher with an East Coast liberal bent and so fired up we wrote. *We are indignant shocked horrified sickened. We don't want to be part of this country we said if it could allow this.* We sent off our three steaming paragraphs to the local evening paper saying nothing to our parents.

A fiery indignation got sown with the mordant seeds of discontent, *for Bach*, my father had said, whenever I asked, *why?* This refrain bellowed from the hollows of my body whenever I was stuck in place panting for breath and unable to move my feet on. *Skin color is pigment. You must speak out if someone calls names, particularizes the skin color in a pejorative as a way to identify a person.* His lips were stern pursed like the minister *Brand* in the play by *Ibsen* my father at his death was referred to as a *righteous man* and held me to an overwrought standard. My father held himself to such an exacting standard eyes softened listening to a fugue by *Bach* along with an unimaginable glower if another was diminished by religion race economics it was if an extra dose of truth was mixed in with his blood. The cloistered phobic rage bursting out of me and onto the pages of the *Newark Evening News* firmly situated me in my father's camp. The letter appeared the next day. The principal called us into his office. *Did you write this? Yes, we said.* He looked

over at us and then told us to go back to class and said nothing more. Some teachers glimpsed a new recognition during the course of the day but said nothing. On the heels of *World War II* and the swirl *McCarthyism* real life already unwieldy for public schools particularly believed awash with Jewish liberalism and its mixes of conspiracies the historical imperative was to avoid the provocative and uncompromising.

That night we each got a phone call asking us to join the Clinton Hill Chapter of the *NAACP*. I joined but my neighbor and friend did not want to she wanted to write the letter but go no further her heart not rife with the wounds of harm in the world she had not been insistently charged with fighting injustice on any front.. The teacher who advised the school newspaper asked me if I wanted to join the staff and when a senior I came editor-in-chief. The editorials were always about something that infuriated the principal calls to action probing issues like tracking and *why black students were assigned to classes with little academic substance* when he handing me my diploma he had a weathered smile of relief giving an extra hard handshake.

(Parenthetically, the Clinton Hill section of Newark the geo-political hot spot the site of some of the most violent and raw race riots in the nation in the flaming summer of 1964.)

Birthright

*Why
Do
They
Scrape
And
Bow
Before
Me
I
No
Queen
Am
Merely
Fleshed
In
White
Therein
Lies
My royalty. - Naomi Barber - 1964*

Postcards from the South: Recently exhibited postcards in New York were of family outings in Sunday best spit shined shoes families gathered together under poplar trees looking up where black men were swinging and twirling noose knotted breath gone this: *Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees... Pastoral scene from the gallant South...The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth* (written by Abel Meeropol performed often by Billie Holliday). In this small basement gallery on Park Avenue visitors were transfixed with the horrifying spectacle of entire families wrenched necks looking up with mean near aberrant mad crazily saturated expressions mixed in with deep other-worldly beneficent satisfaction. Overcome by collective nausea individuals staggered out into the bright day strangers holding onto each other overwhelmed with the horror confronted once again by *The Evil That Men Do... (Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare)*. Reading off the words of *Strange Fruit* while pounding on the piano keys from *The People's Song Book* song coming from the deepest place no *Billie Holiday* but holding an irrepressible urge to sing it out. How to bring thought through *The Holocaust* and then confronting these postcards of photographs of *Lynchings* in the South if not oneself Hannah Arendt writing of the *banality of evil* when describing Otto Adolph Eichmann, *The deeds were monstrous but the doer...was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous?* How to live with the complexity of the hateful and the good the heinous and the wonderful is there a way to regard beauty unencumbered if for moment's relief from the brutal and sordid?

Antioch College 1958: In the early fall of 1958 my parents drove me to Yellow Springs Ohio where I would be attending Antioch College, it got down to a choice between Douglass College a college for women part of Rutgers the State University of New Jersey or Antioch College in Ohio from which my Uncle Harry, my father's brother, was a graduate. Antioch founded in 1852 by Horace Mann (an abolitionist) who served as its first president and who is considered the *Father of American Public Education* Antioch known for its political and educational liberalism leaning way left. Antioch also had a unique Coop Program, three months on campus and three months at a work-assignment somewhere in the United States or in the world. Students managed the campus class attendance was optional and students who lived in then single sex self-contained hallways could vote if and when to have the opposite sex visit. None of its pedigree as progressive college had anything to do with my choice it was Ohio and the distance it would create from my parents. Watching them drive off had me standing in place still unable to grasp that I would not be under my mother's always-critical toxic scrutiny and my father holding me in place as if a member of an orchestra crescendo to pianissimo presto to largo. The upper class student assigned to bring

me to my room, tugged on my arm and said *they're gone* and moved me up to the third floor of a freshman dorm my cello and my luggage already in place one of the two beds designated as mine the other already piled on with clothing in the process of being unpacked. *See you later* the student guide said leaving me in the room soon to enter my roommate wearing a cowboy hat a fringed fitted rodeo shirt body shaping jeans and cowboy boots still sporting spurs. *Howdy* she said striding toward me and offered a bone-crushing handshake my name is S.

She took a swig of what I saw was bourbon as she tacked up on the wall a shiny eight by twelve photograph of Orval Faubus Governor of Arkansas with the following hand written note *dear S..... wishing you the best at Antioch College* affixed with his signature and seal. This the very Orval Faubus who had used the power of his office to subvert the desegregation ruling of the Supreme Court and in 1957 ordered the State National Guard to keep the nine black students from entering Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas until the army assigned by President Eisenhower escorted them through the rage filled community the students known as *The Little Rock Nine* into Central High School the images of this being searing and unforgettable and unforgivable. I sat on my bed looking on the shelf above her bed where she placed a series of trophies and ribbons as a rodeo rider and then as *Queen of the Arkansas State Rodeo*. Without directly addressing me she suggested we go for a ride in her car *to take a look around this part of Ohio* leaving my cello on its side and my bags unpacked I accepted and off we sped in her new white Ford Thunderbird top down she had another bottle of bourbon tucked under her legs but did not take another swig. Antioch College was surrounded by flat farmland and interlocking back roads great for speeding, which we did still wordless I broke into an odd placed smile had I gone insane or was this going to be life away from my family?

Returning from our ride we were invited to form a circle and meet our hall mates, the hall advisor ultimately becoming a major and dissident political force in Washington, D. C. but here sort of a mama hen to make sure we settled in and would get up on our new college student legs and asked that we introduce ourselves with if we'd like some apt anecdote or distinguishing characteristic. I led off and became forever after *Nibs from Newark* followed by the daughter of the founders of the very left *National Guardian* and then the daughter of the head of the largest farm collective in Iowa, another the niece of Pete Seeger, then a very soft spoken girl from Short Hills New Jersey (alarms went off, that was the community that kept Jews out) and who came by herself in her own Jaguar, and there was a tall awkward toward homely girl who announced she was Jewish came from Newton Massachusetts and had just returned from her Friends Service assignment in Kenya, then a real first cousin to the author Philip Roth who had graduated of my high school, and then a sulky and sophisticated girl from Minnesota soon to receive a

visit from her hometown boyfriend Robert Allen Zimmerman, ultimately the very same one and only *Bob Dylan*. There were twelve of us in all and we were to have incredible free wheeling opportunities to create our own hallway rules our own microcosm democracy the advisor saying we would meet weekly for meetings and discussions on topics of concern, lots about sex it turned out and that the only thing she would not abide is our staying in bed all day if not going to class and being involved in something of our own making and that we keep above average grades which meant fulfilling all assignments. That first evening at dusk we were invited to a folk sing-in led by Pete Seeger who was on campus to wish his niece well and then we were all piled onto a bus given black arm bands on our way to Wright Patterson Air Force base where we would spend the night protesting the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

More in a daze than awake I moved through the campus signed up for kitchen duty to help pay for my board, most of the tuition for the first two years of college came from jobs I had held and saved not wanting to give my parents any more legion to intrude on my life now that I had gotten away from them. And although I had chopped off most of my hair in a final act of defiance this of biblical proportion and had a wardrobe of the most boyish sexless looking clothes selected by my mother to keep a whiff of her piss around me, I found my way to a second hand clothing store and bought some Midwestern styled dresses to silhouette my body and by the sweep of male student eyes knew I was being successful bringing out the female girly side of myself. Within the first month I had joined a string quartet been asked out for beer (they had a beer with lesser alcohol content for people under the age of twenty-one) by multiple male students, an Asian, an African American, one from California and from deep in the farmland of Iowa, who turned out now looking back to be the great love of my life unclaimed as a life partner through a series of crafty machinations by my father a few years hence but with whom I often shared an off campus bed right above the local bar. Marijuana was a mainstay of student gatherings whether out camping in The Glen the wild life sanctuary in college dorms or off campus residences and as if clapped into a moral sanction never took one draw even though I smoked cigarettes though less here than at home.

College cliff notes: Going to Antioch created an upheaval of dimensions hard to reckon and as revelatory and upbraiding as was depicted by Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* the experience of overwhelming passions more than could be contained within the context of one's heretofore life Edna's leading ultimately to suicide by drowning herself and mine to unraveling coming apart at the seams having to leave and seek psychiatric help in the clinic at Mass General Hospital in Boston where I moved without letting my parents know following the end of the second year of college. During the time I was at Antioch I found my rodeo queen roommate to whom I had formed a deep attachment slicing into her jugular vein after she fell in

love with and had an affair with a black divinity student from Yale assigned to Antioch screaming for help she was saved and once patched up her very traditional Southern parents whom she had often said were the worst bigots and racists came to claim her and have her car sent home. I can recreate the panic I felt when I found her and the poignancy of the imbalance in her life created when she fell in love with an African American we stayed in touch for a number of years last time I heard she moved to San Francisco finished college and married. Robert Zimmerman (Bob Dylan) became a frequent visitor to our corridor finding him in the morning in our shower having spent the night with his our hall mate and his girlfriend. The mother and founder of the *National Guardian* originally from Vienna scorned at us for being virgins and shared that she had been broken into love by a family friend and contemporary of her parents.

And I fell in heart pounding love at first sight twice, one with the farm boy from Iowa and another with a female classmate who lived in a different hall both times on staircases going in opposite directions. The girl and I purchased second hand bikes and would ride out to the countryside picnic and talk about Camus and her desire to play *Medea* never once did it cross my mind that it could become sexual and never once did I know that she had persistent sexual dreams about me something I would learn after her suicide a decade later when her mother sent me never mailed letters. And the cute heart stopping Iowan was all entangled with another college junior they walked linked across the campus to classes.

Professors were forthcoming and invited us to meals and to soft ball matches and to assist with our class assignments, which I found so far beyond me, my mind persistently unreceptive shutting down in direct proportion to my emotional pain harboring body. Whatever confidence I had in myself as a student faltered betrayed by a numbing resistant mind. As if in a frenzy to build a lengthy dating roster I spent time with so many different male students checking off for diversity and finally caught the attention of the Iowa farm boy on an off moment with his girlfriend who was off on a Coop assignment partially to get away from him. He needing to live in full disclosure never backed away from the fact that she was his first love although we often shared an apartment he rented off campus above his favorite local bar. He respected that I was not yet ready to have full sexual intercourse however introduced me to a love never again recaptured and ultimately on my twenty-first birthday when we were once again dating claimed me I had been waiting for him. Philip Roth in a well turned correspondence urged his cousin to give it away lose her virginity when asked on our joint behalf we held on nevertheless at least through the first two years of college at least I can attest to that on my part.

Friendships and Past Times: I learned the *canon* of folk and blues songs from the Jewish girl tall and awkward and insistent that Jewish be part of how we knew her she was from Newton, Massachusetts and played a mean guitar proud of her travels with the American Field Service she would come back into my life a few years hence in a pivotal and critical moment. I became a close and lifelong friend with the girl from Short Hills who invited me the first Jew to enter her home, discounting workmen, and with whom I drove back and forth to Antioch in her Jaguar. My much loved girl friend an alter ego also under the sway of Camus left Antioch returning to San Francisco at about the same time I returned for my second year but we kept in close touch always planning a camping trip never taken to the Redwoods. And as a new bride finding Robert Zimmerman then Bob Dylan at the Club 47 in Cambridge reminded him that we met when he visited his then girlfriend from Minnesota he sort of snorted back *oh yeah*. And after the twist and turns of a multi-year love affair with the farm boy from Iowa just when he promised to be exclusively mine I turned my back on him when he was sent to Berlin as a member of the military reserve when *The Wall* went up dividing Berlin. I sent him a contrived *Dear John* letter dictated for the most part by my father still having me often in a strangle hold particularly at moments of self-doubt. I have lived through two divorces and fifty years later I am filled with longing and regret, but for the fact that I have three children who call me Mom the part of my life of which I am perhaps most proud.

First Antioch Coop Assignment, La Guardia House: She ran through hydrants. The days were steamy. She had on pastel shirtwaists. Daisy chains of children the soft hues of Latin and Central America following closely behind. She was eighteen slight maybe 116 or less pounds. Her thick wavy curls hung below or flew around her shoulders impatient dancers going every which way. Jewish curls Jewish hair Jewish girl. *You cannot stop being Jewish* she, my mother would often remind me *the world won't let you. Tikkun Olam, repairing the world a Hebraic inner ordnance or for provenance Calvinistic good works good deeds, salvation death not to get into heaven but to avoid guilt ridden last words dropping off bloodied lips* these voices scrambled in a hierarchy for motives propelled me to the streets of East Harlem, penance on the streets of East Harlem. Four of us all Antioch students lived on the top floor of a brownstone on East 116th Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues all on an Antioch Coop assignment. We were three females and one male who tended to all domestic tasks one roommate commandeered by inner voices washed her hands incessantly she was the black daughter of a prominent Southern minister. La Guardia House to which we were assigned was a well-established settlement house the director Pete Pascale regularly requested Antioch students reflecting his deep commitment to progressive education and politics. My father refused to give his consent, this one of the rare assignments that required a parent

sign-off the danger of the streets widely recognized. Threatening as I had quit the synagogue I would quit him and college a well of rebellion near boiling point he signed off.

Counter Voices: East Harlem stood as an antidote to a bruising and blistering first year at Antioch confusing and wildly disoriented close to the surface an increasing preoccupation with suicide. Death wishes lurking predatory inflamed coming upon my *Rodeo Queen* roommate slicing into her jugular the sight of fixed as possibility by the time she fell to inner voices we were interchangeable as entities. Karmalee who held me a drift of fantasy my heart a sunflower in full bloom moved by first sun a rambunctious overgrown pup found my arms reaching to hug and hold the heat increasing as we lay in tall farm grasses our bikes fallen over holding me rapt as she spoke of Camus and the necessity to live at the edge and that in time she would play *Medea* on a main stage. Returning to campus scrambled to the library to get Camus' *The Stranger* and *Medea* by Euripides "*I do not leave my children's bodies with thee; I take them with me that I may bury them... And for thee, who didst me all that evil, I prophesy an evil doom.*" Death dying murdering one's own children was this the darkness behind the light in Karmalee's piercing periwinkle eyes her tipped up nose stunning Scandinavian face the almost white blond shoulder length hair slayer and slain whose love for me misted of the lands of *Lesbos* and I still struggling to tourniquet all feelings of sexuality how my playful touches must have provoked and troubled. My first year of college put me in the company of two females each entangled in a treacherous crossing to full blown womanhood. And then I was drowning in the academic demands made on me my receptors frozen in the wily imprecations of my intellectual inadequacy by my dear mother I was scared I would flunk out. And then there I was lying in a bed many nights next to a man above a bar with whom I did everything and anything but screw and who if told by him to dive into a life-threatening ravine my arms would lift wings and off I would go. East Harlem was familiar ground to me a safe place to regain some inner balance. My attraction for this unnerving set of relationships a war simmering within a recitative in which I became slayer and slain both mother and child further diminished never to reach the glory of Camus' coming to death.

Back to Summertime 1959: This was the summer in East Harlem of well-publicized warring neighborhood street gangs and street violence and the infamy of the murderous *umbrella boys* ultimately forming the basis of *West Side Story*. I ran through the streets with a ragtag formation of children's voices pitched high with excitement we were on our way to Penn Station where they would climb aboard various trains for a week or two of vacation time with sanctioned families who

opened their homes with the sponsorship of the Fresh Air Fund. La Guardia House sent off more than one hundred children each year ages six through fifteen. A major part of my particular responsibilities was to recruit children first timers and to ensure all of the children returnees as well that they were trip ready with medical exams, appropriate clothing and shoes, and as fully apprised as possible of what lay ahead. Greatest challenge urging parents to let their children go off to live in circumstances unknowable at this point to their immigrant lives that and an implicit faith in Pete got them to unlatch the door. Planning occurred over bowls of pigeon soup and other Puerto Rican delicacies instructed by Pete *never no matter what to turn down or away from an offer of hospitality*. It seemed that we drew kids in greater number from Puerto Rican families and not Italians. East Harlem in 1959 had a precarious balance of Italians to Puerto Ricans Italians having to go through the rigors of citizenship if desired and the Puerto Ricans here to find economic viability already citizens from their small island protectorate this a trigger for rivalry against a backdrop of scarce resources upon which to build new lives. Given the heat of the simmering and ongoing gang warfare and for whatever cultural inclination it clearly evident that Puerto Rican parents wanted their younger children off the streets and Italian families wanted to keep their children under their careful watch.

Gathering up my charges on the designate date of departure meant leaving very weepy parents clinging as they were saying *this is good for you. You will have fun. And see how the better off live or how you can live better later*. Stirring these goodbyes igniting in me the desire to make every footstep a delight a great sense of adventure for the children in my charge we sang and danced as we moved from the subway to the train station onlookers reluctant with smiles curious about our expedition and our ultimate destination. Waving goodbye as trains pulled out and receiving reassuring calls when the children arrived set families at ease and then there I would be when the children returned home back to East Harlem to breathlessly awaiting families within each child a spark of life's possibilities off these tumultuous streets and I regaining a footing in the old familiar if still undefined me.

Peter Pascale: Peter Pascale's early life was spent in the hills of Naples, he ran the immediate New York City neighborhood a vigilante guarding a large extended family from endless explosive lawlessness. Thick hands muscular a fork pitching farmer, he loved this neighborhood as if the land of his birth but extracted promises to follow his lead in exchange for his open heart and open door. La Guardia House known to be a safe harbor stabbings and blood curdling cries got us to open the door nighttime *wounded street gang fighters* of either side fell into our arms blood covered trembling with fear and pain. We called Pete who warned that only he got

in touch with the police. Summer's end the four of us found it so difficult to say goodbye to Pete we had yet to understand how much he impacted on each of our lives. In me Pete found a spirited girl unafraid to dance in hydrants and smile over a dish of pigeon soup he spoke about my easiness with others and my ability to connect a brusque awkward hug and I walked away tears like the spill from the hydrants. I was going home for a week before returning to Antioch invigorated and buoyant yet to anticipate that my drive to commit my own death would be a car on a raceway revving up as I stepped the threshold to my home. I was pulled into the vortex the desires to immolate to stab to do away with myself in an ugly pain frenzied way the murderer in me was just the other side of the door. Peter Pascale became a force reaching over time and the girl he knew became a woman resonant with the qualities he so cogently spoke of. Always meaning to return to La Guardia House to tell him how the sense of deep humility he expressed to each person of any age if with gruff tongue and a bit of a hard pat to the flank shaped and reinforced a central work and life tenet I wanted to let him know and to experience once again the warmth he held for me. I read his obituary on the subway on the way to work I had never gotten around to thanking or seeing Peter Pascale again.

Temptations of Suicide of Ending One's Life: Fleeing barely intact from my parents home for a second year at Antioch a jumble of intensified random feelings needing to see Karmalee finding that she had left precipitously with a note for me at Antioch a spare explanation *I just had to go to leave will be in touch maybe to do Medea*. Stunned sickened Karmalee had become necessary to me her friendship attesting to a different landscape in which I could live and breathe freely it was in formation without definition or vocabulary titillated excited the me of me fluttering about her in hard hugs and tight hand holds sexuality so remote necking with dates back home never came close to involving my being. Later almost a decade later I learned that she left Antioch to escape from me and the sweltering emotions she had for me that refused to be contained or suppressed she longing needing a connection in which we would be passionate crazy out of our minds lovers lesbian lovers. Her mother wrote to tell me that Karmalee committed suicide and sent an accompanying stack of never mailed sealed letters in which Karmalee described sleepless nights trying to escape dreams in which we were lovers consumed in a tempestuous passionate covetous love. Holding my infant son reading and rereading the letters blunt confrontational the inner life in which I harbored and fled. Desires to end my own life questions of sexuality and then Karmalee successfully killing herself swooped down on me devouring beating against my temples hysteria unnerved by the bittersweet reminiscence of two eighteen year old girls deep in conversation about Camus and Medea lying side-by-side in farm fields in Ohio.

At twenty-two marrying a man I knew only three weeks and at twenty-five a new mother dreams of flight of self-imposed death dared never intrude. Karmalee recently receiving a letter from me breasts overflowing with new mother's milk had lay down hidden in the shadow of The Golden Gate Bridge grasping rightly the futility of waiting for me and incapable of becoming one with her lesbian identity ended her own life discovered days later. Should I have followed her to San Francisco when I learned she had left Antioch to continue our conversations of Camus and listening as she read aloud from Medea? That *a road not taken* a nice Jewish if secular girl from Newark, New Jersey traumatized by a plundering mother out of emotional necessity stayed safe tormented and powerless from that time hence wondering how I didn't know how to take the lull of our eighteen year old conversations turning them into the heat of love right there beneath the glare of an afternoon Ohio sun.

Friendship and the Cliff Year 2 at Antioch: The other person with whom my heart got entangled on a stair landing that first year at Antioch was the beautiful *goyishe* guy with blond curls and searing blue eyes with whom ultimately I often shared nights above the local bar. Second year found him back with his first true love walking entangled vines across the campus occasional glimpses of a knowing smile sent my way. Margot from Short Hills New Jersey entered the empty space and filling my need for a good and undemanding friend she and I rode around in her Jaguar exploring the outskirts of Yellow Springs, quickened heart as we sped by fields readying to become silage. Margot shared that she was deep into an affair with a married much older professor in whose class I happened to be and whom after that disclosure I regarded as he lectured with accusatory looks often with disgust. My struggles academically became more onerous if somehow I kept passing all of my courses. Less and less of my mind was open to taking in any information words on pages blurred fear and doubt eroded any capacity for being a student my confidence converted into a need to flee. *Quicksilver* was how a therapist much later described me speaking of my inclination to walk out run off close the door getting out before I was tossed when doubt or fear of abandonment seeped into my consciousness.

Truncated life never to impose my will my desires on any situation in which a whiff of discord discontent came near to touching me. Aimless light hearted dormitory banter and speed limit defying rides top down in the Jaguar held me in place while on campus and then choosing two Coop placements where I would live with a family in Haverford affiliated with the Quaker school on the Philadelphia Mainline in which I served as an intern. I found a cello teacher, a member of the Philadelphia orchestra, who although blanching when I played part of an accompanied Suite by Bach, agreed to take me on as a student if I swore not to play any serious piece of music assigned exercise books and hours of just bowing he was constitutionally unable to hear me play the *old masters*.

So I made it from September to July and even to a psychologist in the counseling center at Antioch who as he listened hearing the tremolo the beat of the subliminal death wish forcefully suggested I take a leave from Antioch before beginning my third year and head for Boston where he had connections with the chief of psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital where I could get the kind of help I needed he never qualifying or further defining the condition I suffered requiring such drastic measures. The fear in his eyes left me no choice he saw and I knew I was over my head academically and was unable to form any substantive relationships. Letting the registrar know I was taking a leave I got a ticket to Boston without informing my parents and within hours of touching down and getting settled in makeshift housing I arrived at the psychiatric clinic the psychologist having secured an appointment for me.

Boston and the Psychiatrist: I was yet to contextualize or universalize my inner suffering now the source of anguish the reason for my crashing and falling apart was my mother who was trying to kill murder me steal my existence and I was just quitting and letting her. Blurting out when asked by the psychiatrist *what seems to be the trouble* I went on a *Molly Bloom (Ulysses, James Joyce)* tirade a mad rambling no punctuation lasting more than an hour hardly taking a breath. He kept his gaze fixed asking nothing giving witness to an unraveling of painful imagery in which I described the *house of horror* I inhabited with my parents and younger brother the locks of restraint lifted. He asked that I return the next day and if I would agree to a more public more formal interview conducted for his graduate students part of the admission process for the clinic after which just he and I would meet three times a week for the next couple of months possibly for the year. Feeling an essential trust and connection with him I returned to sit with him in a small auditorium while primarily male residents and interns not much older than I sat rapt as I recounted the harrowing nearly daily temper tantrums thrown by mother seemingly at the very sight of me and of my father's mild but stern deprecations *what did you do to bring this on?*

My father *my rod and my staff* my father beneficent almost otherworldly musician his face descending into gravity and almost intolerable sadness. And then I spoke about waiting each night as midnight struck almost like clockwork the squall my mother's threats to dive deep into the oven or furnace as my father gathering her up begging that she calm down. Troubled eyes looked back at me and then summoning up my still savaging humor quipped playing to these offshoot Freudians *perhaps her night time rages were ritual love dances my parents foreplay*. With that the interview was concluded and the psychiatrists in training left wry with humor titillated if disconcerted. Back in the psychiatrists office he simply thanked me for agreeing to the interview before the trainees and scheduled appointments for us to meet every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 4 in the afternoon to avoid yet to be scheduled class or work conflicts. Back in my temporary housing feeling not very much of anything not even guilt or remorse at having for the very first time spoken of our family life behind the closed blinds and the muted sounds called my parents it was early evening, *Hi, I'm in Boston I have left Antioch I need psychiatric help and will see a psychiatrist starting tomorrow I got here two days ago*. There was a hush overlaid with sob suppressing breathing my parents for the first time in their lives afraid to say or add anything. *Well goodbye I'll call you again when I get better settled* and with that hung up no forwarding address or phone number.

What follows is the gist of what I learned: This is the expurgated version of his clinical notes. *Look seems like your mother was incapable of loving you* to which I quipped *no mother love have I!* With a slight protocol-breaking smile he continued during the course of the year. *You had no mother in the way that you imagined one. Hard to believe you never shared told a living soul about your mother's almost daily temper tantrums or your father's recriminations confronting you. I can imagine how hard to have the person most trusted not finding you trustworthy with his wife and your mother who deemed you chief rival and competitor. Deep in your mind's eye is an image of a Mary Cassatt depiction of motherhood (he was aware quickly of my connection to art and poetry) and of a desire to reach out and settle into her arms loved and protected. Your father entertained not with malice but with great neediness a sexualized relationship with you, frightening to a girl so perhaps unusually precocious in fantasy and dreams. At some point you will need to part with your longing for an archetypical mother. Monitor when making decisions if they reflect what it is you want or if you are still following her script attempting to win her love and approval.* At the final session almost twelve months later, he wished me well and said suggested gingerly that if life got out of hand in the future it would be wise to seek additional counseling. He watched me as I got to the street, I looked up and waved as he moved away from the window knowing that

he was right to let me go at this time I was full to the brim with insights and self-knowledge now as gathered silk threads had to spin them out. Reading always gave me a counter life and an assortment of rich identities and first encounters with feelings leery of novels provided safe places within which to practice playing out desires and fantasies.

Other's Mothers: Many decades later coming upon the writings of David Grossman, (*To The End of the Land*) Amos Oz, (*A Tale of Love and Darkness*) and Lucette Lagnado, (*The Arrogant Years*) over the course of many years all of whom were offspring of immigrant Jews sons and daughters of mothers living a million pieces disconcerted never able to place feet firmly in new soil I saw myself a composite daughter of the torment of the terror of women of mothers finding no place in which to be at home perhaps it was the circumstances the particularities of the flight never choosing to go or leave death's throttling out stretched hands grabbing after even the shadows left behind. *Hitler is dead, Hitler is in Eternity, Hitler is with Tamburlane and Emily Bronte - Hitler is dead and Liveright's gone our of business -The Attic of the Past and Everlasting Minute are out of print...* (Allen Ginsberg, *To Aunt Rose*)

My mother in the end was a screeching owl in a tree looking back wings splintered broken unable to lift in flight I was the descendant of women who never ever again achieved wholeness turning this way and that her desperation overtaking suffocating out all life within earshot of her interminable shrieks and screams. Beating one's head until prostrate was apparently an all too common sight within homes of these wailing women motherhood just a reach beyond the betrayal they played out obsessively without cessation. Characterizations of the familiar puts my life in a certain context if I alone suffered immeasurably resonant with these strident flagellations and got thrown off course unable to know my own mind or will or desire until the moments had always passed. I was not alone in my incompleteness still a necessary step I seem unable to take even at beyond the age of seventy and having bid my own mother goodbye with her last drawn breaths I still cannot forgive her cannot stop hating her still cringing with sorrow and rage at her stalking my life. Fortunately great god no longer want to be her baby reborn to yielding lips and that beneficent unmistakable gaze of unconditional *Mother Mary* love.

Unlikely Coed at Boston University: Life revolved around therapy appointments from which I left each time on new lamb's legs my psyche in repair. Enrolling in Boston University credits from Antioch put me in my junior year the awkward imbalance of self moved me to pursue a degree in clinical psychology with an allied exploration into speech pathology. Probing how it happened for kids to

become tongue-tied or stutter my mother's twin brother Joe being tongue-tied with a concomitant severe stutter until his early twenties driving him from all formal education. This uncle once secure on the safe side of the Hudson in New York City found that his speech flowed flawless as currents on the Hudson on a windless day. Soon after I arrived in Boston my uncle Joe showed up which he would continue to do wherever in the world I was and said straight out *you are in trouble what can I do, do you need money* (by then he was a very rich self-made business man) *you count on me in any way*. This being a most explicit declamation signifying how he had observed the cumulative damage inflicted by his twin, my mother over time. My uncle was tacitly acknowledging the dangerous and frightening reality of being ensnared in the dragon fire of his murderous sister. It became obvious that he knew I was embroiled in a confrontation fraught with risk to my internal balance as I tried to mediate this mother daughter conflagration into focus. Without an utter without ever using the word he knew this was a life death struggle and that suicide was in the offing.

A Brilliant Student: The Chair of the Department becoming a determinant force with whom I over time shared secrets of loves losses and fears and who spoke with pride disturbing at first that I was the most *brilliant student they had admitted to the Department in more than ten years* this contrary to a mantra the din without pause in my ear *stupid stupid stupid* bedeviling since entering college. I moved to a rooming house in Cambridge my father called upon once again to write of his approval this time for me to live off-campus, I was the first co-ed at Boston University to do so. My father wisely, without my mother, actually helped me move purchasing buckets of paint gathering cinderblock and wood to build floor to window bookshelves before leaving he handed me an envelope with \$500 the note saying, *with love and no strings*. Expressiveness flowing I painted the room white with black and red trim set up a music corner with my cello a chair and music stand holding Bach Suites and Beethoven Sonatas and a radio set to the classical Cambridge music station. Both of the visits from my uncle and my father reflected back to me how aware they were of my precarious state the source lodged within me my mother. I saw that they knew I lived on a precipice deciding whether to *live or die* a fragile flower pushing toward the sun the slightest wind to uproot spur and seed to the four corners of the world. *Live or die, don't poison everything - I say Live, Live because of the sun, the dream the excitable gift.* (Anne Sexton)

Objecting heatedly in class discussions to a behavioral approach to psychology and the writings of B.F. Skinner the professor attracted by my persuasive and impassioned arguments asked after class if I would like the opportunity to meet with her husband a professor at Harvard and an associate of B.F. Skinner's to learn first hand the source of my emphatic and vociferous critique. Sitting with her

husband a few days later in B.F. Skinner's lab in the basement of Memorial Hall at Harvard telling him why Skinner made me uneasy and even angry. He listened intently and asked if I would like a part-time job minimum wage twenty hours a week as a lab assistant, which he believed, would give me greater insight and information about the research they were doing. Within months after arriving in Boston, I was thought a *brilliant student* at Boston University a member in good standing of B.F. Skinner's lab team a patient in the psychiatric clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital. And I was happily ensconced in a small room freshly painted white with black and red trim in a boarding house across from the house in which William James had lived. My room a sanctuary in which I allowed my body to rest and my mind to dream the distance greater with each day from the Weequahic section of Newark New Jersey and the crocodiles waiting mouths agape awaiting to slide me down their murderous throats in one swift gulp.

BEING IN LOVE: Through the profusion of psychiatric testimonials and probing the only pure and unequivocal love I felt was for the guy wildly blue eyes hair the color and texture of Iowa wheat biker boots army fatigue jacket carried over a navy *hoodie* it was he who held me fast in his grip. He was now in graduate school at the University of North Carolina studying political science and after having no contact sent me a plane ticket to join him for an extended football weekend in Raleigh Durham. Again lifted on wings of my own imagination went without consulting with or telling the psychiatrist or my bewildered scared and benumbed parents. Although through all contortions and combinations of touching we never had yet to make actual love. When at the airport I spotted him still in biker boots and army jacket my heart tightened at the prospect of having to confront what was still ominous and frightening my heart tightening opposing forces triangulating my welcome. Sensing my wariness gave my hand an extra tight squeeze *you are safe with me* and off we went to a local black bar for some beer and a meal he took out a dog-eared copy of John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* and read aloud passages no one giving us a second glance obviously he was a regular. Later that night we lay on the floor on pillows and a soft rug before a steamy pot belly stove kissing and holding each other he reached for less of me than ever before but had the whole of my heart. On Saturday he took me to a University of North Carolina football game as we descended the steps of a tightly crowded stadium his arm tightly about my shoulders catcalls and whistles could be heard and a particularly resonant *just look at those bohemian lovers* this against the backdrop of coeds in white gloves on the arms of dates in ceremonial fall football dress we against the dress code and much beyond the mold.

With the exception of my other great love K. with whom I shared secret longings reading aloud passages of Camus' *The Stranger* in fields of farm grass two women wondering what to do with their extreme feelings I had never before felt the random peculiar feelings rushing through me my mouth filled with words unuttered if this was being in love I was a winged *seraphim*. Still intact and virtuous we said a tearful goodbye at the airport wondering if this was a pause put on what lingered just out of reach or on hold or a last and final parting.

Back in Boston: The psychiatrist found it gratifying that I took this stealth flight saying it *bode well* for a future disentangled from my parent's imprecations that I was property to be molded and refashioned on their unwieldy and quixotic designs for my future. As I had been jealous pre-awareness of the world and whirl of sexual entanglements of my father's sexual predations and hungers for my mother he was voracious to be the sole possessor of my love. My mother sexless and bloodthirsty ran awry in a maze of contradictions she *both too good and not good enough* superimposing this weird and morose dilemma onto my life. Insights from therapy chilling choking gagging and running amok with my adamant and incontrovertible belief that I was *fat ugly and stupid* the psychiatrist pulling off this superimposed web gingerly contradicting my inordinate declamations. In subdued and kind tones he asked me to look into the full-length mirror he had installed on his office door there a girl with sheathing skin hugging a full discernable skeleton as we jointly regarded this startling image he urged me to begin eating he threatening to keep me in the hospital for force feedings getting me to buy ice cream cones after each session. *Your professor tells you with each paper you produce that they have not seen the likes of your brilliance for more than a decade if ever* more troubled waters to navigate still amazed how I lasted a day in high school and then in college *must be a body double* I would quip. Intransigent fixed if superimposed this a life and death struggle I had to hold tight to these images of myself or disperse a molten gray cloud burst apart by tornado stiff winds. *Ugly* now ugly inside outside murderous rage prickly on my skin men notched mounted trophies faceless nameless scrolled names as unrecognizable as the Hebraic words read off at synagogue service I collected men dates as if stamps butterflies coins. *The blur of men keeps you far away keeps you from forming a close relationship to anyone would you describe this as a form of running away?* This cogent observation shut down further probing and looking away knew this one was intractable insolvable. The psychiatrist would not know if in prophesy that I never cracked that part of myself love was simply out of reach I didn't have the nose for it and ultimately married a man whose name I hardly knew and rejected the one from whom my heart lived loyal ever more as the years increased it becoming all the more sad and egregious.

First Love: Often when I was out walking with one of my faceless men on Back Bay Road or sitting on the steps of Widener Library at Harvard John would come by on his motorcycle having parked it just beyond Harvard Yard or rev up to my boarding house climbing the stairs with his clunky cowboy boots and knock on my door looking beyond a person sitting on my bed with me to reclaim what he by now hoped was his. And I became fully his on my twenty-first birthday on a sweaty mid-July night he took me as out of Jane Austen novel and I submitted as a leaf lifted in a slight billowy breeze. The apartment I shared in Boston looked over the Charles River and I rested against him still soggy and a little bloody and asked in earnest *are you a Democrat or Republican* he with a name and a face kept himself a mystery disclosing very little about himself or his past we existed in the moment and moment to moment. Our rescued cat took the condom filled with his juices and skittered over the floor he chasing naked until the tackle prying the evidence from its mouth.

On the back of his motor cycle the next day at the peak of sunrise on the way to Rockport he said he could feel the heat of my glow on his back and the suppleness of my legs gathered about him love soaked and tender. He held me around my waist chin on my shoulder as we stood on the slippery rocks at the edge of the ocean in Rockport with a craning neck look back over time those twenty-four hours were perhaps the most fully happy in my life rivaled only by holding each of my three children in our first moments together. Not yet ready to discuss how it all ended but to know that I put the poisoned dagger straight into my heart when I could not stave off the stampede the force of the counter voice and had to put him out of my life. No one ever told me that when true love comes *to grab on and dare not ever let go*. Love came to me as a mother and at work I if unbeknownst to colleagues grew into love this a power reasserting itself in other arenas but never again to become entangled with another in a crisply sheeted bed. Now at seventy recollecting life's tattered moments I turn away when K. or John come to mind still wanting a moment or two before the inevitable ending. *Please* I ask ephemera my heart beating irregularly not willing to recognize and accept that K. and John are from such a distant dear sweet long ago and that the when within easy reach it was who I pushed off left them dangling grasping. Love with K. with John was all within my saying *yes* and it was then and thus forever all too great a risk.

Wiles and Wonders of Life Yet at Just Twenty: One year of therapy and I was released reassured that I was not the cause of my mother's madness. Except for a class in existential philosophy for which I got a B in every other course receiving solid A's pleasing the Chair's whose faith in my aptitude for high-level college work never wavered. My lab assistant job with Skinner provided a deep well of men to date half rosy cheeked bloom yet to be plucked and then an enchantress

with a pout and a come-on that got men salivating I was picking up tricks from this sterile studio of bloodless behaviorism. Leaving one darkish evening lifting myself through the early evening an arabesque to the night a man with an aquiline face stopped and invited me for a beer he had been waiting and *yes yes yes* as I said to all men with just a tinge of interest. After an easy conversational beer in which we learned nothing about the other we climbed into his root beer colored car, what is this squishing down on the butter soft leather seat *a Bentley* he answered simply *is it expensive* I queried pulling up in front of my boarding house on Irving Place. He said *may I see you again, how about Japanese food on Saturday of course and yes yes yes* and turned to wave goodbye entering the sanctuary of this odd milieu of housemates. Saturday at the Japanese restaurant scrambling to use chopsticks and failing we chatted laughing at nothing much but comfortable in each other's company. Afterward he came with me to my slice of a room painted white with red and black there resting on cinder block and wood books of poetry and literature that shouted out *Canon* a guitar leaning next to a cello *Bach Unaccompanied Suites* on the music stand all as if a rendering by Braque *want some red wine? Got to go but may I pick you up tomorrow morning to go to church? Church I don't go to church I am Jewish but don't go to synagogue either. How about then going to a carpet auction and back to my apartment where some friends and I are going to watch some film footage of my Maserati racing in Italy?* Later the next day as I watched the *Maserati* I sat there an odd piece on a chessboard wondering who was I but no matter I did that often. And so in a whirlwind romance I became his steady though he not mine and often in an attempt to conceal who he was he drove around Cambridge in his VW Beetle while I headed off to Boston University in the Bentley. *Wonder who that is driving in the Bentley* eyebrows raised, this was the small and closed community of Cambridge and Boston *I am Nibs from Newark* I would say to myself trilling like a newly awakened songbird. Our relationship never formalized the school year lapsing into summer and at the first peak of early fall he and I went apple picking this time in the Bentley and he stayed steady as I whisked around town one man after another often appearing at an exclusive Back Bay French restaurant on a revolving door of suitors. Graduation came and I told him I was off to live with the Navajos *good* never challenging or raising an eyebrow *I will see you upon your return.* Nuanced I was not and whatever the draw he often sat at restaurants looking over at me as what I perceived was love.

Freedom Schools: On the flip side or in my life as a student my being surged with indignation at the slightest incidence of injustice this a gabbled arc to the earliest inklings of wrongs I felt as a small child. In flank with guitar in hand we a group of Harvard and Boston University students marched into a South Boston storefront to open our *Freedom School* for the neighborhood kids shut out of by the heinous stop action of the bigoted city council member Louise Day Hicks. Students

welcomed with hugs and song sat with us in circles on the floor as we read aloud from a variety of books never polemic lovely pieces of literature like *The Little Prince* and *Charlotte's Web* and poems of Langston Hughes. In the communion we drew strength and contrast to the ugly racism and dastardly behavior of so many of the local Boston whites. Named my cat Stuart after Stuart Hughes who was running for office on an anti-nuclear weapon platform simmering still the child swathed in the cloth of pogrom.

The Boarding House was a sanctuary in which as if a stripper from a cake managed to step out of my past seemingly as if new from nowhere the other three or four boarders enjoyed my comings and goings with dates always dressed for drama but with a blinding twinkle. Across the retrieved wooden table in the common kitchen I would watch our budding novelist eat slices of white bread thickly coated with peanut butter and slabs of sardines still dripping with oil three times or more a day my evening meals in restaurants with recycling dates. Often invited to sit on a madras covered bed and read classics by a soft spoken graduate student smoking one cigarette after another hands trembling intimations of *Virgil Plato Cato Ovid* resonant with the tremolo of his voice. *He is in love with you* the only other woman said with her deeply inflexed French accent V neck sweaters plump with cleavage skirts as if poured into lifting just above her knees her feet in spike anklets of various colors she constantly filed and painted her finger nails waiting for the day when her multi-millionaire American boyfriend was released for the local mental institution. On weekends often sitting on the stoop with a neighbor having coffee as he talked about Haiti and his fascination with Papa Doc and Baby Doc about whom he had written as he prepared for a life as an international investigative reporter. At the boarding house those two years found me never happier harbored thoughts of suicide as distant as some character in a novel a fragmentary literary persona but I couldn't stay the me of me pushing out harbinger of all things past kept me on the move.

Loveliness: Seemingly captivated by my radiance or other worldly loveliness people stopped to talk to me remarking on my beauty I was ascendant a pure lipid moment of perfection magnetized. I modeled readily for an up and coming fashion photographer who commented your face is lovely your eyes so sad. I was a composite of suicide wishes and soaring feelings of invincibility I was at one with the universe pained at its disruptive beauty devilishly thrilled to be away from the frightening slaughterhouse back in Newark. All three tenaciously held descriptors of whom I was blown asunder I was not *ugly* or *stupid* and even I could see I was a reed a wisp of a young woman. Blowing up old images of self-hold disastrous potential *I was who I am not* the very foundation of a certain reality toppled wondering then on what pinions what girders do I stand? *I am who I am but not*

who I was taught I was and in truth never came back together again fully whole a new rendering of self defied parodied the inner script I had held to so tightly my mother's narrative for me always held in the balance.

Inner Script: While dating during those first two years in Boston boy/man faces and names blurred spirited gallivanting as if to an inner ancient chant of *Torah* a restless space a Diaspora of heart and longing never at peace in a single man's arms nomadic love elusive gathering up heart beats and moving on restless soul brief encounters. On a particular spring night I found myself falling in love with another blond blue-eyed Midwesterner as I was sitting on the steps of Widener Library he walked and suggested we go for a beer and my heart tumbled out and down at his feet inside I believing finally *he was the one*. He wasn't virtual moments after we soared with the first droplets of love and yearning his college girlfriend came to claim him and he peeled off into her arms an old narrative he unable to break from. Life's jigs and turns caught me in their swell and what remained of that blaze of girl to womanhood dimmed ultimately replaced by motherhood and a breathtaking defiance. In public arenas inhabited by a *to the death* resistance never to compromise an indomitable sense of inner integrity an unyielding sense of power finally I in truth I became a *Trojan Woman*. Circling back post college graduation and yes with honors I still filled with wonder and awe still magnetizing glances I set off on a different journey an odyssey the likes of which I was yet to know. *The playbill: fat ugly stupid the script the stage ultimately upon which I stayed.*

The Book of John: *Flipping back and forth through time the before of the before, etc. etc. and so forth... If you cannot live without him he said my father then you have to go to him live with him and started packing to leave abruptly near the close of my junior year no choice no indecision I needed him and couldn't live without him and then he appeared my suitcase still open. He stood there in my tiny sun filled room in full military regalia he had been called back into the Reserves and was being sent to Berlin to mine the wall being built to keep the East Germans from West Germans and keeping me from him by an oceans span and multiple zones. A glorious weekend out of uniform on his big rented motorcycle we set off the for Boston Coast and Rockport and kissed and necked and held hands I daring not to look at him at cost of wandering off into the deep sea. He who had been my first and only love held me tight as the night lapsed into daylight and it was time to return the motorcycle and take him to the airport which I did in my friends borrowed Bentley the odd juxtaposition not to be escaped. Goodbyes still at tongue tip at the gate bodies pressed was it *Casablanca* or a million war movies at train stations brides bidding goodbyes to weak kneed soldiers wishing I had his baby growing within me a piece of him I could hold onto forever was this a script or real*

life? I watched my love in full army dress disappear into the plane the wings tipping into the sky and wished I could die and did die inside. I crossed over into the solemnity of sacrifice missed chance bad choice irrevocable decision in the offing doomed never to love too scared too timid too unwilling to be seen known revealed to say *yes and forever and ever*.

Gathered I drove to my class parked the Bentley saw my professor the one who thought I was a genius and told him that my man my soldier just left for Berlin torrential sobs followed *now he will return there will be no shooting there*. Promises to wait forever how often I have seen *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* the sheet music sits on my piano each song as if written for me. Never fully able to delve into how and why I let him go why do some turn from true love? I search poems for words that speak to my horror my pain but they never go to the depths and darkness in which the answer swirls. Longing for suicide was this the death I longed for? No sooner had John arrived in Berlin for his post as sentry and guard my father on the one lone weekend I came home suggesting that I say goodbye to John living with him no longer a possibility so that I would be open and available to meet other men perhaps *finding someone nice to marry*. Did he not realize that I was the vamp the disloyal honeybee fluttering ever on to the yet more colorful flower in the mad sea of boy/men that made up Cambridge. Leaving nothing to chance he placed a pen in my hand and some very white fine stationary and fairly dictated a *Dear John* letter in which *I wished John well but thought this was a good time to end our relationship and not see each other ever again* and using that generic military postal address walked with me to the mailbox. Was this my father fucking me was this me submitting to whom could I register this query I had walked out of the synagogue at age eleven giving up on the thought that there was a God. Returning to my snug little chamber on Irving Place I shared what I had done with the French woman in her V neck sweater who looked up from painting her nails her expression bereft as if I had mined every ill-fated love song in Edith Piaf's repertoire and would succumb as she did love does not fall without fatal vengeance and remorse. Love that unwieldy trickster found me a year or so later when a man I knew just three weeks including the wedding date became my husband I was that leaf just short of crisp tossing hither and yon what did it matter who I married I was already the bride of the man my father who handed me too readily over to this man *this stranger*

Fifteen Years Go By: Some fifteen years later on a trip to Washington D.C. with my husband to a political science convention brought along as a treat I found myself alone in the hotel room in DuPont Circle dialing up all of the people with his name in Bethesda Maryland some five or six and he answered. Few weeks before coming to Washington by chance bumped into his old girlfriend from

Antioch in a Village coffee house although having never spoken before we acknowledged each other I asking if she knew where John was, *believe he works in Washington and lives in Bethesda* she answered. Wondering if she was still in contact with him married to a well established novelist and she a local university professor furthermore in this litany she was someone who John loved crushed when she left him for her current husband I was always for solace comfort and affection. His voice set me trembling terrified of what door had I opened *well hello Naomi glad you found me when can we see each other?* I was returning to New York the next day we agreed to meet in Central Station in Washington DC for a late afternoon drink my husband busy into early evening. Ominous feelings welling when seeing him he had become more fantasy an apparition a lover who came to me move me from the solitude and sorrow I felt as a wife at which time I was released from the relentless tourniquet of my marriage floating off with him *The Bridal Pair with The Eiffel Tower of Chagall* crossing the scrim of that painting. As he walked up to me I fell into his arms sobs suppressed held back since the night my father and I walked to the mailbox to send the *Dear John* letter. The wary waters of despair spilled uncontrollably he took hold of me *Come now Naomi* he said as he guided us to a table in a remote corner of the open bar and with his arms tightly around me he held up my very soggy face and gave me a kiss saying *today is my thirty-fifth birthday*. Running his fingers softly through my rich array of thick curls enjoying their anarchy cutting to the deepest and most right place in me he asked *why did you send me that letter it really hurt me thoughts and images of our love and of you held me together during that onerous and unsettling time you were a soldier's girl contrite as that may seem and that necessary*. Enslaved by a father's unruly desires and control couldn't remember at which point in John's redeployment that I sent off that prescient providential life defining correspondence. Fumbling I asked *was I ever really your true love or was she and always second best a woman to rescue you from the hellishness of her quixotic abandonment* he answered simply *when we made love that first time you became the one. Fear and father drove me to deny and lose the only pure and perfect thing in my life, you.*

Second Chances: And then pulling ourselves from the extraordinary he shared that he had two boys and was recently divorced. I told him that I had a son and a daughter two and five and married a man I knew only for three weeks from first date to wedding. Further that my husband was covetous of my every breath and could abide no breach in attention or a shift of focus. I was to bare witness to his every move and if he sensed when out in public that I glanced in the direction of another man he transformed into a wild mad embattled dog. *How often will you be down here let me know when so we can spend more time together* he asked? *I will* I said. Of amazing consequence and coincidence I actually had in the coming

months a consulting job in suburban Virginia with a boarding school needing to upgrade and revise their school program and curriculum. I had just signed on to work in association with the man who had been the director of the boarding school my husband attended and for whom we both worked consecutive summers while in Switzerland. *More than likely I will be back five or six times starting in a month or so* I told him as we said goodbye I needing to return to the hotel room and rid my face of this obvious outpouring of emotion.

In the cab on the way back to the hotel I put this phantasmagoric alternative reality together. Nothing no one not the ever present jealous death threat from my husband who indeed kept a loaded gun without a safety catch in his bedside table drawer children aside nothing could constrain or hold me back I was wily possessed up to scheming lying cheating. Putting myself together I met my husband in the hotel lobby he was preoccupied searching for whom else was in close proximity with whom he needed to make contact. I was an appendage a prop magnanimously he had me tag along offering a few days away from the kids who were with my parents in New Jersey. Musing off to a corner on a lobby sofa I smiled that deep impregnable *Mona Lisa* smile these things just don't happen in real life in real time but I was changed transformed in a profound and immutable way and for anyone who regarded me or looked closely they would have fathomed a deep charged glow.

Reignited Reunited Lovers: We met over a period of three months making love in borrowed friends houses riding through the Virginia countryside on his motorcycle. He took me to his house where he awarded full custody lived with his boys and visited me in New York while my husband was away in Europe on a trip to look at my children. We talked about our marriages and our dreams for the future mine still too overwhelming and potentially dangerous to even imagine. After having dinner with friends the last time we were together the consulting job having ended he took me to a beautiful home overhanging the Rock Creek Watershed in Maryland and after making love until the sun surfaced we showered and dressed. Sitting with me on the bed said in an even steady and kind voice that he had decided to marry a woman he had been dating *our lives together hold the promise of making love each night I think it is that we both find lovemaking central and essential at the close each day*. Still near numb I knew that it would take years if ever for me to experience the level of passion and desire of which he spoke that part of me lost or deadened in ten years of marriage. We had our last or final kiss goodbye embracing near an opened window with the sound of the creek washing over the rocks. He then took my hand walking out to the motorcycle returning me to the hotel where I dismounted without looking back. Beyond heartbreak near to collapsing knowing without a clouding doubt that I had when twenty turned my back on true love the

great love of my life not having the courage or emotional wherewithal to ever say to him *yes* the word, *Yes*.

I am dying perhaps not today or maybe so I am seventy-one a full forty years later recounting this as if only yesterday.

The Realization by Yvor Winters

*Death. Nothing is simpler. One is dead.
The set face now will fade out; the bare fact,
Related movement, regular, intact
Is reabsorbed, the clay is on the bed.
The soul is mortal, nothing: the dim head
On the dim pillow, less. But thought clings flat
To this, since it can never follow that
Where no precision of the mind is bred.
Nothing to think of between you and All!
Screaming processions of infinite
Logic grinding down receding cold!
O fool! Madness again! Turn not, for it
Lurks in each painless cranny, and you sprawl
Blurring a definition. Quick! You are old.*

The Last of John: My mother died at ninety-three last words, *Be with me Mama* a woman whom she had spent her life fleeing damning or denying was whom she wanted to cradle her death. The day after my brother placed her ashes in the Atlantic Ocean in Long Branch, New Jersey while I watched we returned to her home to go through and distribute her things so jealously guarded meted out in return for favors her cunning wiles delineating the distribution. But now and surprisingly her voice not reverberating we went through photographs our lives reflecting events and the history of the course of photography the grain gelatins negatives. There in an old stack two photographs of John and me with attached copies on the back of each handwritten *First Love!* In one photo John arms wrapped around me two bodies as one emboldened with lovers revelatory smiles. In the other photo John just behind me my body resting on his and he looking at me the heat of sensuality a hot breath permeates we complete each other bare and unguarded in love.

Having what I believed was his address in Bethesda sent him copies with a brief note saying that I had found them among my mother's belongings after her recent death and thought he would like to have them particularly as he was in military uniform surprising myself at my notes simplicity elegant simplicity. Days later a hand written note thanking me for the photos and saying he was sorry for my loss and that he and *his wife* often went out to dinner with a fellow student from Antioch and finally *glad you are well signed Best wishes, John*. Unable to resist I

thanked him for getting back to me sharing that my friend from Antioch Margot had died a brutal cancer death and that I still found it hard to accept. And then simplicity notched added *I can;t tell you how much I appreciated hearing from you, Best wishes, Naomi* I writing this as I listened to the final movement of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*. Occasionally I think when I pick up the phone that I will hear his voice, *Well hello Naomi*. Perhaps I will hear his voice as time fades and I will call out *John my love my one true love*. This as my children scatter the remains of who I was. In the tiny scattering ash there will be a wind updraft of relief no longer having to live barren and empty as the *Atacama Desert* - for some things there are no second chances.

Thinking, Tangling Shadows

*Thinking, tangling shadows in the deep solitude.
You are far away too, oh farther than anyone.
Thinking, freeing birds, dissolving images,
burying lamps.*

*Belfry of fogs, how far away, up there!
Stifling laments, milling shadowy hopes, taciturn miller,
night falls on you face downward, far from the city.*

*Your presence is foreign, as strange to me as a thing.
I think, I explore great tracts of my life before you.
My life before anyone, my harsh life.
The shout facing the sea, among the rocks,
running free, mad, in the sea-spray.
The sad rage, the shout, the solitude of the sea.
Headlong, violent, stretched towards the sky.*

*You, woman, what were you there, what ray, what vane
of that immense fan? You were as far as you are now.
Fire in the forest! Burn in blue crosses.
Burn, burn, flame up, sparkle in trees of light.*

*It collapses, crackling. Fire. Fire.
And my soul dances, seared with curls of fire.
Who calls? What silence peopled with echoes?
Hour of nostalgia, hour of happiness, hour of solitude.
Hour that is mine from among them all!
Megaphone in which the wind passes singing.
Such a passion of weeping tied to my body.*

*Shaking of all the roots,
Attack of all the waves!
My soul wandered, happy, sad, unending.*

Thinking, burying lamps in the deep solitude.

Who are you, who are you? –Pablo Neruda

Aunt Rebecca and Uncle Bernie and a Busted Myth: I climbed onto the Greyhound bus destination Albuquerque American Express bills pressed into my wallet, savings from my own bank account from the various jobs I had held throughout college. Now a graduate I was out to *seek my fortune* something drove me West to find the Navajo Indians with a hope of living with a traditional Navajo family. The spear jettisoned into my heart as my father cupped my hand while I wrote the letter that broke off the relationship with John while he was patrolling the Berlin Wall with the American forces still held its quiver.

Never! My father slammed a fist and secured a foothold on my future when he turned away a seductive *Jean Paul Belmondo* look alike with a canvas covered Citroen I had befriended through an ad I placed around Harvard Square inviting someone to drive across country with me in their car sharing expenses. On the agreed upon date this movie like idol came to my house to pick me up. My father so thrown off course that he lost any touch of grace and shooed the man away as if an intruder as if he had fallen from the sky to lift me off a rapine serial rapist serial killer with a sinister French accent and seductive slouch akin to the *Rape of the Sabine Women*. With a heightened sense of my own power as a successful college graduate with honors no less now able to move in my own orbit I had fooled myself believing that in the aftermath of getting rid of John he would hold back any further attempts to crush my will. As the little Citroen drove off I wailed as if over the dead body of my deceived lover playing off the last scene in *Breathless* introduced to me by John. Unnerved sheepish and scared my father said *would you like me take you to the Greyhound Station where you can purchase a one-way ticket to Albuquerque?* Bag in hand I walked out the door fortunately my mother missed this entire event she was out shopping. Within hours I got on the bus for Albuquerque New Mexico where I would stay with my mother's almost two decade older sister Rebecca her husband Bernie and their daughter Claire mentally stunted from a mishandling of her birth Claire staying mentally at about age three if now thirty.

Waiting at the bus there my dear Bernie and Becky in whose Passaic yard I spent many hours on the canopied garden swing visiting my mother's sister was part of weekend visits with grandparents. Seeing them at first from the window of the bus filled me with the warmth I experienced while with them sitting swinging surrounded by the daringly beautiful roses Bernie cultivated and for which he won prizes. Becky and Bernie had two children Claire who ultimately never left their sides awkward for my uncle who never quite felt comfortable with her and her persistent echolalia. And a son Harold considered a genius in math who at an early age came down with a life threatening case of rheumatic fever thus the move to Albuquerque the climate

thought restorative. Suddenly flushed with memories of the trellis of roses lifting above the swing and the morning glories opening with the sun along the fence as blue as Bernie's eyes when Aunt Rebecca and Claire sitting with me on the swing informed me that they were moving in a few days to New Mexico which had a climate thought best for Harold. As I stepped off the bus some fifteen years later I was reunited with perhaps two of the most warm and kind adults I had encountered as a traumatized child. After some big and tearful hugs we got into the car arriving at a simple white stucco house on a street with similar homes. Claire as we walked toward the door *you staying here you staying here you staying here* she was a full bosomed chunky woman her face washed over with confusion and worry Aunt Rebecca reassuring her *yes* Bernie stiffened a few gaits ahead. Moments after walking their home I was the little girl of six again safe and secure sweet scents of roses everywhere in Bernie's hand-tooled vases.

Bernie had become a master potter and made all of the household crockery I learned during lunch. We sat at a hand hewed picnic table in a yard thick with grass framed by endless red and pink roses winners of multiple garden prizes this in a dry and arid climate frequent watering essential and sanctioned. Bernie still wandered off on his deep-sea fishing ventures lasting up to three months having just returned from one. The exhibits of his watercolors of rich and varied New Mexico landscapes were shown in local galleries coveted for the way they captured the light and exacting detail. Within days I was shown Uncle Bernie's extensive coin and stamp collections his many creative and deep sea endeavors cushioned him from lifelong upheaval at the advent of Claire's mismanaged and disastrous birth and his wife's fierce loyalty and intractable desire to keep her with them at home. Looking into Bernie's endless periwinkle eyes threw me into unsettled feelings of the pulsing loss of John who with Bernie had periwinkle probing yet ultimately kind eyes. Again and still missing John as if with throbbing truncated amputated limb.

Bernie immigrated to New York from Lithuania the rest of his siblings going to Israel where they were early founders of a kibbutz this well before Statehood. Bernie was always the *entfremdung the strange one* in my mother's family drawing a particular affinity for him from me. In Albuquerque Harold living only blocks came over on the day I arrived with his three young sons his second wife and her biracial Asian daughter. Harold and the boys' mother divorced she living in Utah. Harold was a highly esteemed mathematician working at Sandia National Laboratories in Los Alamos on classified projects this the place of note where the hydrogen bomb was made. Harold his

rheumatism in check if with a damaged heart seemed disconcerted and embarrassed when talking about his work at Sandia Labs. The boys were poets and scholars in the making about ten, eight, and six and in each I saw reflected the child I had been when Becky and Bernie were still in Passaic and I close by on the swing below the rose covered trellis. For about two weeks I settled easily into life in Albuquerque my aunt reassuring my parents that I was fine. Daytimes I drove around with Bernie as he did plumbing jobs committed to only a certain number each year depending on family financial needs. He also was a sought after moneylender to the Indians and Mexicans unable to secure bank loans his rates low his camaraderie engendered in the loan.

This open-ended time gave way to holding revealing and wrenching conversations with Aunt Rebecca about my childhood and my life with my mother, Claire always wandering nearby. Risked telling Aunt Rebecca how I had been plagued recently with suicidal thoughts and that her younger brother and my mother's twin noting my turbulence offered support getting me psychiatric help. Shared that my father was so taken up with subduing and placating my mother that he became incapable of protecting my brother and me leaving us in the hands and at the mercy of this too often crazy and destructive force. Further our father rather than getting help for this woman so much out of control kept it all in an ominous and unsettling silence crippling my brother and my sense of reality holding us in a state of perpetual pending doom. Discovering only recently my brother seven years my junior had said to our father on his twenty-first birthday *Dad how could you have done this to us left us with this woman?*

I told her of the endless tantrums often at just the sight of me and of her midnight forays into the basement threatening to throw herself into the furnace. At her whim I was caught in the ever more elaborate and intricate web of cunning and manipulation her ultimate desire was for greater and greater control of my mind and my life. When brave enough to ask thus acknowledging the existence of her furies and tantrums my father shared that she had the first tantrum he knew of the day she discovered she was pregnant with me three months into their marriage at which time pummeling and beating her stomach concave. Recounted to my aunt that I believed my birth made my mother into this wild and crazed woman and as much as the psychiatrist I had seen recently tried to convince me otherwise I still believed that I had within me devilish and dangerous powers. Attempting to gain a perspective I asked my aunt *do cry's of such anguish of such grief stream across oceans do they live just below the surface of immigrants lives?* It was then the

dam broke and Aunt Rebecca holding onto her sides Claire looming frantic above cried *god no what we have done to you with our silence what we have done to you what harm?* Pulling herself from a toppling emotionality seeing Claire becoming increasingly unhinged proceeded to tell me that my mother had been wild uncontrollable frightening the entire family with her frequent outbursts. The family aghast as she, my mother tumbled around pummeling herself shouting out manic curses an uncontrollable seizure like behavior unnerving them as they who stood by silent and impotent. No one spoke of this even to other neighbors immigrants like themselves who knew of my mother's aberrant and terrifying ways never words spoken just sad and despairing exchange of glances. And when my father came to ask for her hand in marriage no one expressed a hint of warning afraid he would walk away from the marriage.

Drenched with emotion Claire still pacing my uncle returned from a plumbing job finding his wife in a state of upheaval and disrepair sat down next to her his thick and strong arms enfolding listening as she recounted what I shared his piercing blue eyes glancing over at me. I sat stunned tearless feeling my center shift glacial ice breaking apart a story a life's narrative's veracity lost and another in the making. That evening we went to Harold's had a barbeque and the family gathering around to help me make plans for exploring New Mexico. I left the barbeque with a bike on the back of Bernie's pick-up truck and the keys to a 1958 royal blue Chevy Convertible. The car of particular moment to Harold saying that it sat mostly in a garage. Harold followed us back to Rebecca's and Bernie's in the car returned home by Bernie. I imagine that Rebecca shared what had transpired our distraught conversation with Harold who without a further word jumped into action giving me the tools and the sanction to go out into the world. With Becky and Bernie and their close knit family I found a place where I began to feel at home. Slowly extricated from the bondage of my mother's domination her hand losing its reach I becoming less susceptible vulnerable to her incessant exploitation of my fears and insecurities. This riling fire-spewing dragon mother becoming diffuse her crazy wild mad death dances more and more a grand parodying of a life force. With Rebecca and Bernie I was girl newly twenty-one coming into her own a blossoming and bold beauty needing to set off on her own to wander off to a world which was mine to explore to own.

Route 66: First venturing out on Route 66 on the bike with a wicker basket to the package store to purchase a six-pack of beer to be shared with Bernie Rebecca Harold and his wife Elaine. The day was coming for me to set off on my greatly anticipated journey to Santa Fe, Taos stopping along the way at the homestead of Georgia O' Keefe in Abiquiu. While I in Taos I was planning to spend time visiting the study in which D. H. Lawrence wrote. Aunt Rebecca suggested that I leave in a day or two giving me time to pack and pick up any necessary extras. On the night before I was to set off the entire family came for dinner toasting my venture with a bottle of champagne the car had been washed checked over and filled with gas readying for my road trip. Restless the night before knowing that it was actually to take place and that Bernie and Rebecca would continue to reassure my parents that I was fine. Finally I existed in a moment extricated free from mind hacking mind-fucking voices no stealth warrior monster mother just over my shoulder. I felt a precious pronoun forward steps improvisations expression of my own volition.

It was in Albuquerque with Rebecca and Bernie I found the nerve to shift off the course of self-pity of cackling doom and defeat lifting off my self-styled sanctified bed of nails and bedlam. Here a certain resurrection I was becoming one of Bernie's grafted transported rare roses blooming out of a new soil. I handed off the story of my terrorist mother in exchange learning how she had everyone in her household frightened and intimidated erupting unpredictably throwing horrifying tantrums self-flagellating throwing up multiple meals. Her family continually immersed in the bloodbath of transmigration an old world of haunts of endless dislocation caught in the actions and very being of its youngest daughter. I was after all not the perpetrator of this disease I had not infected my mother she was a horrifying receptacle endless cycles of *pogrom*. I would learn sadly not alone in her anguish and agony finding this sorry narrative in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg the memoir of Amos Oz among others. To reclaim myself to slowly extricate create such a distance to mute the warrior howl the Greyhound Bus was the centrifugal force to carry me on a journey out of the bedlam of my childhood. Desperate in need of absolution and relief never anticipating how crazily off-kilter and wrong the unexpurgated narrative I held to so tightly. No I did not have the inherent power to drive my mother mad but would I ultimately step beyond cross over find a path of nothing familiar an open heart fixing the way? As I move now to fade out from a cauterized moment of time I know what got sacrificed love. Impossible to call back the love of my life spurned under the spell of a lonely and desperate father John would be lost to me forever and with it my instinct

for picking a man or partner to love. The tangled knot of childhood grief and fear pushed me too far from an openness to experience true adult love.

And it's the last moment I remember, which I see them all, thru myself, now—tho not you

I didn't foresee what you felt—what more hideous gape of bad mouth came first—to you—and were you prepared?

To go where? In that Dark—that—in that God? a radiance? A Lord in the Void? Like an eye in the black cloud in a dream? Adonoi at last, with you?

Beyond my remembrance! Incapable to guess! Not merely the yellow skull in the grave, or a box of worm dust, and a stained ribbon—Deathshead with Halo? can you believe it? Is it only the sun that shines once for the mind, only the flash of existence, than none ever was?

Nothing beyond what we have—what you had—that so pitiful—yet Triumph, to have been here, and changed, like a tree, broken, or flower—fed to the ground—but mad, with its petals, colored, thinking Great Universe, shaken, cut in the head, leaf stript, hid in an egg crate hospital, cloth wrapped, sore—freaked in the moon brain, Naughtless.

No flower like that flower, which knew itself in the garden, and fought the knife—lost
Kaddish Allen Ginsberg

Road Trip: Stepping early in the morning into the royal blue Chevy top down Rebecca Bernie and Claire standing at the door next to the driver's seat the map in which Bernie carefully marked off the route from their street in Albuquerque to Sante Fe and then Taos along with some of his favorite well travelled highlights gas stations and restaurants with native specialties. Next to the map was a brightly wrapped box in which there were meals and snacks and drinks that could last well beyond a day or two and on the back seat my small bag in which Rebecca had put small gifts. I was wearing the checkered lace-edged spaghetti strapped dress that was John's favorite with a light white sweater and a baseball cap that said Albuquerque on it. As I pulled away from the curb I lifted my hand to wave daring not to look back eyes beneath my sunglasses smarting I was being released into a voyage of my own making as a pod seed is blown into the air with a simple wish for me to *go just go*.

Taos: With a perfunctory walk around Santa Fe decided to drive right on to Taos but for bathroom and gas stops arriving mid-afternoon booking a room for two nights in a small boutique hotel near the town square. After putting my things in the room walked back out into the center of town finding a bookstore bought a paperback copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* an entire wall was dedicated to the works by and about D.H. Lawrence. At an outdoor café and restaurant ordered a bowl of chili and a beer. I felt transported an

ascendant star yet to find its place in the night sky I held a freedom moving me beyond the conscription of childhood morbidity those ever-darkening concentric circles moving off and away from me a cloud in the achingly blue sky dispersing. Having finished the chili ever so slowly every morsel every bite a baby's mouth circling first fist gripping heaping handfuls of porridge the pleasure of eating and sipping beer revelatory. Paid my tab and walked around finding a bench in the town square thinking nothing feeling no compunction but to take it all in. My mind a hyperbolic running commentary a shroud lifting mediating the immediate the uncensored unsanctioned nothing programmed the boundary lifted separating me from whatever the other the next minute hour unscripted left to muse. Day light dimming went to my room to shower and dress returning to the square to have a snack and some wine again at a table at the edge of the town square. Experiencing an ever more enhanced sense of renewal moving out to an uncharted receptivity to everything about me. Felt a particular union with myself no longer a receptacle of sorrow I felt happy that word happy plainly and exquisitely happy. The sky drawing to stars and the moon off the tip of my shoulder pearly translucent I was in communion with a force a power a riff forming of what it meant to come to life to be truly everywhere alive. After the meal walked slowly back to my hotel to settle into bed propped by soft goose-tufted pillows and soft fine multi-threaded Egyptian sheets a focused light above the bed perfect for reading and opened my new copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Circumspect years later came to know that it is at the dawn of a claimed selfhood that one experiences this omniscient overarching feeling that all is possible.

Lady Chatterley's Lover was part of the litany of books I catalogued as having read along with novels of Virginia Woolf most especially *The Waves* and Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* quoting often the ending, Dilsey: *She endured*. That becoming a totem a way I found to keeping going no matter what. If not fully understanding struggled through James Joyce *Ulysses* a pretender to Molly Bloom's endless soliloquy without sentence structure or punctuation attributing my awkwardness with commas or other literary demarcations as license covering up my ineptness and ignorance of the skeletal bones of the written English language. I was caught in the snaggletooth of my benumbed and blocked mind reading an elliptical futile exercise most words falling off a page unabsorbed words on a page tributaries spillage confronting and confounding any power and desire to absorb giving anorexic testimony to a mind thwarted and in hiding. But as I hunkered down on the wonderful firm mattress and plush sheets I discovered I was reading I had at least found the

astounding world of words and read through the entire book through the night aroused by the text but feeling much like a somnambulant awakened.

With a newfound literary confidence I made the pilgrimage to the property in which D.H. Lawrence lived with his wife just outside Taos. I stood at the doorway of the studio riveted feeling an emboldened kinship with Lawrence and for moments my reality was interchangeable with that of *Lady Chatterley* in all of its sensual fullness while other stilled hungers in me percolated rearing up. One more night in Taos and another read of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* redolent with the possibility once held in my love affair with John I could have soared sitting naked a wreath of daisies woven into my tumbling thick curls John cradling me between his legs close to his naked body enfolding me with sublime and reverential awe. The next morning checked out of the hotel and made one final visit to D.H. Lawrence's home and study the texture of this pilgrimage filled with kinship and openness to the possibilities of love perhaps to be found in my own world.

Rio Grande River: Bought a BLT and two bottles of water got back into the Chevy put the top down deciding to go on to Abiquiu and Georgia O'Keefe's homestead. Driving along the Rio Grande River just outside Taos when impulsively I pulled over to the side and ran to the Rio Grande over the stubble earth and random rocks and plunged or rather walked right into the water shoes off once again in my checkered strapless dress a feeling of exhilaration only rivaled by the water's chill. Suddenly eclipsing this moment of pure pleasure I found I was deep in a swell and swirl of the river's currents being dragged on bouncing off multiple river rocks downstream my arms flailing my breath heavy with fear finding no place for my hand to anchor the banks equally far from either side. Unbelievably there came a deep and authoritative voice directing me to *catch hold onto this* and a thick rope fell within reach and slowly I was hoisted over rock sediment silt and river current to land on the far bank my car clear across on the other side. *What were you doing swimming in the Rio Grande and in the middle of nowhere* a compelling voice queried. Ahead I saw a low-slung pastel house in the near distance. There an assertive arm was placed about my shoulders wrapping me in a fringe leather jacket leading me to the ranch house my shoeless feet tripping over the *cracked stubble earth*. My body trembling with the water's chill my dress clinging a tight silhouette guided toward the house left now with no choice but to trust in whatever would take place. I was in the care of a man whose face I had yet to glimpse his voice drawing me forward. Pushing the door open I saw an open

room a fireplace built with the rocks on the surrounding land and a table that looked hand crafted surrounded by generous similarly crafted chairs. *Take these* he said handing me an oversize pair of jeans and a shirt and a light sweater and *give me your clothes to dry out and I'll brew us some hot coffee.* Obediently I entered what was a guest bedroom changing quickly exiting and uncertain I handed him my clothes. *Here drink this coffee I'm going to bring your car around and gather up your shoes, which I imagine are on the river bank* and with that he took off.

My heart was beating like a tribal warrior's drum I was exploding out of myself dutifully sipping the hot freshly brewed coffee. He returned moments later *the top is up you will be able to drive right out of here tomorrow morning.* Walking with him outside still afternoon he pointed to the fields where cows were grazing and then in another direction a field of sheep and then to his barn where there were five or six beautiful horses snorting flicking their manes as he approached calling each horse by name stroking its muzzle and having it nibble on a hand-held treat. *These are my prizes Palomino and Arabian* he told me *do you ride? No, but I love horses cows sheep dogs* felt like Norman Mailer *Advertising for Myself* developing a subtext in which I was suggesting that I stay with him forever living my whole life out there promising to learn to ride herd lasso and bake. He strode over I was standing head to head with one of the horses stroking its muzzle as I had seen him do he handed me a carrot to feed the horse. *Say I'm Jack and you are one very lucky lady* and I in response saying *I am a very grateful Naomi. Would you like to come indoors while I prepare a meal for us or just wander about feel free to go anywhere but near the River* with that he walked toward the house. Emotions roiling too dangerous to follow still in the aftermath of two consecutive close readings of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* flush craving a re-enactment of that very love a book finally penetrating my mind and the most inner sanctum of my body. As late afternoon fell on the day I fell to musing fate had me plunge recklessly into the River and an awful occurrence brought me into its mystical presence on a small boulder looking out at the sheep and cows. I felt an awkward ambivalence to remain absolutely still until the treachery of my unsettled emotions quieted or to move toward the house letting the fabric of my over heated desire fill the woman in me seductive strong confident. Calling out to me *your clothes are dry and dinner is almost ready* I lifted off my perch and walked toward the house believing that I had fallen in love and perhaps had found a forever home.

We ate in silence some delicious southwestern fare and then he spoke to me quietly and with restraint about the dangers of what I had done currents could have carried me off until some brutal rock smashed and stopped me and then parenthetically he added that straying off this way could have put me in the crosshairs of a murderer or rapist. The jousting humor just below this tacit warning was not mistaken and we both had a good laugh. After dinner he returned my clothes and gave me a pair of flannel pajamas and suggested I *tuck in* and have a good night's sleep. On the edge of the bed a large wood framed window looking out to the pastures a full moon casting a funnel hue onto the clay like soil and quietly but persistently redolent within me *Bach's B Minor Mass* lying down on top of the blankets I knew that in the morning I would be moving on.

The sun had peaked and coffee was brewing scrambled eggs and bacon with slices of thick bread were ready and as we ate he said that he had prepared a jug of lemonade for me to take along with some cheese an apple and the heel of bread *that should tide you over* he said simply. Dutifully I ate all of the eggs and bacon excused myself to go to the bathroom before my trip at which time he walked me to the car he had already taken the hood down and said *I will ride along with you out to the road* and climbed upon a silken caramel palomino and with this he in the lead we took off. At the roadside he waved me on *take care of yourself little sister* and with that rode back into the field and I drove down the highway heading for Santa Fe but not before a planned stop at Abiquiu to visit the homestead and studio in which Georgia O'Keefe had lived and painted. With Georgia O'Keefe I would be standing on firmer and more familiar ground.

Leaving the Ranch: Leaving the ranch whizzing down a road top down in my blue Chevy some local country music station on the radio on my way to Abiquiu coming upon some of the most startlingly remarkable landscapes stopping stepping outside fearing this time I would pick up and just fly off holding steady to the hood I learned from fellow onlookers equally enthralled that this was *Red Wash Canyon* near Chama which was near Abiquiu. Bernie had indeed made this one of the *must-sees* on my trip it was almost unbearable to take in had I been in comparably exquisite places before or was it that my eyes and heart in their infancy were fluttering open? Legs a little sturdier I walked around sat on a boulder and let my mind settle on the vistas without telling it what to think or feel or cutting it off. I was a morning glory opening to a sun pulling up on the day. Can a heart bust apart from this heat this

passion deep inside I heard the sounds the psalms of *Bach's B Minor Mass* and knew there was nothing to be fearful of I had been here before this moved this tender this vulnerable this near my father. Took half a sandwich and the thermos of chilled ice lemonade prepared for me by the rancher and walked over to another boulder there another breathtaking vista this time burnt white cracked ice glacial mountain formations jutting up losing a sense of distance and boundaries the architectural landscape and me. Moving out of my spell I wandered back to the car following the map, stopping roadside at the homestead in Abiquiu where Georgia O'Keefe lived and painted and saw how the land burnished stubbly boulder rubble mesa found its way to her canvas? Moving with me from college dorm rooms to various apartments in Boston and my cozy nook in Cambridge was a print of Georgia O'Keefe's *Cows Skull: Red, White, and Blue*.

After an hour or so touring her studio got back into the car before turning on the ignition reflected back to the impulsive and potentially life threatening act of jumping into the Rio Grande a tectonic shift within had set the direction of my travels. I had fallen in love a Martin Buber *I and Thou Love* and that rancher has never left me and I never returned to find him but when his hand reached for me to pluck me shaken out of the river he revived in me the dream the will and power to want to be alive to relish being alive.

*All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.
When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them. Everyone must come out of his Exile in his own way. Martin Buber*

I saw that what happened on either side of the Rio Grande made perfect sense it affirmed for me that I had a whole world waiting to be divined and explored and hoped that I wouldn't get skittish and retreat just at the moment when I was about to become a butterfly.

*The Butterfly upon the Sky,
That doesn't know its Name
And hasn't any tax to pay
And hasn't any Home
Is just as high as you and I,
And higher, I believe,
So soar away and never sigh
And that's the way to grieve --
The Butterfly Upon the Sky Emily Dickinson*

Albuquerque: Stopped in Santa Fe to fill the car and have bathroom break wandered about sat at a café sipping ice tea abruptly asking for the check practically running to the car wanting to get back to Albuquerque. Just at dusk I was back in Albuquerque I felt a discernible change within me for which I was not ready to give a name. As I walked in the door Bernie was sitting at a table going through his coin collection looking up *Good?* was all he said. *Hmmm* I responded and sunk deep into the bed in the guest room to sleep with my clothes on. When I entered the kitchen the next morning Becky and Bernie had breakfast and hot coffee waiting Becky giving me a hug. Sharing *I had a wonderful time the drive to and from Taos was so beautiful and I got to spend some time wandering around the studio where D.H. Lawrence wrote and even read one of his books while there.* I never mentioned a word about the rancher and the Rio Grande they just sat there listening intently without asking a single question. Volunteering rather blurting our rather awkwardly *I plan on spending three or four days here with you and the family and then want to drive out to Gallup New Mexico and maybe Window Rock Arizona to see if I can get a job with the Navajo Tribe hopefully finding a family with whom I could live for a few weeks or more.* More appreciative smiles *I have been talking to your mother and father on the phone assuring them that you are fine and enjoying New Mexico and the Southwest.* I knew that nothing was said about bikes beer or the Chevy convertible. *I will give them a call before I go off.* Becky invited Harold his wife and the boys, his stepdaughter by now was working in San Francisco, each night for dinner. The boys and I felt a special kinship tying a slipknot of lifelong appreciation. If minus a genetic link the boys and I felt a particular connection to Bernie. Bernie a reference point a spiritual and intellectual blood line his ever deepening blue eyes his sojourns on deep sea fishing vessels his pottery his stamp and coin collections his water colors of beautiful New Mexico and the lovely fragrance softening the air from his roses. What made this Lithuanian Jew so distinctive from the rest of our family all coming from various parts of Silesia or Poland? How did Bernie manage to hold onto the poetry within why hadn't the scar tissue of *Pogrom* and *Holocaust* cover it over in him?

On the Way: The day came the car sitting outside top down filled with gas a map brightly marked off with the route to Gallup and then on to Window Rock a box lunch with fruit and a thermos of ice tea and bottles of water waiting for me. I got into the car this time dressed more conservatively slacks a tailored shirt with a cardigan a light bag packed should I spend a night or two. Bernie Becky and Claire waved as I drove off. Finding my way to the places in which D.H. Lawrence had lived and worked and being in close proximity to Georgia

O'Keefe's homestead held a particular resonance a counter voice assuring me that I could respond openly to literature and art without pretense or pretext the resistance the emotional blocking guard fallen the sway the grandeur of the beauty of northern New Mexico penetrating. Now the journey took a precipitous turn delving into rich fantasy and folklore I was moved to live with and among the Navajo Indian Tribe a desire too dangerous to probe fearing I would lose my nerve. On my way to Gallop about one hundred miles from Albuquerque I would stop whenever I saw some kind of agency that seemed to serve Indians. *My dear you can't just pick up and work in such a place there are requirements and interviews and...* some plump Anglo bureaucrat guardian of Indians laid out bluntly as if to say *who do you think you are to come here and think you can just fall in and do this a real interloper?* Not discouraged strengthened and armored by the trip to Taos I got back into the Chevy top down heading off on Route 66 on my by now sacred singular quest this odyssey of mine happening well before the movie *Easy Rider*. My hair fanning out in synch with the other drivers going well above seventy-five miles an hour I felt I was made to drive on the open road. Little after mid-day I drove into Gallop New Mexico known as Indian Nation's Capital sat in the town square eating some of the lunch Becky had prepared feeling perfectly at ease as the local Indians caste stealth looks met by my broad and defenseless smile. For the most part the Indians in Gallop were Hopi and Zuni the man in the Trading Post told me along with directions to Window Rock Arizona which was the capital of the Navajo Nation. Before leaving Gallop I had one more unpleasant encounter with an *Anglo* bureaucrat sneering at my request for an opportunity to work for expenses only as she waved me away.

Window Rock: After a drive of about 45 minutes I got to Window Rock the anticipation gathering. Parked the car in front of a motel putting the hood up gathered my backpack and wandered in and around a series of official looking buildings sitting down on a bench before a building flanked by the American and what I gathered was the Navajo flag. Respectfully noting a group of men talking informally in front of what I learned was the legislative building suddenly appearing as a backdrop the *window rock* a startling formation of mountains filling the sky. *May I sit down* said a man about the age of Bernie, early sixties in full Western regalia cowboy boots a broad rimmed off white cowboy hat a bolo tie encrusted with a very large turquoise he was eating a banana *want a bite* he asked. *Yes* I answered simply. We enjoyed the back and forth of the banana bites and then he asked *what brings you here?* *I came to offer love and friendship to the Navajos* I answered startled at what had just blurted out. He smiled and asked me where I was from I explained that

although Newark New Jersey I was staying in Albuquerque with an aunt and uncle. Further sharing that I had hoped to find a Navajo family with whom I could stay for a while. *You know the Chief of the Navajos Paul Jones is a graduate of Princeton* he offered while intently searching my face, which must have passed whatever litmus test.

Wait a minute he asked and with that got up and walked into the building flanked with flags. Soon reappearing saying *come with me* and suddenly there I was in the office of the President of the Navajo Tribe, Paul Jones who sat waiting for me. Standing up just a little taller than I was he reached out his hand saying *welcome won't you have a seat. Howard Gorman*, the man with whom I shared the banana turned out to be the Deputy Chief of the Tribe now seated next to me. Chief Jones began by saying *Mr. Gorman tells me that you want to find a Navajo family with which to stay and that you've come all the way from New Jersey to demonstrate your special appreciation for Navajos and their struggles. Yes* I demurred. *Well you will have to find such a family to agree to have you as a guest but we welcome you to work along with our Tribal Welfare Department, which drives daily throughout the reservation making status reports of our families until that time. We will offer you a stipend of room and board and have asked Eva Jane my executive assistant to share her motel room with you. I have asked that she come in to meet you and show you around. Finally thank you for the interest you have in the Navajos. Tomorrow morning Eva Jane will set you up with one of the workers in the Tribal Welfare Department.* With that a very beautiful women perhaps five years older than I walked in to escort me out. Paul Jones came from around his desk to embrace me and offer a very firm and vital handshake Howard Gorman smiling broadly looked on and waved as I left.

Eva Jane shared she had attended two years of college at Arizona State and had been working with Paul Jones for about three years. Walking along next to her I had that rare feeling again of finding a soul mate. Eva Jane showed me around the buildings the legislative hall and the office of the Tribal Welfare Department to which I would report and then took me to her room and showed me which bed I would have. It was understood that after I had met the person from the Tribal Welfare Department with whom I was assigned I would spend the night returning to Albuquerque in the morning to gather my things promising to return two days later. *Come let's have something to eat* and with that we went to the diner connected to the motel the menu resembling those in Greek diners back home with an over abundance of items. Our conversation came easily as we ate hamburgers and shared a beer and then she said she had

to return to work handing me an extra key to the room and walked off toward Paul Jones' office after giving me a warm sisterly hug saying *see you later*.

Recorder Fandango: Not yet dusk I climbed up a path alongside the Window Rock reaching the top finding a place to sit pulled out the recorder always in my backpack a talisman a way for me to keep an emotional connection to my father who these days played for hours on end at home. A few feet away a trio of Navajo men regarded me with a sort of whimsy as I played *The Bonnie Banks O'Loch Lomond oh you take the high road and I'll take the low road and I'll be in Scotland before you for me and my true love will never meet again on the Bonnie Bonnie banks of Loch Lomond*. Just as the *right books* often come at the *right time* so is it with music and song.

THE LUTE WILL BEG - Hafiz

*You need to become a pen
In the Sun's hand.*

*We need for the earth to sing
Through our pores and eyes.*

*The body will again become restless
Until your soul paints all its beauty
Upon the sky.*

*Don't tell me, dear ones,
That what Hafiz says is not true,
For when the heart tastes its glorious destiny
And you awake to our constant need
For your love*

*God's lute will beg
For your hands.*

.....
**This moment, this love, comes to rest in me
many beings in one being
In one wheat grain a thousand sheep stacks**

**Inside the needle's eye
a turning night of stars**

**There is a light seed grain inside
you fill it with yourself or it dies**

**I am caught in this curling energy, your hair
who ever is calm and sensible
is insane! - Rumi**

Resting in the crook of this rock my head throbbing this was the true beginning of a break from the past this plaintive song filled with nostalgia and regret I was at the cusp at the point of no return. Furtive perplexed glances was this a snake charmer riling up displaced dropped other-worldly the trio of Navajo men didn't know to flee hold still or pounce leaving me to my reverie. After about an hour I walked down a different path, which seemed easier on my unsteady legs I was home I was in some kind of a home of my own making. Going quickly down the path before the dark caught my footing went to the diner to have another beer askance Navajo men looking over *an Anglo woman* drinking beer by herself paid got up and went to the room Eva Jane agreed graciously to share with me grateful for the early evening solitude. I pulled out a dog-eared copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee with photos by Walker Evans this a book I always carried along with my recorder. Rereading the text brought me back to why and how I came to *offer love and friendship to the Navajos* it was that inexplicable implacable craving a hunger to reach into the incomplete part of myself longing to combine with what was most human in each of us.

"In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again: and in him, too, once more, and of each of us, our terrific responsibility toward human life; toward the utmost idea of goodness, of the horror of terror, and of God."

- James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

"The mere attempt to examine my own confusion would consume volumes."

- James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

When Eva Jane returned I put my book down and followed her and for the third time that day to the diner where she joined some friends all men who also worked for the tribe. I learned that these individuals were among the very few to attend college with an easy sense of camaraderie ordered a few rounds of beer. The evening was filled with escalating banter and raucous laughter I falling in line cues taken from Eva Jane. Across the table was a particular man who turned up the volume of my heart increased its beat, Tom his name. After a couple of hours we went back to the room, *Tom likes you* Eva Jane said. In response I just laughed lightly not wanting to give away my heart's newest throb. Told her that *I wanted to leave early* she saying *don't worry I will wake you I get up every day at seven*. After a quick breakfast I left heading back to Albuquerque waiting to get back to Gallop to put the top down.

Driving like a native New Mexican maintaining seventy-five miles per hour just to keep pace with the other cars. Pulling up to Becky and Bernie's excitedly walked into the house bursting with stories to tell. Becky and Bernie never raised even an eyebrow as I wove my tale of the day and of the invitation to live in Window Rock and work with the Navajo Tribal Welfare Department. Sharing that I would accompany the Tribal welfare worker all over the vast Reservation to check on the status of families living often miles away from the nearest Trading Post. Without stopping added that I was going to stay with the Chief of the Tribe Paul Jones' executive assistant Eva Jane Charley in the motel in Window Rock finally that I promised to get back the day after tomorrow. Quietly we sat into the night drinking beer the sweet breath of pride emanating Becky said *we will have Harold and the boys over for dinner tomorrow to celebrate and to send you off in grand fashion*. Clare wandering around the outskirts of our conversation repeating words which she picked out *stay with Indians stay with Indians stay with Indians*. Rebecca seeing that I might be gone for a while suggested we shop for clothes the next day to make sure I had what I needed to live and work on what probably would be exceedingly hot days. Rebecca suggested gently that I call my parents given that for days or weeks on end it might be difficult to reach promising that only she and Bernie would have a contact number at the motel.

The Odyssey: Two days later I drove off arriving at about noon and found Eva Jane waiting to escort me to by now *our* room. Depositing bags we went to lunch at which point she shared that Howard Gorman, the Deputy Chief of the Tribe had asked that she take good care of me and to assist in setting me up with the Tribal Welfare Department. The welfare worker to whom I was assigned was welcoming a knowing that I hoped to find a family willing to have me as a guest for at least a short period of time. Parting he told me that we would start very early the following morning. Eva Jane then returned to work leaving me to unpack agreeing we would meet for dinner at about six at the diner when we would meet up again with her friends.

Gathered around the table I saw that this extended family of friends met nightly to dine and hang out. Across the table my heart skipping found my eyes directly connecting with Tom's. After dinner we moved in unison to a social hall where there was more beer and laughter. Then I was met with onslaught of questions for them I was the prototype *Anglo* college woman about whom they were curious rarely having a chance to probe and query.

Responding good-naturedly I submitted to serving, as they're all purpose *Anglo* if for a night my eyes too often looking over at Tom. Somehow it was arranged that Tom walk me back and as if he knew I would oblige put an arm on my shoulder. Here I was again in a swirl of those *being in love feelings* and at the door didn't resist as he kissed me both of our mouths firmly closed and yet deeply responsive. Eva Jane was already inside the room *so you like Tom I see* was all she would say although much later I would get an earful of warnings and recriminations.

Rain Dance: Unbelievably as the clock struck midnight rain began to pour down rain a rare and uncommon event Eva Jane saying *you even brought the rain*. Eva Jane grabbed me off the bed in my pajamas to run outside and suddenly we were twirling spinning moving with great abandon barefoot drenched two interpretive dancers lifting up with joy for friendship and for rain. On subsequent nights we got into the back of pick-up trucks driving fleet under darkened skies to and from the local drive-in movie theater the back of the pick-up truck facing the screen. This theater featured Westerns with cowboys battling Indians or military forts filled with battling military regiments slaughtering Indians. Along with the harsh unremitting sounds of pistols or rifles there were sounds of popping tops of the mounting pile of beer bottles. Eva Jane and Tom sat by silently as their friends shouted out rowdy rousing cheers and hoots into the night air each time an Indian was shot into the sky tumbling off a horse. Cowboys were not declaimed hissed or booed no matter the ferocity of the slaughter and the decimation of Indians bodies lying hither and yon among the cacti. Wolf sounds of sorrow roared to night skies in time I saw that history harbors its lessons with bitterness and shame the whoops masking certain flares for the enemy the slayer.

Understanding increasingly often listening to the inevitable and interminable retelling of *The Long March alive a veritable active verb* Navajos cruelly removed from land and homestead forced at gun point on a terrifying journey dying in alarming numbers from harsh weather conditions and a lack of sustenance and water their numbers thinning a tragic overlay as real as if a day ago. History books or any recounting never ping of the harm and distress of exile and dislocation here it lay just below the surface a din a hum a continuo reflected in the perverse identification with this celluloid enemy. Never figured out how returning from the drive-in we didn't get killed on the road so soaked with beer the driver bouncing zigzagging around while in the back a kind of slaphappy hilarity. Death not so forbidding myriad reasons for living at this reckless pace often perplexing. I becoming less fearful each day

living with greater abandon yielding to camaraderie my identity increasingly fluid thus honoring my decision to come here and live among these new Navajo friends. Eva Jane Tom and I always relieved if subdued returning from these trips to the movies as we bid goodbye to our beer soaked friends. Eva Jane at the end of each evening discretely slipping off leaving Tom and me to find our favorite nook where we would lie close together holding fast in the shadow of the Window Rock.

Tom: It was common knowledge that Tom and I had paired up even Howard Gorman said at a chance meeting *I see you are sweet on Tom he is a good and very important member of the tribe.* Here I was once again falling in love and imagining a life married to Tom while working with the Tribal Welfare Department. We became lovers not in the strict sense of the word but perhaps in much more profound and sensual ways. Each day upon my return from a rough road trek through the miles of the reservation I would look for him and we would sit together or lay down holding hands while looking up at the sky feeling these the moments as eternity. Eva Jane and I had become almost like sisters and after nearly a month together she said as we lay on our beds *don't hurt Tom don't use Tom he is not one for a fling if you don't think you can love him forever than move away back off.* She was blunt and curt warning that I not turn into just another *Anglo* using them for a sense of adventure experiences gathered for a rich future of story telling. In my heart beneath that sky in our room and within Tom's arms I believed that I had encountered met my fate and it was with them.

Canyon de Chelly: On a particular three-day trip to the area at the edge of *Canyon de Chelly* with the Hopi Reservation in sight the welfare worker and I spending nights at guest rooms adjacent to the local trading post I met a family whom I asked with my partner welfare worker translating if I could come and stay with them for a few weeks. After a few moments of consultation Mr. Yazzi Morgan agreed to have me come and we settled on July 17 coincidentally my twenty-second birthday. As we left I shook hands with Mr. Yazzi Morgan who walked us to our pick-up truck. The trip back took twenty-four hours with no more scheduled family visits both of us solitary and silent driving through the night arriving back in Window Rock late the next morning. The worker who had by now become a friend and someone with whom we socialized after work hours said that he would inform Howard Gorman of the invitation. Arrangements would be made to have me flown by the tribal lawyer's plane to a point where a medicine man would meet me and bring me to the Yazzi Morgan's. Crazy how seriously and unquestioningly they all took me and sure

enough Howard Gorman came by later to say he approved and had made the arrangements for me to leave in a week's time giving me a little squeeze looking at me with a huge warm smile saying *yes young lady you have well proven you mean everything you say*. Before he turned to walk off he said *I heard you did a real good job with the tribal welfare department and were very helpful on the visits to families*. Tears were pricking my eyes as I walked back into the room to lie down and take in what was to become another part of this odyssey. Who was this girl this emerging woman moving in such distinct yet eerily familiar dimensions of time and space?

Friendship: Eva Jane and I moved from the tapestry of our rain dance our uncensored conversations a sadness enveloped the dark cloud of departure the dominion of friendship experiencing its final vital reality. How enduring would be this linking of soul mates the unpredictable the unknowable about to happen? How firmly implanted the experience the memory of such an intense friendship in a dimension of time without a particular naming? Tom and I walked around somberly holding less and then grabbing on I had no idea how many loves Tom had had but on the last night together we held onto each other the goodbye eminent. There a permanent gash in the sky a force of fate plunging us into emotions we did not have the wherewithal to embrace or abide. Then a final last kiss never before a sweeter or more poignant kiss the dark separating us as I walked into the motel room sobbing. Eva Jane and I our lives so disparate yet holding onto an understanding that was so beyond our own reach she placing my head her lap winding and unwinding my thick and unruly curls the sweet spot for my solace and I fully submitting. Fearful flashes of times cringing when mother's black-nailed witch fingers reached out to tug curls straight follicles stung by her raptor baiting. Eva Jane's kindness and warmth mediating the despair as we came to this ending *we will know about you and your well being from the medicine man who has been instructed to keep us informed calling from the nearest trading post* she said simply. That night Eva Jane and I slept in the same bed two sisters yes two sisters and then at the earliest moment of sunrise I was taken to the plane where the tribal lawyer brought me to my next destination.

Yazzi-Morgan's: On July 17, 1962 the day I turned twenty-two I moved in with the Yazzi-Morgan family a tribal lawyer getting me on the first leg of the trip in his small tribal plane and then a medicine man taking me the rest of the way in a horse drawn open carriage. The Yazzi-Morgan family amazed when I arrived clearly didn't expect I would actually show up the children gathered about me the little ones jumping up and down and the cluster of teenagers

some near my age stood back regarding me closely anticipation all around stirring the late afternoon air. I had learned from the tribal welfare worker with whom I traveled that the Yazzi Morgan's were a wonderful and nourishing extended family with lives closely conforming to traditional Navajo customs and values and as I had observed on our visits increasingly rare as dislocation and general family deterioration became more the norm. Alcoholism was rampant emblematic of the final disruption many believing that Navajos and Native Americans in general had greater susceptibility to that life destroying addiction.

I came wearing Levi's a simple shirt and sneakers carrying a small satchel with changes of clothing some toiletries including tooth paste a tooth and hair brush and toilet paper along with a small camera multiple roles of film and in the spirit of Bernie water colors paper and paintbrushes. Three Hogan's opened onto an expanse of open space with a large hearth for cooking over to the side. After the medicine man left the children grabbed the satchel emptying it onto the dirt laughing and quickly grabbed the toilet paper running it out like streamers I was shown that they used old gathered up newspapers and dried desert leaves in the outhouse. Mr. Yazzi Morgan and his eldest son Patrick mounted horses riding off soon after my arrival later learning they went to hunt prairie dog a special treat for our dinner. As far as my eyes could see nothing but scrubbed lands of brown verging on pink scattered cacti and in the distance some astounding rock formations jutting into the sky. I was firmly in the *Bosom of Abraham* wondering if I had the forbearance to meet the challenge the promise to experience stripped of language culture joining with this family a kinship a deep shared and inviolate humanity?

Picking my things off the dirt Mrs Yazzi Morgan drew me into the center Hogan where she placed my things on an open sheep skin beckoning me to follow her back out she walked me to the outhouse waited and then invited me to sit down next to her on the ground in front of the Hogan. Mrs. Yazzi Morgan dressed in the familiar traditional long skirt velvet top with trimming her hair tight in a chignon rested her hand on my knee and with a steady gaze let me know I was welcomed. We sat together watching the younger children tumble and chase each other the older nearby to see that they were safe the baby the youngest less than 2 sitting close by pushing dirt around with her plump light brown hands. In time Mrs. Yazzi Morgan went into the Hogan and came out with a large earthen bowl filled with what I learned were the ingredients for fried bread and on a wooden board she rolled out thick sheets of dough while

a girl about sixteen built a fire on the hearth and brought out some lard which I knew was part of a monthly government food ration distributed at the local trading post. Having put a large amount of lard in a cast iron frying pan she waited for it to sizzle placing in pieces of dough rising plump and golden placing them gingerly onto the wood board I was aware that fried bread was a delicacy and staple of meals.

Prairie Dog: Later Mr. Yazzi and Patrick returned with two prairie dogs dismounted came toward the flaming hearth and prepared the spit to cook the prairie dog which first had to be prepared. The family sitting excitedly nearby I watched closely as they beheaded the little rodent and pulled out its entrails little did I know that soon I would become the *chef de cuisine* assigned the full preparation and cooking of prairie dog. As soon as the prairie dogs were prepared we gathered in a circle with Mr. and Mrs. Yazzi Morgan eating prairie dog fried bread with beer for the adults. I holding together trying not to gag as I placed the little morsels of singed meat wrapped in the bread in my mouth my stomach churning nausea peeking. All eyes high beams on my mouth and then as the evening darkened the younger ones went running off the motion ceaseless the laughter piercing frolicking. Mr. Yazzi Morgan began to roll cigarettes offering me one taking it almost too quickly I was a smoker of Pall Mall Camels Galois soon I had a second job rolling cigarettes somehow more amusing than I can account for. Bedtime the first night was awkward family members after warm nighttime wishes dispersed to other Hogan's I escorted on the arm of Mrs. Yazzi Morgan inside one and instructed to lie on one of the sheepskin it would be next to hers and unbelievably within moments I was in a deep dreamless sleep.

Family Member: Falling in line fully participating in daily family routines and chores mornings after eating a spare meal of very strong coffee and fried bread I set off to accompany the younger children as they took the family sheep to a nearby watering hole. Afternoons were time for initiation rites in the baking sun I was set on a bare back galloping pony as it raced around the well grabbing hold of mane and neck my legs pressed into the flank clearly terrified. Suddenly Patrick leapt onto the horse with his arms around my waist and as the horse stopped helped me dismount a squeeze to my hand the laughter from the assembled appreciative subsequent rides had me astride more gracefully and upright. Then came the moment I was dangled into a well by the teenage set squirming for relief and brought up quickly. Desert afternoons reached as much as one hundred ten degrees or more but it was a

dry heat not the insufferable swelter of New York summer days. Settled together in the swelter Mr. Yazzi Morgan regaled his family with stories in Navajo the family regularly bursting into hard laughter at pauses eyes turned to baby Berth tumbling and twirling and settling into her mother's arms to nurse. Occasionally in those early weeks the medicine man would stop by at dinnertime and as promised to see how I was holding up staying to share a meal I featured preparing the prairie dog even some fried bread and then rolled cigarettes to share after the meal. His reports must have been positive since no one from Chief Jones's office came to fetch or rescue me.

Mrs. Yazzi Morgan taught me not only how to make fried bread but how to card wool along with the girls and ultimately had me weaving rugs with her which would be sold at the local trading post. I had abandoned much of my East coast self within hours of my arrival and saw that the family increasingly accepted me as full member practical jokes less frequent. Occasional bouts of anxiety swept over me unsettled I would raid the family larder and put fistfuls of the government rationed peanut butter into my mouth knowing full well that I was being observed and that the family were completely aware that their metered out ration was being foraged by their *Anglo* house guest a Jewish girl from Newark New Jersey starved desperate for the familiar. Ashamed of my lack of will power I remembered that a philosophy professor had suggested that the only palliative for existential angst was peanut butter. By the lack of reaction or admonition on my hosts' part made me know they understood the root of my anguish homesickness but really it was more an aberrant feeling of dislocation.

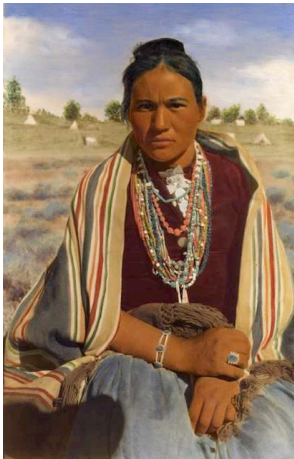
Squaw Dances: Within the first month we attended a *squaw dance* called by the medicine man to support someone afflicted by acute despair multiple families arriving by horse drawn wagon with food drink and a sheep to slaughter. The medicine man suggested a series of dances and chants to call out and heal the suffering individual hidden away in a tent. The community of extended family danced and chanted through three days and three nights without ceasing expressing an inexplicable love and compassion. Mr. Yazzi Morgan hand extended had me join in the circle with approving smiles from the onlookers the *squaw dance* came to an end when the stricken person emerged from the tent joining the circle for some final dances and chants. I had been brought into the soul of the family included in the squaw dance learning a sacred source a wellspring of their endurance and resilience.

It's Love: Again I found myself falling down that slippery slope of love this time it was Patrick with his almost waist length diamond black hair his lithe body muscular arms and intense and piercing seductive glances. Night times I would slip out of the Hogan when everyone was asleep and join him near the lone tree where we would sit silently shoulders touching holding hands occasionally he would set a hand on my knee or stroke my hair we would rub noses and cheeks and kiss but not the deep provocative no turning back kisses more sweet with the promise of a dear and probing passion. When my head was on his shoulder I believed I knew I belonged in a Hogan near the family as Patrick's wife having his babies and weaving beautiful rugs to sell to help sustain us.

Rodeos: Weekends we would travel to Navajo rodeos where young Navajo males would do horse riding stunts racing about lassoing sheep and when possible ride out on a yet to be tamed young steed. The families would cheer their rider on and before returning home share fried bread some singed prairie dog or on rare occasion as at Squaw Dances a sheep fired on a spit this a true and rare delicacy. If the Patrick who embraced me in our evening jaunts had my heart racing watching him at these rodeos set me spinning. Mrs. Yazzi Morgan alarmed at this forming union instructed me to move back from the sheepskins I shared with the other family girls and join her placing my sheet skin directly in front of her she sleeping with an open eye wondering who she was protecting Patrick or me? On one of the last times we were able to join each other under the nighttime sky we lay down close our bodies aroused and our lips meeting in kisses which become hot and hungry we were close ever so close it was after that Mrs. Yazzi Morgan set me beside her to sleep.

Desert Heat: The heat of the day blazed almost 120 degrees I could feel Newark slipping from my interior geography a past obliterated memory lost or suppressed selective amnesia the horrors and terror sweats of my childhood succumbing I was forgetting. Too quickly I got up leaving the family sitting semi-circle in the heat mostly silent went inside the Hogan drifting off in a swoon like trance the present and past colliding in me like smashing atoms collapsing under the weight of this transformation. Mrs. Grace Yazzi Morgan came in *My man thinks you are lonely* she said in rare expression of crisp clear English and thereby opened a chest of ceremonial clothes and family treasures digging deeply she retrieved pulled out a thick hand-made ring with a turquoise stone, crude and large with little curved slice markings on either side she then put it in my hand *for you to keep* again in flawless English. Then she drew out a *Sears Catalogue* from the turn of the century our *wish book here*

look she said and then she embraced me and sat me down running her fingers through my thick unruly curls massaging my scalp and then plaiting my long hair this the touch the longing of my soul a mother's hand reaching clear through the dearest desire of my youngest life plaited my long bushy hair. Then standing me up dressed me in her best tribal ceremonial skirt placing around my neck a thick turquoise laden squash blossom necklace clasping my hands within hers as if in prayer our eyes held fast mine two pools of tears we stood close she watching to see if I could pull myself back together reassured she said *here hold this* the Sears Catalogue as if it a sacred *tablet*. Dualities me in full Navajo ceremonial dress holding the Sears Catalogue *both, both she whispered* looking on I was her beautiful daughter! On a moment in time in the heart of Navajo Nation I given a perfect reading of an identity *See my daughter of the desert of our family you have become one with us and yet you live on the pages of this rare edition of the Sears Catalogue our wish book you live in both worlds both, both!*



Navajo woman in traditional dress

Turning she took my hand leading me out of the Hogan parading me about the semi-circle everyone laughing and clapping the laughter loving and playful. I had become part of the family lore connected tightly to land and sky transcendent I had become someone to name to treasure someone to remember unaware of being slowly extricated sent on my way. Mrs. Yazzi Morgan's knew I would soon leave never to return my moment with them monumental and not to transgress. This story would appear imagined if it weren't for the photos I have of the family all of us taking turns as photographer developed at the Trading Post along with the fifteen or so water

colors of the Hogan and the land painted by the children over a collection of afternoons each having paintings to keep.

The Denouement: Patrick the son whom I had grown to love and for whom I skinned and singed prairie dog and pounded dough to make fried bread looked at me in the tribal dress hair plaited squash blossom neck piece stunned by my beauty my accessibility my familiarity and my strangeness. Stealth glances exchanged weighted with the ominous the inevitable a foreboding that soon I would become desert mirage levitating out of his life from the desert from this afternoon. In my heart I knew I couldn't stay the forces of a sobering *reality* militated against it. Looking back who is to say that a greater good may have been to stay as Patrick's bride baking breads, weaving rugs sleeping night times in the crook of Patrick's arm making stealth love producing babies to delight the encircling embracing family when the heat of day struck. Inevitable I would leave extricated from my silently amassing dream. The exit coming in a particularly dramatic way soon after I was graced dressed in full Navajo regalia. The clothes and jewels were to be a gift a sending off present as fortune would have it or as fate lay in wait for me.

Here at pivotal event a Rodeo and I pushing against a barbed wire fence to garner a closer look at Patrick as he leaned in holding on to a bucking horse. Smitten captivated totally taken up by Patrick's thick black sun glinting hair fanning out down his back and suddenly a loose unfettered wire on the fence caught clawed my leg just above the ankle which started to bleed as if a mud slide of red goo. Mrs. Yazzi Morgan seeing the gush of blood rushed over with a thick piece of cloth pressing a tourniquet just above the wound and urged the medicine man also at the rodeo to contact the deputy of the tribe Howard Gorman to come and get me afraid I would bleed out before they arrived. Soon I was lifted into the open wagon stricken with horror and embarrassment waving meekly and so sadly goodbye. The medicine man drove the horses hard to a site where a plane was waiting to bring me to Window Rock. The medicine man chanted as we travelled glimpsing frequently over at my wilting body my eyes vacant my smile wane as I gathered prescient the implications of what was happening. Back Window Rock Howard Gorman stood next to a van with a driver and accompanied me to an infirmary where an *Anglo* doctor working with the Navajo tribe treated me. The wound required thorough cleaning disinfectant ten stitches to hold the torn skin together along with a tetanus shot infusions of antibiotics instructed to rest with my foot up on pillows. Howard Gorman called my uncle and aunt who had been hearing frequently from him about my general welfare. Later in the day Howard

Gorman still by my side handed me the phone on the other end my father's voice concerned predictably filled with his Germanic severity saying a ticket would be wired to Rebecca and Bernie and that the Deputy Chief would drive me to Albuquerque when it was safe for me to leave.

Departures: Never had a chance of a true goodbye to the Yazzi Morgan family my dreams of life with Patrick dashed exhausted by yet another failed futile fantasy. Eva Jane arrived at my bedside at which point a hale of tears poured forth clinging holding hands promising a friendship with endless letters and visits in abundance. The next day Tom visited sitting on my bed eyes welling wishing me a quick and full recovery saying he thought it best for me to return home of course having no idea how disloyal I was by attaching myself to Patrick. Tom sat with me through the next two nights and as dawn approached kissed me with that same unreserved tenderness on my lips nose and forehead. Finally squeezing my hand before walking off when Eva Jane came in with the doctor who after an examination said I was free to leave and should have the stitches removed in Albuquerque. Hobbling holding onto Eva Jane's arm walked to my car already packed with my belongings. Howard Gorman would drive me to Albuquerque followed by a van for the return trip. I in a weakened and vulnerable state was weeping bitterly as Eva Jane and I hugged and I settled into the car next to Howard Gorman the top down. Before driving off Howard Gorman proceeded to tell me my sobs subsiding *Chief Paul Jones and the tribal welfare worker were unable to say goodbye because they were not at the moment in Window Rock. He continued Paul Jones wanted me to tell you how wonderful your work was and how much you were appreciated everywhere you went on the reservation and that the Grace Yazzi family said that they would never forget you. Yes you did indeed bring friendship and love to the Navajo people and the Navajo Nation. Thank you Howard Gorman for everything* I said my voice subdued *and for sharing your banana with me.* We both laughed and sat silently for the remainder of the trip.

Back in Albuquerque: Becky and Bernie with Clare were waiting at the door as we pulled up. Howard and the driver of the van were to invited to stay for lunch the table in the garden set festively in the center a pottery vase made by Bernie filled with his fragrant and beautiful roses. Becky prepared a generous array of New Mexican delicacies and as we sat together Howard Gorman shared what a success I had been word of my visit reaching over many parts of the reservation. Rebecca and Bernie beaming with pride Howard warmly looking over at Clare as she repeated rhythmically *you the chief you the chief you the...* The meal concluded late afternoon Howard Gorman ready up to

leave giving Becky and Bernie strong embraces and then kissing my forehead putting me in a playful bear hug. He left with the driver who understood scant English saying little during the lunch but waving vigorously they drove off. It was then that I broke into a hard cry alarming Becky and Bernie and setting off Clare into tears of her own. I was to be with them for almost another week until my stitches were removed and the wound was on its way to healing. Harold and the boys hung around much of the time all of our dinners shared. Bernie drove me around town in the convertible and as he collected his loan repayments and even on one plumbing job in the very simple home of a Mexican family to whom he also lent money. Most of my time was spent with Bernie who showed me his coin and stamp collections had me work on a piece of pottery with him in his basement studio and asked me to help prune the roses. Becky Bernie and Clare took me to the doctor to have the stitches removed and who gave the okay for the flight back. In two days time I was scheduled to leave it was by now very early September.

Prescient Farewell: On the day before I was to leave Rebecca helped me gather my things and pack my bags. Bernie gave me a water color he made of the Window Rock apparently he had been there sketching and painting while I was with the Yazzi Morgan's once again bursting into tears as he gave me what was a perfect representation of the Window Rock. The painting is still up in my room some fifty years later. Harold his wife and the boys came over for the last dinner together and then I asked to stay up after Becky Bernie and Clare went to bed. I walked out into the back lay down on the grass encircled by roses beneath a full moon. Consumed overcome by grief knowing that here the odyssey ended. Would I become once again a shadow to myself an unknown a person without will to drift forever? I was a turmoil and erosion twisting and turning wracked by feelings of morbidity of death of an ending finality. I was dying more than I could fully comprehend in the moment of such anguish. Did I know how much of me was becoming deadened the power and omniscience I had felt drained gone extinguished? Prescience the answer to this to be revealed reckoned with in succeeding weeks months years lifelong.

The looming question that night was why I didn't get back on the road turn on the ignition of the Chevy convertible and race back to Tom to Eva Jane if not to the Yazzi Morgan's? Sweeping my body a shattering sorrow curled up in a new and awkward birthing. Again the earliest hours of life of beginnings only this time bombarded by the knowledge of a self, which had broken off from the past in deep and powerful ways. Did I have the forbearance would this

transformation this experience endure carry me forward or would it become more fantasy *real life* seizing me? I was a curiosity to myself a strange mélange of a girl regressive *fat ugly and stupid* and a woman too easily falling in love moving well beyond the once constricting boundaries of my life my heart my soul. The sun came up I was prostrate exhausted smelling the coffee found my way back inside for a final breakfast before being taken to the plane. And again not a raised eyebrow or a question Becky and Bernie had watched at the window as I spun out of control lifting up to the stars and night and moon for answers.

The Plane: I climbed aboard the plane Becky Bernie and Clare receding into the distance tearful goodbyes caught in uneven breathing. My suitcase held all of my treasures the skirt and top given me by Mrs. Grace Yazzi Morgan anticipating my departure long before the event that catapulted me from their midst had placed them in my backpack sending them on to the hospital. The hand crafted turquoise ring was securely on my second finger wrapped tightly with string to keep it in place. In possession as well a packet of photographs the family and I had taken of each other near and around the Hogan some watercolors of desert settings painted by various family members with the paper and paints I had brought along. On my lap a watercolor of the Window Rock the almost photo perfect rendering by my Uncle Bernie painted on one of his stealth visits to meet with Howard to gather a status report. I was hollowed out I was scared and the wound on my ankle throbbed still raw. The incursion of a pivotal time encroached no words no descriptors to assuage to keep off the panic mounting the fear that I would be sucked in pulled off track by the undercurrents of my tremulous past life. Were the experiences with Eva Jane, Howard, and the Yazzi Morgan family firmly ensconced sufficiently alive within me to withstand to stave off the pressure from my parents? Anticipating predictably fomenting power grabs to shape my life sensing vulnerability and errant rivalries bent on devouring laying claim to a future they nearly let slip out of hand. Could I hold on know that in my memory in my mouth in my defiance I had become truly and fully born not born again but born fully a first time? As the plane tipped its wings landing gear in place I felt a sweep within me a composite of the essential profound connection to the humanity extended me by all of the individuals I left behind. I had found the power of spirit the song of Bach with my father would I now find a jealous tormented man seizing wrenching the experience from me or perhaps a more docile loving man seeing the new light within me if faint yield soul-to-soul an unquestioned affirmation. Would this man all too powerful who anointed the possibility the necessity for passion within me crush me pull me back driven

by his predatory twisting anguish eviscerating seizing repossessing his contradictory rib? Could I stand firm in my own existence at its cusp or topple curl up fetal a supplicant without will or desire at the mercy of two predatory if in different ways parents who never ever believed that I was a third and other person?

Years Hence: And to the present if I listen closely in the night's silence I can hear a throbbing tribal beat a tom tom the nasal Squaw Dance chants the laughter the stories transcending a common language a circle of family sitting close together beneath the unmediated afternoon desert sun. In the year 1964 having left the Navajo Nation in September 1962 sitting looking as the dark settled mid-afternoon on our Swiss mountain village a wife stranded on her own impetuous vows I wrote the following:

She From Whom My Love Comes

*I lay down inside to cry
Wretched people baked beneath a torrid sky
No air-conditioner, no freezer, no frozen pies
Only squinting eyes smiling into mine
Time undated unlogged
The rhythm of shadows to synchronize
Legends of the past passed on
Days moved off
Gently held to sleep returned by waking
Kept each night so safely
Given to each space a place a name
Life a calm passage louvered by a death
That could not break a desert noon
A rite for life alone
Illusion without sentiment
A way to live a way to repent
I came to offer friendship and love
Or run from a self I had tired of
I came to save and apologize
Or to stage of ritual
With players tuned to atonement in solitary acts
Only my voice my song my sorrow
Broke the quiet of their easiness
I fell into infant rage
Between adoration and contempt
I ended pretense of savior and sage
Running to seclusion
In the earthen corners of their Hogan
To burrow and return a Navajo baby*

*Caught digging my way back through time discovered
Mrs. Grace Yazzi Morgan became my mother
Folding me into her lap
She touched her fingers to my scalp
Gently, gently holding me
Until finally I was freed from my infancy
Without looking back
I stood up walked away
Leaving her to bake beneath her hot sun
She from whom my love comes
Naomi Barber 1964*

Yucca Roots

*Yucca roots for my hair
Tough fingers strip it clean
Brushed and rubbed left shining
Dressed in tribal robes
An arm around my shoulder
A look to warn me of my beauty
A laugh to salt my craving
Tucked by her side to sleep
Beneath the moon my love waits
Stepping from her embrace
We met as if prearranged
Two naked babies we played
Beyond time beyond convention
Sprinting unicorns
Only the desert to remember
The dark warned us with light
No kiss or touch would say good-bye
She waited my return to wake
Quietly I slipped back in place.
Naomi Barber 1965*

Becky Bernie and Clare: On a spring Sunday morning in 1966 walking about in our small but grassy backyard in Philadelphia not far from the University of Pennsylvania campus where my husband had his first academic position. Near me a little guy just a little over a year old pulling himself up on my leg quietly singing *Mommie Mommie my Mommie*. Hearing the phone ring grabbed this little son up to the kitchen to answer the phone and through the screams and wails I understood that my mother was telling me that Becky, Bernie, and Clare had died just a few hours earlier in a terrible car crash unable to fill in details she hung up. Holding my son so tightly that he uttered a protest I went

back outside put him on the grass and sat down next to him. No tears yet just another horrifying reminder of how far I had come from the days when we had coffee and they waved as I sped off in the Chevy convertible. Life resolves itself now Clare would not be left to fend for herself away for the first time from her mother's side and I had married without them to bear witness the trip too far on such short notice. Aunt Rebecca acknowledged validated my pain that of a child cursed devoured by a *Werewolf* mother her much younger sister. Wondering still the reason for Aunt Becky's silence not a hint or intimation when as a child I sat on her backyard swing holding her hand in the midst of the sweetest perfume from the abundant prize winning roses in Passaic New Jersey. Did Becky ever want to tell me try to tell me or did she believe she could compensate by the kindness and love extended on my frequent visits as a child? Did Becky and Eva, her mother and my grandmother, ever talk about the frightening circumstances of my life with my mother, a sister and daughter? I knew that after I unburdened my soul that Becky without hesitation informed me of my mother's troubled and menacing childhood and became a protean mother giving me the room and space to shape or try to shape a unique and independent existence and future. With the death of Becky Bernie and Clare my New Mexico odyssey forever existed as memory in tact preserved held sacred.

My Mother Lived With the Indians: When that little son sitting next to me on that sad day grew to become a second grader he shared with his teacher that *his mother had lived with the Indians* as the class embarked on the curriculum unit on America's Indians. Invited to come in on a Friday afternoon to share the stories of the time I lived with the Indians I agreed with conditions. Before entering the room asked that the children be seated on the floor in a circle the shades partly drawn playing on the turntable a record of Navajo chants. Hearing the Navajo chants my cue to enter the room and that wearing the traditional Navajo dress given me by Mrs. Grace Yazzi Morgan nearly ten years before stepping toe to heel in beaded moccasins circled the children chanting along with the record. Slowly and gingerly lowering the music almost inaudible I sat on a small class chair sharing how the Navajos enjoyed their children and enjoyed recounting the history of the tribe and of their family having no written texts. Continuing shared that when and if a time came when any child told a tall tale or a story not exactly true or took things that did not belong to them the adults had them stand up alone and dance around the circle of the gathered family members. Children singled out for not being forthright after dancing to particular Navajo chants were then welcomed back to the circle.

The children were mesmerized and I could see them thinking how they would try not to say things that weren't true or take things without permission that didn't belong to them. Responding to the hush turned up the music danced twice more around the circle and left the room. The children were asked to draw pictures on the recollection of the visit from the Navajo lady holding heated discussions about truth telling and respecting other's possessions. On the following Friday when picking up my son I was presented with a packet of stories and drawings made by the children to thank me. To this day recollecting that afternoon I believe that many of the children believed that an Indian woman a Navajo came to class. Throughout the year the teacher let me know that the students struggled with behavior verging on enlarging truths or taken that which did not belong to them. Many of my son's classmates held to the end of the year and beyond that the Navajo storyteller was not could not have been Jeremy's mother. On that same day as I picked Jeremy up from school in my usual folksy long skirt and peasant blouse he kept looking up at me as we walked home his younger sister in her stroller stopping for our usual Friday pizza followed by ice cream cones continuing to be extremely quiet. During the weekend when his best friend and classmate came over he looked up at me and asked straight out *Naomi was that really you?*

HEGEMOMMA –The Fault Line Rests Here: My parents pulled me off the plane hair roots scalp tingling eyes smarting still hobbled by the wound on my ankle and visibly favoring my left foot. *We've got to get you to a doctor* they perseverated on the ride home as if I had been treated by a series of *voodoo* doctors. Once home I climbed rapidly up the stairs to the room a neutered space in which I really never lived my parents having moved to this *good Jewish* neighborhood the Weequahic section just as I left for college. The Weequahic section was the last residential stronghold before the ever assimilating upwardly mobile *Jews* moved to South Orange and Short Hills just follow the love map in *Goodbye Columbus* by Philip Roth. Here I was back to the home I returned to on visits from college where John playfully seduced my mother as she brought out to the screened porch home backed cookies and lemonade titillated aroused eyeing us as we sat intertwined on the loveseat on gliders moving back and forth. This was the house in which John insisted for *my own good* that we make love on the hallway floor just down from my parents' bedroom as they slept. Submitting dutifully and glad for the scandalous abandon flexing muscles with ardor and dispassion and this was the house from which I would flee a day or two later. That day newly from New Mexico entered the room closed the door tumbled to the floor heaving.

Was this beginning of the end turmoil heating my body eviscerating my moment of grand renaissance a mockery of the spirit the soul of the girl racing on Route 66 top down in a Chevy convertible? Receding retreating time reversing I was collapsing into the straits of old behaviors old compliances the wail of doom muted was I terminally lost gone?

Mommy Dearest: Pivotal juncture *get up off the floor walk out leave run hide still enough of a re-imagined future intact* the warrior within wounded weakened rocked on knees bunched up dueling desires heating up the essential contest do I have it in me to go to walk away and stay away? Counter voice rises to assuage *don't worry Mother you have me back* craven hungers my life sacrificed to keep you in balance mortal threats *I will kill her destroy her rather have her dead* frenzied a seductive craziness ensued. I existed for her absolute domination my life her dominion my father her henchman bought himself peace and who knows what else? Their immutable struggle anchorage weight for a mad woman to keep her balance to stave off her lurching into the furnace or oven mouth hegemonic mother. Her mouth full of threat a bully tormenting corrosive insides she lay in a pasture of wilt possessed by the trampling the gassed deaths of the *Holocaust* she was not in fact a survivor but then again she was. This woman with a daughter to shape different destiny cannibalistic appetite vagaries morsel by morsel to overtake how close to curling fetal I hold my heaving sides still a closed door. Holding onto yet the scrim of desire more doubt more myth and whim. Holding fast to the vision of the girl in full traditional Navajo dress loved for the generosity of her spirit her passion the sweet vulnerable quest for the most human of connections forged near the mouth of Canyon De Chelly. Do I dare walk away there is no middle ground with a *Leviathan*. The hold tightens the web of the black widow spider *I am back home with you my mother* the force of the moment its implication. Futility of a dead end struggle the pain of morbidity overtaking clouding what was still mine to chose. Ought I to go or to stay becoming finally the person I had just reclaimed was it in my power the answer soon enough. I got off the floor sprinkled cold water on my face joined my parents for Jewish delicatessen, pastrami corn beef cold slaw Russian dressing and potato salad, agreed to see the doctor the next day and soon after that return to Boston to attend graduate school which would start in a day or so.

Awful Premonition: A terrible feeling of desolation and futility fills the house seeps into my bones my soul can I step beyond the wreckage the quarrel waiting to be picked the havoc? The sylvan memories of New Mexico taunt I am lost to myself the girl to woman reduced there is my *Momma* the ignominy

the piercing eyes the probe shoulder to shoulder *American Gothic* (Grant Wood)
the pursed lips impenetrable sadness a drip, drip of tears slide down a hapless
face. The Daddy of my midnight rescues seized from the hot furnace mouth of
my devouring mother looks on plaintively I am again disappearing. Sylphlike
invisible as air awkward positioned doorjambs as I step outside defiant insist
on returning to Boston on my own this posture this play mannered
inauthentic. What transformation what person walks past the door curdling
the descent to powerlessness familiar the ground settles graveside imaginary
headstone strange sense of security melding. The offspring of tangled
immigrant warped and irretrievable self lost to meander near the imaginary
headstone a heaving a bloated darkened cloud bequeathed doomed always
just at the cusp of madness. I a girl lost trying to climb out go beyond pulled
back by the roots of her unruly untamable thick Jewish hair lambent reverie of
what could have been as I submitted. Revelatory wailing silenced in the last
harrow no fight left.

The doctor thought the wound was healing well *good treatment there* he said.
Clutching backpack and duffle got into the waiting cab off to the train and to
Back Bay Station where Margot would meet me with her car my belongings
stored at her apartment. Margot was waiting in her eggplant Ford station
wagon her eyes always abundant with empathy if she persistently accused me
you take over a room when you come in everyone's eyes turn immediately on you.
Accommodating her sense of displacement over the years I would lapse into
steadfast silence a state of *Coventry* to appease to broker our friendship.
Margo suggested I call Tammy when we got to her apartment to let her know I
would indeed be moving in with her. On the phone the next day Tammy
although having not seen me for a couple of years welcomed my company she
went on that she had fallen in love with a boy from Antioch (not Jewish) but
chose not to live with him until their relationship became more formalized her
parents just minutes away in Newton. Turned out that although I had left
Antioch so abruptly after my second year it became the backbone of
friendships extending open hands unquestioning in the coming years.

***At once Ben hushed . . . the broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes
were empty and serene again as cornice and facade flowed smoothly once more
from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its
ordered place. (The Sound and the Fury, William Faulkner)***

Embedded With the Familiar: Quickly relocated at Tammy's I went to the graduate program offices at Boston University where I had been accepted as a graduate student with a sizeable scholarship. I walked into the Chair's office he the contrarian who insisted that I was among the brightest smartest most brilliant students ever to cross the threshold of the said department. Upon seeing me he drew me in closed the door and as we sat looking at each other he saw immediately that something had changed and that I was a mass of struggles tied in knots and had a look of wild formidable confusion. His expression of concern the same as he comforted me after I had driven John to the airport when he reported back to military service to patrol the recently put up Berlin Wall. I couldn't speak or tell where I had been and or that now I inhabited another universe one in which I lived on a desert floor smoking rolled cigarettes learning to weave rugs. Suffice to say I blurted out that *I didn't want to go to school anymore and what will you do* he responding. *Don't know* I answered. *How about we double your grant get you a bike offer more generous medical and dental benefits and an additional stipend to cover your rent giving you time to gain greater clarity about a future direction at which point you can take a leave and go off?* Knowing he saw the turmoil percolating within me yielded to the kindness and wisdom and within days began to attend classes as a graduate student.

Tammy: Tammy's apartment couldn't be more comfortable. Tammy asked so little of me that I offered more in the way of friendship and companionship praising her choice of mate whom in truth was really quite nice and totally enamored and captivated by her. Cambridge is a small town and soon I had bumped into my boyfriend who had the Bentley who said over a coffee *maybe it's time we got thinking about making this more serious and you meet some of my family* which I understood was part of the courtship for more serious relationships when the possibility of an outsider being brought into this gilded gated family. Delaying the inevitable we continued to share meals and affection along with slow walks along the Charles River. Wandering about in Harvard Square I met a high school friend who I never dated and was in medical school at Tufts. We went to the movies and for beer and when back at Tammy's we set about necking until a kiss became a little too sweet. Abruptly ending that relationship did not want to be a wife whose mother-in-law had been our high school librarian and the butt of many sophomoric jokes and who breathed the dragon flames of absolute control.

Meandering met a blindingly handsome socialite from San Francisco and we started going out he obligingly taking me to a Drive-In so that I could see a school assigned movie *The Sky Above and the Mud Below*. Oops I nearly fell off my mark and his penis came ever so close to finding its way inside me jumping up still faithful to a man I would never see again and for whom I still maintained a steely loyalty. San Francisco did not stop calling believing the next time he would win. In Harvard Square I came upon my other guy named John tall blond Mid-Western with whom I had become quickly smitten last spring we managing to pick up where we left off when he told me that he was trying to extricate himself from his college sweetheart who refused to believe their love was to end. He and I cuddled and kissed and held onto each other as we lay close on the bed in his room. In the heat of the moment climbing on a chair in his room feeling as if I was virtually flitting about the room like *Tinkerbelle* the spirited fairie in *Peter Pan* proclaimed my undying love for him believing in my heart he was the man with whom I was to spend the rest of my life. John was in the political science department at Harvard a recipient of a prestigious and inordinately generous *Danforth Fellowship* his academic focus Africa and would do his field study in Nigeria. In my mind I was going to go with him living within the heart of a rural village sitting among the women as sister friend daughter a little delicate floweret of hope was budding. The Chair of the Department seeing me said *you are getting to be more like you* as I was entering a class.

Africa: Convinced of that I was going to be in Africa with John the following year when my parents came to visit a little more than two weeks after I got back to Boston. Soon into the visit I blurted *that the following year I was off to Nigeria with John another John to live and work with him side-by-side in a small Nigerian village and that I wanted to spend my life with him but didn't want to ever get married even when we had babies*. My father blanched and said quite firmly *you have got to stop dating all of these different men or you will find that you are not suitable as a wife* this almost verbatim and then my mother chimed in *if you don't settle down soon and get married you will find you can live without being married and never get married*. My mother sorcerer supreme sniffed out my perplexing confusion and turmoil fixed implanted a counter voice a fully realized script knowing in my heart I would rather be dead than without soldier John forever and ever.

My parents left satisfied that I was in school and pleased that my scholarship had been generously increased that I was living with Tammy such a fine and sensible (and Jewish) woman and shortly would come to my senses. I was in mourning I was in agony longing for the Southwest submerging a desire to climb on a Greyhound a counter force had me flitting about from man to man reckless with almost full abandon reflective of the turmoil and disarray of my inner life. Focusing on John and Nigeria gave the future a shape. John was despondent as he tried to extricate himself from this college sweetheart obsessively stalking him preoccupied we still saw each other his attention often diverted though planning that we would go to Nigeria together. The late days of summer verging on fall slipped off I got to and from class on my new bike and got enough school work done to maintain my brilliant status it was fixed by now if not believable to me. Flitting reckless habitué more duck rudderless than ingénue of marriageable age.

Damn Danforth: After I went to the Drive In with my San Franciscan to see *The Sky Above and the Mud Below* primarily through the fog of heated up sexual play I arrived home grabbing a beer relieved I hadn't fully submitted to him though dangerously close. Tammy was asleep the phone rang it was John they were just finishing up a dinner with the political science faculty and officers from the Danforth Foundation. He wanted to come by to go out for a beer before leaving the following day for a period of at least three weeks in Washington DC collecting more data and research for his dissertation proposal. Just as I was putting my shoes on there was a knock on the door and four high spirited graduate students Danforth Fellows all members of the Political Science Department tried to enter the apartment I held out a hand and said *wait my roommate is asleep I'm just going to grab a sweater.* As we walked out into the early morning hours I saw that they were a little tipsy silly feeling the hubris of their anointed station at Harvard where their Fellowships brought prestige and money. They had promised John that after a quick beer at the local Cambridge all night hangout they would disappear and as we got to 5am and then 6am there we all were embroiled in tight knit conversation. Noticing the time I begged off moving quickly through the streets knowing I had a class in two hours John following me home apologizing that his friends had refused to leave giving us little time alone. He then pulled in close gave me a warm kiss and held me tightly in his arms for moments longer than usual. He walked off as the sky lightened up. Watching he turned around waving before disappearing around a corner I was firmer than ever in my resolve that he was the man for me.

An Invitation Not to be Refused: When I returned from class that same day mid-afternoon Monday Tammy said some man named Ben called you and left his number. Ben was one of the other Danforth Fellows who stayed beyond his time the night before. Leery but obliging I returned his call at which point he said *hi how about dinner later, No* I answered heatedly and rapidly. I had some kind of moral compass directing me and said *you know I am John's girl* and he said *well I will keep asking until you say yes* he being aware of John's struggle to free himself from his old girlfriend. Finally when we got to Saturday I agreed adding *but just this one time*. Saturday night came and at exactly the appointed hour there was Ben greeted by curious Tammy. Off we went to a local Italian restaurant having easy conversation over pasta and red wine going on to the same local beer pub where we had been just the last Sunday. When it got to be about midnight I said that I needed to go home and get to bed. We got up walked the few blocks at the door he asked to come in. Then there we were on the couch moments later Tammy asleep in her room making love. Tammy in the morning started belting in her best folk singer voice *Going to the chapel honey And we're gonna get married Going to the chapel And we're gonna get married Going to the chapel of love...* apparently she was less asleep than I thought and got a whiff of something pending sooner than I.

In the following five days Ben and I we were rarely without each other at which point he said *I am going to marry you I put it in my diary the night we met, Okay when?* I answered. *How about in three weeks* he responded. *Okay let's call my parents* who lifted up the phone at two extensions as I announced that I was getting married in three weeks and that I was bringing the groom home to meet them this coming weekend. We were going as well to meet his father and his third wife and his mother his father's first wife.

Post Library of Congress: John soon after this fortuitous announcement returned from Washington DC called asking to come over he had not been in contact those three weeks. When he got to the apartment I stepped outside and sitting on the worn marble steps told him I was getting married he looked perplexed and asked who it was *Ben* was all I said. He was a gracious Midwesterner and stood up to leave after giving me a very genuine hug and kiss wishing me well. He soon married his college sweetheart and we were young couples gliding in life to the rhythm and cycles of love as they mimic and move with the phases of the moon.

Past What Past: Ben did not know about La Guardia House or about Antioch or about John or the Navajos or about Emmett Till or that I was the Vice President of my high school student council and the Editor-in-Chief of my high school newspaper *The Calumet*. Ben did not know that soon after arriving at Antioch I had fallen in love at first sight with both a man and a woman or that I had been haunted by desires to destroy myself or that a millionaire from a well established family wanted to marry me or about the boarding house on Irving place. Something had him fixed on me and I like a fly fluttering but unable to move off the flypaper somehow knew on the deepest darkest subterranean levels why I was going along. Reprieve:

Little Fly

*Little fly
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brushed away
Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?
For I dance
And drink and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing
Then am I
A happy fly
If I live
Or if I die*
William Blake

Soon after we married I wrote the following:

Let the Cat Out...

*A lion's in that man somewhere
The restrained speech
The suggestion of tears
I licked my chops
At what lay beneath the words
So tempting, the unsaid
A gentle Knight, a lion for my bed.
We held the chalice*

*To each other's lips
Some wine for the promise
The candle easy in our gentleness
Two weeks later the promised kept
White Mantilla, crimson vest
Gold ring exchanged
Silken sheets on an heirloom bed
On the wall embroidered
His family crest
Betrothed in lightness
But not deceit
A maelstrom of incompleteness
My legacy
His a family of forms
Courtesies without warmth
I called
Come out my predator, my King
Let us begin our kind of living.*

**Naomi Barber
Married on November 11, 1962**

In the following episodic and in disjointed sequence, the patchwork of a marriage and a divorce and the times in between we bring ourselves with us wherever we go. Pasts haunt if denied.

Prelude to a Wedding: That first weekend arriving at my home on Keer Avenue my father meeting us at the door embraced Ben. My mother swept into his arms almost prostrate weeping believing he was rescuing me from a sordid flagrant life and probably saving me wantonly pregnant. Standing back to look at him she said *I saw you in a dream and you were going to marry our Nibsie* a nickname Ben was yet to know. There was my father immediately smitten with Ben he the very father who guarded and watched over me like a Swiss Soldier at the Vatican. Was my father having held onto his inner depravity cloaking it in fatherly protectiveness now freeing himself of that tyranny? I watched an observer as the power that had been building slowly within me the power I let bloom and flower was now being so flagrantly tossed. Losing the fateful coin toss I was submitting to living an accessory to a man I knew only on levels that would make my former psychiatrist squirm. I just quit giving up abandoning the self I was growing to cherish and love.

Throwaway Bride: Almost in front of my own eyes I was becoming extinct invisible an archetype exemplar of a character in a novel I read well into my marriage. I was indeed an original member of the *Ellen James Society* in which women cut out their tongues thus becoming mute to belong. I was a charter member living within *The World According to Garp* if published (1978) more than a decade into my marriage. Novelists are often predators who augur have a distinct sense of the particular disjoints and dangers levitating in a particular moment of time. John Irving captured the effect of subversive tactics against women when hatching a colony of women *the Ellen James Society* living as one speechless tongue-less. *Yes and yes* on a Jungian subliminal level I knew the man very well whom I promised to marry. I moved right into the final futile destination of my inaction. I became the perfect rendition a vestigial virgin lambent suffering sacrificing a heart's deepest craving for true love descending into the hell the agony of perfect subjugation subordination. I reached back through time I rang the carillon bells the death knell of my demise in one gulp one fell swoop I let him enter me and gave all away. I lay in the terminal bed of my mother's first arms I was deceased well before uttering the marriage vows. Ben knew me not at all except that I was a supplicant devoted loyal never to stray never to disobey I was the anchor the weight his encroaching madness needed. *I do I do* I said as my friend Margo squirmed her eyes darkening with sadness anticipating the death of whim and wish from a friend whose passion whose flame dimmed with a promise of fealty. I felt myself losing myself *let no man put asunder what god hath joined together* damn god damn my Jewish god. God's body still present in the wafer dissolving in my six-year-old mouth finally the girl having her first holy communion a catechism of the faithful but as a bride. I was married on November 11, 1962.

Poetry and Pistols: And much later on in the marriage my husband strangely though not surprisingly knew me not at all registering great surprise when he came upon poems or rather reflections in which I wrote of my growing unhappiness almost becoming suicidal once again only this time with two young children. One evening as we went out in a feverish pitch he snickered out *I didn't know you were so unhappy and since when do you write what you think of is poetry* pushing me roughly against the car door making sure no witnesses were nearby. He was the writer in the family and he was the friend of literary women like Erika Jung and he had written and published a series of essays about women and feminist entitled *Liberating Feminism*. He ordered me not to attend another meeting at Gloria Steinem's who was then forming the *Women's Political Caucus*. Don't know how I lost my bearings boldly attending

even one meeting and that with a confirmed feminist neighbor who held weekly meetings of her *Woman's Socialist Reading Group* in her living room for which her husband baked cookies. Begging out from future meetings without betraying my husband's threat with the force of a fist vituperative and to be abided. After this physically abusive confrontation at the car I shut down further becoming more secretive not able to stop writing a sharp knife in the gut the alternative. I hid my writing where they could not be found unlike his loaded yes loaded gun without a working safety catch resting in its cutout rare book holster wrapped in a lovely piece of old muslin in his bedside drawer always just a little ajar.

Equivalences – Me and the State of Israel: Married fifteen years sought therapy struggling how to stay married to keep functioning the present was closing in on me. I warned the psychologist before sharing what troubled me that *I did not want to leave my husband or break up my marriage* rather wanted to find a way to stay further *I didn't want her to tamper with the poetry in me to trample or disturb my muse*. She accepted me as a patient even with these conditions even after informing her about Ben's gun knowing that most therapists would have backed off. Ultimately I knew I had to leave the marriage but not until *I could leave it with everyone more or less whole* her stipulation. I started making plans and knew sooner or later I would have to involve him in planning my departure but before I could do this he sped up the clock calling me from one of his frequent trips this time Israel. *Now I know who you are you are the State of Israel* he stated triumphantly without humor. When I reported this to the therapist she suddenly felt a sense of urgency saying we had to speed up our timetable. *Things could be getting truly dangerous for you as he senses you getting powerful he will feel threatened at potential dangerous and unseemly disclosures and ultimately with abandonment*. If sometimes I felt my life a parody of a Grade B movie no longer everything the therapist intimated rang ominously true.

Daddy's Good Little Girl: Pricks of disrespect cropped up to mind among which Ben's greeting when seeing my father asking derisively *so Bill how is your little job?* If subconsciously my father shaped a destiny in which I lived in the nether world of Dante's hell he remained for me supersize an exemplar of what makes us human. My father quickly and adeptly turned these dismissive greetings into earnest placating warmth if with welling eyes he had come to see Ben's neediness and rampant narcissism. At odds the father who had practically shoved me into the arms of this husband now assuaged or appeased becoming ready audience for Ben's manic disingenuous buffoonery

our own incendiary Sunday visit comic operas. In direct proportion to my growing isolation and despair my father inquired less and less about how things were at home, wanting only a pert *fine!* I was the original *daddy's good little girl*.

Running in Place with the Absurd: *I cannot do this he will feel emasculated crushed senseless addicted to absolute control this weapon is his lifeline composed intact frightening scaring lording over his gun is necessary as a heart beat how can I extract excise he protects us from harm from his harming us he needs his gun how can you ask this of me* I say pleadingly on the phone with my therapist and with the court appointed psychiatrist Ben was forced to see. The psychiatrist informed me *your husband is capable of any kind of bizarre behavior. You have two young children* he says sternly. Before seeking a legal divorce I was to remove the gun from the house. In this conference call on a Saturday while Ben was out at the park I agreed to remove the gun the psychiatrist helping me with a strategy. First I needed to have the children stay at friends for a long afternoon visit and then to invite his oldest friend to come over. The friend was aware of our marital crisis of Ben's violent temper and of the gun from recent conversations with me. He agreed to sit with Ben when I with Ben's full knowledge took the gun out of the house. I was told to inform his mother that her support might be necessary if he brayed and bellowed scratching the heavens with his despair at losing his weapon. She the very mother overburdened producing the annual story lines for radio and television soap operas was the very same person who had sent him to boarding school at the age of five. The psychiatrist promised to attend to Ben should he have to be taken to an emergency room. This scenario was so far bigger than me and yet not. I was the child sentry at the door to keep the Nazi's from hauling my parents off to Treblinka this when I was less than five.

Castration in Earnest: Have you ever heard a wounded animal of any kind screech have you heard a woman in labor without medication scream have you heard the last and final gulping whine and whimper of someone one the way to dying have you heard a starving infant cry beyond these incantations well beyond these sounds his response as I told him I was taking the gun. His friend large and strong loomed over him as he lay on the couch in his study. I took the gun still in its rare book holster wrapped in fine old muslin out of the bed side table drawer closing it fully for the first time putting it into a pillow case then a shopping bag and hid it in the pantry where I was sure he wouldn't look. The following day I would go to the lawyer I had retained closing the door on our marshal law tyranny. By the time the children came home early

evening he had gone out to eat with his friend more or less composed if snarling when he walked passed me. The children electric with fear of looming disaster unrest being our current family norm were well aware that the turmoil of our current situation would soon be resolved in divorce.

Post Script: My lawyer a lame tail between his legs Jew yes Jew immediately threw the gun away and kept the holster as bounty a trophy and I lost the grounds for my case for absolute and full custody of the children with supervised visitation rights. Ben could have been sent to prison for a year harboring a gun without a license my role as accessory in question.

Meeting his Family Stepping into Multi-levels of Reality: The wedding staged as a theater piece played out in our Keer Avenue living room forty rented gold velvet-folding chairs with just enough aisle for the bride party. A cellist and pianist both close musician friends of my father's played the *Adagio from Beethoven's Sonata No. 2 in G Minor*. My father entered first followed by my mother and then his mother who had not until this day seen her ex-husband (for whom she pined every day of her life) since their divorce more than more than fifteen years before and then his father velvet smoking jacket with paisley ascot Ben and I coming in together I holding a single red rose and his arm. The day before Ben and I struggled to near blows selecting gold wedding bands ultimately selecting simple wide bands in which was engraved *from now until forever*. Troubled by my indecisiveness clashing with his absolute clarity he called his mother who said *if this is so difficult call off the wedding*, wise woman.

A necessary aside a foretelling of the havoc that would eventually destroy our marriage if some seventeen years hence, upon meeting his mother at her charming carriage house filled with pedigreed antiques in West Redding Connecticut she mumbled to me as we sipped early morning *Bloody Mary's* her son my intended still asleep *you know you are marrying a man who can be very cruel almost sadistic this from a playwright poet and creator of beloved soap operas on the radio and television*. I took this in with equanimity a dramaturge lifting words from the pages in play of my own life. Ben relished in telling and retelling his parent's life stories. I was enamored his mother daughter of a millionaire businessman attended Radcliffe and the Yale School of Drama had two plays on Broadway and a published volume of poetry by the time she was thirty and her first cousins on her mother's side were the real *Marx Brothers*. His father from Mason City Iowa went to Harvard had a friendship with Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* started the Yale School of Drama with

Baker and was the author of the definitive *New Scene Technicians Hand Book*. Further his father was a director of the New Deal *Group Theater* with Stella Adler and Harold Clurman where nights as he would recount in the future to me were filled with communal sex. His father went on becoming the communications director at a Relocation Camp for Japanese in Wyoming so much of life being shaped by war Roosevelt and the *New Deal*. Present at the wedding a third wife sons some twenty years younger the infamy of his father's imbrolios and faithlessness bringing Ben to swear never to leave me or to be unfaithful this into our three week courtship. Sheepishly admitting if I didn't know him or even love him I loved the idea of joining his family not remotely like my own. Ultimately their darkness would rise in smoky morning Berkshire fog but it did not harbor the same Jewish dark *alchemy* left to people of more modest backgrounds and less grand dreams.

Pre-Marital Family Meetings Prenuptial Warnings: The evening before driving to Connecticut to meet Ben's mother after spending nearly an entire day with my parents smitten from the first Ben playing every instrument in the house then talking democracy with my mother whose deft knowledge amazed. Now my mother had that unique knack of complete transformation accommodating whomever she found interesting or attractive by becoming an alter ego a mirror image a body and mind double as if the person's missing other half. This phenomenon or gift best illustrated by Woody Allen in the film *Zelig* when an image an exact replica Hitler a doppelganger joined him raising a hand calling back and forth to the enamored crowd *Sieg Heil Sieg Heil* anon a chameleon has too few changes or choices to be descriptive. Dumb stricken sat to the side as Ben and my parents made detailed plans for the wedding three weeks hence my mother assuring she would take care of everything agreeing to no wedding cake offering to have a wedding dress ready for me. Ben and I were assigned to inviting friends and his family the living room could hold only forty guests. As if in a misguided infant nursery baby exchange I was handed off Ben embraced the long lost missing son. My father must have known he had just out of the Old Testament sacrificed me to an angry retributive god and my mother for moments looked genuinely happy fulfilled living in a right world. *You marry when you feel you cannot live without the other person* his words of pearly wisdom regarding John and my need to move in with him, of course married, and now this errant swap for his ease of mind.

The Harvard Club: After leaving my parents, we were off to the Lincoln Tunnel and the Harvard Club where we would meet his father and stepmother

for dinner. Entering this bastion of the rich and powerful attempting to be at ease my attention diverted immediately to a tall imperious man lording over a crew of waiters and bus boys. This gentleman was impossibly elegant as if drawn from a *Toulouse-Lautrec* poster black cape brilliant red satin lining flung over his shoulder with great theatrical flair. Next to him just as startling a woman with blond hair a wave of which fell just above her eye in a *Marlene Dietrich* wide-brimmed hat and a slinky black vintage Parisian dress sipping a glass of wine. *Oh there they are* leading me toward the couple in the center of the squall the waiters scattering hang-dogged the maitre de placating. Within moments we were swept into a grand embrace extending their theatricality to the other diners now openly audience.

Finally settling in as dinner partners the woman in moments was commenting on my beauty stroking my hair intuitively finding my deepest dear spot. His father hardly veiling astonishment remarking that his son had certainly found a remarkable and lovely woman to marry him subtext *how did this son of mine so unpleasant not even very handsome land her*. Strangely comfortable I shared a little about myself while we ate a sumptuous meal they ordering rare French wine. About ten we left on our way to Connecticut where his mother who never slept at night was waiting. No doubt I had been swept up in a funnel cloud I had been lifted *Over the Rainbow*. Still the knot in my stomach the rasp in my throat residues of the night I lay beneath the moon in Albuquerque heaving sobs foredooming a very problematic future carried along by the *flotsam and jetsam* of indecision relinquishing giving up any hold on my life title deed and all.

Wedding Day Blues: Walking awkwardly together as the cello and piano played a judge in place we parted to stand with our rightful if wildly disjointed parents. I in a creamy satin dress falling just below the knee with smocking flaring out as if to cover an early pregnancy which my mother believed to be the case. I had fortuitously turned over all of the arrangements for the wedding to her and this was the dress she had made. Covering my recently straightened hair an antique mantilla falling just below my shoulders. Ben wore an impeccably tailored navy suit with a red satin tie. The blood color of his tie and the maternity looking dress warned from the start of a life lacking a certain innocence and veracity I quickly fading into a reticence invisible no longer to resist or fight back. Abrogating my right to any say including the wedding dress was clear evidence of my full and utter and very sad disappearance.

As Witnessed By: Looking out to the people assembled to witness this glorious event were my observant immediate Jewish family members on my mother's side my secular Jewish family on my father's and an entourage of very and obviously gay theater people escorts of Ben's mother. And then Ben's step-brothers, four and six, his much loved aunt his father's sister and a few close family friends, one of whom was his step-mother's best friend from Barnard. (With a quick aside much later his father shared thoroughly nauseating me that this women had been his mistress weekdays while working in New York while his wife and two sons remained in the Berkshires. The wife holding this friend most dear never I believe knew of this infidelity.) And then there was James Dean who I thought had died about eight years earlier but there he was. After the wedding introduced learning he was my now husband's older blood brother who at times believed he was James Dean reincarnated and perhaps he was.

Ben and I created the wedding ceremony as if script for an off Broadway play about such a wedding. My mother spoke first saying *I never could find a way to get close to our Nibsie or even understand her but I wish her well and glad she found her happiness.* Thinking as she spoke that my mother really didn't love or know me wishing I could somehow let the psychiatrist pulling me from the jaws of my abyss subduing my suicidal inclinations that these thoughts were bled into me by my mother now in the heat of these revelations. Next his mother spoke of love as if unburdening her heart intimating how she was shackled and enslaved by her obsession with Ben's father never giving up wishing and believing that he would return to her outstretched arms this if veiled slightly as a soap opera script. The individuals on the gold velvet chairs leaned forward riveted at these unguarded confessionals. His father decked out with a *Liberty House* paisley ascot and velvet smoking jacket spoke with great authority and timbre about marriage and its sanctity this a man on his third but not final wife. And then my father reliably responding to my request read a passage from *Rilke*:

*Again and again, however we know the landscape of love
And the little churchyard there, with its sorrowing names,
And the frighteningly silent abyss into which the others
fall: again and again the two of us walk out together
under the ancient trees, lie down again and again
among the flowers, face to face with the sky.*

The Landscape of Love, Rainer Maria Rilke

Vows: The judge read the requisite state sanctioned vows and we were husband and wife everyone gathering around to wish us well. There were champagne toasts and dainty waspish tea sandwiches and petit fours. Ben had out ruled a wedding cake my mother obliging a woman who never took orders from another seriously if it was contrary to her desires. Dusk began to settle signaling time for guests to leave. Ben's little half-brothers departing the youngest one saying *if I ever go to another wedding I want to go to this one* kissing me on the cheek. An illustrious member of the theatrical entourage accompanying Ben's mother stating with flair *this was just about better than any Broadway show I have seen recently*. Quick hug thinking this was exactly the right observation of what was a more a theater piece than a wedding service resonant with words from Rilke. Excessively thanking my parents we got into the Volkswagen Beetle to spend our wedding night in his mother's West Redding house his mother staying in her New York elegant apartment on Central Park West.

Wedding Night: In Connecticut awaiting us chilled champagne tins of chilled Beluga caviar and two long stemmed crystal glasses and on plates of heirloom English china tightly wrapped toast points. In the guest bedroom silken sheets a hand-embroidered duvet covering a goose down quilt on top of which was a note and a gift for me. In ruby velvet jewelry box sitting in soft gray satin a bracelet with multiple diamonds and sapphires accompanied by a note lovingly wishing me well. What world had I fallen into and as if dream settling on this night we became one. The next day we drove to Cambridge to live husband and wife in the little four room house we had rented on Cowperthwaite Street next to the Leverett Towers parking lot. On the drive I felt myself reluctantly going silent this without giving up speaking or conversing I fell into a series of empty words disjointed words from a rapidly disappearing self.

Married Lady: And so I married a man with a soupcon of vows in a *Whirly Jig* romance three weeks from start to finish. Beckoned by the throbbing incantations of a gong of Martha Graham's curled and unfurled feet pounding out the anguishing heart beats of retreat. Images flashed of an exquisite hell into which I was descended. I was married my parents' Cheshire grins giving me away and in real time my interior self was folding up crashing in on itself dissolving exactly and as contritely as an *Alka-Seltzer* an obliging bromide in lukewarm water. I was a stray fall leaf swept along errant on the shoot of an uncommon sudden rush of wind.

I was gone done relieved my life lifting off me the dumb weight of decision of dream of love given a *Mayan* sacrifice of first daughter. I offered myself I blotted myself out a *Tabula Rasa* without past without future configure confabulate do dear husband as you will with me. Unconsciously I knew this prince would obliterate me I opining for nothing. Left on the desert a mirage a girl in tribal dress stripped naked lifted whisked off. Preying on flesh and soul cratering despotic ancient inclinations absolved of the future ensconced firmly triumphant my own doubts and fears. Shuttering in the harsh awareness of dissolution and that at my own hand.

Until the End of Time: Words throw themselves at me need to feel cacti bleed into tongue remembering Bruno Bettelheim discuss the arousal of pain in a young patient chewing on cacti in order to feel real. Inscribed wedding bands *until the end of time* demarcated by a crazy tyrannical gun wielding political philosophy professor in the making extracting absolute fealty obeisance. Promised in his diary to marry me and a fictive me struck to life in these pages did not disappoint wife compliant in vow and life to a man in the guise of a mannered almost knightly gallantry.

He stayed hidden undisclosed but in the beveled text of psychoanalytic speak I knew exactly what I was doing knew him within hours of our first date. This man rescued me from the tower of my turmoil my rapidly collapsing resistance comely subterranean our twin starved damaged interior selves. Deft astonishing relegating my future to that of paschal lamb sacrifice easier less reckless than the alternative a vertically sliced wrist on a diagonal. Lived in a tilt of lesser evils gave a life to a narcissist of pre-eminent proportion mirror image of my mother took the predictable the known the familiar self-contempt caught in my throat as I said *I do*. Girl in antique mantilla and wedding dress with room for baby bump on November 22, 1962 married her mother.

Catapulted marriage brought me almost instantaneous relief. Recapping often almost obsessively how my father handed me off enamored or relieved of me by a man who within moments of meeting touted his musicianship by suggesting he played if just tangentially most of the instruments in the house piano saxophone trumpet violin bass fiddle and guitar which he actually in earnest strummed and was given to take back to Cambridge. Foolish girl in a long line of contemporary female poets to revile their fathers yet fall captive almost derisively to despair love too encumbered ensnared in the untoward unwieldy. Ben and I in another iteration of our married life became travelling

troubadours *the darling couple* sitting close together singing a repertoire of folk political songs: *The Banks are Made of Marble* and *Hang Man Hang Man Slack Your Rope* and *Amazing Grace* to various configurations of his responsive disjointed family,

Pregnancy: Like a good Coronation bride I became pregnant almost immediately like a piece of driftwood in a rushing river we moved into this without thinking or planning the undertow of this free flow through time and space had us having a family when we hardly knew each other except in morbid and subterranean ways. This little seedling immediately ran into obstacles I coming down probably in week four with a fever red throat and a sprinkling of rash viral I thought not bothering to see a doctor. Returning from class soon after I was sick found Ben in bed covered with the same rash feverish and shivery. Early the next day we went to the Harvard clinic where the seats were lined with students all afflicted similarly. At our turn the doctor preemptively examined and told Ben *you've got a good solid case of German Measles seems to be all over the place the only danger is if your wife is in the early stages of pregnancy* looking over at me. Drained and shaken I informed the

Doctor that I was that wife pregnant and that a week or so ago I had much milder symptoms of what seemed to be the same malady. *Let's give you a test to see* it coming back positive the doctor saying that although I did indeed exhibited the German measles virus it was impossible to tell whether it was of recent duration or from a case diagnosed as a teen. The doctor shoulder to me dismissive and impatient finally saying that *there's actually no way to know if you actually had the highly contagious virus in the early part of your pregnancy.* This was 1963 and abortion in the United States was illegal and in Catholic Boston strictly verboten even to discuss. Meeting with a social worker my desperation rising shared there was a contingency if I could prove that I had had German measles in the first trimester or first eight weeks of my pregnancy could find two Doctors to sign on I would be eligible a clinical procedure to remove the fetus. There evidence was clear even then that time German measles in the first trimester of pregnancy could be very damaging to the fetus.

Abortion Rights: December was encroaching and I was in the nether land of decisions about an unexpected pregnancy a woman of twenty-two who had given up the use the personal pronoun *I*. Walking into the office of the chair of my department started sobbing startled he stood up holding my shoulders asked *what's wrong what has happened?* I had to inform him first that I had

gotten married if yet to fully accept this fact and now having a baby. He asked returning to his desk chair, *what happened last summer that has thrown you into such turmoil and precipitous actions? What happened to your plans to go to Nigeria with that fellow you seemed to like so much saying that you wanted to spend your life with him if not marry even when there were children?* How to explain that an emboldened past toppled me breaking my will its force crushing the force and power I had felt to move forward. *Why don't you go to the library and look up German Measles and its impact on the early stages of pregnancy maybe there is a case you can build* and with that he smiled weakly and suggested we have lunch sometime the following week.

I sensed his disappointment perhaps he had not wanted to know of my suicidal craven death wishes now dooming me. Following the meeting immediately went to the library where it was akin to reading of *Hiroshima and Nagasaki* after the bombs fell there were diagrams of very early fetal development and how this particular virus twists and attacks budding cells with the force of atomic weaponry. As I read my breathing became more labored I became addled with fear. I decided not to involve Ben at this time but to go first thing to the Harvard clinic where I was registered as a *Harvard wife* bringing with me one of the more explicit texts illustrating my dilemma. The doctor not much older than I was listened intently and with eyes that progressively grew sadder and a mouth that became more resolute. *If there is no way to prove you had German Measles during the first four to eight weeks of your pregnancy there is nothing we can do just remain hopeful and keep our finger's crossed* he said standing to dismiss me before he said more than he wanted to. When I got back home Ben feeling much better blurted out *I called everyone, meaning both our families, and told them that you were pregnant and all of them were thrilled. Further your parents are coming next weekend and your mother will take you shopping for maternity clothes.* Metrics worked against sharing a premonition I was to buy maternity clothes while miraculous creation would not form mellifluously twisted fate gyrations of the putative grew within me.

Shop of Horrors: To have taken a butcher knife to my heart would have been better but of course since he hadn't the slightest knowledge of who I was or of my past how could he know that the premier battle ground of my relationship with my mother was around shopping and clothing it was when she fully and insistently got me to become a floppy rag doll and disappear. And come they did with my father looking wary as I left with my mother after both of them commenting on how charming our little house was. Two hours later we

returned unrestrained my tears raucous blistering the well far deeper than this shopping expedition. From then on Ben treated me gingerly rarely mentioning the pregnancy preoccupied with preparing final drafts of his dissertation which would be defended in the coming months. Evenings every evening we went over to the Club 47 where Ben was greeted as a leading patron. He had lent Paula the owner and manager money for some mysterious compelling need she had and thus given this reception and by association was always courteous and gracious to me.

Club 47 and Gun Slinging: Night after night we sat in our front table along with other of his graduate school friends listening to regulars Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, Bob Dylan once known to me if slightly as Robert Zimmerman friend to Antioch hall mate. Other notable local blues groups and folk singers like Jeff and Marie Muldaur and the Jug Band performed weekly. These young artists felt the Club 47 was an important venue. Club 47 acquaintances never asked about me or my life Ben the magnetic force if not likeable compelling.

Early on in the marriage I began to notice traces of strange or atypical behavior in Ben prominent at that time was his love of fires racing out of the house almost as swiftly as a firefighter standing at the curling smoky edges eyes fixed. Ben had a loaded revolver not as part of a gun-collecting hobby or to use at shooting ranges, as did a former boyfriend *no* he informed me he had a revolver *to protect us*. Ben held no legal firearms license kept the gun with a rather crude safety latch in a bedside table. First learning of the gun on a weekend trip to *Walden Pond* when he took the gun out commencing to instruct me on how to use it by shooting at a tree. Lurching back with each pull of the trigger whimsy and tyranny rushing me in the sheltered woods surrounding Thoreau's *Walden Pond*. Wounding a tree was akin to shooting at a flower or swan having a particular sense of connection with the natural world. This gun became as much as the rings on our fingers a staple of our marriage. Remembering the last time I had been around guns was on the Navajo reservation when Mr. Yazzi Morgan and Patrick rode out to shoot prairie dog for special meal.

Twisted knot of Being Grows: Meanwhile when I should have been studying I was charting the internal disfigurement of my baby mapping out where the brain went awry and the internal organs dwarfed and entangled. On monthly visits with the assigned clinic doctor I would urge my fate on him to which, he would look understandingly as if the actual chemistry of pregnancy brought out all kinds of hyper reactions and disconcerting preoccupations. The greater

the understanding the doctor showed the more I knew he was just tolerating my rants flagrantly disregarding my presentations of scientific findings. The baby was due in August and if he found trouble with any part of the pregnancy he kept it to himself. Preoccupied quite mad obsessing scoured the library for books on fetuses exposed to German measles. This was 1962 before *Roe v. Wade* and the Internet lacking the courage or support to hop on a plane and take off for Sweden where I could legally rid myself of this thing growing inside me. The game girl who had travelled to Window Rock was now a shadowy illusive figure. Now Ben was quite aware of what he perceived was my dilemma never quite confronting the pregnancy or the advent of becoming a father.

Breaking Down: Distraught on the verge of breaking apart overcome with fear on a June night after class I checked myself into the hospital begging to be put into the wing with mental patients for I was cracking up. Explaining erratically that my body needed to part with this so-called baby growing inside if not due until August. Right inside the hospital admitting room miraculously I went into labor the baby forcing its way out of me reluctant host body stiff with repulsion for this unwanted troubled pregnancy. The attending doctor a complete stranger to me rushed to give me an injection to speed up the delivery *it is too late to give you anything to subdue the pain* he said and walked off to wait for me in the operating room. By now I was screaming shrieking wailing jumping around like a truly crazy woman the pain inordinate the need to rid my body of this freaking infant stumped and disfigured. From deep inside me a wrenching tangle twisting yelling out kicking punching *get this out of me get it out of me! Put her in restraints* the nurse called out and in rushed three women brutal wrestling me down as they tightly wrapped me in this contraption. *Is there someone you want us to call, your husband* the nurse asked now that the inevitable was approaching I whimpering and held down. *Husband what husband* this man whose wedding band I wear and for whom I changed my name and whom I had not yet known for a full eight months. *There is a number to call in the wallet in my school bag* my sobs chocking the pain riveting *his name is Ben* I called out as they wheeled me into the elevator. The crowd of hospital staff dispersed waiting on alert in case I broke loose I was writhing and kicking every sorrow in my being belted out. Even in that out of control haze could not remember ever losing control to that extant or even close.

Alonzo Wilson Barber: His name came from Ben's great grandfather a man of the gold rush returning to Mason City hurling gold dust down claiming land and ultimately more than half of Mason City as his own. Further according to Ben's Aunt Jeanne he was an unruly man whose wife held her nose and had sex with him night after night to keep him from going plumb wild.

I saw *him* Alonzo Wilson for moments as he was lifted into the air stone silent. He looked perfect so tiny so soundly asleep *dead on arrival a stillbirth* overheard *take him to the lab to autopsy*. I was submerged in a drowsy weariness and relief the restraints removed. Returned to a double room on the wrong side of the maternity ward the part where mothers with pink or blue bows in their hair were awaiting their newborn infants. *Is it a boy or a girl* a matronly candy stripper asked officious with her clipboard soliciting a purchase from the hospital gift shop and perhaps a donation to the candy stripper *good deed* fund. *Dead stillbirth* I responded with an emptied out voice the new Mommy in the bed next to me fell into a swoon. Ben was waiting in the hall where the distraught and disappointed were but soon appeared he was ashen and distancing himself from me.

The next day they let me go home although advised bed rest for a few days danger of bleeding. The very next morning as the sun tipped into the sky Ben left for New York City for some meeting or another asking the wife of a fellow student and neighbor to come in to make sure I was alright. What was in the mind of a man a husband whose wife having just experienced a pregnancy punctuated with a stillbirth would invite a fully pregnant woman in to look after her? The marriage not a year old held a time line dotted with thoughtlessness I was increasingly an amalgam the signifier wife. This neighbor in a month's time was off to Nigeria where she would have the baby and where her husband would write his dissertation. Off to Nigeria as well and with a pregnant wife the man for whom I still held a *secret love* and for whom I was too impatient to wait yet to know the poem by Adrienne Rich *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far*. Quicksilver I moved panther like through life even bees sipped pollen with greater deliberateness. Lost the personal pronoun *I*, it went missing along with the power I had felt just months before. Propped on a foundation of conciliation I was unable constitutionally to hold live as one with even one dream or desire there were no deep reserves of self so quickly the *I of me eviscerated gone*. Poignantly resonant Allan Ginsberg as he described his mother *Naomi*, a namesake *Naomi, resting briefly in catatonia...bickering with echoes of the soul*.

Castration: Some fifteen years later by then a mother of two retrieved the gun that symbolically held us hostage removal of the loaded gun the first step on the way to breaking off from the marriage resting on an inevitably fracturing fault line. Struggled to work through maternal feelings of protection for Ben not wanting this gun-slinging husband to feel castrated by taking his gun. Aberrant nestled deep in time-etched consciousness misplaced like an animal in the wild instincts lost protecting the predator's nest.

With the skills Ben honed through an academic career unflinchingly amoral and unethical he lorded his professorial ways throughout the divorce. He the *Leviathan* depicted a weak and depressive soon to be ex-wife the mother of his children with whom he reluctantly offered to share custody. By court decree we divided the kids up equally four days on three days off. Motherhood my one true center curbed pigeon holed into a tortured calendar.

Divorced in 1979 in a free fall spin how to live disjointed giving my four then three days with the children the life I had promised to them well before they were born. I would not be my mother. I would not be their father. We would have a home filled with flowers and laughter and could turn the face of the clock face down if no school. Totems of our daily lives pinned on the walls for us to see. We would be free, free of fear but then the children would have so many days living with the autocrat, as my mother called him, the transitions complicated and unruly. Had a made a great mistake by moving on and having the children's lives chopped up like sides of beef? The next challenge my conscience to face a set of decisions and actions taken following from my weak sullied and impotent past.

Wrote the following in 2011 but reflective the interiority of a working mom:

Not Home Yet - Are They Dead?

Not home yet
Are you dead or alive?
Prelapsarian moment
The door unlatches
Knot stomach lurches
Back to grinding
Moments of truth
Are you there
For me to touch feel see
The scepter of time
Clocks hours chip away
Mr. Rogers on yet
I slip inside
Two heads pitched together
Symbiotic their waiting
Momma slips in
Looks to see
They are breathing
They are watching
I have come as promised
As Mr. Roger's ties his shoes
Entering a world of imagination
We dressed up for his opera
Lady Elaine is a fairy princess
This Gordian knot of motherhood
Subways take me to the other side
I am beside myself
I forget them
Whistling at work
Call only for emergencies
I am gone in another world
Two babies expire die disappear
I forget them
The subway moves me on
I am gone and then
I reappear are they there?
Two babies soaked floppy
Drawn from my limbs
How to begin how to begin
How to leave them
I do it each and every day
Neon blink bleak choice
Devour destroy eat them up
Or step inside a subway car

Stygian compromise
Prelapsarian moments
Going off and coming together
Before time before life
Before I understood
My life had
To move beyond them
I had no choice
The father the seed
He placed in me twice
Returning bountiful
Murderous rage
Woven into the fabric
Of our lives
I had to leave each day
To grab for and gasp the air
I am there I am here
The working clock tic tocks
They the children never appear
Not to commingle barb reality
I go off to stay intact
To keep alive
Click I clasp the doorknob
Mr. Roger ties his shoes
They don't look up
They know I am home
As I said I would be
The Gordian knot of motherhood
Dictated that I leave
I needed to breathe
I am not here yet
I would say each day
Stepping out of the grimy
The officious cling of work
Throw on whirly hot colored
Mexican skirt and peasant shirt
Spread out my thick ruby silk locks
Sit down and wrap my legs around
The bundles of babies
The trusting babies
They were yet to know
The hurdles to go through
Breaking the bonds of vows
I moved on another wilting face
In the gnarled knot of working mothers
We broke the house up
He got the kids I got the kids
Evenly matched hour for hour

Minute for minute
I wanted life to be
So much more
Than just about survival
I had kids
Hacked the family to bits
To have us each more or less live
Never the knot loses it grip
Mom without a husband
On her days
Clicks the door open
Yet I am never here to stay
Never again to be here to stay
The rules of the court held sway
I left with vestigial remnants of motherhood
Vestigial motherhood
Fucking motherhood
Terrible motherhood
Wish I were dead motherhood
Too much to love never enough
Banged and bruised inevitable
They go forth from my womb

Naomi Barber 2011

From Graduate School to Graubünden: When strong enough after the pregnancy I got on my bike to finish my Master's Degree. Just about the time the baby was due we were off to live in Switzerland for two or more years. More precisely to an Alpine Village on the *Julier Pass* which was on the way to Italy from Zurich as he showed me on a map. Ben passed his oral exam and received approval to write his dissertation on *Democracy in Graubünden* coincidentally in the heart of Swiss ski country. Graubünden the Swiss Canton where we were to live more particularly in the village *Churwalden* was five miles straight up a mountain from the nearest City *Chur*. Like a migrating bird I was learning that Ben out of emotional necessity needed to return to places in which he felt at home having been tossed from the maternal nest at five or six when sent to boarding school along with his two year older brother who had at the wedding appeared to me as James Dean. In the almost first year of marriage rarely saw Ben's brother who seemed to be living in a halfway house affiliated with a well-known psychiatric hospital.

Albert Schweitzer College our destination was a one-year international institute devoted to studying *Reverence for Life* a seminal theme in the life and works of Albert Schweitzer. Ben had attended the institute the year before he started at Grinnell and was eager to get back to old friends and to skiing. Nothing by chance nothing generative nothing spontaneous I was learning that moments and days were planned with mapmaker's precision nothing ever left to chance. The family who founded Albert Schweitzer College had six children the husband Swiss and the wife English their idealism irresistible. They located the college in a weathered hotel in the midst of an imposing startlingly beautiful Alpine mountain range. Ben very much thought of this family as parent and sibling surrogates the connective tissue reparative for his frightening boyhood demons. Ben was on a constant restless odyssey to contain avenging furies, which governed his life thus the need to return to this family and this tiny farming village.

Democracy What the Hell: Ben received the blessing of his committee at Harvard to write a dissertation on participatory democracy in this Canton in which only the men voted if by a show of hands or swords or pitch forks dressed in the traditional deep blue smocks with decorative mountain flower trimming. Existing within his master plan I arrived in this little mountain village still numb with grief at the loss of a baby. My body my being filled overflowing acute the desire to become a mother this as I slipped off the map of my life driving up the perilous narrow road to our new home. On the way up the mountain pass couldn't stop singing deep inside myself *Mamma may have Papa may have. God bless the child that got his own. That got his own. (Billie Holliday)* Having in a bold reckless moment mentioned my visceral need to have a baby to Ben who shot back one of those menacing looks I had already come to fear. Silenced but for the churning longing for motherhood elemental an animal living within cycles of birth and birth my preoccupation.

We are as forlorn as children lost in the woods. When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours. And if I were to cast myself down before you and weep and tell you, what more would you know about me than you know about Hell when someone tells you it is hot and dreadful? For that reason alone we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would before the entrance to Hell. (Franz Kafka, Representative Man, p.98)

What a Difference a Year Makes: It was a little more than a year since I was sent off the Navajo Reservation having incurred a wound they feared would not heal. It was a time I lived beautifully and fiercely a *Prickly Pear Cactus* in full and generous rose pink bloom a tall and indomitable *Giant Saguaro Cactus* against an interminable at times pouty blue sky. The transformation startling abruptly moved from the peacefulness and fullness I felt asleep on a sheepskin with Mrs. Grace Yazzi Morgan's arms around me lulled a young child experiencing a mother's love for the first time. Now off to Switzerland a gold band glinting on my wedding ring finger upon which often my eyes were fixed and I moving in tandem with a man my husband about whom building within me an erratic crazed irrational combustible fear. I had slipped back to being a sad sack dejected pile of girl in disarray dissembling crumbling a funnel wind pushing me back on the old terrain of supplicant without will dangerous despair building death again becoming a preoccupation. Too soon in a marriage patterns of incessant abandonment of going off, *attracted to abandonment more than to love*, I wrote here I was again on the backside the backside of life and love. *He put her in a pumpkin shell, and there he kept her very well*, having a wife only inflaming his faithless ways far beyond a marriage bed.

Arriving in Churwalden: Within moments of our arrival in Churwalden I was deposited in a room with our luggage and my old beaten up cello in a faded once elegant Swiss mountain hotel. Before I could turn around Ben left to join his old friends to drink and catch up at the local Post Hotel nary a thought of inviting me to come along. Books often come to mind that speak uncannily eerily to a moment in time here I found myself a subject in *Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann in a hotel spa for a particular ailment a displaced personhood and in which I was to live for the next two years above what had been the grand ballroom. I was to learn quickly that the faded once elegant ballroom was now a *Bundnerfleisch* factory preparing the Swiss delicacy by drying endless cow carcasses which appeared like dancing shadows hanging from meat racks as they dried out producing the mellifluous odor of farmers' feet out in the day's dung before washing. Our room scented by the drying delicacy and anticipating our arrival the gracious French windows were opened looking out at the Alps almost close enough to touch. Leaning often against the decorative ironwork of the slight balcony to grab onto some fresh air never less startled by the daunting majesty of the mountains. Before long learning that in this narrow village winter light was mere hours long the next village up nestled in a wider expanse of mountain range held a warm sunglow many hours longer.

Roman Holiday: On that very first day Ben having gone off I stood on the slim balcony trying to catch a breath and calm an overwhelming nausea existential and very real. Needing to clear my head my body limp with premonition as I turned to look at the very gracious room my encampment with a grand Venetian headboard a fading oversize Persian rug a proper antique writing desk and a maroon velvet chaise longue. More fiction than real in an ethereal mountain setting I was locked in a tower of my own making I escaped from having to become more of myself to vanish into silence and invisibility. Ensuing weeks dusted up little rebellions moments in which I planned escapes. When timorously near wilting asking Ben if I could go off to Rome for a week never intimating his exclusion resolutely told *nothing doing* pressed against the bed prostrate hostage to an iron fist and unequivocal *no never!* Instead of gathering a few things and walking up to the next village to find a way to get to Rome the threat became gospel. As if cloud vapor I lost any capacity for defiance or mental acuity to vanish if mythically to a familiar more welcoming fantastical place to exist. Finally a thwarted runaway a mentally crippled and cowered woman and I all of twenty-three. And so began my life as a new wife in a Swiss village in which I would become increasingly monastic taking a vow of virtual silence requesting to eat alone in the kitchen with the staff of Swiss-German speaking farm women whose eyes pools of sorrow as they served and tried to reassure me. Lunches packed with chocolate treats leaving for frequent walks on mountain trails above the faded old hotel sitting among the loveliest mountain flowers almost an audible hum in my heart.

Cellist: Humiliatingly mediocre cellist practices hours on end as if oxygen a necessary palliative driving in our VW bug down the perilous and taunting mountain road to take lessons weekly from a cellist who came to Chur and who shook his head sadly as he heard me play the music of Brahms and Beethoven and Bach. Hour upon hour afternoons bow digging gruntingly into the strings against palsied tremolos pressing the cello so severely against my chest bone almost to crunch and awful purple pink welt moved through battering Bach Six Suites each movement met with a stiff swig of Kirshwasser mellowed by the time Ben reached the room before leaving quickly and abruptly for dinner no longer expecting to be joined by me. Launched a mad quixotic reading campaign dredging up dusting off old copies of translated Jung three volumes of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* and *Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann from the little college library. My days filled up with mountain walks schnapps lubricated interminable cello sessions and long

reads on the maroon velvet chaise longue the glow of a Victorian lamp washing over the pages.

Hours days months past as I like *Nero fiddled as Rome was burning* self immolation by the rabid flames of silence subdued by the sips of schnapps remembering my grandpa who while playing *Casino* with me after each turn took a stiff gratifying swig. I was burning up fluttering off to numb to be gone to deaden to sob no strength even for death wishes and planning suicide. This the coda to be played again and again, dragged hair root off to a small German Swiss village on the night train from Paris and swiftly as the landscape sweeping by disappeared before my very own eyes. My husband of not quite a year no longer strange or a stranger to me was the ghost of my wrenched and wretched childhood prophesies. And now having just been emptied of a baby dead on arrival the strain of grief the strongest voice in a gospel choir of collective fears. Finally reaching pre-destined a place rampant with solitude the proclivity predisposition for displacement a disease harbored by the dispossessed. Fumes of aging Bündnerfleisch commingled with the historic stench of family members swept up in the *Holocaust* kicked off lands for which they believed they held title. I was returned to the old country into old soil if in a forbidding Alpine mountain range there earth sodden with stillbirths.

Jews in Switzerland: If neutral in war time the Jewish population in all of the Cantons crossing language and culture could be counted on one hand with me in residence proportionately adding to their numbers. Recitative re-reeling never ending with then tugging of the baby from my insides dead I left my wildness my yearning my faith in myself my confidence go off wrapped with the infant corpse to be cut up and autopsied remains tossed and buried with the rest of the toxic by-products daily in hospital use. On the overnight train from Paris to Zurich I listened as this gun-slinging fire loving Ph.D. candidate from Harvard, a Political Theorist in the making warn me never to refer to him as a Political Scientist. Contemplating how as I sat beside this marauder this thief of my dreams life and limb knew that I was relieved to be back hidden and broken. Displacement a state far more familiar and better fitting than the identity adapted when a hand-rolling cigarette-puffing girl on a desert floor believed she was really more Navajo than Newark, N.J.

Upon handing me my Master's Degree in his office, the chair of my department looked over at me sadly casting an incisive eye cutting through me as watching a human sacrifice in the making but to what jealous god? How many times had he witness my saying goodbye to myself this time had the finality of a grave

side flower toss reverie gone energy gone laughter gone smile gone looking blankly back at him no facial expression to deceive me. I walked over to offer a parting hug I knew he knew that I had just let go power the sparkle a flash of shooting star racing toward darkness. Slipping off the shelf of my life a mortal self-sacrifice not wise but happening, happening too late to redeem. Pushing slightly off our mentor student embrace I left closed his office door sitting afterward on the Boston side of the Charles River. I felt climbing up in me the endings the goodbyes to John to the Southwest and the Navajos to the girl who ran so freely in the spray of fire hydrants on those scorching summer East Harlem days. The past four years mathematically converted to eons. Thought about my now empty uterus my baby gone this the very part of my body I had shared with the psychiatrist that I wanted to savage with a cleaver. I got back on my bicycle for one last time crossing over to Cambridge and Cowperthwaite Street boxes ready for shipping made us lunch tuna salad and looking over at him my husband saw knew for sure that he never ever really looked back at me, at me.

Inner Dialogue Regarding the Past: So we moved into a grand room almost large enough to swallow us and me now a virtual speck of bug lifted off the pages of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Replaying over and over how my collapse happened so rapidly declension of cancer deaths in the end swept up torpedoed to final breathes. So much later finding my emotional collapse at twenty-three as amazing as the *World Trade Towers* on September 11 faulty cross beams interior structure lacking unable to resist nose dives of high fueled jets at high speed. There I was a woman twenty-three who vaporized just disintegrated he the first man to come along not knotted up with gyrations of youthful twisted love-tongues declaring at once *I am going to marry you*. Taking a long look back there I was standing in a heap of luggage and a rag-tag mediocre cello fumes of headless cow carcasses dangling from gallows giving off the scent of a million dirty smelly farm seeped and dunged feet beef drying to become a great Swiss delicacy. There a woman neurasthenic as any Freudian case study suffering extreme *nausea* the exhausting trip dragged mindless shipboard across the swelling seas to a faded old world spa finding illusory shadows of tubercular Victorians' dancing. Gagging from the start from the improbable fumes of beef ripening or drying into that great Swiss delicacy *Bundnerfleisch*. The bitter taste the rupture finally pervasive and complete I was to live in stench filled grandness rife with old world mustiness in a scrim of old reveries and imagery. Suddenly living alienated among strangers one of whom was my husband who introduced me to *the old friends* taut cursorily red deep heat filling his face cueing others to regard me with

shadowy recognition pro forma greeting. I was to live within a cocoon the sanctity of the *literary canon* as much as I knew it. Residing within the confines of a grand turn of the century spa high in the pure air of the Alps my lungs harnessed with the whiff of drying beef. Books propped louche on a chaise longue covered with a moth eaten shawl a character straight out of *Magic Mountain* the diminished self annexed to a butchers' smokehouse.

Perseverate - Muttering Kaddish Over and Over: Moments after dropping me into a fiction driven world my husband and his friends chattering animatedly in German ah this man my husband was perfectly fluent in German reunited with his old friends in perfect gait this tight little group moved down the single village street to the central gathering place *The Post Hotel*. I watched from the balcony further spun into fictional reverie. When he returned I was all curled up fetal on top of the draped large bed pretending to be asleep never bothering to check he lumbered down beside me beer breath rivaling the drying beef. He left early in the morning he then me rifling through our as yet unpacked bags. As the sun light tipped the mountain tops I slipped out unnoticed not remarkable and walked through the village passing a few farms with flowers billowing from barn window boxes farmers in royal blue smocks trimmed with bright delicate mountain flowers.

Returning greetings *Gruezi* a word I quickly learned smiles emanating as I waved back found my way to a bakery mustered up my nerve to go in greeted warmly *Gruezi Frau*, mumbling one of the few German phrases learned in anticipation of my new residency *Haben zie kaffee?* Studying Berlitz to memorize some rudimentary German phrases the formal language in this part of Switzerland. Finding out quickly that they spoke *Swiss-German* just as my grandmother spoke *Yiddish* taking the formal language and adapting it for family friends a community conversing among the familiar. Recognizing my German lifted from guidebooks appreciating my meager attempt to communicate the lady in the bakery said *Ich habe kaffee* pouring me a container full, Milch? *Nein danke* and pointed to a particular pastry, *Nussgipfel?* Handing me the coffee and the pastry *Danke* I said offering up some Swiss change she selecting a few of the coins then turning left slowly. Rarely missing a day for the next two years I walked early mornings to the bakery for coffee and a *Nussgipfel*.

The Reformation: During one of my morning bakery walks I ventured to the end of the town past the Post Hotel to the Church still holding my coffee and *Nussgipfel*. Happening upon what I came to learn was a rare glimpse into European religious history. The first sanctuary stark white unembellished upright wooden benches a simple crucifix plain wood framed windows letting in light and then through an arched door a second sanctuary walls of deep velvet magenta stained glass windows of the crucifixion and a life size sculpture of Mary weeping over Jesus with a crown of thorns wounds seeping blood. High above the lectern embossed with gold flowerets an enormous cross-mounted with a bronze life-size Jesus a depiction of his crucifixion fixed in the beautiful cut glass fragments in the traditional *Rose Window*.

Sitting alone in the more ornate chapel reckoning the stark simplicity of the Protestant Church contiguous with this Catholic Church resonant with St. Rose Of Lima in Newark where I dared to take a Communion wafer. Holding my coffee and pastry untouched walked out onto a cemetery a final resting place partitioned with a place for Protestants and for the Catholics. Sitting on one of the benches sipped my coffee eating the flaky and delicious pastry within the sanctity of the enclosed burial gardens ever apocalyptic on how life had so irredeemably changed for me. There I was in an architectural rendering of the *Reformation* holding in a single structure both worlds transfixing epochs a great historical irony captured my imagination I too was negotiating living within and balancing dualities. Returning to Albert Schweitzer went to the library in the main building the actual residence of the forty international students and the classrooms and found a book in English about the history of Graubünden including Churwalden reading later that this church was singular the only church in all of Europe containing both Catholic and Protestant sanctuaries.

One dollar a page the Director of Albert Schweitzer responding to my acute isolation offered to pay me to type over and over the same letter to the wide array of supporters of the Albert Schweitzer College updating them of its ongoing success. Accepting the assignment filling the break in time between day's end and nighttime before slipping off to sleep numb and overcome in my nether space of near delirium and catatonia. Within a very few months at Albert Schweitzer College it became difficult to remember the girl I left behind growing within me was the harsh white light of longing a mad obsession to have a baby a crazy hunger to become a mother harboring fantasies of an infant suckling. This longing bridled against a palpable need to escape to run

away to hide in some garret in Florence where I could wander about in the shadows of buildings along the Arno looking for Bernini fountains coming each day to look at Michelangelo's *David*. Acknowledging to myself that I had indeed run away from the great love of my life, from college, from The Navajos, from Newark and the Weequahic section where was the spur to move me beyond where the spirit the spite the capacity for quicksilver exits? I was an inveterate runaway short-circuiting any natural or even decisive endings now fear immobilized a solipsistic paralysis overtaking. I was living with a husband who increasingly frightened and unnerved me bringing me to mute or silence myself. His threats of any demonstration of independence on my part would be met with certain if unspoken threats to damage me physically. I was his and troubling those waters was where I couldn't go.

Vow of Silence: Within weeks my husband wary of my silence if complicit in my rapidly deteriorating urged on by the Director of the Institute who was told by the kitchen staff that they were worried about me and my frail mental state decided that we would spend a day in Zurich every other week. In Zurich we did visit galleries, museums, shops have tea at the Grand Hotel and sip wine in the *Juriers Pub*, which James Joyce among others frequented. Although I was consoled by the life moving about me familiar and urban Ben acted as if taking a stranger on a tour he becoming the main exhibit at each place we visited exerting his need to further impress me and further incarcerate or bring me under his spell.

Ben was like one of those migratory birds always the same routes through the same seasons year after year without deviation or departing the route and so it was with us on holiday time when we went to Venice, Florence, Rome called upon to tour exactly as he had in the past with a running commentary shaping the way in which I was to take in feast my eyes on all of the artistic and architectural wonders. To him I was a *Tabula Rasa* a feral child to acculturate, instruct and tame though the wild in me was already so suppressed that it was all but gone. Admittedly I gave him little reason to believe I was anything but an empty vessel waiting for him to fill up even sex was rote on schedule made perfunctorily obligatory his ardor was placed elsewhere.

Ben was adamant about not wanting a child at this point in time if ever scowling when once in Zurich at the zoo as I watched a mother chimpanzee carefully and prodigiously going through the scalp of her young meekly said that I wanted to have a baby. Back at the college after trips left alone with my reveries I could slow walk through each of the visits to Zurich or Florence as I

played the cello and sipped my kirshwasser. I was taken with the fountains of Bernini Ben noticing my fixation bought me an art book filled with the Bernini sculptures and fountains in Italy. As I had when a girl with the huge art book my mother put on my lap I returned to these pages daily moving myself beyond time space and circumstance to the wonder and beauty of the Bernini sculptures.

Flying Off: On one of these holiday trips I came apart. We were on a trip to the South of France, the Cote d' Azure. Ben decided to drive first to the highest point above Nice so we could look over the expanse of the Mediterranean. We rented a tiny cottage perched on a rocky ledge that seemed to go straight down to the sea. The cottage opened to a terrace overhung with a trellis of fragrant and lovely flowers. We were sitting on the small table near the precipice with our bread cheese fruit and red wine when something in this place triggered a crazed temptation to dive off the cliff into the blue seas and eternity. Ben holding the well anchored trellis with a tight arm about my waist held me back as I silently reached out arms wings to fly off and descend.

Scaring us both we went the next day walking about the market in Nice buying a few things to eat abruptly heading back to our home in the Swiss Alps where I could crawl back into absolute sanctimonious solitude and he could escape the trauma among and with his old friends. He had shaped trips to seduce to entice not to further entrap he wanted to show me his world through his eyes leaving no room for me. Romantic or historic settings became dangerous launching pads for me to contemplate a desire once again to take my own life. I was no stranger to serving as an appendage a witness to a pathological narcissist captive never doubting that I existed to provide the virtual air for them mother and Ben to breathe. Needless to say I now knew my charge in life but Ben never understood why I wasn't totally captivated if subservient to his life and whim. Vowed never to leave me walk out as had his father on wives and mistresses I was a totem to his loyalty if not fealty. Soon into our stay in Churwalden Ben began an affair with a twenty-year-old blond bosomy Swede.

Respite and Rescue: A break with isolation and silence came with a visit from the Headmaster of the boarding school, which Ben had attended for high school. This man was a German expatriate who fled Germany in a rescue boat to Denmark wanted for his anti-Nazi activities. He was a close friend of Dag Hammarskjöld dating back to his underground infidel days and flew the United Nations flag over the school he founded in the Berkshires. He invited us both to the Post House for a dinner at which time he suggested we join him

in the summertime at another former hotel spa one in which Edith Piaf often came to dry out just outside of Geneva. He had developed a program for about thirty-five high school students to study and visit the most notable World War I and II war grounds in Germany, Austria, and France. The experience would be combined with the famous music festivals and theater events in those countries. He suggested that Ben serve as the lecturer and that I join him as co-director looking over at me as he spoke. Ben could never defy or disagree with this man still pining for this man to regard him with the same love and affection he had shown his older brother always thought of by me as *James Dean*.

Ben agreed easily of course without consulting me. The offer involved our flying back to the United States at the conclusion of our first year at Albert Schweitzer College giving us a chance to see family if for a few days. We were to meet with the said students the day we set sail on the SS Rotterdam bound for France. The students would reflect a breadth of backgrounds consistent with the pledge for diversity at the boarding school. Before leaving us at the Post Hotel he said he would cover all of our expenses giving us a generous stipend as well and then he shook Ben's hand and pulled me into his arms giving a ferocious bear hug. Winded averting eyes the light within me retrieved from a man I had never before met now inviting me to work in tandem with him shaping this bold and vaunted educational experience.

Ben informed me that in advance of the visit he had received a detailed explanation of the offer. He chose not to share this with me until he decided if it was something for which to disrupt work on his dissertation necessary to prepare the lectures on world war battles and battlegrounds. One thing I could without equivocation attest to was his careful preparation for each teaching assignment and lecture. I wondered silently if he had alerted this man to the fact that I had tried to fling myself off the highest tier above Nice to the Mediterranean deep below. Thinking better knowing this was an event as gone from his mind as anything discomfiting or dislodging. Back in the grand suite once again left alone standing looking out to the darkened Alps sipping kirshwasser thinking of the final lines of the opera Gertrude Stein wrote with Virgil Thomson *The Mother of Us All, Do you know because I tell you so, or do you know, do you know*. The Director just knew! How does the possibility for life appear when darkness enfolds and encumbers is it the unrelenting throb of desire that pushes out the yearning for one last brilliant moment?

S.S. Rotterdam: The lilt of life of light crept back inside during that summer based in the reclaimed spa near Geneva. Memories collect thinking about that countervailing summer more specifically a particular night early in the voyage on the SS Rotterdam taking a female student who had sneaked up to the bar in first class swerving with drink through the night with the Captain as we walked her to sobriety about the ships decks; claiming students in a Munich jail arrested for stealing Swiss army knives from a store; sitting in an vast open air amphitheater in Verona audience holding candles listening to Puccini's *La Boheme* obliging the enthralled audience Rodolfo singing over and over *if you want, keep a memory of love! Goodbye, without resentment and finally, What a little frozen hand, let me warm it for you. What's the use of looking? We won't find it in the dark. But luckily it's a moonlit night, and the moon is near us here.* The moon glistened as the aria filled the night airs the students in the swell of the event transformed. In Salzburg we sat in a town square for a performance of the morality play *Everyman*. The students well prepared for each event by lectures from Ben and other staff fell to silence during *Everyman* if not understanding the words later reflecting on the nature of grief and forgiveness at the moment of death pledging to avoid lifelong excruciating guilt by practicing forgiveness. In Verona there was an emergency appendectomy for an Danish born blond beauty at my insistence staying by her side during the surgery along with nearly every male merchant from the town square never knowing if the surgeon was the butcher or vice versa.

Critical learned that when students fifteen to seventeen participated in an intense and unwieldy experiences like walking over World War I and II war grounds blood staining the earth or when students sat in open air arenas audience for great and timeless art events they yielded when carefully and thoughtfully prepared given opportunities to ask questions writing critiques and responses. These observations informing much later work breaking apart dysfunctional middle schools in the Bronx pivotal shaped by that summer in Geneva.

Dachau 1963-64: Holocaust a never relenting din within me lifted to an almost excruciating decibel level on a particular night at a Bier Halle in Munich when the students with total abandon joined the circle of beer swigging dancers and singers identities merged and blended. Shocking glimpses of how a dictator could easily hold sway. Early the next day students slack with fatigue climbed into a bus for a visit to *Dachau* where refugees from East Germany were living in the very same barracks that housed the victims of the Holocaust. Hushed rustling in the air extant moaning shadows of past

residents deep in the wood pocked walls. Students gripped one another as they entered the chambers of the incinerators valves ready to release their next asphyxiating sprays somber this troop of fifteen and seventeen year olds who crept back into the bus overarching an ungainly silence for the return trip to our Swiss farm village.

Sounds of baying sows filled the air in and around the Spa. Nightly students having had their highly coveted treat of Swiss yogurt ran to the back fields for soccer games with kids from the village. Ben continued amply detailed lectures about the wars and the European history the students experienced throughout their multiple bus tours. Quickly I regained a sense of balance reminiscent of the girl who ran in summery shirt waist dresses through hydrants followed by gangly giggling neighborhood kids years before if only four or five. The headmaster and I forged a partnership, which had its own complementary if unspoken inner intuitive language. For that summer I was an active verb energies like summer sparklers verve spirit if hopefulness too daunting.

Am I a Vegetable? The spa nestled tight in a farm community with the most enormous baying sows visits led daily by the chef's three-year-old son. His small hand firmly in mind the pleasure of which filled the gnawing emptiness I felt heating up with an increasing desire to have a baby. On one occasion he asked *what do the pigs eat? Vegetables*, I answered in my still very rudimentary German. We parted big hugs he running off to the kitchen moments later a knock on the lower part of the door finding a very tearful three year old boy, *Naomi, am I a vegetable?* he asked thick with sobs, *Oh no* I on my knees at eye level replied, *You are just the most perfect and wonderful little boy. Good*, he said as he walked off.

That summer was filled with incredible experiences and the powerful feelings of renewal. After bidding goodbye to the students received a bone-crushing hug from the headmaster watched as the plane left the Geneva airport. Ben and I silently climbed into our Volkswagen Beetle to return for year number two at Albert Schweitzer College.

Gone Girl: How quickly I disappeared vanished back in my den of unrelenting putrid smells the mountains never moving further away from the French windows the dark folding in sooner and sooner as the minutes of fall passed us by. Dusting off my cello with a new bottle of kirshwasser in hand began my long practicing stints and lessons weekly in Chur. There were no more letters to type had finished that mind numbing chore with a thousand of my own

dollars contributed to the common pot which Ben used to purchase much sought after new skis. I resumed my afternoon walks warmly protected with meals and hiking packs by the kitchen staff. I continued to upset my cello instructor with the persistent mediocrity of my effort as he patiently kept adjusting my bowing hand and my fingering listening to airings now of *Bach Unaccompanied Suites* the playing of which would fill the entire year. I can only imagine the swigs of Kirshwasser the poor instructor took upon his return to Zurich pleading with the *god of music* to forgive him and me for daring to take on this sacred cello music.

Ah Roma: On a trip in April to Rome as we sat in a café Ben suggested we go to a doctor in Chur to check me out to see if my body was ready for a baby. We were near the Vatican I held onto the table believing that the spirits of birth and ascension must have seeped into his being this being Easter week. Earlier we had having actually stood in the presence of the Pope as he delivered his Easter Ecumenical. Pro forma Ben never needing an answer from me proceeded upon our return to make an appointment with a well-recommended gynecologist obstetrician accompanying me down the mountain drive for the appointment. The doctor reported saying that *you are ripe you are ready to have a baby*. This conversation held in *Hochdeutsch* translated to me as we drove back to the college extant as if birth originated with this statement.

On subsequent visits on my own I discovered that the doctor had some training in the United States and spoke perfect English indulging Ben believing Americans liked to act as if native speakers. Waiting for my picnic lunch on a day in early May the farmwoman in charge of the kitchen who had all but as Mrs. Grace Yazzi Morgan taken to mothering me looked straight into my eyes and said rubbing my tummy that I was with baby she saw it clearly in my eyes and yes there I was pregnant confirmed on a visit days later to the doctor. Walks in the mountain hills became hymnals holding sprays of mountain flowers in my hand weaving them into my thick curly hair singing over and over *Glory Be to the New Born King* along with *The hills are alive with music*. The cello instructor heard passion rising as I played Bach with better musicality. Determined to complete *The Man Without Qualities* before our leaving Albert Schweitzer met often with the local minister by now a friend to discuss my readings on my frequent visits to the Church eating morning Nussgipfel and sipping coffee now with that bitter telling taste. He held a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Berlin conversant in English commented that he knew immediately I was pregnant presciently divining

that this was to be a boy a Jeremiad a child who of the left hand who will weep for the universe. Was it my pervasive sorrow my evident hand wringing anguish my blood seeped despair that brought on this prophecy? Some almost nine months later newly back in Cambridge Jeremy was born *Glory Be to My New Born King* I sang out the only Harvard wife in a ward filled with women many of whom were trying to give up their babies unwanted by their swirling poverty.

Leaving Albert Schweitzer College: June came we said goodbye to everyone at Albert Schweitzer College many saying their regrets about not having gotten to know me better and bidding their life-long friend *until the next time.* We were off to England to London to a flat in a house owned by the French mother of the Director of the College's French/English wife where Ben would re-meet his old friends from the London School of Economics. Once again Ben walking over well-trodden ground in London where he would complete his dissertation and I would have the benefit of National Health System to oversee my pregnancy. Driving to London from Switzerland we actually found ourselves holding hands on the long scenic drive stopping in Paris for a night in which we actually wrapped around each other sitting head-to-head on the ferry to England as we approached the *White Cliffs of Dover.*

Croydon not fashionable Hampstead was where we were to spend the coming months. We lived in a flat on the first floor the rest of the house occupied by the eighty year old French mother of the Director of the College's wife, who greeted us enthusiastically firmly planting real kisses on each cheek tea and biscuits waiting. We were to share a kitchen living room dining room and a lovely garden with a generous size bedroom and bath. I learned early how to *put a penny* for the heater and without refrigeration had dairy delivered daily and soon started with her permission covering over the mold creeping the walls with fashion photos from the stacked old magazines.

Ben within days disappeared into the City, London, almost ten miles away to meet with old friends from his year at the London School of Economics and to secure a place to work on his dissertation returning evenings often after dinnertime. Once arriving home so late accosted him hitting him on the head with a frying pan for causing me to feel so agitated the owner of the house was right behind with a frying pan of her own.

Life in London hummed along, I was about three months pregnant when we arrived in the summer and during a first cup of tea the day after I found words

just spilling out of me. Our host with her still strong French accent welcomed the conversation and so we chattered through the mornings and afternoons while I followed her around the yard as she pruned and fussed with her rose beds. Strong images of my Uncle Bernie's roses fresh with scent and petal came to mind her gloved hands inspecting each flower reds and pinks with reverence and respect. Spry and certain on her feet she took me to the midwife down the block who told me when to come to meetings and warning that everyone would have to do much more on their own since she had just had a hysterectomy and *wasn't up to much pushing and pulling*. Next she accompanied me to my first doctor's appointment. It seems I would be having the baby in the hospital and not at home as is most common since my first pregnancy was complicated. The doctor told me to eat well, drink a bottle of milk (whole) each day to eat liver and fish once a week and vegetables and fruit daily. The doctor strongly suggested we limit sexual activity believing it disturbed the growing fetus. Sent off with a sheet guiding dietary and other pregnancy related activities, which I followed without falter including the mile walk each day. The house was without refrigeration necessitating daily visits to shop in the local common to the produce store, the fish monger, and the butcher most times arms linked with my by now dear sweet necessary French friend. We chatted endlessly and had endless cups of tea and the milkman knocked on the door when I hadn't returned an empty bottle for a daily replacement these kept on a ledge leading to the cellar. There was an expectation that an expectant mother gain twenty-five to forty-five pounds the menu guaranteeing the weight gain. As I filled up with baby a deep connection to life around me formed. I was happy.

Sunday meals became my specialty preparing quite a succulent rosy roast beef with Yorkshire pudding along with the rest of the trimmings that go into traditional English Sunday dinners including Trifle. Soon at Sunday dinners along with Ben and our landlady by now necessary and revered Ben invited luminaries from the London School of Economics each bringing lovely bottles of wine sipping a cordial or tea in the rose garden following the meal. I had become some kind of celebrity chef to my husband who got these gentlemen to come way South of London to Croydon. Also around the Sunday table Lords, no Ladies, contemporaries of Ben's and part of the old friends from the London School of Economics who with clipped English tongue commented on my superlative English cooking. My landlady and executive chef had my hands rolling roast beef in seasonings preparing Yorkshire pudding and Trifle a neophyte in the kitchen finding an ease and pleasure never experienced in quite the same way before.

With baby I bloomed taking daily mile-long walk hosting Sunday meals and reading books by Thomas Hardy gotten from a second hand bookstand in the village. Read and re-read dog-eared copy of Grantly Dick-Read, *Childbirth Without Fear* given me by the mid-wife instructing that I read it closely she aware that his writings ran contrary to American obstetrical opinion and practice. Straightjacket wails of a pregnancy gone awry met with consternation and cynicism still had a hold on me if now regarded with near reverence as a woman with child who if with support and assistance was to take hold seize the control of a healthy pregnancy and delivery. Two quotes of Grantly Dick-Read became my *testament on the mount* from which I could not be swayed or countermanded: *crime to dull consciousness of a natural mother who desires above all things to be aware of the final reward of her efforts, whose ambition is to be present, in full possession of her senses, when the infant she already adores greets her with its first loud cry and the soft touch of its restless body upon her limbs.* And, *The newborn has only three demands. They are warmth in the arms of its mother, food from her breasts, and security in the knowledge of her presence. Breastfeeding satisfies all three.* Weeping as I read these words aloud to my landlady unable to explain the extreme I had experienced she attributing the ripeness of emotion to a burgeoning belly filled with growing baby.

Twilight: During the first pregnancy on visits with the doctor he unable to listen to my concerns and desperation informed me that when I delivered I had to chose either a form of anesthesia called colloquially *twilight*, this to take away all memory of the delivery and labor, or submit to a *spinal* whereby medicine would be dripped into my spine to make me numb and unable to participate in the delivery. With excessive temerity I suggested that I wanted to have a baby naturally looking up he responded first by informing me *that there was enough suffering in the world without adding to it* and then asked straight faced *are you in one of those Cambridge feminist fringe groups?* I couldn't find the humor or the absurdity for this was the physician I was pleading with to rid my body of the baby. I knew it was slowly dying within me.

Reading Grantly Dick-Read turned me militant and I vowed to fight the medical establishment espousing the technical removal of women from the act of birth. I was later (1978) to read Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born* a scathing and scandalous historical accounting of time when male physicians entered the delivery room designating midwives witches. Adrienne Rich tells

how these preposterous and supercilious physicians not only subdued the women in labor but initially used implements forceps shaped contrary to women's birth channel to seize and tug out the baby tearing the women's insides and crushing the babies' heads. I was armed with a stalwart confidence reinforced reading in Grantly Dick-Read's book that should a woman be caught while in the throes of labor in an air-raid or bombing obviously during the War she should crouch over a curb drawing the baby gently but firmly out wrapping it in the womb finding the nearest home or doctor's office. Now believing I could do exactly that if hearing air-raid sirens warnings when entering the derelict male dominated world of obstetricians back at home.

Ben seemed so at ease in the world here perhaps he was getting to the end of his dissertation or the camaraderie of Lords and London School of Economics eminences suited him. Although he had been adamant in the past about not wanting to be a father he seemed to be warming to the idea admiring my ever-rounder belly and wanting *to feel the baby kicking*. Though he was gone most of the day and through the early evenings weekdays, weekends we took expeditions to London proper where we went to the theater and saw *Marat Sade* at the Royal Shakespeare Theater among other plays. We went to the opera to see part of the Wagner's Ring, *The Meistersinger* having catered delicacies delivered for us to dine on between acts, as was the custom at the Royal Opera House. And in a gesture that resonated as nothing else since our marriage Ben got two front row seats for a concert of Beethoven and Brahms cello and piano sonatas played by Jacqueline du Pre and Daniel Barenboim who was her husband. I felt her looking at me as she played drawing the bow across the cello so that it was not only one with her body but that brought the cello to song as if never before. Trembling with awe transcendent I once wrote that all I longed to do was to live one day to be for a day in the skin of Jacqueline Du Pre. The passion and artistry that would never find its way through me exhibited on a level I had only wished for here Jacqueline du Pre dared to both get lost in and exalt in the music.

Jacqueline du Pre

*once
to sleep
covered
by the skin
of
success. –Naomi Barber*

Fortune's Expedition: Lumbering pregnant we took a weekend trip to Cambridge University and there appeared a former boyfriend whom at one time had been Editor of the Harvard Crimson and was now studying at Cambridge. As we shared hugs and greetings flooded ominous recriminations his warnings that my escapades and flirtations with men would lead me to a solitary unforgiving life. I quickly introduced him to Ben noticing the gloves covering his always-cold hands held back blurting that this husband was found and married within three weeks and I was indeed destined to solitariness if with child. Bidding goodbye looking back over my shoulder as he walked off Ben wondering who he was *just an old friend from Newark* I replied he came from Newark as well. Shaken seeing this friend raised in such a strict Orthodox Jewish home who I later learned grappled with Judaism and Jewish dislocation his entire life.

Walking on Ben and I settled on a grassy knoll beside the Cam watching male students punting in a caravan of boats many with females drifting their fingers through the water and as sure as my soon to be born infant child leapfrogged about in my stomach there a vision of my son standing tall and beautiful punting on the Cam. Prophecies of a weeping *Jeremiad* from the minister in that Alpine village and now a certain fixed image of my child living in and among this lavish rural setting at ease within the Gothic buildings punting on the Cam. *And it came to pass...*

No Stabilizers: My truly happy existence in England was to be bitterly put at an end. Within weeks of our weekend in Cambridge Ben announced that he had to return peremptorily to Harvard or he wouldn't be able to get an academic position for the following year. Sharing he had been advised by his advisor who had been inordinately tolerant of his stay abroad to get back forthwith. Tickets purchased we were to travel on the United States liner in mid-December *it is not advisable* the doctor admonished the mid-wife anguished as they had overseen my *impeccable earnestness and joyfulness in their care*. I thought we wanted our child to *be born an English citizen* I said sobbing the gruff unkind impatient man had returned. Six weeks from the baby's due date, February 2, we walked up the plank into the ship the French lady waving her hanky as we departed. As the ship pulled out of the harbor the horn piercing one of the ship's staff came over and said that the Captain was confining me to our quarters and that I would have an attendant assigned the Captain wary knowing that the ship had no stabilizers to buffet the unpredictable December seas. And sure enough we lurched and bucked our way across the Atlantic any furniture not fixed flew about or so I heard from

the female attendant assigned me. Ben scarf around his neck on the ship's prow astride looking out to sea as *Captain Ahab* for *Moby Dick*.

Ship docked helped to my very unsteady feet and escorted to land by the attendant asking her to warmly thank the Captain. Ben in the lead there waiting an entourage including Ben's father and step-mother and my parents all commenting that *I must be carrying two or three in there*. His father had driven Ben's old beetle to the dock and after a rushed meal at a diner we were off to Cambridge our luggage sent ahead to the apartment my friend Margo had rented for us right in the Center of Cambridge above the Window Shop across from Design Research and Marimekko. The sweet cozy apartment was furnished with our things from storage including a gift from Margot a second hand rocker to be used while nursing. Margot steadfast lifelong friend until a horrifying cancer death many years hence always present always to be counted on. The following day Ben rushed over to Harvard to deliver his dissertation and to talk about available professorships he wanted as I did to be in the greater New York area a seminal point of agreement that bound us. I went to the clinic at Boston Lying-In covered by insurance as a Harvard wife and was examined by the resident on duty who turned out to be not much older than I was and a Boston Irish Catholic who told me that at the delivery whoever was on duty would be the resident assigned. Instructed to come in weekly until ready for delivery, which more than likely wouldn't be for some six weeks.

Margot came daily to walk with me around Cambridge she was getting a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Harvard and generously agreed to accompany me on my daily constitutionals as I lumbered and lurched legs unsteady holding up eye-catching baby weight. This little still forming person was seeming positioned all in front as if his head were pushing out of my belly button and legs stiffened against my spine. *Can I touch is it coming tonight wow how many* the irrepressible Cambridge jaunty tongue. Old boyfriends were no where about either married or back to the wherever except for John, the Danforth Fellow John just returning from his three year stint in Nigeria here to defend his dissertation before heading to Northwestern and a professorship. His wife the college sweetheart with child was due about the time I was. Sitting close at the Window Shop cafe just below our apartment he sat with Ben and me sharing stories of *the field* though never accompanied by his wife. It didn't seem as if he was off on Safari's or touring the savannah unlike Ben who had woven into his dissertation ample time for skiing and flirtations. Describing their lives, his and his wife's in the small hut among indigenous natives with

weekly trips to the neighboring market flooded me with a strange sadness. His depiction exacting was the life I had envisioned while captivated by John even fortuitously informing my parents of such plans. No longer enamored by John but his very presence filled me with remorse at the betrayal of self I had perpetuated. Never to be assuaged or salvaged dreams dashed swept now by moments of tempestuousness of fury at everything about my life even the baby busting out belly.

Affairs of her Heart: Margot meanwhile with big doses of therapy unlocked the litany of her multiple affairs of the heart. I the free wheeling stage-stealing friend stayed locked up frightened fooled by my prudence. Poisons from desire distilled expunged my life felled with the rotting remains of lost chances derelict and too proud to ever say shout out *I love him I will die with him for me there is no other choice*. Squandered on a false premise that by not taking the sacred plunge I savaged myself sacrificing myself to her my mother who had made her lip licking conquest when she beat against me in uteri I was just too slow to learn. Yet here was Margot loving recklessly our psychology professor some thirty years her senior with wife and kids and then onto a flirtation with an old boyfriend of mine after I left Antioch rivalrous at heart. Currently in swoon with the *piece de resistance* the son of the cult-driven psychologist laying hands on seemingly the entire population of Cambridge and any other equivalent communities. Did she think I could meet him somehow this never happened he slipping from her multi-threaded Egyptian sheets onto someone else devastating her. Her face so sad we were for a time mirror images of subdued disappointment of our joint inability to hold onto men with whom we really fell in love. Margo and I never lost touch remaining lifelong fast friends. We knew each other's deepest secrets never having to couch a revelation or personal secret I didn't hold back. Contentiousness in the past arose painful and disruptive to our friendship when she shared that whenever I entered a room I drew attention from her by the very nature of my entrance. I was no longer that girl now she found a friend broken dimmed kirsch soaked from two years facing a mountain range sawing away on a cello and taken a vow of near silence. Like those dogs that leap through the fiery rim of a hoop in the circus after having my baby infant I found myself resurrected filled sparkle and song.

Visit Number Three: The third visit to the doctor on this our third week back had me again with the cute Irish Catholic from Boston *how are you doing* he asked gently and *how is your husband* having never met him. Following the exam he said with certainty *not for another three or more weeks* and see you

next time though it was the luck of the draw. That evening after some virulent dust up with Ben who already had tired of the whole pregnancy and baby business was understandably focused on defending his dissertation and getting a job in the greater New York area. *Coming to bed he growled No* I said *Okay* he mumbled as he dozed off. It was hard enough to sleep as any woman in late term pregnancy can attest placing leg up on a husband's hip works to relieve the stress and pressure on back and on bladder but I would rather sulk in the cushioned rocking chair all night rather than risk the chance of even touching him or having him come near me. Subduing sobs there I sat in the oversize rocker almost feeling the sensation of holding a suckling infant when suddenly as I dozed lightly my legs got all wet sticky gooey unmistakably drenched. *Ben I called out my water broke I have to go to the hospital.* Rousing little he called back *no not until you are in labor.* Ben having never attended any doctors' appointments on either side of the ocean was not aware of the meaning of water breaking and that it was a clear sign the baby was on the way and necessary to get to the hospital quickly and safely.

Unsteadily lumbered over to the phone dialed for the doctor on call the number well memorized even on the brink of hysteria who said *put your husband on the phone* telling him *you've got to bring her in immediately!* It was the same irresistible Irish Catholic resident I was relieved to know. Even without labor wails Ben took the opportunity to rush through the streets horn blaring breaking through stop signs and red lights pulling up to the Boston Lying-In just across the Charles River leaving the car in emergency parking where the doctor was waiting. *Say goodbye now* the doctor said to Ben. In 1965 husbands were not invited into labor or delivery rooms. *We'll have you a baby by midnight* he said as he escorted me through the doors. After a quick examination getting all sticky and gooey himself he said *we are going to have to bring this baby on with some help your body wasn't ready you hadn't dilated sufficiently to deliver without this injection to accelerate labor.* Flanked by nurses' and aids I was wheeled up to a room filled with other clinic patients waiting for the time when they would be taken to delivery rooms. Most of the women shrieking just out of *snake pit* other women sullen-eyed having been given injections to numb their lower bodies.

Echoes of England: Settled in waiting for labor to begin I pulled the doctor near me and said *I have been well-trained in London for a natural delivery will you please work with me* defying obstetrical protocol where it was either twilight, the shrieking women who would remember nothing of labor or delivery, or a benumbed lower body. Looking at me with a real appreciation of

my steely will he squeezed my hand and said *oh okay we will try it and I will personally look in on you* moving me to the far wall informing the nurse he would check on me frequently. I couldn't forsake his trust envisioning in mantra fashion the essence of the words of Grantly Dick-Read and of the mid-wife constantly warning that we had to *push the babies out on our own* because of her recent hysterectomy. Seemingly putting myself in a spell in a tight knit web of my own making I persisted as the pain mounted I just looked far across the ocean for solace and support and the sweet kind face of the French lady with whom we lived. Then came the moment when the doctor brought me into the delivery room and with just a nurse in attendance said after a close examination *the baby is transverse sideways we are going to have to get his head moved downward ready for delivery I can manipulate a little but you are going to have to help by pushing* the alternative being a dreaded cesarean *for it was not good to keep a baby from delivery so many hours after water breaking.* I understood and all of my if aimless cello practicing held me in good stead I followed his instructions exactly pushing on cue and pushed and pushed and pushed without exaggeration for nearly two hours and then as the clock reached to midnight he said *now we are ready let's go heave ho and with everything you've got I bet in five or six of those we will have you a baby.*

Occasionally checking in the Attending Physician the very same doctor who had put me in restraints not so many years ago looked on with disdain although not countermanding reassured by the resident that I was holding up well and that we could do this indifferently he just drifted off. On January 15 just fifteen minutes before midnight this Martin Luther King's very same birthday Jeremy was born. The nurse placed him on my belly and I whispered to him *Glory Be to the Newborn King.* The doctor gave me us a hug and said he would be by the next day to visit and to perform the circumcision should we want one. *I'm Jewish how could we not my attempt at a little weak and weary joke.*

Wheeled back into the ward where I was the lone Harvard wife the other new mom's a lick or step from poverty. The mixture of feelings and sensations in that room was daunting many women weeping not knowing how they would care for this new or next one slim curtain separated us but not the sounds. Ben was nowhere to be found he apparently had gone to some Danforth event that went on to the late evening. Just as the sun rose he entered the room having no visitor restrictions saying as if he created him on the eighth day *our son is here a nice eight and half pounds and over twenty-one inches long.* He

seemed truly and movingly proud. For moments we were joined and overcome with the pleasure and honor of holding our own newborn son.

As the only new mother wanting to nurse I had been given the infant to hold through the night attended often by the nurse assigned to assisting new nursing mothers. Unobtrusively listening as I sung over and over *Glory Be to the New Born King, Mary what you gonna name that pretty little baby, Oh, pretty little baby, Glory be to the new born King*. As physical as the birth I became another self no longer reticent that woman had floated off into the stratosphere she was just plain plumb gone. I felt strong and powerful a warrior woman I was indomitable I had a son hours old suckling at my breast. I felt fearless head-over-heels in love I was a mother and no one dare diminish or temper or quiet me. I would not again tuck my tongue inside my mouth returning to membership pre John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978) in the *Ellen James Society*. Before the next day arrived Ben entered in a huff *you didn't put a name down did you* and I hadn't. *I hate my father why would I call **my son** Philip William it will be Jeremy William the William after your father*, my father who Ben would belittle and disdain throughout the entire course of our marriage.

Golden Child: Jeremy was a golden infant glowing really. Following the circumcision difficult for the Irish Catholic doctor to perform still entrenched in his choir boy past he introduced me to a pediatrician a beautiful woman a resident as well. She walked over as I was holding and comforting my squalling infant saying clearly and unequivocally *your baby is very jaundiced this probably because he is three weeks premature his liver not fully developed along with his finger nails and eyebrows*. She continued *the baby's liver is reacting aversely poorly to your milk but since you seem to be adjusting so well to breast feeding we want to ask if you will bring the baby in early every morning so we can slice his little foot to get a blood sample it is called a Billrubin test to see if the levels of jaundice fall on their own as the baby adjusts to the milk if not we will have to ask you to stop nursing and transfuse the baby's entire blood stream*. This said almost without break or pause and I reacted if tearfully with confidence knew to trust her and put both of us into her hands. For fifteen days Ben without hesitating brought us to the hospital although feeling panicky he seemed afraid to defy or contradict the new, if a stranger, me. On the fifteenth day almost the date Jeremy was due the levels began to fall both doctors broadly smiling saying *we did it and now just bring him in, in five days so we can be certain*. Standing tall with me a young Irish Catholic resident, defying all hospital standard protocol and now a young pediatrician willing to take a gamble on me appreciating that I would abide the promise to turn

things around the connection with my baby Jeremy not to be tampered unrivalled.

Roaring: A belching brewing furnace a lion's roar the roar of storm and thunder of whip spinning tornado the climb of the undulating seas wind seduced to rise curlicue skyward searching for metaphor for simile to capture me, Mother. My life reaching far back to first howling infants thrust from mothers her sounds unimaginably human unimaginable birthing mothers' inventing the spectrum of sound. Holding my tiny son I felt a surge a power the universe touching me beyond time beyond destiny beyond chance. How to name the force pitching me forward mythic woman fearless daunting? What to say with every suckle someone stormed out of me not to be denied or turned from the personal pronoun *I*. The hieroglyph the symbols of motherhood ancient raw animal human whoever whatever pushes a new life from limb a universe in perpetuity of one. Touch me come near savage tooth lance in hand hands that once mauled clawed confronting now a *sacred sphere* a *Mandela* "the only difference between me and a madman/ madwoman is that I'm not mad" (*Salvatore Dali*).

Mad words scrambling searching the words electric rattling the earth's first power the first storm crawling out of seabed. What primitive body thrust thighs fly open crazy umbrella in gust of wind who cares who the seed relished desired beyond madness a hunger rears grab any push him into me my body needs a baby my body crazy urges unruly desires unkempt beyond human or all too human elliptical danger to innocence I am no man's parody. Love is something else it belongs to the heart. The squall disruption life breaks apart crazy wanting fist down throat yearning for an infant a baby my body unruly in its quest and when squish and throbbing first screaming out baby's mouth crazily lurching searching to complete itself breasts pumping beating hardened hurting milk liquid blue white comes *let down* they call it animistic soul dream words memories days weeks days gone. Timeless circling the sky unbounded no hold on me baby and me we soar we move off a shadow on a passing cloud we move away from you away from you. Hunt words scavenging searching how to speak it say it a body a baby suckling stretching out across tummy still swollen achy limbs birth passage pulses bruised and hurting.

How disembodied disemboweled my mother who turned from her infant me tits filling with *sakrete* pleading how minutes old I had turned from her rejected her let her know I didn't couldn't would never love her.

Madness

Eyes shut tight
I hear my brains go splat and scatter
Like dry tea-leaves.

I must kill
One lovely languid serpent after another.

A horse lies dangling upside down and a moon rising
Mary with a child in her arms weeps with red eyes—
Now watch me whittle my finger away
And paint red characters.

One streak of white hair many streaks of white hair
I am not to blame it's the dreams the paper that are to blame
A car crashes into another car slowly undersea
Whittling my finger sharpening it like a pencil
Let me write in red O Mary what words do you want to write down?

Darkness comes rushing on me with waves with fever
A knife comes flying to me with a cat O burst the window!

Pitiful

O everything each and everyone so pitiful. Sachiko Yoshihara

Sachiko Yoshihara: I found her, Sachiko Yoshihara, she is my discovery there is always a voice a song testimony wild but not crazy not alone never alone yawning time the fishing metaphor brings in reels a vision a star has a face the moon a voice nighttime sounds. Women totem ancient dancing about me Matisse galumphing dancers circling me I am not alone women alive within I see them I feel them. The baby came I was the grandest me power overwhelming the night sky stars hold on tight I am roaring I clamor I harvest every sigh every kiss every suckling infant from the first to me. I am all of motherhood I am that powerful I am that powerful *Glory be glory be* dear sweet wonderful Jeremy. Jeremy lamentations will come never can rest easy too much to ache and cry for sorrow is a constant and the harder weight to carry to strive for. I hold my infant my newborn alert for any who trespasses on our inner space. I am resolved to savage I am that lion on the savannah I am the tiger teeth poised for gnashing I am the robin darting wings flying near nest eggs cracking open tender wet soft peeping sounds never doubting a mother to answer first calls. Transformed warrior woman emerged threatening menacing don't get too close or else I am everything to fear that power that energy that sorcery the baby my Jeremy on my belly I dare you, you will never again be near enough to touch me. Father looking on another child turned from moments old and that is our common hold.

Love is something else. Had no nose no footing instincts amok it was would be impossible for me to pick the right man to love to love the right man I stopped short of moving beyond. Life devoid of massages of loving affection of hand holding of having my hair toyed with all not never possible. Loving that way didn't come with me circumstance history genealogy being Jewish crazy nomadic Jewish blood of the lamb plagues Arcs on stormy seas bred into me. *God* I don't believe in you in love will never have a true love never experience true love. What is worse to never have had a true love or to be so aware of never having been loved in that way by man or woman? But birth that is way beyond the sky behind the sky beyond the sky this is bigger than circumstance this is way bigger imagination rivals *god* becoming a mother an infant to hold that much trust entrusted thus dwarfs *god* and his mean gestures and withholdings. *Glory be to the new born king* he my Jeremy was no vestigial miracle birth a man entered me gave me his seed love was no part of this quixotic yet exalted act horrifying to say but true. Love's possibility short-circuited as if born without limb or malfunctioning internal organ my soul connected prodigiously to the sun the sky the sunrise the sunset the ocean's tides but a human face the spirit the love of my life if ever present escaped recognition As I moved my fingers through the soft of my new son's hair I knew there was a breach a brokered agreement to have true love never find me. Stampeding wild horses wild mythic beings wishes on full moons on birthday candles on pod rich dandelions would bring me naught nothing to offer the love *god* could entice change the current of this life course.

NONSENSE

*The wind is blowing
The tree stands.*

*Yes, nights like these
You stand, the tree.*

*The wind is blowing
The tree stands, a sound is heard.*

*Alone, I play with bitter lather
In my bathtub late at night,*

*Breathing out the bubbles like a crab
In the lukewarm water.*

*A slug is crawling
On the wet tiles*

*Yes, late nights like these
You crawl, the slug.*

*I sprinkle salt on you
You disappear and yet remain.*

*What fear is: existing
Or not existing.*

*Once again, spring has come
Once again, the wind is blowing*

*I am a salted slug
I don't exist, not anywhere.*

*Surely the lather
Has carried me away*

*Yes, nights like these
I'm carried, me. Sachiko Yoshihara*

On Being a Mother: I found my earth I found my star motherhood gave that to me. First a son, my Jeremy and then three years later my prize *heifer*, Rebecca screaming her lungs out before her head crowned. Twenty years later I took into my arms a son a found son an indigenous child my *Guaraní Indian* whose birth mother still searches the sky from her tree house parrots squawking nearby. Celestial inebriating ecstatic mommying until a collision course with fate when an event beyond imagining when one's child is felled by a catastrophic illness when they ripped out the stomach of my found child his poop an endless stream of clotted stench running off a surgical hole in his stomach. Humbled handmaiden to physical malfeasance maladies body massacred in ways beyond speech words what vocabulary for battling death and coming out so diminished disfigured life so twisted up humbling being a mother thus. More than Mary so saintly regarded thus by those who looked away *if you hadn't taken him in who knows* they say a chorus of the horrified to mollify. I am that mother who took you in and now and now look on as they ply you with drugs and strange devices. From the start you could never sit to eat a regular American meal would not drink milk fruit and sweets were to eat. Your energy scared the sanctimonious *he needs pills to calm down* his father thrust them down his gagging mouth while I protesting vociferously watching on. Motherhood henceforth took on other auras other orbits wondering why and why not never got it right. I got born I lived beyond gnawing suicide to multiply and divide like a simple cell acknowledging now that ancestry was too narrow a lens Jews Pogrom my mother only half of the picture. Irrelevant all I am an invention of the soul of birthing womanhood its unquestioning constancy. And that is how I frame my life death legacy.

The distant noises in the streets were gradually hushed; the house was quiet as a sepulcher; the dead of night was confined in the silent city.
Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit

MARGO: Scrambling beyond our imaginations suicide clinging like wet clothing we were two sparring friends who is to save who? We lived through it episodically we went on. Margo, I was at your graveside reading something about Antioch and as a Jew to another Jew. As death swept her body a terrifying unremitting Lung Cancer Margo became a Jew. Margo whose family was listed on the Mayflower manifest Margo whose mother was a member in good standing of the Daughters of the American Revolution and a Kentucky blue grass native. Margo whose father was an original Standard Oil potentate grew up in Short Hills New Jersey an enclave restrictive of Jews and this Margo became a Jew.

Motherhood pulled her to the gravesite the Jewish burial ground she converted to Judaism to lie next to her John dead twenty or more years of leukemia. Margo never forgave herself for having him suffer through legally obligatory chemotherapy treatments. Leukemia diagnosed when he was just three almost four sucked into the world of pediatric oncology subjected to a cruelty beyond tolerable. The chemicals dripped in remorselessly heating up crippling pain food finding no place to digest his blood stream thinner and meaner contaminants drawing him away from her. Until just before his seventh birthday Margo held onto him John's pleading smile trusting but wondering as she rocked him back and forth *why and why and why?* Never reconciled beyond John's death why she submitted agreed asking herself over and over why she didn't violate the law and run away a renegade finding their Tahiti. But Margo couldn't budge never late for one of John's ruthless merciless scheduled appointments each time he looking up at her wondering *why, why, why mother why?* Margot steadfast following cancer treatment protocol never forgave herself never found a worthy answer forever having his small face looking at her wondering even as he finally was drawn from her a limp withered baby dying in her arms.

Margo raised three children a son born exactly to the day a year after John's death but never stopped longing if lifetimes ago to have lived with John among Tahiti flowerbeds bathed in light and sun and when as his last breathes sputtered out she had covered him in brilliant native cloth wading with him out to sea with the evening ebb of tide. In actuality John was buried in the

Jewish family cemetery in one of the plots held on reserve by her husband's notable Boston Jewish family.

Soon after the birth of the third child a son Margo and her husband divorced he intolerant of her obsessive Tahiti fantasy he a physician if psychiatrist soldered to the world of medicine and pharmaceuticals. Margo became a Jew in the last months when her life was foredoomed. Only Jews can be buried in that cemetery and Margo wanted in perpetuity to be with her son, John. Talking with her graveside I understood mother-to-mother I understood.

For the two years I was Antioch Margo and I drove back and forth from Ohio to New Jersey she to *no Jews allowed* Short Hills and I to the overwhelmingly Jewish Weequahic section of Newark. We were always an odd couple gravitating to each other and pulling away negative and positive force for no understandable or discernable reason there was no chemistry there was no tingle and yet we became a lifelong couple of mysteriously committed and connected friends. Margot was brilliant and never spent a sleepless night questioning the power of her brain or that she could fathom life and ideas on a level left unavailable to most of us. I lived in fear of disclosure convinced I was of my very limited intelligence and probably not up to even being in college. Margot and I never ever discussed how smart she was or how stupid and lacking I believed I was. When I left Antioch in the dark of one night to relocate in Boston she asked that all of her succeeding Antioch Coop assignments be in Boston or Cambridge. In crisis immediately receiving help complained to the psychiatrist about her shadowing me he trying to give me tools to create a distance in our friendship. The psychiatrist never getting the real need Margo and I had for each other it existing in the realm of the metaphysical. While Margot had love affairs early on with a rarified assortment of men age or marital status of no relevance I pined for John obsessed about John waited for the day when he would take me, which he did on my twenty-first birthday. Margot towered over most academic challenges and was accepted for a Ph.D. at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Chicago in the fields of philosophy or psychology. It was to be Harvard for psychology perhaps because and maybe that is how we connected she needed to come to terms with her craziness yes craziness as we were both at root crazy insane raw but had a strange knack for keeping it all for the most part in check. Attending my wedding to Ben, Margo looked on at me with a profoundly grave and sorrowful expression. She knew that I was making solemn vows that meant nothing to me that I was pitifully handing myself over sacrificing myself for to appease my mother. I was choosing *never to stand on my own two feet* the pull of the

umbilical cord greater than any if unremembered dream for the future. Margo came to visit me the day after I lost the baby her eyes again held that sadness obliterating the shell of me as she squeezed my hand.

I didn't see Margo again until I returned to Cambridge nearly three years later when she was waiting to greet us in the apartment she had furnished and rented for us. Margo was well into her graduate studies and had professors searching for avenues to keep up with her incisive and endlessly probing mind. She was in love with this powdery-faced gorgeous graduate student at Tufts whose father was a psychology luminary almost of iconic stature. He was a mediocre student if handsome as any Hollywood star with the magnetism of Steve McQueen and Robert Redford. It was perplexing why he hung about so closely to Margot who was intense and attractive but never was considered pretty. On an afternoon visit to her apartment with my by now four month old plump and continually humming Jeremy I asked her what she was working on so intently *Oh his paper* she responded quickly. Then I knew that this guy needed a lifeline to academic success Margo the designated co-author more ghostwriter of his graduate papers and sure enough when he had gotten to his dissertation which he never completed he dropped her just ran off with nary a good-bye. Soon after Margo found a psychiatrist in training from a prominent wealthy Boston Jewish family. I quipped to her new husband at their wedding *that wanting to be or be near Jews was like an addiction that Margot had no choice after so many years of friendship with me to wind up with a Jew.* Margot with her own great-inherited wealth and her wealthy Boston Jewish doctor bought a Victorian house on the *historic registry of houses* in Newton. Soon had a daughter followed two years later by another daughter and then two years later John. Margot had been visting us in our cabin in Lenox, Massachusetts when I thought something seemed off with the baby she was still nursing. Suggested I go back to Boston with her and stay there with Jeremy and by then Rebecca and her two daughters while she took John to the pediatrician.

When she walked into the house she was shattered and sobbing it was almost certain that John suffered from the most virulent strain of leukemia tests to confirm within days. Her husband was in Israel on a trip with friends when this diagnosis was made and quickly returned. And then the struggle ensued he wanting to abide by the protocols for treatment to the letter of the law and Margot wanting to take the older children and John and go off yes really to Tahiti. For more than a decade of summers after I left Ben we would rent cottages in Wellfleet Massachusetts and on the way would spend a night or

two with Margo in her extraordinary Victorian house. Blankets and laundry flung over the exquisite woodwork yet to be folded and distributed each of the children's rooms a tumble of laundry mixed in with other belongings. The kitchen table held wood bowls filled with bagels an array of cream cheeses in the refrigerator. Margo was proud of the hand painted Dutch tiles forming a backsplash and bordering the entire kitchen. Margo and I shared a birthday, July 17, were a year apart I the older neither of us putting much weight in the readings of constellations but throughout the years spoke or met on our birthday.

Our Mother is Dying: Soon after our birthday I got a call from her oldest daughter to inform me that Margo had been diagnosed with a rapidly advancing lung cancer and that she would welcome a visit of the two of us I had been the smoker. Within days I got on the shuttle greeted at the door by her sister with whom she was very close. Margo and her sister lived contrasting lives with the use of generous trust funds Margot conforming to a Cambridge Newton life style among and with other Harvard affiliated psychologists and psychiatrists her sister and husband raising four children in Uruguay in a rural and wildly desolate part of the country.

The sister gave me a quick hug and told me that three of her four college age children along with Margot's three children were all in and around the bed with Margot. I could not have been adequately prepared for the shadowy harrowing vanishing soul of a friend a vague and ominous resemblance. Fortunately holding back any gasp or sob I smiled weakly at this dearest of all friends in an embrace she thin to the bone the chalky white color residue of chemotherapy minus eyebrows with a few wisps of hair covering her clear skinned skull. She looked up and reached out and then I just heaped into her arms and toppling into hard sobs suddenly there were a chorus of us hard crying along with her sister holding onto each other. I had never experienced anything like this before the awful cancer ravished transformation of a person going from life to death inevitable and incontrovertible breaths away.

The sister brought us sandwiches and lemonade, which Margo turned from. Her children brought out photos from the time when Margo and I were in our twenty's and early thirty's Margo put them in a single album. I was stunned by our symmetry and how beautiful I seemed to have been I never had any idea before this moment that there I was a shimmering rare beauty. How strong and clear-eyed Margo became leafing through the album with me how often our hands or shoulders touched leaning in with hugs and cheek-to-cheek

embraces. I wanted to keep a photo or two knowing that if not then I would never again see myself captured in this way. Of course we never looked at photos again when I returned a few days later it was obvious that the final hours were near Margo unable to lift her head off the pillow. This time the family left us alone and I lay down next to her head-to-head sort of dozing holding hands I knew as I closed her door that this goodbye was final. Margo shared as we lay there that she had within the last months with the direction of a rabbi converted to Judaism so that she could be buried next to John. She explained it was either that or exhuming the body in the dark of night not wanting to disturb his long final rest she chose to become Jew. As I listened I quipped that this was inevitable since she always was trying to be just like me to which she just giggled arduous and breathy as it was. The next morning her oldest daughter called and said that Margo had died early that morning and as was the practice with Judaism would be buried the next day. There would be a grave side ceremony led by Margo's Rabbi and she asked me to speak a request made by their father as well. A reception would follow at Margo's stately house hosted by her sister attended by colleagues and friends.

The next day I arrived at the house at 8am and immediately Margo's children and I were driven to the cemetery. After John's death Margo enrolled in courses to study the sources of leukemia at MIT. She worked as a training psychologist for Harvard and directed one of Harvard's mental health facilities. In the car I learned that her oldest daughter who had received a Ph.D. in biochemistry was employed as a researcher in Washington at the National Institute for Cancer Research her husband a mechanic watched their son about five years old. Margo's other daughter was completing her medical studies at Harvard and would go on to become a pediatric oncologist. The youngest child her son a recent graduate of Bard would after extensive travels to India with Bard friends to settle in Brooklyn to make films and work on food vending trucks.

At the cemetery there were about thirty invited guests colleagues other relatives including her ex-husband's immediate family his wife and her children. After the Rabbi gave some introductory remarks about how he had come to convert Margo believing it was what was in her heart then saying the traditional graveside prayers for the dead. Each of her three children got up to talk sharing anecdotes of their memorable special moments with their mom and then they asked that I speak. What follows is what I read:

We drove back and forth to Antioch College in her Jaguar, no she reminded me a mere few weeks ago, it was a Triumph. We were an odd couple two New Jersey girls who shared the same birth date, July 17th one year apart I was older. I a non-practicing Jewish girl from Newark and she a Christian from Short Hills, that exclusive enclave that I had always heard kept Jews out. As the miles to that unlikely school, Antioch College, unraveled we found ourselves breaking the trip in the hills of West Virginia, we found an inner resonance. Now Antioch, that was the school in the late '50's that political radicals sent their progeny. Pete Seeger held a sing-in on our first night there to welcome his niece. Two nights later we were lying down in front of Wright Patterson Air Force Base protesting. I knew how I got there, but how in the world did Margot? Did her guidance counselor mistake it for Amherst, which of course then did not accept girls?

Soon into our friendship on a school holiday, Margot invited me to her house to share Christmas. I know that I was the first Jewish person to cross the threshold except for contractors or delivery people. Her mother with all Southern grace asked if I wouldn't give out the presents. I am sure the irony occurred to her biblically as well.

When John got sick, I was with Margo. When I was bed restricted with a newborn and a three-year-old Margo came to Philadelphia to take care of us with a huge handmade Pooh Bear tucked under her arm she entered our home much like Mary Poppins.

Through the years we shared secrets about boyfriends and life's exigencies, there was never a doubt about our constancy. We attended each other's weddings, my two, and consoled after divorces.

But mostly we would talk children. I always wanted five or six and would talk about it when we were still girls. Margo never spoke that much, if at all, about having children but when they arrived I saw a powerful transformation as if she finally had come home to herself. If asked what her most wonderful accomplishment the thing that brought her the deepest pleasure, it would be Mike, Laura, and Martha.

When I visited with Margo which was to be for the last time it was in the glow of a transcendent love, the love of three children surrounding their mother like sweet angels, like serious individuals who knew they were embarked on escorting their mother to her death. "Death is our most

important moment," a friend told me as my father died. "Death is the mother of beauty," writes Wallace Stevens.

My friend Margo died a hard death in the most loving set of arms. I know that Margo lives inside of me. I will keep sharing. Mike and Laura and Martha have an inner strength that is unrivalled. I hope they will every once in a while keep in touch so that I can feel even a little closer to my Margo, my dear dearest life long friend, Margo.

Then the Rabbi gave the final blessing with each of her children and nieces and nephews putting a flower on the casket as it was lowered into the ground. We drove back to the reception, which was filled with young people friends of her children and colleagues. Margo was gone for me and irreplaceable and now as I am seventy-three I often find myself consulting with her. Blunt forthright empathic and loving anticipating her responses to my latest revelation about a child or the current state of my life that reverberating ache of her loss penetrates permeates. Her death emptied her life of physicality but she exists for me as spirit a body double I becoming responsible for this duality. Margo I cannot say your name without my throat tightening and tears filling my by now cataract salted eyes.

CAMBRIDGE TO PHILADELPHIA SHUFFLE

Swelled with milk and with power holding my Jeremy to my breast whenever we felt like it in our big overstuffed rocker his laminate tan fading the jaundice in control we hummed and lollygagged and for the months of his first year I was complete. Swelling within me a *sleeping tiger* when just the glimpse of the whiff of danger of threat an untoward look a garbled twisted compliment from my mother on our occasional visits and I would bay up unfurled stretched out claws jutting incisors sharpening quick to hold back just barely the threat of throttling clawing dismembering the scent of this lurk kept my mother the singular tool of incitement contained.

In the haze the aftermath soulfully singing a gospel of love *Glory Be to the New Born King*, a Harvard psychiatrist who had a radio show on the Boston public radio station linked to WBAI asked to hold a two hour interview with a circle of Harvard affiliated new mothers. Without hesitation I agreed to participate. WBAI was the primary source of my mother's ever left leaning cant at odds with slippage, her tumbleweed of racial slurs and homophobic comments

drawing swords against her and peeking odds with her husband my father. My father weak-kneed at her my mother's seductive beauty stood tall never wavering from principled positions of justice the sanctity of which held a promise *to the death* if that is what it meant to defend *equal rights for and above all*. My father's persona Ibsen's *Brand* ever wrought and pure of heart a heavy burden for those of us whose tongue's got occasionally jumbled and mired in contradictions wayward digressions. Powerless to resist an opportunity to speak of motherhood when Jeremy would suckle or curl on my belly the power of a vanity moment outweighed the sense of foreboding of the interview's reach through WBAI to my mother's Millburn, New Jersey kitchen.

WBAI: On the day of the two-hour interview convened three women unknown to me all of us still with sore bottoms and oozing breasts. We all of course nursed even if it frowned upon by the greater Boston medical establishment if not in our enclave Cambridge. We were either Harvard graduate students or wives of graduate students at Harvard. After brief introductions the director signaled we were *live* not wanting to impinge upon or corrupt the spontaneity the psychiatrist leading with, *Please share fears you had before the delivery, during the course of your pregnancy, if any:* speaker one a rosy faced Irish Catholic from across the river said she had had none, speaker two ruddy farm girl from Minnesota *just loved being pregnant she answered*, speaker three blond confident from Los Angeles *occasionally I would worry if the baby would come out right would be perfect*, and then me, *pregnant for most of it in London and here just three weeks before my son was born I was filled with the fear that he had multiple heads if not that multiple legs or arms or that his body would be inside out*. The psychiatrist trying to mediate the others seemingly stricken with my confession brusquely and provocatively interfering with their over arching sense of well-being and inner harmony.

Well, the psychiatrist who had previously interviewed each of us continued, *you, to me, had had a rough first pregnancy perhaps that contributed to these fears*, the breathing around the table eased. Undaunted eager to tell my story I continued, *it got to the point where I would quip occasionally annoying and upsetting my husband that he ought to place his hands on my ever burgeoning tummy to feel all of the legs and arms or the two heads just like an octopus. He indulged me if tense because he had read that pregnancy often makes women crazy. Well* stammered in the Minnesotan *when they told me I had a daughter I didn't believe them I thought I had delivered a still-born and this went on for about twenty-four hours even when they brought the baby to me. And the*

woman from Los Angeles chipped in that she had fervently believed and could not be convinced otherwise that there was something terribly wrong with the baby and that no one was telling her the truth. The Boston Catholic stayed in character and as the two hours drew to an end I blurted out zealous into this confessional, *what was most frightening to me was that my mother would walk into the room to see the new baby and my milk would just dry up it would be gone I would not be able to nurse.* The psychiatrist in summing up said something generic like, *it is pretty universal for a woman to worry about whether the baby will be normal and a normal baby is what every woman wants to have and that the fears are played out in pregnancy in dreams or fantasies or after the delivery when women often have a hard time believing that they did indeed deliver a normal baby.*

Chopped Liver: Some weeks later on a phone call with my mother she recounted a radio program she had heard on WBAI about pregnancy and in fear I tightened up *well here goes* I said to myself. And my mother always the prevailing expert shared the content and then said with clarity and authority *it is true all women fear an abnormal baby I was afraid with you* she continued *but most upsetting was that one of the women was afraid her milk would dry up when her mother first came to visit the baby imagine, how sad to have that level of anger in a mother daughter relationship* and with that she hung up. This is not one of those long shaggy dog stories often from the time when I was about five until about nine when I stopped listening to her she would often say conversing with strangers or friends, *I always wished I had had a daughter, or I always wanted a daughter* as I stood there next to her. Now she was feeling the *sorrow and pity* for the girl whose milk might dry up at first sight of her mother. I guess I had been and will forever be just *chopped liver* in her eyes.

Ben successfully defended his dissertation and was offered an assistant professorship at the University of Pennsylvania where we would move in the summer. The University offered to pay a down payment on a row house near the campus if in a reputed dangerous neighborhood. On a trip in late April we purchased a corner row house with lots of light two floors three bedrooms a solarium a fireplace with a sweet small yard looking out to a commons shared by the other six attached houses. Returning to Cambridge saying our goodbyes Ben to the Club 47 I never returning once Jeremy was born and to the Political Science Department and to his advisor Louis Hartz, author of *The Liberal Tradition in America* seminal to political theorists. Professor Hartz soon thereafter suffered a complete mental breakdown moving to live in Istanbul where Harvard with due civility paid for an attendant to look after

him to make sure he ate had proper medical attention and where I believe he ultimately died. I remember him as a rather high strung animated energetic professor a bit out of the mold of the staid S.S. Pierce shopping devotees of Julia Childs many of who were regulars at her coveted dinner parties. Professor Hartz often dropping the word Jewish into commentaries like a clunk of ice into a drink to prickle the skin of the secular and Christian fellow colleagues would brag about his son and mention his Bar Mitzvah. Professor Hartz was devoted to his graduate students and moved them all through the rigorous Ph.D. process. I never got around to crossing the Charles River to show off my new baby or to visit the Chair of my department I had nothing to say to him the what of it gone deep inside.

PHILADELPHIA: By August we were in our new home. Ben had been invited to serve on the faculty by a fellow Harvard Ph.D. the Chair of the Political Science Department, a GERMAN Jew who still wore upon occasion his Gymnasium tie from his days as a student in Berlin before his family fled to Austin Texas. Moving way forward, in the most profound and prophetic way he never really ever left Berlin and at his death in his late '80's he left money to the very same Gymnasium still educating students still wearing the same ties. Almost a compulsion always jarring I would up my quotient of Jewish references when near him, which grated and enraged although always held in with respectful restraint. We the babies born to Jewish families in the 1930's and early 1940's were the characterizations so apt in the novels of Philip Roth whether observant or secular Judaism loomed pervasive and haunting. The Chair of the Department and Ben shared an affinity for the writings of Louis Hartz and I imagine adhered like Velcro to professorial identities shaped in a Harvard department disdainful of anything New York, i.e. Jewish. Both men needing to embellish their credentials their rapacious ambitions seminal to their very existence quickly and spuriously invited the esteemed Professor Carl Joachim Friedrich to a guest lectureship Professor Friedrich of thick German accent renowned and Jewish.

Professor Friedrich stayed with us one night a week for the entire semester and often enjoyed feeding Jeremy his morning pabulum still in pajamas with toothbrush like a precious folded hanky in pocket. He challenged Ben to be a strong and brilliant political philosopher and not yield to his obvious astonishing appetite for fame and fortune to pandering and to the derivative. As a fatherly mentor co-authored a series of essays with Ben giving him a *leg up* on the tenure ladder and ultimately broke off contact as Ben unreeled himself as a *hungry mouth* for professorial largesse sacrificing depth and

significance for a carefully crafted rise to notoriety and a professorial *bad boy* reputation. As wife as much as I would wince at many of his actions or moves I always believed he enjoyed teaching and his students and perhaps that was the most authentically expressed part of him.

Welcome Basket: Within days of our arrival in Philadelphia a robust energetic woman came to the door with a wicker basket covered with a folded checkered cotton napkin filled with gourmet specialties mustards jams crackers assorted cheeses bottles of French red wine and a bunch of freshly picked wild flowers. She came to welcome us as the wife of the Chair of the Department. Wicker basket on the table she wandered around admiring what were *pedigreed antiques* in the living room and dining room. Ben's mother had a storage house filled with furniture put away as she had moved from each of her homes to make room for newer and more precious acquisitions. I was to learn later that she squandered a fortune on furniture as she exchanged apartments about every two years. I shared that the furniture was on long-term loan from Ben's mother and asked if she knew how best to care for the furniture. It was my good fortune that she knew how best to care and preserve each piece. Royal maroon was the color I chose to paint the dining room flaming red for the kitchen. Filling old irregular small bottles with vegetable dyes getting the colors just right an ongoing preoccupation as they sat on the sills of our corner row house windows reflecting magical hues throughout the day and early evenings.

Becoming a Friend: During frequent lunchtime visits I learned this woman had married while at Radcliff a man who he had been her professor and was fifteen years older. She a bona fide Philadelphia Mainline socialite growing up in a large gracious house with an expanse of land in which her horses freely roamed and attended a premier private girl's school. Her father was the Chair of the most prestigious bank in Philadelphia and had been the Undersecretary of the Navy a political appointment of Eisenhower's. Stalwart establishment Republicans recoiling when she brought home this German Jew if a Harvard professor announcing her intention to marry. Her family brutally shaken by the death of her brother and sole sibling from a car crash the aftermath of which left him in a comatose state for almost three years. Obliging her new husband became a reconstructed Republican ultimately with family largesse served as an Ambassador during the Nixon administration. This generous and big-hearted woman became a close and lifelong friend and of all to be admired was the robust and adoring love for her two young sons as well as her prowess in the kitchen.

Through exigencies of life she divorced her trolling Professor husband after she had served loyally as an Ambassador's wife. Set free entered the Foreign Service on her own terms serving as a political officer first to Iceland this when her younger son entered Columbia and her other son finished up at Harvard. Along with another former Harvard wife we formed an informal alliance calling ourselves *Ex-wives of Harvard political scientists*. In the spirit of true sisterhood we accompanied her to the airport as she left for Iceland and then to Norway and ultimately to South Africa. What bound this friend and I so tightly were the bangs bruises crushed spirits and a perpetual need to flee the murderous rages of our mothers. Hers a boozy member of the Mainline and mine a wild inconsolable Jew each living with men who were supplicants husbands and not fathers witnesses to unconscionable behavior to daughters remaining numb and silent.

It Came Upon a Night: On about the third night we were in residence in Philadelphia the doorbell rang at dusk. There was a little boy about seven with his sister about five they looked as if they were originally from India asking if they could stay with us because their mother had to go to the hospital. They lived three houses away *of course* I said and immediately grabbed Jeremy and went with them to reassure their mother that they would be well taken care of and to get their things already packed in two duffels. The mother was Caucasian I never learned about the identity of the father except to say he had come from India. The two children became as if the inner lining of our lives often sleeping and eating at our house dismounting the school bus coming to our door for snacks and hugs for Jeremy who waited each day by the window for their arrival. By mutual if unspoken agreement I shared this brother and sister with their mother who with stooped shoulders offered if occasionally a wan smile.

CAMPUS UNREST: This was the late 1960's the campus was abuzz with resistance to the Viet Nam War and Ben in the thick of it. Students gathering at our house welcomed around dinner times often feeding Jeremy as they spoke of politics and planned protests. I was the Professor's wife very connected to the moment joining *The Women's Strike for Peace*. Groups of similarly minded women would go out in flank to inform young men in poorer and all black sections of Philadelphia that they *had rights and that they didn't have to serve in the military* to which we received rude mocking attention at best. Who ever knows what came of our leafleting it was clear that they were not the children of the privileged who lurked in the shadow of the draft while their families searched for waivers or alternative service or safe houses in

Canada in which they could hide out staying perhaps forever. Fervor and high energy reigned around our dining room table where plans were formalized to protest march resist. Friday evenings we opened our house to what we called a *salon* where a co-mingling of faculty from different departments a rare occurrence came together to discuss politics and to find ways to join the resistance to the Viet Nam War with their students. We sipped wine drank beer as if inhabiting the universal terrain of artists and intellectuals taking our place in the canon of *great salons* always a gracious hostess wanting to please Ben never feeling quite at ease with colleagues his connection to students always more comfortable.

Life was on a fairly normal keel Ben was immersed in campus life and plotting his next moves although his ambition raw and unnerving. The solarium became his office but as he moved in and out of the house he often just gave us a weak greeting if he recognized us at all. Our home a hub for students coming over even when Ben wasn't there enjoying these young charges who played boundlessly with Jeremy and in these times of roaring uncertainty and dislocation our home became a true *safe house*. One day on the way to the Park waiting to cross at a light a young girl black girl around eleven asked if she could accompany us to the Park and then to our house for lunch she too becoming a regular part of our household. When she asked if she could live with us I mentioned it to Ben who fell off a cliff rearing up in full force his frightening rage, which had been primarily dormant or blunted since our return from Switzerland. The young girl became a constant presence joining us summers in our small newly purchased unheated cabin in Lenox Massachusetts not far from Ben's parents Inn, Wheatleigh to which children were not welcomed if their own grandchildren.

Disturbing on a walk on the campus not far from our house there from a flagpole extending from a fraternity house was a black body hung by his feet in effigy. I was stunned I hadn't met these students these bigots the stolid mainstay of a university most probably legacy students whose parents funded the university generously. Spinning the stroller around I ran off the campus repulsed and enraged and hating any affiliation we had and when I mentioned it to Ben who obviously had come across things like this spending so much time on the campus he just threw it off as a small if hateful part of the student body.

Ben's solarium was off bounds to Jeremy and therefore to me his papers and work not to be moved or violated and around the room along the baseboard were about one hundred photos of girls pre-puberty or just at the cusp in seductive poses with scant clothing these the work of his brother still to my mind *James Dean*. Back in the states barely a year and again wondering what I hath wrought with a house filled with rare antiques a solarium with salacious photos of young girls and a husband who increasingly with each day had a rapacious hunger for fame and fortune a prominent place in this world. He became a skulking wolf after a barren winter filled with a need to destroy whatever stood in the way of his ambition no matter the cost. Motherhood shrouded and protected me I was no longer susceptible to being put away to becoming invisible to churning up old screams and old fears and old longings for death. Motherhood almost making me impervious to the lesser and lesser role I was to play in Ben's life as he mounted with undaunted fury more and more *a place in the sun*.

Jeremy and I sat on the banks of the Schuylkill River on fall and spring Sunday afternoons while Ben rowed to and from our sightline in a one person skull on high alert we waved as he came within focus he watched to monitor our level of attentiveness. Jeremy who was mild mannered and who never ventured far from my side would in his first year wander about settling down to watch a cloud move by. He was not yet aware that our primary purpose the justification for our family life was how well we watched we witnessed served as audience for our increasingly despotic head of family. Subtext urgent above a whisper that we existed to affirm his existence again I was attached to pathological narcissist Ben with exacting symmetry mimicked my mother's manipulative craziness when she sensed our eyes our minds straying veering if for moments unto our own selves. Our day at the park ended our bottoms grass stained returning to our row house Ben commenting straight faced without a scintilla of humor *that was a very nice very gratifying Sunday family outing*. Everything got a grade was judged on the slide rule of good to bad dependent upon a kind of supercilious grandiosity this the dominion of a ruler for his supplicants. We were increasingly the subject's feudal tenants living off the whim of a ruthless overlord.

Tulips Springtime: As months moved on and our fall planted bulbs bloomed if for a day Jeremy gingerly taking petals yellow red orange bringing them to me in a hat *here mommy this is for you* each day thereafter Jeremy wandering the small fenced in yard looking for more bloom. Jeremy and I became a wonderful ensemble an easy alliance of mother and son knowing that his desire to be

close to my side would not last forever if at times his clinging was excessive I knew that our easiness had to be unselfconscious. Jeremy would sit next to me humming and playing ever so softly with toys while I continued to struggle more mediocre than ever on the cello the struggle with the cello enabling me if for moments to blot out the tempers of our confinement.

Ben was at his best when helping the young students organize for political actions. As a young professor he seem to relish teaching the entry level required course in Political Theory. Initially his delivery was hesitant with lots of *umm's* and uncomfortable pauses he often invited Jeremy and me to sit in the back to watch and comment. As time gathered him up in a swell of student adoration he was able to drop the uncomfortable pauses. Now some forty years later he is as smooth and polished as a televangelist a frequent *talker* on the world stage onto which he commandeered for himself.

Panic: At one particular mealtime students everywhere Jeremy standing on the top of a set of very steep steps leading to the yard tumbled off backward and calls of panic were set off. Gathering him up in my arms holding my breath calling the doctor who upon hearing Jeremy's blood curdling cries told me not to worry but he would come over and check instructing me on the care of a concussion. The students stood tearful uncertain whether to leave or to stay. The pediatrician came over quickly from his nearby house on his motorcycle after examining the still wailing year old told me to watch him walk him throughout the night and to have a shot or two of scotch his remedy for all manner of mother nerves. By dawn Jeremy was exhausted but okay surviving one, more to come, of childhood's brushes with destiny. Horrified to this day remembering the time when for seconds I let go of his very heavy stroller which rolled into the trolley tracks anachronistic but still in use. The carriage turned over he somehow managed to stay inside, he was strapped in, and about that I was fastidious. Retrieved I sobbed all the way home no trolley appearing later in the day I wondered how children ever survived their parents mishaps missteps careless or reckless moments. Ben missed both of these events and they remained unshared.

Thanksgiving: Everything moved merrily along we hosted a family Thanksgiving on a day it snowed Ben grabbing his skis and going up and down the slightly hilly avenue near our house. His mother a rare moment when she was included in a family holiday looked around as if a furniture appraiser finding everything in order approving of the way I reupholstered the hand carved Victorian dining room chairs. However coming upon the most precious

piece of furniture an Edwardian bar commented *my dear you haven't used supermarket furniture polish on this?* No answer necessary at the earliest moment I would visit an antique shop in downtown Philly to ask how to care for such furniture. On the following day she believed rightfully that she was being forced to leave Ben having his fill suddenly ordered a cab as if running her out of town. She waved and called out *Goodbye to holiday hotel* a line worthy of the soap opera queen that she was. Ben and his brother regarded her with fear and hatred rivaling if unspoken my own feelings for my mother only theirs were dug in deeper more entrenched his brother commenting after she left *if I saw her lying in a gutter I would step over her believing that is where she wanted to be.*

Unforgiving: This comment a great contrapuntal line for the soap opera queen the brothers' rage stuck in the time when they were preschool and kindergarten age sent off to boarding school where they cried themselves to sleep night times often forced to sleep in their own vomit the staff so uncaring and inattentive. On school holidays they were sent to boarding school vacation camps designed for kids whose parents were in *Outer Mongolia* where they couldn't easily travel not in lofty indulgent penthouse solipsistic serenity hostility curdled twisted their insides. For Ben this terrifying early school experience manifest as unrelenting fear of abandonment clawing the air showing up as an entitlement to exclusive rights over another to rule those about him with absolute authority leaving no room for displacement or dislocation. Throughout the years of our marriage soon after he entertained hour upon hour conversations with his mother on the phone happening every three to six months old rages would percolate ending up in a pummeling on my arm or perhaps a swift hard hand to my face. I always knew that within a week the damn would burst the fisticuffs lift and I becoming the representational canvas upon which to express his hatred. Conversely his brother my very own and much loved James Dean fell inside himself way deep inside himself. Expressions of his twisted longing for a mom found its way into photographing pre-pubescent girls these little Lolita's frozen in time never to grow and menace as women. It was little girls he craved for solace time in frieze frame when miraculously a most stolid and solid woman from rural Oregon came to him almost plucked from a latent desire or dream.

Carnival Life: They married the woman adoring him taking care of him never unnerving or threatening him. She accepted him unequivocally on his own terms while she made strides as an artist she a graduate student from an Oregon art academy. In time she began selling large life-like paintings of

women living on the edges of circus life of the Follies Bergere. The paintings were satirical colorful if seeming knock off's of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec whom quixotically Ben's father caricatured at our first meeting at the Harvard Club. In this family there was lots of theater and theatrics lots of pretense and pretext if the boys had been left for scorched earth in the earliest moments of childhood. People walking by our very modest cabin on Laurel Lake in Lenox Massachusetts wondered why we had at one point twenty carousel horses or a glass encased gypsy fortune teller lay about hither and yon my brother-in-law's wife fixing them to up appear as they were at the turn of the century. His artist wife could make anything-new look old the couple earned a very modest living as regulars at east coast flea markets and auction houses. Having them live with us most summers in our modest cabin filled me with a keen sense of envy as I watched the obvious devotion they felt for each other. Ultimately they had two daughters and held onto an enduring marriage a poignant expression of tolerance for the idiosyncratic. Ben kept them in his thrall they obligingly serving well his need for complete authority and dominance with it came generous financial largesse.

The Gun Again: While we were abroad the gun was tucked deep in a large trunk and kept in storage but resurfaced when we moved to Philadelphia. Ben carried the gun hidden in the inner pocket of a coat evenings we went out we lived in an acknowledged very dangerous neighborhood the newspaper reminding daily. Armed we walked toward dinner parties regular social gatherings among faculty members the number of invitations uncommonly large resulting from the Friday *salons* in our house. On one such evening as we arrived at a dinner party with a professor from classics and his a decade older Italian aristocratic wife the gun fell out on the floor as Ben's coat was being hung up tapping into gentility myth and mystery tolerant the other guests if surprised were weathered on generic worldliness.

Young charges: Everything went along I with my extended flock of two young half Indian children and a black girl going through puberty. In time met her family who came from the darkest places where poverty enervates and depletes my charge had frequently been taken from home placed temporarily in foster care one notable event appearing in a news clipping found her tethered to a refrigerator with nothing in it to eat for hours each day. Her family with a desire for a better time for her welcomed Jeremy and me and did not hide the facts of prison and that at times their daughter had experienced unbearable harsh or cruel treatment and were grateful that we had taken her in.

Big City Big Lights: Ben was out of the house or shut in his solarium more and more his desire for tenure intensifying. He wanted to accelerate the process to move in closer proximity to New York City a fit launching pad for his ever more zealous ambitions. Granted early tenure Ben promptly received an offer from Rutgers at an even higher professorial level and with tenure. Within a hairbreadth we sold our row house and found a rent-controlled apartment on the Upper West Side to which he commuted throughout the duration. Goodbyes were painful with our little Indian friends by now almost siblings and neighbors. Now in her early teenage years the African American girl remained in contact and joined us summers in Lenox. The little Indian brother and sister came once for a weekend in New York and then giving Jeremy a favorite brown bear disappeared into memory. Ben and I from the first shared an intense desire to live in New York City I needing to be part of the tapestry of the big city. Ben needed to be in New York to begin his real calling as a playwright. The professorship served as a source of remuneration academic life a fail-safe just in case another venue in which to become powerful famous rich failed. In his secret heart Ben aspired to identities equal too as lofty as Rousseau Ibsen Plato and Mailer. Routes to the top of professional heaps were craftily and invidiously mapped out. He came to near fisticuffs as he wrenched the editorship of a well-regarded political theory journal from a former boarding school acquaintance. Scaffolding for craven ambition built for accession to governing boards of Fulbright and Woodrow Wilson fellowships.

Writer: Ben from the first was a disciplined writer turning out almost annually if derivative books of essays about the student activism against the war, high lighting the fraudulence in feminist rhetoric, finally a mordant work with the publication of his dissertation about democracy if in a Swiss German Canton. In this writing fervor he wrote a full-length musical with a composer friend about Nixon. Theater tapped into a vital connection with his mother who finally awakened to her son hosting a series of showcases for potential backers ultimately receiving a series of concert performances. I actually thought the play was compelling and can still sing some of the songs and lyrics memorable if for me alone. Life with the professor turned playwright found me shaken as never before when he moved out to live with the leading lady in one of his play showcases. Ben as if Arthur Miller with Marilyn Monroe just walked out to be with this actress as Jeremy five and his sister two watched confused and perplexed as the door closed after him. For the only time in my life I lost touch with whom I was brought back by the children each with a

head on my lap. New York had lifted in Ben the flames of crazy ambition rearing its stormy tempestuous head and our lives as he moved on the way to someplace else were never again balanced or calm.

Time: Moving back and forth in time a prerogative, back to Philadelphia where we stayed until Jeremy was a little more than three and Rebecca an infant. When Jeremy was eighteen months old I took a job at the Philadelphia Shut-In Society of which I knew nothing only that I could work two and a half days a week. I hired a sitter who brought at my urging her own daughter just six months older than Jeremy the two quickly bonding as siblings. Grasped that a way out of the house was a necessity I was disappearing the wind being ripped from my sails I was fading fast as Ben's ambition mounted. I had to protect myself as I fell intentionally into a protective and by then coveted invisibility. Motherhood brings with it motivation in the extreme to stay alive the connection to children a life force a veritable reason for living. Mythology theater and news clips present moments where a mother jumps out of a window following a child tossed or a woman raging crazy with jealousy and vengeance slays children to punish a faithless husband or mate (*Medea*).

No longer residing in the realm executing a mythic suicide I left this little guy ripping him off my leg tearing off as if being chased and went to work. For succeeding years this was one of the many inventions and iterations I created for myself an unremitting search for sun or any light a reprieve from the increasing aberrant rages that veered on murderous as impatience as the next thing reared up in my husband. Tempestuous urgent irrepressible unappeasable Ben's need to have more fame more money more the most and beyond fatuous like a child wanting a trillion million gazillion and more. Willing to pillage and rampage a wife a family for more money fame recognition a barb taunting mouth a clenched threatening fist not surprising surges of my own motherly power lifted within me as I drove around my map as guide to visit with my assigned posse of Philadelphia *Shut-Ins*. Jeremy often asked to visit with the babysitter and her daughter on weekends so close this newly forged alliance. The sitter who lived predictably in the most depressed area of Philadelphia welcomed our visits on Sunday after church where an extended if informal family drank whiskey and ate delicacies like pigs feet never foisted always donuts waiting us.

Shut In Speaks: I started a literary publication, *Shut-In Speaks* with a community of about thirty-five individuals who could not walk or leave their homes for the most part locked into wheel chairs by disabilities like spinal bifida of which I had known little and other types of paraplegia from a variety of accidents both birth or otherwise. They were loosely affiliated with the Goodwill Society who had a sheltered workshop for individuals who were of limited cognitive and intellectual abilities. Ben often home locked in his solarium study plotting next moves surrounded by the photography of those precocious pre-pubescent girls percussive seductions of budding bodies on the verge.

Answering an ad hired by virtue of my work on the streets of East Harlem at La Guardia House considered equipped to do social work if without formal credential. The necessity and urgency of this work assignment becoming increasingly clear to me as I set off with a map and a cup of cold ice coffee snug in its car holder to find a first *Shut In*. It was my job to visit with each of these assigned individuals for an hour or so to get a status update and to anticipate any coming needs or emergencies. These individuals lived alone for the most part with food delivered nurses taking blood pressures bringing meds receiving that obligatory call or two from a relative reluctant to visit. Swept into the orbit of what could be conceived as disparate unfortunate and sad individuals by my own veritable need for connection. Knowing Philadelphia not at all and finding all maps disconcerting I had with thick red pen marked out the route to the three initiating visits prior to leaving my home the *Shut-Ins* as they were referred to by Goodwill staff were alerted to the fact of my visit and the range of times of my arrival not being fixed to a particular length of visit.

However it evolved my desire to connect with the other brought me beyond waves of nausea and disgust as I entered the home of the first *Shut-In* and sat down for a cup of tea and sympathy and information gathering holding myself together overcome until he drew me in exchanging straight forward eye contact and I was again once again anchored in my better self. And from then on the conversations flowed forming friendships with each of the assigned clients looking forward to each visit. Once again as if back baking in the Arizona desert sun smoking a rolled cigarette with my Navajo family finding a great overarching union and an inevitable sense of connection and affirmation. Regaining a sense of self as someone kind a hand reaching out if not returned by an arm stiffened into place by a very problematic happenstance of God's

rarely believed in or referred to. I kept wondering whom else what other force would lock a person into such a body. Of even greater wonder how did most of these individuals manage to find a triumphant spirit to live and transcend?

Learned that I was reaching the thirty-five charges for a record number of visits if for an hour or so and enjoyed the communal meals we all shared as a group at Goodwill headquarters every other month. At one of these gatherings we decided to start a literary publication, *Shut-In Speaks* that would include poetry stories essays drawings and illustrations no photos too expensive. From that point on part of every visit was going over the said submissions editing commenting and making perfect serving as conduit to the press. At a national gathering of Goodwill our publication won an award. *Shut-In Speaks* included some credible compositions individuals writing of life of love and of the world about them. *Shut-In Speaks* connecting through art and its expression a palliative the *Song of Solomon* executed and ringing out once again. Final visits were weepy but the publication lived on. We were on our way to New York City and as I left Philadelphia and the *Shut-In* friends I once again felt the tremolo of my desire for connection riveted to the formidable experience of submitting and exchanging one self with the other. Love destined always to be experienced with strangers and friendships outside the home except for my children love becoming a personal anathema. Not again to experience true adult love in the realm of the physical but the spiritual.

Discovery: Compelled to write poetry behind my own back half hiding my efforts in and among pajamas and underwear when discovered by a foraging husband. Reacting in extremis when once outside the apartment the kids with the sitter locked my neck against a car throttling pummeling me and screaming on a fortunately vacant street *how could you be so unhappy I didn't know you were so unhappy how dare you so damage my image of being the head of a happy intact household.* I am not dramatizing here and if hidden before practically scrambled for inner isolation and seclusion a clam shut down even grizzle shut inside.

Rent Controlled Apartment: We moved to our rent-controlled apartment when Rebecca was eight months old and Jeremy three-and-a-half it was in a grand turn of the century building in which Hearst kept an eight-room apartment for Marion Davis, his mistress. The cross street West 105th was in the heart of an acknowledged dangerous neighborhood it was hard to convince friends to venture beyond West 96th Street. And yet the residents of this building were akin to extended family children eight and under travelling

from apartment to apartment being entertained and fed wherever they landed. Two doormen ensured that the children never left the building. Food coops and baby-sitting coops flourished in a series of neighboring buildings and there was a spirit of camaraderie resonant of pioneers. Guards hired block by block along with doormen kept our side of Broadway relatively safe beyond the crossing islands. The east side of Broadway was crime infested predominantly Puerto Rican most of who were living at the edge of poverty. These were the foothills of Columbia University in the convulsive throes of student revolt bursting out into the streets chanting songs and slogans against the war in Viet Nam.

Stay at Home Mom: Until Rebecca was two I stayed at home often with a neighbor's little girl while her mother an architectural historian worked. The girls were within months of the same age and quickly connected as sisters. As families we shared Sunday night pizzas both fathers professors he at Teachers College Columbia. As Rebecca turned two she and this other little girl attended a morning nursery program at a church right up the block on West 114th Street where Jeremy was in the pre-kindergarten program at St. Hilda's and St. Hughes. After visiting Bank Street and St. Hilda's selected this school if lead by Episcopal nuns in full habit its classrooms filled with happier seemingly more engaged students further the school offered an 8 to 6 option for working parents my plan to soon become one. St. Hilda's was closely affiliated with the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine that was experiencing a major and inspirational renaissance under the leadership of Archbishop Moore and Deacon Morton. The Cathedral now serving as a hub for artists musicians apprentices cutting stones for a renewed building effort this under the tutelage of a famous British stonecutter. A politics of resistance dominated the atmosphere above West 96th Street bringing with it a sense of exhilaration and national purpose.

Returning to work meant finding someone to pick up Rebecca and the other little girl from nursery at noon and Jeremy at three, a mother with a young daughter of her own offered to sit asking for very reasonable remuneration. Rebecca resisted going to school and leaving the comfort of being at home with mom and her little friend. Too difficult for me to take her to nursery I watched in horror from around the corner as the father of the other little girl tried to scrape her off the pavement. Refusing to budge blood-curdling screams I almost giving up watched as he scooped her up ripping his pants right up the seam in the process. That evening I wrote:

Of Mother Love and Liberation

*My baby
Poured upon
The cement
A cry
That never left
The throat of men
Before
My answer
To her fear
I said, "Good-by"
Walked away
And left her
There.*

Naomi Barber 1970

Motherhood and work always filled with conflict and upheaval years into my working life I wrote this:

Not Home Yet

Are They Dead?

Not home yet
Are you dead or alive?
Prelapsarian moment
The door unlatches
Knot stomach lurches
Back to grinding
Moments of truth
Are you there?
For me to touch feel see
The scepter of time
Clocks hours chip away
Mr. Rogers on yet
I slip inside
Two heads pitched together
Symbiotic their waiting
Momma slips in

Looks to see
They are breathing
They are watching
I have come as promised
As Mr. Roger's ties his shoes
Entering a world of imagination
We dressed up for his opera
Lady Elaine is a fairy princess
This Gordian knot of motherhood
Subways take me to the other side
I am beside myself
I forget them
Whistling at work
Call only for emergencies
I am gone in another world
Two babies expire die disappear
I forget them
The subway moves me on
I am gone and then
I reappear are they there?
Two babies soaked floppy
Drawn from my limbs
How to begin how to begin
How to leave them
I do it each and every day
Neon blink bleak choice
Devour destroy eat them up
Or step inside a subway car
Stygian compromise
Prelapsarian moments
Going off and coming together
Before time before life
Before I understood
My life had
To move beyond them
I had no choice
The father the seed
He placed in me twice
Returning bountiful
Murderous rage

Woven into the fabric
Of our lives
I had to leave each day
To grab for and gasp the air
I am there I am here
The working clock tic tocks
They the children never appear
Not to commingle barb reality
I go off to stay intact
To keep alive
Click I clasp the doorknob
Mr. Roger ties his shoes
They don't look up
They know I am home
As I said I would be
The Gordian knot of motherhood
Dictated that I leave
I needed to breathe
I am not here yet
I would say each day
Stepping out of the grimy
The officious cling of work
Throw on whirly hot colored
Mexican skirt and peasant shirt
Spread out my thick ruby silk locks
Sit down and wrap my legs around
The bundles of babies
The trusting babies
They were yet to know
The hurdles to go through
Breaking the bonds of vows
I moved on another wilting face
In the gnarled knot of working mothers
We broke the house up
He got the kids I got the kids
Evenly matched hour for hour
Minute for minute
I wanted life to be
So much more
Than just about survival

I had kids
Hacked the family to bits
To have us each more or less live
Never the knot loses its grip
Mom without a husband
On her days
Clicks the door open
Yet I am never here to stay
Never again to be here to stay
The rules of the court held sway
I left with vestigial remnants of motherhood
Vestigial motherhood
Fucking motherhood
Terrible motherhood
Wish I were dead motherhood
Too much to love never enough
Banged and bruised inevitable
They go forth from my womb

Naomi Barber

Back in 1970 going to work part-time was a necessity once again the edges were fraying I was being overwhelmed gulped up the man become tyrant when he crossed our threshold more onerous than ever now in NYC his appetite for fame and fortune heightened enflamed. Motherhood shoved me out the door to a job this time three times a week with an educational toy company preying on the desperation of the emerging armies of suburban mothers. Located in three shopping malls one in Wayne New Jersey, Queens LeFrak City and Garden City Long island. Visiting each center once a week I formed mother circles their toddlers tended in another part of the space the goal of the company was to sell their products I was a conduit though poor salesperson. However as it worked mothers' always left with one or two of our overly expensive educational games introduced to the children during the discussion group. I found the commuting exhausting and despite myself formed bonds with the mothers in the circles and would have stayed longer leaving abruptly when the boss *hit on me*. Reacting with fury lacerating surprise he offered me unemployment insurance. Time back at home when the children were at school gave me opportunity to take my random notebooks drawing from them poems, still squeamish about that word, and placing them in a volume which ultimately became *Looking for Mother* with a second edition, *Mother Inside Out*. The autocrat as my mother referred to my husband

became more surly and more scary driving me to look in earnest for a full-time job believing this would give me the girth build muscles to resist becoming more fragile and frightened. Sure enough in the *Sunday Times* I answered an ad and received a call for an interview all of this done without revealing this newest quest for work with Ben who had often told me that he didn't want me to work that he wanted me around for sexual favors and to watch him as he wrote in his study commandeered as audience.

Going Abroad: Ben building an academic international presence secured lectureships in Paris, London and Berlin and secured places to stay in each City with live-in colleagues, mistresses or girlfriends. Home life became easier the more Ben traveled leaving us with schedules for each day and each hour beyond the school day, which of course we flagrantly disregarded, and even when possible ate with reckless abandon including fingers and as the day for the mighty return encroached we practiced manners and appropriate decorum. Ben scowled when he walked in the door finding fault within minutes of his return no getting swept up in the afterglow of his travels he worked quickly to bring us to size to make us feel once again insignificant and small. Contrasts startling in our home life Sundays when he was away we were gadflies dancing the light fantastic having weekend adventures in Central Park cheering on the mellifluous national parades on Fifth attending puppet shows at the City Museum of New York followed by rich pastries on East 86th in a German bakery then home to baths communal meals of pizza with our neighbor family. The other husband, the professor who managed to scope Rebecca off the pavement when she first attended nursery school along with his daughter, had an inclination toward the monastic often exhibited in earth brown monastic robes. This gentle soul watched disconcerted as Ben ruled with an iron fist enjoying on the sidelines in his absence our wild ribaldry we were fairies set loose on a *Midsummer's Nights Dream* regaling the night and this wondrous life.

Fashion Icon: Under the grueling mean eye of my mother I had become fashion neutral or neutered in a strange turn of events inspired by Ben's stepmother veering toward the outrageous I found myself a doyenne of high fashion of high couture of edgy fearless and original dressing. Forming a fast friendship with a fellow mother on the park bench who was a designer and part owner of the shop *Betsy Bunky and Ninni* sold me sample dresses at cost hoping to gain customers learning of the illustrious circles in which Ben and I ran. Breaking through the stranglehold on my spirit Ben enjoyed my sudden emergence as a high fashion trend setter it was in perfect symmetry with his

plans to garner even higher visibility when out at the theater or concerts in the Berkshire summers at *Tanglewood*.

Ben's father and stepmother were proprietors of an exclusive Inn adjacent to Tanglewood, Weathleigh in which they opened a French like nightclub bar called *The Cave de la Comptesse*. Following concerts Ben would make a grand entrance sporting his high fashion modeling wife and in these moments we were connected as couple. Guests at Wheatleigh included Leonard Bernstein and his family, Norman Mailer a summer local and other such notables' their presence further enflaming Ben's desire to exceed their fame and notoriety. Summer weekends at midnights his stepmother would appear transformed into a French chanteuse regaling with Edith Piaf and Josephine Baker signature songs reverting then to blues as sung by Billie Holiday, Odetta, and Mahalia Jackson. Sadly to build up the courage for this transformation she secretly swigged vodka straight from the bottle prior to her appearances. Ben's father hosted in a velvet jacket with silk ascot a gifted interior decorator designed a bar using a huge old radiator and thick old barn door. Music spun the dancer out in me who was this stunning dancing fashion icon? Where was I or was this another I wanting and waiting to show up get born?

Where did Mommy go?

James James

Said to his Mother

Mother, he said, said he

You must never go down to the end of the tow

If you don't go down with me. Disobedience, AA Milne

Without sharing the interview and job offer I let it season and gingerly informed Ben on one June evening when were walking about the Italian street fair in Little Italy that I had taken a full-time job to begin right after labor day and that the children would be attending St. Hilda' and St. Hugh's full days, Jeremy now in first grade and Rebecca in nursery. The school one of the few in New York City for middle income families had an 8 to 6 option although I had arranged for the same mother to pick up the kids at three each day. Preparing the children during the summer months, told them that when Mr. Roger's tied his shoelaces I would be home unless I called and I always was.

In Public: My life as a publicly angry rebel a thirty-one year-old with a mass of thick curls dipping down deep beyond my shoulders disconcerting outfits as if from the wardrobe room of *HAIR* a lilt in my step an inscrutable *Mona Lisa* smile mining the small corridor of the School District Office in the Northwest Bronx the Superintendent's Office my office crazily situated doors away. This was 1972 at the dawn of legislatively decreed school district *decentralization*. In the late '60's furies boiled over into the streets pitting entrenched primarily *Jewish* unionists against disenfranchised marginalized *Blacks* and *Latinos* filling the streets primarily of Brooklyn and Harlem crippling the school system the aftermath bellowing gutting good will between community and union for decades the acrimony and mistrust inevitable. By 1971 the State legislature created thirty-two school districts to be governed by elected school boards a school district for special education and the high school division remaining under the auspices of the central board of education.

Father Figure: Divine serendipity when an urgent need in me to work full-time coincided with a zealous no-nonsense ex-marine now school district superintendent's urgent need to recruit new district office staff to serve as foot soldiers for his agenda. Answering an ad in the *Sunday Times*, which said nothing about a public school district staff position I arrived at PS 95 in the Northwest Bronx, which housed the school district office, and at the sight of the school door wanted to turn on my heels and run. Upon finishing high school had an all pervasive and consuming desire to live in Paris writing poetry playing the cello having three or four babies the fruits of love affairs with nary an intention to marry. *Brand* (Ibsen) akin to my father whose hackles rose as he listened to the plan I staked for the future contested this wish with practicality asserting the necessity for *women to be able to pay their own way and never to fall financially dependent upon a man or partner*. These ardent father/feminist ways ahead of his time incapable of my loving men in the plural gave an urgent and ominous prophecy for his own self-preservation and as an uncanny prophecy for me. Yielding to his will led to securing a college and graduate degree I a lilypond barely afloat in academic waters. After watching my father's monumental struggles with the Newark public school system vowed never to work in or with schools and here I was at a schoolhouse door seized with waves of nausea and mounting self-doubt compounded by a neighborhood reminding me of the Weequahic section of Newark which I fled at eighteen. Unable to flee reluctantly I advanced up the steps to the interview.

Premonition: Greater than an awful premonition of what lay before me was the knowledge that I had to get a job for self-preservation as mother and wife and that this incontrovertible necessity had brought me here. I sat at the interview table opposite two *educated consumers* as if dressed by *Syms* bland bureaucrats whose questions were rote and expedient at the close of the interview they asked *what I would do*, having shared I was the mother of a three and six year old, *when the children were sick*. Abruptly I got up thanked them and left indignantly the interviewers had crossed a sacrosanct feminist line. Once outside racing toward the subway relieved that I wouldn't have to confront a decision about a job just yet. Unbeknownst to me very much in the background and never introduced was the said superintendent who had listened in on the interview.

Oh Freedom: Protecting myself from a grand inquisition I had neglected to inform Ben that I had gone on an interview. Breaking into our ritual of pizza with a neighboring family on Sunday evening the phone rang and believing it was my mother I answered. *Hello Naomi this is the superintendent I was sitting in on your interview and want to apologize for the tactless and poorly informed questioning about your child care and work commitment this was crossing all acceptable lines. I want to personally offer you the job as well as an additional ten thousand dollars, please let me know by the end of the week. I hope you will agree to work with me keeping the offer in the personal.* I responding with a weak muted *thank you I will, goodbye. Who was that?* My ever-suspicious husband queried *nothing special just about a play date for early next week.* The dilemma confronting me lodged like a chicken bone in my throat. Here it was the moment the first steps to inevitable freedom, freedom from the marriage from my husband this all on an unconscious level peeking as I was thrown to decision making. Now having to face down burdensome conflicting forces exponentially making incursions into my life. I lived with an openly adulterous at times raging increasingly autocratic gun-toting husband who I was outgrowing and though badly thrown and tethered by our marital dilemma knew I needed the distance and financial security to plot out the next course in my life.

Finding a female language for power the charge the moment child tethered to garage door child waiting out the Nazi convoys child preyed upon by ravenous crazy mother and borderline depraved if loving father the girl preparing prairie dog for a Navajo family the girl dancing the world of boyfriends fantastic lighting for moments a humming bird gathering nectar the woman who let the love of her life run through her fingers the woman who married a man she did not know not even a month the woman now mother of two begins propelled by emotional necessity an odyssey for her own inimitable voice her unique language for power the woman going for once toward freedom not quicksilver backing away down and out of contention.

The First Scent of Power – Sadness and Sorrow – Part One 1971-1991

Mid-September of 1972 I began a tenure extending twenty-years in this school district in the Northwest Bronx. In the spirit of resistance with a fist swelling force of adrenalin I carefully selected a work wardrobe as if stepping off the tarp of Woodstock or the set of *Hair*. *Better angels* or instincts got me to know to unsettle and unnerve the *Syms* bureaucrats to startle alarm-evoking ridicule behind my back and a gentle giggle or tease from the superintendent. Knowing I had to immediately establish that I came as a warrior protagonist and not a colleague. From the superintendent's daily perusal regarding my outfits I saw that I reflected his intention to cause disruption and upheaval in this newly legislated school district understanding he wanted me to work along with him creating real and meaningful educational opportunities for each of the thirty-six thousand students under his auspices.

Ben had just published *Liberating Feminism* another of his prescient diatribes opportunistic derivative expedient if well written and well researched he had after all received an advanced degree from Harvard. This book a mean-spirited well-argued attempt to disrobe disarm and discredit the burgeoning army of feminists whose true motivation was to castrate to declaw to neuter men breaking the back on their hold of power. Soon in the early time of my employ the deputy superintendent would yell out at the door of my office, *Who the hell is fondly Naomi?* To be explained in greater detail later in the text.

The children made the transition to full-time school days like chirping birds to a bird feeder. After a warm silly hug and wave goodbye I moved off planetary motherhood to work steering clear of thoughts of the children a survival mode I adopted early on. I could not simultaneously work and be a mom. I entrusted an order of Episcopal nuns in full Habit to the care and education of my children and for the most part it worked out wonderfully. Occasionally I would get a call that my son was sobbing inconsolably observing two boys engaged in play fighting worrying that they were hurting each other a reassuring word or two comforted. Jeremy like *Fernando the Bull* (*Munro Leaf*) a book which he loved hearing over and over could be found at the park lollygagging on the grass enjoying the passing clouds humming soulful tunes which set his father ready *to play ball* into fits of rage his father a two fisted go for the jugular competitor. Ultimately I stopped his father from taking our son the park unless we all went along. Working gave me the distance and the fortitude to stand up increasingly to Ben's fractious demands and orders poignant and disturbing insights undeniable about how intolerable how bad the fit father to son.

Winding up in the wrong house with the wrong parent or parents with a growl a purr an undercut to the jaw *"The more it snows, tiddly pum, the more it goes, tiddly pum, on snowing, the colder my nose, tiddly pum, the colder my toes, ... (Winnie the Pooh, A.A. Milne.)* When family members collide confined to the same common space when a father and a son together form a dangerous chemical compound (*hydrogen peroxide/sulfuric acid mixtures can spontaneously detonate*) in close proximity. So it was with our family things and people who did not go together generation after generation accidental comings together biology askance. Witnessing shooting asteroids landing wrong and so it was a song bird a child a son of lamentation a Jeremiad name prescient and a fierce gladiator to whom *winning is everything, the will to win is everything.*" (Vince Lombardi), Oye!

"I was afraid of looking into my heart...afraid of thinking seriously about anything...I did not want to know whether I was loved, and I did not want to admit to myself that I was not loved..." Ivan Turgenev

Mother Returning from Work

Mastering the art of returning home gulping the air breathing hard as the lump of fear and forget gathered as I lifted up in the gathering place the elevator to the 12th floor the level of adrenalin meted out in direct relation to the fact of leaving and coming home to two children whom I could not live without yet from whom I departed and disconnected each week day. Entering the house noticing that they were alive well real not figments of imagination the sitter the children knowing that although they saw me listened for me to say *I am not here yet* until I settled in making the otherworldly transition from public to private self. Their father arriving home from New Brunswick and Rutgers University more than likely scaring to hell half the drivers on the New Jersey Turnpike while avoiding the police would enter kissing me asking perfunctorily how the day was then the children wondering about their day at school. He never once asked about my job in his mind non-existent a *Norman Rockwell* still lives preparing the evening meal Kinder and Küche manifest. Most nights he informed me of the evening activities, which could include seeing a play or a reading tickets to a venue of high visibility never an evening without a well-concocted plan evenings at home unthinkable when the entire glittery gossamer world of the *great white way* called for our being present. Going out evenings creating an intense tension distracting from evenings spent reading stories bathing cuddling humming adoring lullabies as the children fell asleep. Gestures of mothering nurturing of the children made his skin crawl he the child abandoned to boarding school before his sixth birthday

could not tolerate observing a mother snuggling nuzzling cooing he devoured attention as if he would expire and we were his life support.

I learned to act as if I had no job the children and I cuddled and kissed in eerie shadows in stolen hours when his attention was diverted. Fortunately his hunger to be in and of the world had him travelling more and more. Leagues away our little trio would flagrantly break rules no enforced bed times tummy tickles bubbly endless baths eating with fingers. At the top of our lungs we sang *Mr. Roger's* songs traditional folk tunes I pounding at the piano. As if Maypole dancers we circled dancing the house to *Peter Paul and Mary going to the zoo tomorrow*. We wept as we read Christopher Robin notifying Pooh that he would not be able to go daily to the place of *nowhere* rather he had to learn numbers and geography. Sobbing futile attempts to get through *Charlotte's* last speech to *Wilbur* in *Charlottes Web* and believing without question the book *Beautiful Joe's Paradise*. In the curlicue days of his absence we made up for mad lost time when it got to be the eve of his return we'd again take on the demeanor the solemnity of manners and restrictions of forks and knives of subdued voices with appropriate awe and respect given our very own autocrat (as my mother always referred to him). He was increasingly someone to be feared necessitating our sitting still at full attention adherents to the gospel of his rule there were occasional rages our untamed lion stalking.

His hunger for recognition and fortune were unrelenting driving him to rages menacing he drew ever more restrictive a *Maginot Line* and if we moved off or beyond but a fraction outliers he would go wild. We were desperate not to weather the repercussions going beyond the carefully delineated *Faultline* the dictum his ever more resonant edict follow the program the script he was the author we lived in his ever-airless if absurdist world. When we were sure his plane was in flight we would romp around the living room in wild circles (*Let the wild rumpus begin – Where the Wild Things Are – Sendak*) bringing ourselves into noisy and deliberate disobedience. He would leave a detailed schedule of what we were to do each day including swimming and visits to the park oblique so little aware of our own lives our likes and our habits. I was a fireball at work springing back into life as in the days before marriage the children were flourishing in school. Being subdued as if occasionally with a zookeepers dart gun was doable we functioned as a family in our totally dismal nearly fully articulated dysfunction. One fraught evening when he was home a staff member deigned to visit with an urgent hand written message from the Superintendent answering the door a hand reached out to give me the document the person's expression blanched with fear as if he had just

come upon a ghost. Next day at work he stumbled into me *saying I didn't think that was you I hardly recognized you, you didn't even look like or even act like you.*

Finding a Female Language for Power lifted up from within as I side-stepped my own life no direct route no straight lines doubt weighing down every decision but kept on keeping on (*I can't go on. I'll go on. Samuel Beckett*) Coming from some deep ancestral within I was often filled with laughter and humor life had a lighter timbre irony and symbolism framing most days. A voice lifted long in hibernation a *deep sleep*. Indulgent staff and colleagues if with self-conscious laughter listened attentively to the poem or reflection bursting upon out on pivotal moments. Vibrating voice trembling hands launching embarking on a new project inspiration lifting from the mist of poetic impulse it was that deep connection the prompt to move to act to give. Others were welcome to think to respond to work similarly.

Making Mothers in the Bronx

*I went to the Bronx to make Mothers
To locate nurturers
To find all of those
Tending the young
I went to the Bronx to find a Mother
Someone who was caring constant and kind
I told them they were
That, just look in the face of the child
Watch her trust as she obeys
Watch the vulnerable soft hand reach up
Watch the child reach for arms strong vines
To hold onto
Watch the face of the Mother
Who is aware she can love
I found so many arms
To wrap into
So much warmth
To fold my sadness into
Goodness and warmth
Transcendent and other-worldly
Because of its limitless generosity
Calm steady strong
The fertile earth of hope
Exists in the crook
Of a loving mother's arms – Naomi Barber 1981*

Here In the Real World

*Daddy your good little girl
Is sitting at a big table coffee cigarette butts
Crumpled papers strewn
Notes in margins
Printed agendas with the State seal
The Governor sent me a mail gram
That is why I am here
Daddy, I am in the real world
Daddy, I want to go back
To the couch in our living room
Where I got lost in the pillows
Too small to even make an imprint or a dent
For mother to fluff up again
Daddy we listened to Bach and wept
Daddy I'm sitting here
Because of Bach
Because of you
Because these words spoken here
Are like ashes flicked off a cigarette
While some child lies in the street
Broken and broken hearted - Naomi Barber 1974*

What follows are stories of projects as if *Matisse Dancers* initiated during the years 1972 – 1992:

Matisse Dancers



Project CREATE (Community Respected Elders and Teenage Exchange)

June 14, 1979 Flag Day we roared into Poe Park led by police motorcycle brigade followed by a local Catholic school fife and drum corps in flank a proud group of early adolescents along with a team of medical residents and interns from the neighboring hospital, North Central Bronx. We were announcing the beginning of the *Poe Park Restoration Project*. Poe Park was a little sliver of parkland on The Grand Concourse in the Bronx. On this archipelago of land stood extant the cottage in which Edgar Allen Poe lived with his young wife who when succumbing to tuberculosis in her early twenties led Poe rife with grief to write the almost unbearably sad poem *Annabelle Lee*. The cottage like the rest of the Park had fallen into great disrepair. The park was surrounded by distressed desecrated formerly grand turn of the century apartment buildings. The air often thick with choking smoke wafting from the cinder and ash of arson set fires. Buildings it was said that were set to flame by insurance gluttonous landlords further south in the Bronx.

The *Poe Park Restoration Project* an ambitious and multi-pronged plan was committed to refurbishing and cribbing the perimeter or rim of the park adding shrubs and perennial flowerbeds under the tutelage of the NYC Parks Department, restoring to former glory the dilapidated band shell paint peeling like skin off a burn victim. Remembering my grandpa and his Yiddish droll compatriots on the park benches in Passaic New Jersey the impetus of the project became the elderly

individuals who spent good weather days lining the park benches sharing intermittent Yiddish exchanges. Designed a series of endeavors laurel branches of friendship along with workshops on providing extensive information regarding medical updates, health and nutritional information, and eating nutritious meals within limited budgets. Recruited staff from the Cornell University Extension program for the health and food related. The coup was having the President of North Central Bronx Hospital agree to have a group of Interns and Residents work with us to provide blood pressure and health surveys to the daily park bench residents with follow-up visits to the hospital. Ambitious by any standard of great note the primary members of the project were twelve and thirteen year-olds most of whom attended school if at all on a scattershot basis.

Planning for this comprehensive initiative took place either on a random park bench on which the out of school students often gathered or in the local branch of the public library minutes away. A detailed census was taken of the individuals the regulars to the park benches with their names and other information when volunteered. The students set about with the help of a librarian to hand write invitations with elaborately wrought calligraphy inviting the very same individuals who inhabited the park each day to come and sit in their very same spot and enjoy the planned kick-off event for the Poe Park Restoration Project scheduled for Flag Day. It was clear for this predominantly immigrant population that Flag Day had a disproportionate meaning holding on to a flag of stars and stripes as they mourned their lost home countries.

June 14th arrived the weather beautiful a not too humid. The still peeling band shell was covered with bunting equipped with speakers. The roaring police motor cycles followed by the tooting fife and drum corps in full regalia set the stage for a brief welcome by one of the students followed by our crooner a Frank Sinatra impersonator. With eyes closed it was possible to imagine that Frank Sinatra himself was singing *What is America to Me - The House I Live In* and *New York New York*. The crooner recently out of prison lived in that perilous space between reality and acute mental anguish singing as if his life depended on it intent listeners eyes glistening tearful. The singer would go on living primarily out of prison but in psychiatric emergency rooms and out patients' corridors.

The invited dressed in finery sat enrapt during the program which included a dramatic reading of the poem *Annabel Lee* the captain of the local police precinct shared a greeting as well as a representative from the Bronx Borough President's office. Students then handed out detailed flyers with the extensive menu of events that were to take place in the summer of 1979. The Borough President's office offered that they would contribute by having the band shell stripped primed repainted restoring it to its old glory as well as hosting weekly band concerts along with ballroom dancing.

During the ceremony students sat interspersed with new friends holding onto trembling often-rheumatoid stiffened hands. As the ceremony concluded a student read from *Annabel Lee*. *It was many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea, That a maiden there lived whom you may know By the name of ANNABEL LEE; and this maiden she lived with no other thought Than to love and be loved by me. And finally, For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side Of my darling-my darling-my life and my bride in the sepulcher there by the sea, In her tomb by the sounding sea.* The incantations of lost love resonant older person to these early adolescents a common denominator on the foundering reckless harsh streets of the Bronx in 1979. With that the throbbing beat of *New York New York* the motorcycle police who had stayed for the ceremony a good will gesture from the local precinct rumbled out followed by the fife and drum corps, the students part of the Poe Park Restoration Project stayed behind serving lemonade and cookies donated by a bakery at the rim of Poe Park.

Prior to July 1st, students spent laborious hours being trained to give blood pressures to any of the elderly individuals agreeing to offer a willing arm. Students would be shadowed one-on-one by a said Intern or Resident. And then the propitious event and that on the record breaking heat of an early July day blood pressures taken of almost fifty individuals followed up with detailed medical histories. Appointments were made for follow up visits at a special clinic at North Central Bronx Hospital students to escort there by now if older by decade's friends.

The summer moved along three mornings a week weather permitting nutrition staff from Cornell University Cooperative Extension with the students presented foods along with recipes that were thought best to eat at this particular time of life along with information provided for limited food budgets.



Poe Cottage at Fordham, est. 1812

Wednesday early evenings were filled with dancing partners moving to popular tunes hands knotted as the park trees with those nearly infant smooth moving with the grace of good friends enjoying good times. Interestingly the partners were for the most part about the same height with an occasional gangly boy lording over. Punch and donuts lined summer themed paper tablecloths. Temerity seemed to banish with the pulse of the beats and the burgeoning friendships.

Flowerbeds rich with new plantings lined the part as the summer moved on perennial of glorious colors delineating the part perimeters from the traffic.

Who were these individuals spending most of their days on the Poe Park benches? As we were learning they were women and men creased with palpitating crinkly flesh resilient people whose greater collective ages were above seventy more towards eighty. They were Jews for the most part who still twitched memory nipping unceasingly of the *Holocaust* some having been plucked bones and terror from *The Camps* by the rescuing troops. Others were mourners steeped with death bequeathed appointed to cry incessantly if silently for the family members that vanished into embers on forever tarnished old Europe soil. The vagaries of a police state that systematically routed their family members if just by virtue of being born Jewish. Jews depleted worn down unable to fight or face the facts that fellow countrymen had devised a mechanistic well coordinated and finely executed plan to

wipe them all of them child to old person off the face of the earth. These bench sitters lived each day to weep and mourn a yellow star fixed cupped in hands to never forget or forgive.

And who were the students invited to participate in the Poe Park Restoration Project? They were the offspring of very new arrivals from primarily Puerto Rico in whose homes Spanish the dominant language. These early adolescents were found along the highways and byways of school days in which they roamed the edges of the park ducking behind trees not to be discovered in case there was a truant officer or some other school authority hunting them down. For the most part they had to stay outside except in the bitter wisps of winter days when they wandered neighboring Fordham Road shops and found a *free* apartment (no adults) in which to hang out. The kids were looking for places to hang out during the precise hours of the school day at which point they could re-join friends and families bursting from school exits many of whom seemed to be gasping for reaching toward a certain necessary freedom.

Schools in that community noted for the dangerous fights regularly breaking out ambulances and police cars in the no parking school zones waiting to be called into schools rampant with upheaval. Early on I had informed the superintendent to beware that a murder was a hair breadth away in the hallways of the local junior high school where the principal hid under his desk with an intercom announcing the menus for the days lunches and any other mostly irrelevant announcements this to assure the students and staff that he was on the job emerging only to dash to his car each day in his designated parking space. It was almost masturbatory his slurping salacious message about whether peas or beans or hotdogs or hamburgers were to be served during the five lunch periods spanning from 10:30am to 1:00 almost dismissal time. He broke into class time so frequently perhaps to rescue teachers from having any chance of continuity for their lesson presentations their indifference joining his menu accountings.

So the kids who joined me in the Poe Park Restoration Project didn't go to their zoned school wisely its reputation as if writ on tablets from *Truth Sayers* neighbors and siblings. I never asked this posse of ten or twelve students why they weren't in school implicit a common recognition of the hell-hole their local junior high school they knew by my demeanor that I was on their side, their team. Soon we were a gaggle of comingled ages sitting among and with each other taking in the day planning together what would become the Poe Park Restoration Project of 1979 and the coming summer festivities. Issues of health and diet, of depleted soil and flower beds the peeling band shell launched friendships and bonds that began to sprout well before our gardening between the old and the young the Jews of Poe Park and the young Hispanics who recounted breathlessly and lovingly stories of their grandparents and aunts in P.R.

When I met with the president of North Central Bronx hospital to have interns and residents train adolescents to take blood pressures and medical histories of the women and men who frequented Poe Park he said *yes* unequivocally perhaps he too had a soft spot or perhaps deeper connection with the women and men who sat in the Park. Cornell University Extension was far more forthcoming with staff to help with nutrition and shopping workshops in which they would train the kids to actually present the materials standing close by. The Parks Department was thrilled to have the opportunity to refurbish the greenery in the Park it being a much-overlooked responsibility. The Borough President gave us a grant and a promise of weekly band and dance parties and the police revved up the motors of their motorcycles at the mere thought of advancing their accessibility and need to connect positively to young people. The Catholic school thought a grand idea to have their fife and drum corps in the parade still overclouded overshadowed by the vagaries of anti-Semitism and well-documented exclusionary tactics.

Artful calligraphy invitations set the tone and standard hands reaching out with personalized notes to each individual who regularly came to Poe Park the seat reserved for them was the very one they occupied almost daily. The teenagers burst forth animated and excited committed to *showing up* for the program each day and not a student was late or out during the entire planning process throughout the summer, which was one of the hottest recorded in New York City history. The Superintendent, not the one I initially served under, his Deputy, was overcome with consternation at my vagaries and the close scrutiny that would come to him from these alliances and cooperative ventures. Thus he stayed very much in the background asking every once in awhile for a sweat-filled update. His trepidation mounting as stories of the temper of the said neighborhood middle school abounded.

What is America to me? This a song I learned as member of the chorus in the seventh grade in my elementary school by Mrs. Schwartz whose legs stood at odds with each other as if held apart by a brace. Mrs. Schwartz with steely gray hair and a no nonsense approach had us singing as if our very hearts would burst and our vocal chords snap. Her two fingers rose as peace signs as she brought the American *canon* of songs through our lips. And for me they continued to live an active verb as I lurched through disheartening versions of my country my America with this very song lodged in my heart and now which was being taught to the students by a local musician if an ex-convict who could croon through Frank Sinatra's grand and portentous rendition.

Fast forward 2010: There she was in my lobby a towering sunflower of a woman her face bursting with sparkling warmth and laughter she wore a formal EMT uniform had terribly broad shoulders shorn hair upon seeing me swept me up in her muscular patient-tending arms. She sent me an email having found me Goggling proceeded to introduce herself after a more than twenty year hiatus as Lillian from CREATE. Within a whiplash moment I responded with a ripened seventy-year-old receptivity unguarded knowing this time of life was *icing on a cake* as I would say and time lived impatiently within me paring down the hours days years. She asked if she could take me out to dinner and then said mirror imaging my lack of guardedness that she *had never gotten me out of her mind* and wanted to let me know *how important I was to her life and to thank me*. At first she suggested a very upscale landmark steak house, *Frankie and Johnnie's*, we settled on a local restaurant a block or two from my apartment building.

We walked out of the building each a little salty-eyed and found easy seating at the very early shift of the restaurant and began to talk overrunning sentences and then cupping her strong large hands we began rapid fire time encapsulated questions. It had been more than twenty years since last seeing each other she then twenty with an infant a GED working as a salesgirl on Fordham Road. At another point she shared that I sort of brushed her off when she trying to contact me, *divorce troubles I told her* and then tumbling out her personal story going forward. The pediatrician to whom I had taken her when she was eleven joints swelling walking with great difficulty having quieted the rheumatoid arthritis suggested when she was twenty that she attend a training program to become an EMS the doctor paying the tuition and fees. Lillian who already had a deep connection to anything medical from her first days with Project CREATE immediately obliged.

Lillian's mother was an inept thwarted woman neglecting to feed or care for her four children Lillian being the oldest Lillian who at eleven served as the mother to the three other siblings' social service entrusting her to the dominant family role. Lillian assumed her parental role onto her broad shoulders finding sanctuary in the classrooms of Project CREATE. She almost took up part-time residence at North Central Hospital, our project partner and affiliate, where she eventually became an almost indispensable force of support for the many stranded and sick hospitalized seniors stories soaring about how she got so and so to talk after years of silence or Mr. X to eat having been on a morbidity hunger strike. Lillian became a prominent prop and sidekick for the president of the hospital bringing her out when publicity was in the offing it was clear he regarded her with affection and respect ultimately issuing her a certificate and plaque for service rendered to the hospital. Lillian was invited on morning rounds into operating rooms and to case management discussions for elders in her care this when she was in middle and high school.

The narrative continues: Having completed EMS training with honors she joined the ranks of EMT workers ultimately absorbed into the New York City Fire Department. Rising rapidly and ultimately invited to participate in the training center and finally offered the directorship of training all EMS personnel including new inductees into the fire department. She started a pilot project for struggling high school students who could gain credit and ultimately be brought into formal training as full-fledged EMT workers attributing this initiative to Project CREATE. Bringing me breathlessly up to date sharing she currently held the rank of Lieutenant as the director of training for all EMT personnel. Every other sentence she attributed to my support and our monthly milkshakes and hamburgers at the Riverdale Diner as reasons for her success. Hardly taking a breath informed me that she was about to become a Captain in the Fire Department and would be oversee a force of EMT workers in Brooklyn asking if I would like along with the pediatrician to stand with her at the ceremony. Parenthetically she told me her mother lived in a trailer in Florida and that her most loved brother had died prematurely and that her oldest daughter was now an EMS in Florida striving to become a member of the Florida State Police force.

Hardly twirling the spaghetti on my fork I sat rapt nearly losing a sense of time and place, then taking both my hands relieving them of fork and said *I attribute all of this to you and I have something else I want to share*. Drawing in a deep breath *I'm gay and married got married to my partner in Connecticut where gay marriage is legal and I have an eleven year old with a husband I divorced upon discovering I was gay and we share the care of our daughter who lives during the week with his mother and with whom I share supper meals homework and piano practice*. She watched to find any level of discomfort within me and asked if I wouldn't want to see photos of her partner and her daughters. *Of course*, I answered. Finishing the meal I insisted on picking up the tab and we walked to my building and promised we would meet again soon and she walked toward to her large black SUV.

Some weeks later, she picked me up to show me the home in the Bronx she just bought with her partner it was a simple single home near a subway stop and about which she could not be more proud there was a frilly girly bedroom for her younger daughter and a room for her partner's brother, age 23, who had come to live with them after his mother's recent death. *Let's go to Home Depot* I suggest *I want to get you a housewarming gift* and asked what was high on her wish list *barbecue* she said. And so like any good mother or aunt we bought a substantial barbecue the one she said she had had her eye on. She then drove me drive back home and another promise to get together this time for a barbecue at her home so that I could meet her partner and her brother. Videos of her daughter performing in her Catholic talent show would have to do for now weekends her daughter was with her father. Her younger daughter eleven about the same age as Lillian when first

encountered and in her daughter saw the same glitter and verve watching on the tiny screen as she performed a Selena Gomez hit song her mother's eyes melting in awe and pride as she watched along with me.

9/11: Lillian had been a first responder supervising the EMT squads in the aftermath of 9/11 staying on the site for more than two months without respite, which she says, took an incredible toll on her inner psychic balance.

The Red Rooster

Short-circuited another time capsule to my rescue by Lillian without all of the gory details. Some time later before the barbecue at her house I passed out while having lunch and a glass of wine at the destination restaurant in Harlem The Red Rooster. Encumbered and surrounded by staff and guests holding onto me and a fire captain questioning me covered with vomit buying time I asked for the check and paid on my credit card with generous tip trying to show the concerned assembled that I had awakened with a clear crisp responsible mind next enter the two EMT workers with a gurney *no* I said I want to walk out and with that followed by an entourage flanked by fire fighters and EMT I turned to thank the well wishers and was moved into an ambulance and the fire truck departed. Then suddenly in the ambulance a woman whom the EMT referred to as chief said she believed I should go to an emergency room that this could have been potentially very dangerous and that I needed a going over to which I said *I would rather go home* but it was clear she would be there until the motor roared onto a hospital emergency driveway. Trying again to prove lucidity I said that I knew someone in the fire department working as an EMT who recently attained the rank of Captain and who had directed training for all EMT workers this not trying to brag but to show I had all my faculties. She asked her name, Lillian I answered, she gave not a hint of recognition and continued urging me on to an emergency room to which I ultimately consented and was off to St. Lukes upon taking her leave she said smiling *I know Lillian she is one of my closest friends and as soon as I leave I am going to call her.*

She must be Mayor Bloomberg's relative the staff muttered as they were amassed by EMT officers inquiring about my condition and the treatments and tests I was being given and unbeknownst to me Lillian had the doctor in charge on the phone and then by my bedside a Lieutenant who said he adored Lillian and that when they released me she wanted to pick me up from the emergency room. And back on sort of steady feet there was broad shouldered Lillian all regaled in her uniform asking me how I felt and then picking up a couple of Gatorades she drove me home. She said this could be quite serious and it could happen again and that I had to follow up with my own doctor and perhaps a cardiologist that something in my body had triggered this and then as the door of her SUV closed said she was on her way back

to Brooklyn to oversee her troops *we will schedule a barbecue soon*. Rebecca and Jeremy and Luca learning of this egregious and embarrassing episode a day or so later were appalled that they did not receive a call to inform or to help. Lillian of whom they knew when contemporaries was back in their lives and mine solidly, very.

Back to 1979: The summer and the *Poe Park Restoration Project* ended with a quieter celebration just before Labor Day somber looking students and saddened elders looked over at each other at a divide that would widen with the calendar. Flowers bloomed along the perimeter of Poe Park with an odd sunflower or two jutting up between the neat rows of flowers cupping the sun the cribbing in place to prevent drainage and runoffs executed with precision as if with the hand of a master horticulturist, the band shell was restored to its old glory, even Poe Cottage got a fresh paint job with a new resident manager for this historical site. On the hottest day the students had taken about one hundred blood pressures with the medical residents in tandem and on Wednesday evenings danced. Band concerts were well attended with youth escorts to and from homes and if with heavy uncertain steps moving around the pavement dance floor. Students accompanied elders (as we now called them) to follow-up medical appointments, went shopping with them for the groceries budgeted for health and economic probity, students did errands for their elder friends all of this without orchestration rising out of friendships and the deep sense of interconnectedness the individuals felt for each other beyond age ethnicity and race.

As the sunset on the last formal day of the Poe Park Project everyone reluctant to leave a park bench I asked the students to escort some of the elders home and to meet me back at the Park where a handmade certificate with delicate calligraphy was awarded each student never late or absent. Finally and forthcoming the question that had stayed unasked despite unrelenting temptation *so what about school, going to school?* And from the collective voice of the fifteen students, Lillian among them, they said *if this were school, we would go!* And so that was the beginning of a school created and tailored just for them. The students would spend mornings in class and afternoons at the hospital assigned to seniors on a particular floor. The President of the hospital eagerly consented as long as a licensed teacher for purposes of safety support and indemnification accompanied the students. Two teachers were identified, one a novelist who lived in Manhattan and still had the glow of idealism and ambition to become an accomplished writer and the other a math science teacher who had dreamt of becoming a doctor and was intrigued by the opportunity to connect science and math to the medical life within a hospital setting. I had observed these teachers whenever I entered the torturous environment of the local and predatory junior high school. Having disturbed the

superintendent with the imminent dangers lurking behind the schoolhouse door he was amenable to letting me set up this mini-school asking for a few classrooms to be set aside in an isolated corridor advising strongly the principal support the plan.

The two teachers on the last moments of vacations dreaded returning to work so when I contacted them they were relieved and delighted to work along with me to establish this little school. Inviting the students to meet at the local branch library informed them that they now had such a school to attend starting with grade 7 and that at first they would be the only students and that the following year we would jointly select the next group of entering 7th graders as they moved on to 8th grade ultimately graduating from the 9th. Looking at me askance scared but willing to exchange education despair for a spirit of hopefulness our summer bond bearing fruit no longer dreading a year in which they would be lurking in the shadows of the school watching a clock tick off school hours. I told them we had found two teachers and that if they were attentive and fastidious with their schoolwork mornings they would lunch at the hospital be assigned white jackets and photo identification and the title *Junior Assistant* assigned the geriatric service. Warned that there had to be a full commitment to the academic side of things but that they would receive any help necessary to catch up and at the hospital there could not be even one irresponsible incident. Teary eyed their mouths broke into smiles I asked what they would like to name their little school *CREATE* one of the students said *Community Respected Elders And Teenage Exchange* and there it was just waiting on the tip of his tongue just waiting to be said aloud.

The inaugural year of CREATE was a major success with news stories, television appearances promoted primarily by the hospital president talking about how students who were in their very early adolescent years had brought music and lightness to the geriatric floors where the mute spoke the starving accepted food. *Respected elders*, as they were now universally called, regaled by student read alouds laughter erupting perhaps from some elder off-color jokes. The students startled the teachers with their estimable academic work advancing like wind-blown clouds as if just waiting for a real invitation to achieve academic success. Weekends found the students visiting their respected elders perhaps to provide safe harbor from their own often-chaotic home lives. Friendships from the Poe Park summer continued students shopping and performing errands this just by informal mutual agreement with their Respected Elder friends and who can ever measure or define how lives were enhanced extended or perhaps saved?

As we came upon springtime in our inaugural year at CREATE summer months looming I asked the students if they wanted to return to Poe Park responding as if in unison a resounding *Yes*. This time with the help of the English/history teacher novelist we agreed to and planned for the gathering oral histories of the Poe Park friends beginning with the development of a thoughtful and nonintrusive questionnaire. As an essential part of the project students would return to the local library each day to write up the oral histories gathered during the day. The recounted stories were to reflect the highest Standard English and would be diligently edited by the teacher and library staff. Stories would be collected in an anthology distributed widely to all of the participants again traversing the vast cultural and chorological divides. June brought the last day of school the hospital encouraging the students to continue their by now essential visits identification and white jackets and cafeteria vouchers issued. Following the July 4th weekend students entered Poe Park this time to gather stories from by their by now good friends waiting for them on their park benches.

On the very first day with jitters and anticipation young interviewers entered Poe Park exchanging hugs with old friends clip boards tape recorders and cameras in hand asking if particular pre-selected old friends would entertain being interviewed for in-depth oral histories. With consent students offered that each individual would have the right to regularly reviews of content and to edit right up to the preparation of a final draft. Frequent check-ins occurred to insure that there were no misunderstandings or feelings of being plundered of a cherished past. At the end of each day snacks waiting gathering at the local library debriefing and discussing the status of interviews to trouble shoot and refine the process. Students spanning the library tables to put the interviews into written form often agonizing as they composed and edited librarians now with great fondness for the students guiding and sitting patiently by.

It is hard to describe the first few days of the oral history project but to say that students requests for personal histories were met with faces twisted with pain, elders looking away or tucking their heads deep into their chests many held up a hand to indicate *go away or no never I can't*. The students were stunned that many of the elders with whom they had forged strong friendships cast them aside as if strangers. Most of them were Jews from the old country who sat on the benches blank recollections of early years way past sorrow way past pain still with the stench of gory degradation dimming faces of family members embers and ash. Many of these individuals lost children mates mothers fathers incinerated all and here on a slice of park off the Grand Concourse they came to forget never to forgive yielding to the friendships with these young people because they were so totally and absolutely grounded in the present. What the elders hadn't reckoned was that most of these young friends had experienced a kind of harshness or

ugliness in their own lives. Revealed by the students at off moments during the course of these evolving relationships had accountings of the depths of gory and harshness life has as its underbelly. Sobering neutralizing perhaps the elders gingerly unfolded life stories that were indeed sickening but tolerated by young lives ensconced in brutality and meanness if with occasional murder and rapine. Narratives unfolded undaunted with the highest level of respect minimal amounts of intrusiveness if with ongoing *gentle persuasion*. Daily we would confer about approaches when to back off when to gingerly persist. Slowly very slowly we received the consent to gather the oral histories from about twenty-five of the elders most of whom not surprisingly had forged close ties with particular students.

Back at the library excitable now young teenagers racing in breathless often with grayish pallor inquiring if we teacher librarians and I knew of the *Holocaust* a historical phenomena new to their lips and vocabulary and what *Hitler* did to the *Jews*? Students became insistent on finding references and resources to read more to see how factual the evolving stories were continuing to be aghast. Innocence splintered off their lives and we wondered if this had been a good idea after all. Stories of family members with detailed descriptions of who they were accompanied when available photos were ever flowing and forthcoming. It seemed once assented to the elders wanted to tell their stories recapturing the essence of the lost the elders recapturing with their youthful captivated interviewers loved family members as if extant active verbs. It became apparent that for most of the elders days and nights were configured around their ongoing recollections if too often in the twisted turntable of nightmares.

Unearthed beautiful children sisters who could sew and crochet brothers who were scholars and farmers mothers who shrieked when dragged out of the door tattered clothing bones splintering through skins so frail and death driven. The stories unfolded whole present tense but rather than the horror it was the glory of enduring love childhood picnics music lessons and school where they learned many languages and about the dresses and suits they wore. Minor players in all of this were the family members the offspring of many of the elders rarely coming to visit and then no longer than parking meter time limits. The Grand Concourse as distant as the old country offspring wanting to move far as possible from their Yiddish dominant parents and the memories that could spill forth over a bowl of chicken soup with matzo balls. These infrequent family encounters fear riddled with the incursions on their current lives doffed often in imaginative self-invention. The children did not want to hear a recounting of memories of horrific past lives these offspring wanted to escape the family members who had escaped. Often told that it wasn't until after death that an offspring fully learned of a past in a concentration camp if the particularities of a tattooed number lived normalized.

The piece de resistance came mid-summer when on a brilliant early August day students ultimately working in teams of two or three came streaming into the library violating every enforced library code of quiet beckoned everyone assembled *to just listen to this!* With that they flipped on the tape recorder and there it was with a thick overlay of Yiddish accent necessary to recount exactly to do it justice: *Goils (girls) you've got to learn to masturbate to take care of your own needs be a doctor a lawyer don't get married right away don't have babies wait!* So much for forbidden caustically censored sex education in school and god knows in church the relationships the fellowship had grown deep enough to resonate almost with burly Jewish humor and pure *yiddishkeit* motherly advice never actually given in this exact same way. Love formed deep and abiding a kind of caring about the young ones and their future handing on the kind of sacred and sanctified advice that could only have come from wise and adoring elders for their lambent and young charges. *Holocaust and masturbation* and everything in between the publication with photos illustrations and stories that could break a heart and yet uplift exists as a document. Lifting off the pages the often unspoken of the harsh ominous bridges crossed boundaries broken transcendent alive and this within the domain of such dolorous love and loss of Edgar Allen Poe's wife the *beautiful Annabel Lee*.

Lost Children

What mother's lost children are these?

Cluttering up the streets

With their randomness

Who left them

Or gave them leave?

Where the imprint

From whom

The seed?

Walking as if no hand

Held a first step.

Nothing to remember

Nothing to forget.

Vacant eyes

A house no one lived in

Without history or compromise. Naomi Barber - 1978

Presenting the history of decentralization of the New York City Public School System through a very particular and personal lens.

To retell a little bit of school system history through a personal lens I was brought into the school system in 1971/2 as thirty-two decentralized school districts with elected school board members were created. These semi-autonomous school districts were charged with hiring a superintendent and providing educational oversight for students in kindergarten through the ninth grade. As they formed conclaves around newly drawn district boundaries the community activists the teachers and supervisors unions were wondrously finding in a whiplash moment how the newly devised school system could be turned into patronage honey pots. Before the legislative ink was dry the teachers union and the leaders of a racially embedded politics seized the opportunity to deliver patronage and to further entrench the Union. Jews and blacks from the recent uprising resulting in these historic changes were kept in a lockjaw enmity, a raw nerve that would seethe with the littlest provocation.

While jobs were shaken loose for favors the superintendent who hired me took a different tack interpreting his multi-pronged responsibilities. Strategic from the first he saw the necessity of keeping the predominantly Jewish middle class from fleeing the local Riverdale schools. Assuaging panic that soon their schools bastions of good scores and population stability with a surfeit of supplies and enriched budgets. From the first he counted heads as votes to keep his superintendency buoyant and viable. Inheriting the most heavily populated school district some 37,000 students cutting the greatest swath of land in the Bronx including some of the most poverty decimated neighborhoods all with a high concentration of Hispanics. In discrete and sometimes not such subtle ways if raising the hackles the consternation of populations to the South he granted way more favors to this middle income community to keep them living in the Bronx and their children in the school system knowing that higher reading and math scores generated by those local schools would ring favorably with politicians funders necessary to advance his educational program. The district included a large swath of land extending to the *South Bronx* by then a symbol of urban blight the scent of burning buildings never lifting off the lower atmosphere to the Italian neighborhood most of whose kids attended catholic schools and to other primarily blue collar less sophisticated and economically marginal neighborhoods. The student population some 37,000 and climbing rivaled that of Rochester and Buffalo a fact often thrown into his leadership pitches.

Like Pete Pascale and the chair of my department in college and graduate school he saw the same light in me the same desire to look at the work before me with an almost other worldly fearless passion and intensity. We shared the same sense of the ironic he enjoying my energy and spirit a visible manifestation of which were my work outfits quipping to him and others *I only dress like a member of the Hair cast here but at home sport wardrobes straight from Ann Klein*. At root he knew I meant at the most profound and determinant level to find ways with him to provide better schooling for each of our 37,000 charges and was willing to go out on a limb taking risks to do so. My outfits my wild unruly mid-back length hair (sorry mother) were armor costumes to disconcert put off unnerve go beyond. The intention to circumvent mocking jeering teachers to bait and lure identify still salvageable individuals before being ultimately lost to the cynicism the sinecures of malevolence blind eyes turned to students 8 to 4 daily. Perdition in public spaces where teachers become estranged from themselves and make strangers *the other* of students. (*Teacher as Stranger*, Professor Maxine Greene).

You go out there and have fun and let me take care of the politics he told me once freeing me of the grimaces and veiled threats of school based union-lockstep administrators and teachers. He saw his job clearly as battening down the hatches sealing off the borders and letting no stray or well-intentioned Central Board bureaucrat into this northwest Bronx domain. When such an individual was spotted we were to escort them to out beyond the borders of our *terra firma*. Called upon more than once to thrust such an official into the IRT No.1 line waving a feisty spirited goodbye as the subway pulled away from the West 231st Street Station. Further all of our curriculum materials had to be selected or made locally as *made by us*. We formed a sort of cottage industry of instructional artisans creating homespun curricula. He grasped that leading a paradigmatic shift meant going solo as he had as a marine in World War II when he had been a solitary foot soldier gathering information as he trekked lonely roads on battlegrounds in Japan.

Often he commanded the district office staff as if warriors as in the *Battle of Bataan* and in the spirit of songfest asked us heartily to join in on a resounding chorus of *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. This after a school week concluded and before he'd sent us on our way with a raucous salute he standing on his long conference table saying, *Yup, we fooled them for another week!* With a Hobbesian appetite for power and the strategic bearing of Machiavelli he lorded over staff reminding them that their singular focus ought to be on instruction. *You do the educational work leave the politics to me* he would steadily remind as he arm wrestled the borough political leadership into sulk skulking with retribution hands gooey in the honey jar of jobs and power. He was often overheard saying to the Borough President or to the local Democratic Party leader both named Stanley this

with his large hip high trout stream fishing boots on, *Stanley I'd love to talk but I've got to go I'm going fishing*. He would then cruise our offices with his boots on fishing pole in hand mildly grouching about our loyalty to his version of decentralization or community control. The teachers and the supervisors secretly self-serving sniveled their way in support if surreptitiously to the Stanley's' most of whom were Jews with a group of re-emerging and ascendant Irish. Other times he would don his FBI styled trench coat felt fedora brim turned down over one eye and say to us *take care of everything I am on my way to the Empire Theater* infamous house of porn on Pelham Parkway.

Inevitably power hungry leaders of the teachers and supervisors unions turned once oppositional community forces the ones who had fought them for local control of schools into supplicants begging for jobs in return for total and complete obeisance obedient to dictate and edict. Before ink was dry on the new legislation the entrenched quickly and expeditiously moved in to mute quash silence any naysayers particularly in the black community counting in at about twenty-five per cent of our school district of thirty-seven thousand students. These political henchmen were rightfully worried that the muscle-flexing fist of warriors for change would reach from Ocean Hill Brownsville into their little corner of the expansive northwest Bronx. Exploiting the Latino community was far easier they were accustomed to hand outs by war lords many having fled Banana Republics only to land in reside in another in the Bronx. Jobs were handed out like Halloween candy in extraction for pledges or chits for votes the forbidding language of English and a frequent need to live *sub Rosa* kept much of the Hispanic community hostage and silenced their children tethered to mediocre at best and for the most part inferior schooling.

School based officials modeling kingpins and lawless drug lords had jobs to dole out and so the muting of public school decentralization and the deadening of children's eyes by the time they reached first grade. In a sardonic twist of fate, chubby and ungainly Jewish mostly school building principals de facto members of the *Emile Society* which was the transcendent administrators club in power at that time had a harem of five to six dark skinned Latina beauties who were designate parent leaders in the school. School building principal jobs were handed out on the basis of a carefully regulated equation of homage bidding for the local politicians. School principals attended school board meetings attended by a royal guard of stiletto wearing cleavage enflaming female parent leaders. The sole Hispanic school board member would show up occasionally at meetings in a tuxedo with a flourish of lace and ruffles taken off the racks of his family's bridal store on the *Grand Concourse*. He a Latino straight from central casting clasped to near suffocation into the upper echelons of the power orbits. Incursions into the new law like *worms* in computers infestations of long-horned beetles in trees loopholes and

words that could be twisted and re-interpreted stole the early days of decentralization from a sense of hopefulness and possibility to the combustible and contaminating disease of indifference and cynicism that rode the blackboards of classroom like chalk gone awry.

The following excerpt for a NY Times Book Review October 3, 2010 could have been taken off the pages of 1970's Bronx local and school district politics.

Handing out jobs, specials protections, pleading a case preparing a militia of the right and willing and inspiring fervor and fury unleashed on behalf of a candidate as if lifted off our Bronx school district playbook?

In the end, this is a valuable account. Hezbollah has found a supple and sophisticated extremist formula – the combination of social services, an aura of incorruptibility, jihad and inspiration – that can and may well replicated throughout the region.

(NY Times Book Review, A Privilege To Die, Inside Hezbollah's Legions and Their Endless War Against Israel, by Thanassis Cambanis.)

An Agenda Shaped

Everyone satiate getting a bite or piece the children in the schools left to founder but for the efforts of what turned out to be a more than admirable and ethical superintendent who wielded humor like a weapon. Against this hastily concocted backdrop of what a local school district was purported to be under the new law, he asked me to join with him to disturb and unnerve the complacent and entrenched staffs in our junior and middle schools. Being mentored by a bona fide member of *the greatest generation* a returning WW II veteran morphing into a school district superintendent gave flame to my greatest passions and desires. Believe first or early mentors in spiritual and professional endeavors can lift a better self into an orbit incorruptible daring fighting to have meaning and meaningful work in one's professional life. I had the great fortune apprenticing in public school reform with this man his ever supportive gaze his wicked unflagging humor. His one flaw nearly fatal and succumbing was his sweet tooth for the girls (female teachers) and his ever growing desire for a hug a touch of tosh or to pat a succulent nubile rear. To right him a *task force* of feminists and local leaders from *Now* convened at my request leading a series of meetings about how to avoid anti-feminist school practices. The primary and superimposing suggestion coming from the *task force* was that boys shouldn't be the only ones to carry the milk cartons at lunchtimes in kindergartens and other early grades. The boss got cover an upbraiding and kept mostly to hip hugging fishing boots and threats to leave with his fishing pole to go get him some upstate trout. His humor kept everyone on tilt and fending off cases of shingles.

Decentralization limited the school districts to serving pre-K through grade eight. The superintendent developed a masterful strategy for turning the notoriously horrific middle schools topsy-turvy tipping the scales right meaning a good days worth of schooling. The plan included tapping new recruits' individuals who had flocked to the school system rather than serve in the Vietnam War. Knowing that these young men with little prior experience or knowledge of the internal workings of the school system would perform without a soupcon a lemon drop of union entrenched boot camp training. At a series of informal offhanded meetings welcoming these primarily blue collar offspring colloquial *draft dodgers* he offered enhanced freedom and authority over a corner of a school building in exchange for taking in some of the said school's most disruptive students. At first glance it seemed as if principals and teaching staff were relieved to get these roustabouts off their hands never sensing indifferent or inured at the potential for upheaval or reform that could come from these actions. Complacency the illusion of maintaining the status quo kept the teachers union leaders bickering endlessly with the building principals a staple creating a sense of stability. The stealth warrior superintendent continued his forays canny and devious subverting the internal stasis of school-based professionally concocted communities entrenched in routine. Mediocrity and indifference were left in place while the new superintendent made his incursions ignoring the intransigent stiff third finger given him upon occasion. Strafing with barb and jab subterfuge his modus operandi deft making in roads for the ultimate disruption of gross indifference and cynicism pervasive in the middle and junior high schools. Primary tapped as agent number one for his master plan was thrilling enticing a sleeping tiger a *Joan of Arc* fantasy awakening.

HEADHUNTER

The Superintendent asked that I work as headhunter finding among the most discontent distant or alarmed evaders of the draft those who took the greatest most unsparring umbrage at what they observed to be the shabby or hateful treatment of students. The plan was to take the overheating festering disenchantment the generalized expressions of anger and disillusion converting them into opportunity. Grouching draft dodgers offered enclaves the chance to break off from the rest of the school staff creating little or mini-school spaces. Our new teaching recruits desperate not to fight in the War in Vietnam rushed helter-skelter into teaching a safe harbor averse to jail or fleeing to Canada and without parents of influence to get them some kind of waiver or to move their lottery number to a number closer to infinity. Like *Felix Krull* emerging in the margins of Thomas Mann's mind they were young men sick to death at the mere thought of soldiering. Encouraged and given cover teachers with internal upheaval pangs of conscience offering just whiffs of an adequate schooling were invited to lunch and offered an opportunity to

join with a team of likeminded individuals to form a small instructional community.

These small schools-within-schools as they became known would offer the teachers initially a modicum of autonomy with oversight being provided by the superintendent's office. Deals were struck with principals to relieve them of the school's incorrigibles in exchange for three or four rooms in some remote corridor of the building teachers answerable and reporting to the district office. Principals jumped at the chance to remove the *bad kids* from classrooms and corridors thus relieving them of having to write onerous incident reports never good for reputation and future aspiration. In a series of informal meetings identified teachers or groups of teachers were invited to prepare a brief but cogent concept paper focused on instruction and collaboration. Superintendent and I sat with these teachers after five in his office and when deemed ready to build such a fledgling instructional environment were invited to discretely empty their desks gingerly escorted to set aside rooms on the upper reaches of particular school buildings. Principals were generally agreeable to taking on these newly devised small schools if occasionally a teacher or two had to be abducted from a building of an intransigent principal. Straight out of the *Hollywood Reporter* buzz triggered among the stable of the co-opted and entrenched when learning that these sacrosanct instructional spaces were freed if informally from union regulation answering to the superintendent and not the principal. Thus an army of teaching professionals rose from the ranks of the *Refusenicks* changing slowly but dramatically the norms within middle schools where one corner of the building was resonant with the hum of student and teacher exchange even possible to see the zigzag crisp of sparking imaginations. Students in these schools the most disruptive *jackets of incorrigibleness* following them as they sank into classroom seats.

By taking the wild and unruly students off the hands and out of the classrooms of the mostly lazy and indifferent teaching population getting the principal and staff agreeing to go along with the plan soporific never fully realizing that this was a far-reaching strategy for change. The Superintendent and I hosted a series of afterhour's meetings with the emergent teaching teams with wine and cheese everyone on a first name basis plans drafted to further develop the curricula of these schools-within-schools. *TIAEE Teachers in Alternative Educational Environments* was the designate name given for this evolving club of teaching professionals as a good soldier the Superintendent suggested that this campaign have a unique identity and entitlements. Teachers once discontent increasingly saw themselves as infiltrators of a school system that retreated to old habits if once purveyors for enlightenment and community control. It didn't take the school system long to smell a rat disturbing new found complacency manifest in the

sudden viral opposition to these small educational sites by no less than Albert Shanker the all-powerful boss of the New York City teachers union.

Foot soldiers for the union were to turn their backs on these turncoats who were increasingly for protection isolating themselves in their own instructional enclaves. Teachers in these *alternative* educational environments were evicted from seats in the teachers' lunchroom and tossed from suburban car pools. This was after all a *gorilla war*. The *TIAEE* mission and existence remained sub Rosa though the advent of wine and cheese parties with the Superintendent leaked out. Principal couriers with petitions for the Stanley's (party boss and borough president) brows furrowed realizing that a corner of their building was no longer under their strict domain. The superintendent anointed me de facto principal of the emerging small schools which twenty years later by the time I left the district numbered twenty-six. Zealous draft dodger's given desired and exclusive contact with the Superintendent created educational environments in which students thrived and in which a disproportionate number outdistanced and outperformed their fellow classmates though cut from the same demographic cloth. Drawing these mini-schools into the light gained favor and positive publicity scaffolding (a much maligned school system word). Curried enthusiastic press write ups and small grants from the foundation world brought principals to their knees off their phones with brokers and running to capture the flag much like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*.

Weekly the job outgrew its initial description now multi-tentacle octopi I was organizer of parents trainer of teacher leaders supervisor to recently hired ex-addicts who were going to work in a richly funded drug abuse prevention program that aside from principal extempore. Tenuous the relationship with the deputy superintendent who was reprimanded for his lack of gender protocol at my initial interview and with whom I had clashes early on in my tenure led to reporting solely to the superintendent spurning and causing the deputy no end of distress. Sprung from captivity my heart took flight I met the workday as if each was mine to invent. Rushing as spring waters down a mountainside every whim every idea every passion unleashed unharnessed I zooming around myriad shooting stars in my own firmament. Without precedent I was in a good place to walk on the fertile ground the new soil of a recently anointed and unfettered decentralized school district in the Northwest Bronx increasingly reminding me of my hometown Newark. The superintendent roared with an independent spirit proudly as a feisty member of the greatest war serving generation. Like eons of tarnish lifted off heirloom silver so my work shown through the tedium of the exhausted scrambling to find a place a voice in the newly recreated school system I moving in easy symmetry with the superintendent whose humor could scald even the most well covered skin. He and

I mirrored each other's gaiety and unstoppable fervor to create that better world for children motives inevitably cloudy but our actions bespoke.

Walking on Water: Now that the superintendent believed I could walk on water he asked that I take on take into the alchemy of my trancelike and transformative circles a group of recalcitrant and hardened Assistant Principals. Heard on the school district grapevine sinister whispers of an offsite training space where school people could get out of school time by just showing up bleating sheep while this ridiculously dressed woman stood on a soap box espousing better treatment for all kids mocks sneers proliferating. Fishing pole in one hand the superintendent suggested that I guide them out of the morass of their bigotry and their fisticuff handling of charges enlightening them returning them to school buildings chastened and cleansed individuals reborn compassionate striving to help the most *disruptive* students. Down in the ledgers of infamy these men (all) expressed such disdain and revulsion for a large number of their student populations they moved about boiling over vigilantes with noose ropes in their sashaying hands. Resisting at first this request he stamped his fishing rod onto the rug, sanctioned *thy rod and thy staff they comfort me* or have too much faith in me to myself thinking he doesn't know the fragile balance with which I hold myself. The meeting scheduled following a half year on the job in which I suffered from severe nausea often retching my insides out upon returning home after days when observing particularly despicable treatment of students in all grade levels. The door thrust open rushing off to the bathroom before re-entering the lives of my two waiting small children *I'm not home yet the mantra of a returning mother after retching out her insides sprinkling cold water on her face and putting on at home gypsy skirts and folksy tops.*

On the appointed day seated in our circle I quickly surmised they had cooked up a strategy to befuddle and upset me. Issuing as if a responsive reading overheated rhetorical descriptors of the students they served and the hazards to their very own daily lives trying to control reign in pre-ordained murderous young thugs. Volume lifting diatribe verging on the pejorative *N* word left unnecessary as they carried on the conversation as if spoken from the graveyard of *Our Town*. Ending the workshop abruptly called out vituperative reflexive spasmodic vitriol spewing from the putrid acids lifting off my intestines like air thick with the sewage of dying rivers and lakes remnant fish gone dead upstream floating backwards like trash heaped in dumps land fill exuding contaminants my mouth gushing with anguish overflowing remembering the touchstone pages of ***Frederick Douglass's Narrative, I am the embodiment the scream lurking my tongue webbing my insides.***

Scabrous monsters all of you, you are murderers killing the mind and spirit of students killing their futures their very lives their essences you belong in jail on death row. Naomi barber

And with that I swooped out gathering my overflowing hand painted multi-sequined skirt a standard in my work wardrobe meant to disconcert.

The Off-site Training Center Rented primarily to work with motivated teachers to create student-guided curricula following the awarding of a very large multi-year grant from the State. From the first as hostess supreme I wore a uniform wild and bohemian inhaling deeply Pall Malls or *Galois* depending on the need identify with or put-off participants entering my lair quipping always *at home I dress like Ann Taylor* always good for a few relieved giggles. Burning with mission backed by the superintendent lit up with reform fervor and fire the training sessions for discrete groups of teachers went at first from extremes of mockery and cynicism a desire to flee thinking they would be better off in the *stinking' halls* of their schools than facing this mad woman in crazy clothes inhaling deeply cigarettes relinquishing not an inch. Greeted always by banquet table overflowing with Bronx bagels a range of Jewish inspired cream cheeses and freshly brewed Colombian coffees served with *half and half*. These teachers in these groups, three a week, were for the most part young still malleable becoming in quick time desirous of delving into the particularities of their discomfort with the students in their classrooms and the leadership of the school. Preliminary meetings if deemed a success had teachers settling into the series of twelve all day sessions replaced by substitutes feeling as if they had won a lottery in essence they had. Even to the most jaded of principals these teachers seem to hold promise for instructional leadership in the school. Ultimately many of these teachers came to create and lead our burgeoning community of small schools-within-schools scattered throughout the District.

Toppled this time the quicksand of cynicism getting to me with this rump band of assistant principals these men tethered by a web of jocularly and contempt. Sweeping dramatically out I left them to gather their things wondering if they should just head home rule bound knowing it was an hour too early. Skirt in hand ran to my office a block-and-a-half away gathered my things got into my car back to my sanctuary the Upper West Side. Bursting through the door got to the bathroom in time to throw-up to wrench my guts out for the last and final time and to quit before being fired.

That evening as I was feeding my two children already in a flannel nightgown and bare feet the doorman announced that a guest wanted to come up. *Dangerous looking* I ask. *No* he answered. *Okay* I said. And there he was the superintendent. Opening the door I was greeted by his sobering wry smile and a bouquet of flowers, *can you find another way to say the same thing*, he asked? *Please come back to work on Monday* and in a door ajar flowers in hand a firm understanding came together a student at the proverbial knee of a wise mentor.

I left the School District twenty years later with twenty-six of these *schools-within-schools* proliferating regarded as among the most successful small middle schools in the City. This was a powerful legacy a tribute to the long gone superintendent and a reflection of our collaborative relationship forged on Friday evening so many years before. Three years after I was hired the superintendent retired his leadership ingrained and internalized a certain way forward as I continued to work in public education. Unfortunately for me the job fell to the deputy who continued to be unnerved by me yet woefully intrigued. At the superintendent's retirement party he took me by great surprise inviting me up to join him when he thanked me giving me a beautiful silver necklace and bracelet saying something like *Naomi was the one who broke new ground I just followed her*.

With this small band of renegades an increasing number of small schools-within-schools were created attracting additional funding and even wider ranging freedoms to develop challenging curricula. Schools continued to refer students identified as *throwaways* meaning the kids the schools wanted to dispose of. Ultimately *good highly motivated* students clamored to get into these small schools families willing to transport their children back to the *bad* neighborhood they left. Strategically located in the most economically hard-pressed parts of the school district known widely for providing quality education necessitating a competitive application process. One of the small schools taught Latin as a requirement developed an internationally recognized chess team which ultimate travelling to Russia for competitions. Resistant principals began to see the great benefit of handing over parts of the school to these small bands of teachers encouraging the highest performing students to apply. *It's great*, quipped one principal if with cynicism, *I don't have anything to do all day but read the sports pages and call my stockbroker*.

At the time of my incarceration, more to follow, in a windowless room twenty years hence there were 26 small *schools-within-schools*. In the early 1970's the UFT under the leadership of Albert Shanker had been our most persistent protagonist. Over time the UFT latched onto these small schools like babies on a nursing tit trying to salvage a public relations nightmare politics the lick of sway pragmatism the plucking flower of first bloom.

What follows: snippets and bits of projects that come to mind stand out in a series of work related recollections they are not in any chronological order.

Stories in the Oral Tradition of the Past Retold

*The origin for this project came in large part from the book **Teacher as Stranger** (1973) by Professor Maxine Greene in which she “suggests that the stranger’s vision brought a kind of acuity unlikely to be found in a person whose vision was dulled by familiarity. In effect, I was asking the teacher to take the view of the critical onlooker, someone attentive to inequities, false pieties, groundless promises.” She was asking that teachers continually question the material they taught to keep themselves from becoming dulled to the information they imparted. Professor Greene goes on to state that the role of the teacher is to cultivate what she calls “wide-awakeness” in students. Part of our job is to teach our students that the possibility of learning is everywhere and that we have only to engage fully in the world and in our interactions with others to start seeing it.*

The cultural racial ethnic divide is great, supposition: Teachers welcoming students to the first grade too often hold forth with a head full of mandatory curricula and State standards. Twenty-five first graders in slight or large motion move to different if unheard rhythms they form a circle a composite a blur mocha colored distant lands still permeating there being. *Stories in the Oral Tradition of the Past Retold* was an initiative to include and integrate dreams family stories and personal narratives into classroom instruction. It was devised in the best tradition of oral story telling an open market place in which culture and ethnicity became vivid and personalized. The project was conceived as a way to move beyond rigid compliance with curricula objectives often responsible for regarding students as quantifiable identities that would or would not register well on a standardized test. Central was to refocus the teacher’s lens to make unambiguous that the six and seven year olds crowding her were distinct individuals with a wealth of past experiences. A small group of teachers and parents signed on to participate. Students were then asked to illustrate the stories, which would become classroom readers. Student stories as well as teachers’ became part of a growing anthology of personal narratives and readers.

The particular public school identified if struggling instructionally had a principal who welcomed family members into classrooms and the school. Responding to the posting for participants in the *Stories in the Oral Tradition of the Past Retold* project the principal showed up at the first meeting along with the parents. The workshop was limited to twelve participants who agreed to attend the twelve-week workshop in which they would develop a personal recollection of a universal childhood event: first haircuts, first lost tooth, first pair of childhood shoes, favorite item of childhood clothing, grandparents, favorite family dishes. In this community we could draw on parents from more than sixty countries. The twelve members spanned every continent and had come to the Bronx within the past five to ten years. Stories deemed ready for sharing had the story teller enter the hallowed ground of the first grade class students and the teacher were seated in an arc much like the setting when a shaman or elder in a home country would retell a story/tale. The story was enacted as if performance art or *living theater*. Students' backs upright listened attentively questions and comments followed at the end.

Purchased at an artisan fair this hobbyhorse had weathered miles of trails throughout our six-room Upper West Side apartment. The riders my own children now in middle and high school left the wobbly horse propped up against a wall. As one particular story got refined and near to telling I brought in the hobbyhorse assuring myself it would be returned to its artful place in the archival dust of my children's childhoods. The story telling father to whom I lent the hobby horse had trekked down from deep in the hills of Puerto Rico and lived with his family in a modest walk up off the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Nighttimes he worked as an orderly at the local public hospital and daytimes took care of the family while his wife worked as a seamstress downtown in the fashion district. Free daytimes he was active in his children's school life. Never missed a Parent Association meeting. He had a son in the first grade and a daughter in grade three.

Recounting *My First Haircut*: – The children were told that they were going to hear a childhood recollection from one of their classmates father's about his very first hair cut in anticipation their mouths agape and eyes unblinking. The storyteller stepped into character wearing chaps and a cowboy hat riding in on a stead a hobby horse its head made of buttery brown felt stuffed with straw its mane thick woolen knitting threads browns and gold's its piercing eyes round black buttons flaring nostrils shaped of black felt one could almost feel the heaving of his thick breaths his whinny pitched high from the *hey ho* of its rider. The children eerily quiet as the storyteller with thick well-worn cowboy boots *thump thumping clip clopping* around the room. After galloping around the classroom four or five times he began to share the well-rehearsed story of his *first haircut*. The story is retold as an inexact narrative, it was yet to have a script.

I was just about your age when my grandfather said it was time for me to get a haircut. My parents never defying a wish of my grandfather handed me over to his waiting hand. My thick black hair fell below my shoulders with bangs brushed aside just over my eyes. At times my mother would pull my hair back with a rubber band. Never able to refuse my grandfather I went reluctantly tears streaming my cheeks a lump of fear made it hard to swallow. He placed me upon the unsaddled horse and told me to hold on fast to the rope guiding the horse around its neck. We lived in the outskirts of a small village high up the mountains in the countryside of Puerto Rico. In the village there was a grocery store a church a small town square a one-room schoolhouse and a barbershop. The barbershop was the gathering place for the men of the village. We walked the steep incline to the village over rocks and dirt stumbling and scuttling stones down the slope. And then to the clearing where we entered the village it seemed that the entire male population of the town was waiting. My grandfather led us in a wide circle weaving through and around the town square the men looking on smiling and laughing though not with ridicule but with pleasure and pride a milestone about to be met.

I dismounted the horse in my grandfather's reassuring arms and slipped to the ground. We entered the open barbershop hand-in-hand. The barber was waiting. He shook my grandfather's hand hugged his shoulders and drew me in gently to the barber chair. I was beyond tears choked back by fear and the knowledge that this was not the time to cry. Clip snip clip snip the thick black locks fell to the floor there was no mirror but the gaze of my proud grandpa's eyes. Snip clip snip clip I could feel the warm thick late morning breeze on my neck and ears. I could feel the clearing on my forehead and the full length of my sight the full-unencumbered view from my eyes. And then suddenly it was over with the towel wrapped around my shirt my neck was brushed off. And then a small round mirror was held up to my face. There I was a boy a boy all grown-up.

Haircuts were the rite of passage from baby to boyhood. I had arrived. I still didn't recognize my face but I turned to my grandpa who lifted me off the chair and gave me a warm hard hug. He then placed me back on the waiting horse and we once again paraded through the town. The men gave hearty claps and calls out. I felt proud. My grandfather's chest protruded with his deep accomplishment. He led the horse out of the town down the sloping mountainside again skirting rocks and unsettling pebbles and dirt. Reaching our home my mother and father waiting my mother wiping the streaking tears and my father sniffing a bit. Dismounted they held me close. I had left hours earlier a baby and returned a boy. I stood in the circle of my grandfather and my parents and felt the wonder of standing still without the thick locks of hair heavy on my young shoulders. It was a day I will never ever forget.

And with that the father storyteller rode around the classroom slapping against his thigh to get the horse to gallop without breaking the spell or convention of the tale told. He then propped the hobbyhorse against the corner of the room and presided over questions hands waving like shafts of wheat on a breezy Caribbean day. There was not a boy in the class who did not have a haircut story to share. The girls listened rapt and occasionally told of a time when they visited a beauty shop with their mothers to get a haircut or a manicure. At noon lunches arrived. The horseman with hobbyhorse departed waving his hat at the class as he got on the horse to a slow trot out of the room. The following year a small-illustrated book appeared on the library shelves of the first grade and also as a keepsake to the class that had moved on. The illustrations wonderful depictions by the children who obviously savored the story they had been told. Imagining the hobbyhorse propped against some apartment in the Bronx. He never returned it to me. I never asked for it back. It became an unspoken pact not to ask for its return.

The following week as scheduled our next storyteller entered the classroom. She was anomalous exotic not from the Caribbean or Latin America as most of the other workshop participants and students. She was from Armenia. Blank stares incautious scratching of heads. What or where was Armenia? And how is she in the Bronx. Her three children attended the school in grades one, three, and four. She had on what she described as traditional Armenian country garb. She placed a map up against the black board and showed the class where her home country was located. She only briefly mentioned the history of the horrific brutality and bloodshed from which her family fled.

In the softest dulcet tones she recounted: *I lost my first tooth sitting on the floor of our hut. There was a fire. The end of the day had come. All of the family gathered. Our extended family worked as goatherds and farmers. We had four big goats and two baby goats from which we got milk and made cheese. We always sat together on the dirt floor in a circle to eat with my parents and my grandparents. The meal nearly finished when I felt a hole in the front of my mouth and the taste of blood. My hand reached for my mouth and there tumbled out a small very white tooth. I clutched it in my fist. I wasn't ready to share the news. I knew when my family learned that a tooth had tumbled out of my mouth everyone in the family would yell out and clap. My grandmother first spotting the trickle of blood on my lip clutched my shoulder and held me tight and the small tooth fell to the ground. It glistened like a fallen star in the fireplace light.*

Tonight as I slept the tooth fairy would fly out from the sky and place a small token near my bed mat. Knowing if I did not go to sleep she would not come I reluctantly closed my eyes. In the morning there was a shiny coin. My mother

looked over her shoulder as she made coffee. She smiled. Clutching the small coin in my fist a big smile came over my face. My eyes were bright with stinging tears. I was not the old me anymore. I was not the baby. I knew now that my small sister would wriggle and dance in the center. I was getting bigger. To this day I feel a shiver in my back and a little whisper of sadness. Life changed for me. The coin rests in my treasure box to this day. And when each of my children loses a tooth I share this story with them and show them my precious tooth. My littlest one who has just turned six has yet to see the coin. We had to leave our old country. We were treated very badly. But the tooth fairy followed us here. How many of you here have tooth fairy stories to tell?

This story joined others in the series of early readers drawn from *Story Telling in the Oral Tradition* project. Ultimately two professors steeped in the world of narrative story telling led the project ultimately well funded by a bank.

Note: The readers were modeled after those developed by **Foxfire. The Foxfire Book** series stands as memorial to the people and the vanishing culture of the Southern Appalachian Mountains the stories collected by high school students serving to preserve this heritage.

The ALS or Alternative Learning Space

We took over a pocked marked building in the heart of the Bronx right off Fordham Road near the Metro North subway stop blocks from St. Barnabus Hospital on the outskirts of Little Italy and Fordham University. We recruited a more experienced teacher disenchanted with his home school to serve as leader. The students all had *JD Cards* records that would be obliterated as they reached eighteen referred by a family court diversion program. This small school was known as the Alternative Learning Space served fifty students all of whom had been thrown out of more than one of our local middle schools most of whom had just stopped going. They were rife with defeat bombastic wary as if tinder in a moment set to fight a wild serpent tongue-cussing ready.

Joey a young drifter fell into our anarchic space. He fled his home through a bathroom window and lived on the subways or on *nice* nights in the parks. He fell in line easily with fellow brethren. Court appearances would ultimately remove him from his mother's auspices giving him over to a court guardian and a responsive group home. His mother scalded the courtroom with her screams as the judge ruled. Joey taking one last look at her as he left with a court appointed lawyer.

The students were a rough and tumbled gaggle of boys heaping on each other in ongoing fake brawls. Confronted their shoulders would lift the lips stiffen fists clenching *what, what, what* ready to pounce or run calculating the risk. Each student had spent a night or two in some form of detention. These early teenagers were engulfed by abject poverty defeat and crumbling family lives. Threats were the medium of interactions moving fast and first as nimbly as flicked ash off cigarettes. In our leadership group we agreed to structure the space as loving nurturing and respectful akin to early education these young adolescent boys yet to be preschoolers. We created centers and reading circles community meetings at the top and end of each day sharing notes and experiences good points and disappointments. The readings inspired by E.D. Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy by way of building common ground if particularly attentive to including literature and art from around the world. We read multi-national versions of *Cinderella* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* about *Robin Hood* and myths of roaring conquests great warriors among them the *Knights of Sir Arthur's Round Table*.

Rowdy students fell silent listening in the small reading circles observing felt a numbing a deep chord of distress and sadness filling my heart and my mind. When had these children, these kids drifted off the horizon? When did they disappear into wildness and vagrancy? We got video cameras and easels and pallets of rich tempera and acrylic paints. We opened an art studio with smocks and thick oilcloth aprons. Paint splattered occasionally off a tip of a brush much like a food fight flicking off paint playfully but always with that rib-edge of simmering rage and anger at any moment that could flame forth.

At one point lying on the bathroom floor a loaded gun alerted by perhaps the owner who suddenly realized that he would have to give up his easel and story time for a another round in the purgatory of the familiar *kid jail*. Pointing it at my foot I attempted to take out the bullets discharge it remove the magazine as I had read in detective magazines in supermarket lines. I ran it over to the local police who were rooting for our success with our youthful charges. *Are you crazy you could have shot off your foot* I handed them the paper bag holster and they asked no further questions. Ultimately female students referred by the court entered our ranks interestingly more taken with the school offering than flirting many of whom were sexually experienced some already having had a child.

Our video equipment this being 1978/9 was lumbering and difficult to wield. A recognized videographer/film maker who actually had his surveillance pieces in the Whitney as well as other museums came to teach video and to help the students prepare short films for a planned film festival. The equipment was kept in a

storage room with a thick metal door and impenetrable lock students were invited to take out equipment for weekend with a signed agreement to return it on the following Monday. The door was the gauge of a bank vault. Police called me at my home early on a Saturday morning leaving my children with neighbors jumped into my car and got there to find a hole the size of a body in the door. The equipment including our television and video player were gone the smell of the blowtorch still scented the air. The director also summoned and I chagrined but not surprised after filling out all required reports put a plan in place.

We would flood the neighborhood backyards with a sign *saying equipment to be delivered to a specified backyard site by latest Monday at 6pm. No charges brought. All forgiven.* Students were alerted with a sign on the front door that school was suspended on that Monday. Broken apart wooden fences lined the rubble yards we in a defensive maneuver fending for ourselves giving a shout-out to the local neighborhood operators. Predictably all the equipment was returned but one video player. Legs lined with barbwire cuts external manifestations of crossing boundaries. Blood coursing staining as we lifted the hoist into a waiting van replacing it in the storage room the door had by now replaced by one with even more cast iron and grit. At the Tuesday morning meeting having retrieved most of the equipment we talked about trust. Silence to be pricked and deep breathing with an occasional sob like sigh were emitted. No one ever told but each knew. Whether the new door was impenetrable or a formidable lesson learned it never happened again the equipment continued on a loan lease basis. The film festival grim with the stories of ghetto life of life on the run of theft and fights of knives and guns puncturing the celluloid bursting forth with rage forthrightness and hopefulness.

Alternate Learning Space (ALS), Graduation – 1978

One Child

*One child got saved here
One child, one life
Which one was it, which ones’?
Was it yours? You?
Just one child got by
Out across the path of scars
A thick forest
No one should go there
We were told
One child got through
One life rescued
Who knows what it took
How it worked*

*Why in the forbidden forest
Someone dared to go
To the other side...
What's out there?
I don't know
Will you tell me?
When you find out?
For I want to know
One child got through
That one child is each of you.*

Naomi Barber

Note: Years later when kept hostage during work hours in a large windowless room the same videographer created a Hologram to play in a loop of the surrounding street environ featuring the sounds of screeching and zooming Fordham Road traffic alas leaving the school district before the installation could take place.

Chase or Citibank

Transformed tar paper tattered roof rubble strewn into elegant roof-top garden a way-station students sitting together on antique wrought-iron benches scent of perennials abloom snack table replete flowerets of broccoli and cauliflower carrots tomatoes upstate farm cheeses whole grain crackers juices chilled in cooler full. Interpretive jingo inspired murals refined subway graffiti art wild colors multiple drafts led to artist renderings.

What? They are coming in thirty minutes. It was Citibank not Chase. Calligraphy and colorful Puerto Rican native hibiscus weave in and out of the name of Chase. That was not the bank that gave us the money for the roof garden. It needs to be changed. The executives will be here momentarily. Going beyond the laughter the hilarity we white wash the name out and then framed with even more colorful hibiscus flowers replace it this time Citibank in floral calligraphy. Every bank in those days had five to fifteen thousand dollars in a virtual drawer and could give it as a grant without much paperwork to build good will in the neighborhood. The bank officials arrived layered with bosses and supervisors each patting the other's back they had *branded* yet another good deed in the bowels of the Bronx. Looked at a distance at the students not resembling frightening criminals in the making they swayed and swaggered in unison as if wheat shafts mouths agape. Sipping lemonade and munching Italian pastry from a nearby Italian bakery on Arthur Avenue lavishly toasting each other and us then left.

Moving On: The *ALS* a place for wild spirited students shouting out responses to complex and challenging questions and issues a place for art and creativity without censor or monitor the free flow of laughter and tussle as street life recedes on a brief trucking up some metal steps. Predetermining the future and the outcome for the students as most urban public education does had no place in our school. Let the chips fall where they may sturdy students confident moved through these halls in concert and see the world outside on the streets with different eyes strong enough not to be toppled by the tempting often destructive pull of the neighborhood. In question who would be their next teachers would the students be able to transverse the difficult negative at times of bigoted and disrespectful teachers and find those individuals who would want to regard them as students in good standing entitled to a strong and high standard education. Would a JD card stand metaphoric *Scarlet Letter* never to go beyond?

Community Mediation Training Project

What we got the grant, now what? We applied for and received a substantial grant from the District Attorney's office to create a program in the community in which there were students of middle school age receiving a high preponderance of JD Cards (Juvenile Delinquent Cards) or for which Bronx Family Court had the highest number of PINS Petitions (Persons in Need of Supervision) where family members were giving up on the rights to parent their children asking the City and State to take them over. The premise: if there were parents available who were trained to intervene in a family crisis with an early adolescent that cooler tempers could prevail. The said family would be supported with friendship and a close look at other more productive options for handling family turmoil when it broke loose. Idealistic or far fetched as this idea proposal readers took to it. Underpinnings concept derived from scant knowledge of *barefoot doctors* in China or other grassroots attempts at *informal* non-institutional interventions and solutions to interpersonal family troubles and conflicts.

Through an extensive interview process listening closely to the cadence of the interviewees hearts as they recounted stories of their experiences with children who were early adolescents (11 to 15) and more than likely their own. It was important to develop a training cohort with individuals who had a teenager or two as members of their own household. Steadiness and empathy were important touchstones along with a magnanimous sense of humor clearly demonstrating that these women really liked and enjoyed being with people this age. We needed to

ascertain that these trainees desired to understand the immediate world as young people saw it. Most importantly that these individuals regarded the information they would have about said families as sacred trusts not to be violated by gossip or untoward commentary. Although many of the women selected came from harsh and disturbing life circumstances they came forward as individuals who found goodness and strength within their families' and found effective ways to respond to crises or difficulties when they arose within their own lives.

Fifteen primarily women were identified to become members of the training group selected from buildings within close proximity in the high-risk neighborhood. The challenge became finding trainers for the group psychiatrists or psychologists who could move beyond the traditional and create a trusting and empathic environment or training circle with individuals from such distinct and disparate backgrounds. Dr. Harris Director of Psychiatric Training and a well-regarded psychologist whose work was rooted in community was contacted and recommended the perfect training duo a psychiatric fellow and his psychiatric nurse wife. The participants were given weekly stipends to cover costs for childcare transportation and snacks or meals during in-home family mediating sessions. Primary concern being careful not to jeopardize any form of government subsidies these individuals were receiving.

The group met weekly for three-hour training sessions for a series of fifteen weeks. Loose leafs with ample sheaf's of papers were distributed for class notes and to be kept as clinical journals. The centerpiece of the program involved alerting families in particular buildings that should there be a raucous and angry disturbance in a neighboring apartment between adults with teenage children that along with contacting the police to call a hotline alerting a community mediation member. If agreed to by police and brawling family the teenagers would be escorted to a *safe home* in a near-by building with a member of the training cohort. The young person welcomed with hot chocolate sandwiches cookies and some soothing non-intrusive conversation. Mediation members were trained to give the young person in question a chance to breathe and hangout without fear of a pouncing fist or a lashing tongue. Conversation or confessions were not elicited this was not to be a grand inquisition in which the young person was forced into disclosures that would promote feelings of disloyalty to his/her family. Troubled family members were to view this as a cooling off period in which *time away could heal some wounds*. The said youthful visitor hot chocolate and donuts usually started weeping often breaking into torrential tears. From journals shared in the training circles everyone in the family was weeping in concert hearing in detail about the excising of wound hurt and fear. Members of the cohort took reiterating vows of discretion limiting unless essential any discussion of the family or the crisis. Cohort members had

twenty-four hour hot line support from the training leaders and were instructed to call the young person's family to inform them that their child was safe if not revealing the exact whereabouts or location. Assessments were made regarding the viability of the family in crisis and whether the young person could be returned and what kind of support system was necessary to provide a healing environment for the young person and the family.

The ultimate goal of the project was to see if there was a way to avoid stigmatizing a troubled family with a young teenager avoiding placement in the foster care system ending perhaps any possibility of rebuilding on the strengths and love within the family. Crises exacerbate and limit any chance more often than not of bringing back together of the broken pieces of family life by labeling calling in the forces of expedience and unilateral and categorical thinking. The group met for two years about twenty young people cycled through our loving enlightened empathic arms. The project attracted private grants along with the initial funds from the District Attorney's office. The possibility of a new construct for diversion and prevention for youthful adolescents was built. The funders visited a session in about the 10th week and listened intently jotting down notes. As they left they congratulated everyone in the training group already in hand positive results verified by the court diversion program. Commenting finally once out of earshot of the group *these cohort participants were incredibly articulate attributing this to some formal education beyond high school*. Requiring great restraint this comment too frequently heard when individuals from neighborhoods with high poverty and high incidence of school dropouts were *too well spoken* straying into the territory or world of the *articulate*. We were gratified by our success as attested to by the Bronx Family Court and the DA's Office designating the Community Mediation Training Program a model for future adolescent diversion programs and recorded thus so in the annals and records of the court.

Propensity to not look back once moving beyond a project but driving by some of the buildings in which a community mediators resided I could almost feel the heat of compassion and kindnesses emanate.

Project Athena: The Infamous Thanksgiving Meal

Giblets homelessness foster care totems of the dislodged the disowned the unclaimed or dumped shoved precipitously into the world by circumstance never to be taught at the knee of a family elder about giblets, giblets.

This was our first Thanksgiving meal. Every meal before had been at some long table in some sanctuary served by the mayor the junior league or other such notable. These were the foster kids the kids from the shelters these were the babies who had babies all of whom had been placed in the nether world of foster care if for short periods of time as were their mothers' before them. Here they were recent arrivals in beautifully renovated and appointed apartments new appliances freshly painted walls bathrooms with bath tubs and shower heads each with at least two bedrooms. The City had given grants to a number of Bronx based community development organizations to renovate or rehab vacant buildings in and around some of the most decimated and poverty stricken neighborhoods. The organizations would oversee the management of said buildings and they would become home to families approved for residence by a set of pre-conditions one of which had them recently residing in City funded shelters.

An apartment on the first floor was designated for use by *Project Athena* a program funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to assure a good transition from the scattershot housing of the newly arrived tenants and to support family stability as part of this influx a potentially significant resettlement. Staff selected for Athena reflected the composition of the neighborhood African American Puerto Rican and Italian with each of the three women holding advanced degrees in social work and deeply connected to their lives as mothers. The grant was part of a national *family preservation* effort to keep troubled families together with appropriate interventions and supports thereby curbing referral to foster care for children and ultimate family disruption.

As was often the case with projects the genesis of the proposal started with a poem or reflection, which included the name *Athena* defined as *women bringing strength and wisdom to the city*. The *Athena* apartment was open to all residents early morning to early evening seven days a week on an informal drop-in basis. Children many of whom had recently been returned from foster care to *rehabilitated mothers* deemed so by City social services ranged in age from a few months to early teenagers though the greatest preponderance were pre-school toddlers.

A Day in the life of...Athena 1986

*Deep in a mythic memory, lodged a word HOME
A recollection of an experience a place never had never known
An archetype a composite smoldering inside bones,
What should crawl the walls
Beside a shadow?
What should a voice sing to its echo?
Empty space blank
The last home the only known home a womb,
Coming from an exile which housed mothers before mothers before mothers
Strike up an imagination fire it again
Give it things and ways to remember
Locate the strength the ideas
Love is still as frightening and strange as the empty rooms
Pacing the borders standing in doors looking out windows
Putting keys in and out of doorways
Walking in and out
Flushing toilets peering in refrigerators thinking what to fill them up with
Home a space in the personal
Athena a place to get comfortable with the word home
Its sound its meaning
How it feels what it knows what it signifies
Athena where the soul meets its song its longing
Chips of the past formed into mosaics for the walls
Dreams shaped into pillows wall hangings pottery
Reformulating images of self in a hat a bag
Self-expressions filling the walls like decorative jewelry
Child and mother finding their connectedness that sacredness
Building the endless and infinite possibilities of family
Decorated with laurel wreathes and juniper nosegays of dried flower potpourri
A HOME a HOME comes together
Figurative representations of self-sacred hidden away more than decades
Come home to stay
Mythic memories evoked
Life in the person gets born
Athena a safe place for families to form. Naomi Barber*

Mornings brought a gathering of eight to fifteen women sitting around a very long dining table having *coffee n' cake*. Quickly we understood that these women were the emissaries testing our viability as helpers each with long experience with the erect dispassionate social service system moving through their lives quickly and expeditiously ultimately deeming them unfit to be mothers women incapable of caring for their own children. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation was a leader in the national *Family Preservation* movement had us at cross-purposes with tried and true institutional mandated approaches most often based on a said worker's subjective and weary perception of any given family situation. Our first task quickly became building a sense of camaraderie and sisterhood our apartment a place to let one's hair down chatting and laughing about what seemed on the surface like nothing much we aligned as friends and allies shutting our door on perpetrators of the old social service order of things. We gabbed as women do about sex and men sluicing parsing the atmosphere with rage and hilarity. We could have been any group of old friends lapsing into jocularly uncanny openness rage burbling up an unsettled *fracked* soil bed. Hardships were kept at bay this a world minus file numbers in Family Court and other State social service agencies.

Bruising damning family disruptions generational ledgers long sins of dislocation seeping into the present and the future our team acknowledging that our own families too had deep wells of secrets of destructiveness drip dripping on our present lives if kept out of societies public realms. Deemed wondrous children returning to mothers as they moved into state of the art apartments bred instead fear disruption and a brewing sense of alienation from space, time, surroundings and offspring. The harm of homelessness and forced separation from children was unfathomable and possibly impenetrable. It became our task to find ways to build steadiness and confidence to make the new homes places for relative strangers each with unbearable hurt to build viable lives together as family. Feelings of dislocation flared in newly renovated apartments swirling ghosts longings seized hold for the life of exile for the familiar the chaos and blistering ransacking and ravaging fragmenting feuds replete with ongoing police intervention in shelters of a former life just moments away. Children many waddling in diapers calling out in chorus over and over mother, mother for women with modest allowances charged with purchasing furniture clothing for their children and ample *nutritious* food supplies most of which was without precedent prior life experience or preparation. Women never ever dreaming of living behind a white picket fence a periwinkle door mounted with festive country wreath now were in a place to call home so foreign so remote so unreal.

How to begin our small convivial team quickly and intuitively understood the extent of dislocation of historic proportion for most of these women our charge thus to create the circumstance for family viability in as unselfconscious matter-of-fact manner as possible. Harm and lack of collective experience in steady and stable home life meant our taking nothing for granted building ongoing rituals of *coffee 'n* a pot always brewing the door ajar and just a slight recognition of the women gathering with a nod or wave. Noting the swelling populations of infants' toddlers and preschoolers we designated one of our three rooms a playroom hired an additional staff member not only experienced with best practice nursery and early childhood education but conversant and confluent with our non-negotiable strictly adhered program philosophy and principles of operation: to lead by listening and *co-constructing* new realities and experiences by building upon and enhancing choice and opportunity and never ever to impose or overlord. During the course of the day there would be story hours in which a compendium of wonderful childhood books were read aloud to whomever gathered. Poignantly it was the mothers who covetously gathered in a circle with the reader the children off running helter-skelter clearly many of these women hearing a particular story for the first time. Agility essential in our shaping of Athena maintaining quiet during story hour meant engaging the children in the playroom. Multiple copies of books freely distributed to families interested in building their own home libraries sharing bedtime stories with children. Impossible to overstate the difficulty in creating Athena the majority of women justifiably trusting no one gauging the level of honesty and authenticity of our interactions with a Hawkeye the prudence of apostles accolades never to stumble ever straightforward unembellished never preachy never to raise an eyebrow or cast a stealth look at a colleague and in the advent that something horrific was uttered to respond as if it had.

Furnishing the apartments of great consequence a problematic to negotiate how to spend the limited budget making sure there were beds for all and places around which to eat and sit. Here totems or wish lists were plentiful and difficulties ensued finding furnishings to taste staying within budget no credit permissible and one can only imagine local furniture stores luring with deal chops wetted the possibility of this onslaught of new customers. Around the ever-brewing coffee pot a rapidly congealing self-identified *tenant leadership committee* came together task one to provide a list of stores personally surveyed deemed trustworthy providing good deals without exploitation. Heartbreaking to watch the huge dreams for furnishings condense like rain spills on a new sunny day. We came up with a motto *only the basics* personal touches would be handmade Athena within its budget upon request of the committee purchased medium and large sized pillows fabrics' needles spools of thread knitting yarn needles and a wide range of decals for the walls with favorite and current childhood themes. Within the Athena

team of social workers craft artisans skillful at covering pillows embroidering homilies knitting sweaters making laurel wreaths and potpourri stuffed animals and dolls. One staff member was a part-time potter guiding a group of mothers to mold moist mounds of clay into planters' cups and vases leading to the purchase of an Athena kiln. Another of the staff had at one time worked in the world of fashion creating fanciful felt hats adorned with abundant feathers and ribbons workshops attended to overflow. Athena soon filled with the continual hum of busy artisans crowded around tables industrious and focused on self-styled and personal crafts with a wide range of music playing.

In Which Athena Creates a Crafts Co-op

And here begins our venture as a micro-enterprise or *Athena Co-op* replete with treasurer a ledger for expenditures income generated all deposited in a common Athena bank account. The *Athena Co-op* artisans believed that items made to personalize and enhance apartments were thought desirable potentially marketable with each successive pillow, planter and hat building up pride and confidence. *Athena* artisans decided unanimously to launch a sale of their crafts at street fares downtown meaning Manhattan. Feverishly building an inventory of pillows wall hangings homilies reading *Home Sweet Home* with a few Bible quotes hats for Church and pottery for plants. The centerpiece item small straw dolls dressed in traditional Southern rural garb close replicas of dolls made of corn husks found in a craft magazine made in sewing circles in the deep south. Our first foray at a Bank Street School Fair on a Saturday where by early afternoon only a few items remained for sale. It is hard to describe the laughter and banter on the return trip to the Bronx and the pride the industriousness imbued we were off and running. Athena Co-op members clamoring to make more and more items with greater speed it was hard to reign in the energy and verve and maintain the diligence and high standard of the original items. Due diligence had the treasurer accompanied by the inner Co-op corps to the bank to deposit the first monies coming to amazing enough three hundred dollars in cold cash. Supplies originally came from the Athena Project grant ultimately drawing on earnings to supplement.

During the course of one year customers would look for the Athena Co-op table set at local fairs and events like Harlem week, the group building an expansive business knowledge and acuity developed a logo with a graphic of the goddess *Athena with the words Athena bringing knowledge and wisdom to the City* affixed to each item. Becoming ever more adventuresome the team decided to create a small cottage industry to sell its straw dolls (thought to be replicas of the straw dolls made by slaves on plantations) the biggest draw always at craft fairs promoting sales in national publications for homespun crafts. Tumbling from

mailbags orders for the dolls hundreds of orders flowing to our discrete off-site post office box. Dilemma crises followed the piling up of orders never anticipated the group frozen in place overwhelmed without the capacity or the will to spend hours each day making new straw dolls. A majority of our *coffee n' Athena* members were pursuing GED diplomas applying to community colleges and job training programs. The children placed into day care or pre-school the next Athena cottage industry the formation of an Athena fully licensed home day care center. The Athena Co-op closed shop sent notes to each of the individuals placing offers regretfully informing that the item had been discontinued and then rather soberly closed the Athena account using the funds for the playroom and the ever-stocked kitchen the Athena apartment continued serving as a hub an ever-evolving hub. The Edna McConnell Foundation featured Athena as a model family preservation effort noting the measureable drop in placements to foster care or calls to social service regarding child abuse.

The first Thanksgiving found Athena in existence for more than a year lists made budgets set recipes drawn from a set of cookbooks a recent gift from the funder. It was thought important to have dishes representing the wide array of cultures and ethnicities represented within the building and whether fiction fact or archetypical memory the menu becoming extensive. The Thanksgiving committee designated shoppers and chefs joining forces to host revolving family groupings throughout the momentous day. The first of the large Turkeys wiped down generously rubbed with butter stuffing baked separately to avoid bacteria build up within a turkey then placed in the large pre-heated oven. Chefs and other neighbors huddled over very early *coffee n'* when fumes came pouring out of the oven engulfing fire alarms set off the apartment door flung open along with windows and through the thick choking smoke out came the turkey which had spurting flames shooting out from its well tethered legs. We had forgotten the paper-enwrapped giblets. We never removed the giblets. Choked with laughter and *turkey butt* fumes turkey unsalvageable smoke dissipated the next turkey rubbed down placed in the oven giblets in a pot filled with canned broth celery carrots and seasonings. Prepared a pan of bacon drizzled stuffing placed in the oven in preparation candied yams sweet potato pies mashed potatoes to be served with thick brown gravy collard greens and other such delicacies. The pastry crew arrived with cakes and pies and cookies baked in other apartments and all made from scratch. The first seating delayed by a few hours began with participants holding hands expressing emotional statements of gratitude and then breaking out the wine and a small keg of beer. The children were in one of the apartments with the appointed mommy the littlest ones in one place and the older in another. This was a rolling sumptuous feast in the true spirit of communion and community that lingered through the day and well past mid-night.

Many years after this our first Thanksgiving feast I had lunch with one of the original social work team sharing that many of the *originals* had moved away and were doing quite well and that the women who stayed became the *elders* building on the rich *Athena* tradition of strong community. And we, what happened to the original *Athena* team three of us divorced one married again each moving to careers in social work education or as craft artisans. Thanksgiving often bittersweet a day at *Athena* when almost visible the weight of collective despair lifting commingling the scent of delicious foods and a first rightfully hard won communal celebratory meal.

*How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn
And custom for the spreading laurel tree*

A Prayer for my Daughter, W.B. Yeats

Who the Fuck is Fondly Naomi?

In 1972 a fledgling District Office staff member as if burdened with an early onset inner ear dysfunction I began to feel dizzy and nauseous at work each day. To fight this off and get an even footing I found myself working more and more outside the walls of school buildings - vacant lots, living rooms, Bronx Irish family pubs, local funeral parlors, suburban living rooms – any place to break through the covenant the intransigence of the *school system* I saw rising before my eyes a tsunami. The incident precipitating becoming an *outlier* occurred when the deputy superintendent the very man who almost derailed my employment snarling asked how I would manage coming to work when my kids were sick came to the office door a year into my tenure yelling *Who or what the fuck is fondly Naomi?* My crime sending a letter on school district letterhead to a group of teachers enrolled in a course counting toward a salary increment under the aegis of the UFT, which I affectionately called *The Happy Hour*. Attracting a waiting list of teaching singles and war resisters we were planning to meet on a Wednesday evening in one member's suburban living room. *Dear Happy Hour Class Members, Sabrina will bring the bread, Myron will bring the fruit and cheese, and I'll bring the wine, Fondly Naomi,* the letter read. Humbled and duly humiliated I stepped forward. *Have you any idea what you've done you sent this correspondence out on official school district letterhead – you bring the wine, fondly Naomi - are you out of your fucking mind?* Duly reprimanded never again to commit a word on any official letterhead designing rather letterheads for each project with which I was connected. Thereafter referred to in close professional circles as *who the fuck is fondly Naomi?*

The *Happy Hour* was designed like a communal quilting bee in which we examined the impact of culture and ethnicity on the classroom. I was increasingly finding my way to delineating and defining a personal *Weltanschauung* as alarming signals of the school systems unchallenged unquestioned and uncompromising mindset emerged. Pushing up through me was an impatient desire to make a better school world. Bushwhacking a path for school reform with a decidedly feminist bent. Poetry was the milk of my engorgement my seduction. I wanted to create a space in which mutuality and respect transcended formal hierarchy. Broad shoulders humor an unmediated worldview vigilance and the willingness to take full responsibility for my actions became the qualities necessary to inhabit both my world and there's. To my delight the poetry often lit up the skies of the discontented enticing them out of the orbit of the culpable and colluding to reciting verses of their own forming an unstoppable *poetry rave*.

The Bronx New School

In 1980's we held a student admission lottery for the parent created proposed K-5 school named The Bronx New School the second parent initiated New York City public school following that of The Brooklyn New School a year or two earlier. After an intensive year of meetings with a parent committee drawn from every neighborhood in this very diverse Bronx School District a comprehensive plan was completed detailing an education philosophy and a blue print for curricula. The committee developed the school plans after a series of intensive visits to a wide range of schools from traditional Catholic schools every student in crisp uniforms sitting in rows facing a teacher to schools where the day originated with students assembling in a large common room singing and dancing in circles to a drum beat. Through an arduous interview process a Director reflecting the planning teams philosophy was selected. Moments of dissension were worked through in laborious discussion over tea and home baked breads and cakes in committee members' living rooms. It was quickly apparent that educational preferences were steeped in the schooling pasts of the parent committee members or of preschool experiences of their children. What held them in common was complete dissatisfaction with their neighborhood-zoned public school no matter where in the School District it was located. Schools in the middle and more affluent neighborhoods had children who scored better far better than those in the poverty level areas. Surprising was that parents from both economic spectrums registered equal dissatisfaction.

Handing as the designated messenger a petition to the superintendent submitted by this group of disenchanting parents had the superintendent's blood pressure registering in the danger range veins on his neck bulging face hot with flush

enraged near prostrate flinging papers off his desk close staff aghast. By now use to his tormenting and torrential outbursts he having succeeding the man who instilled the need in me for a steely spine stood by quietly reminding him that this petition reflected the philosophy and opportunities he espoused in multiple public arenas. Oh and ouch, *okay meet with them in the morning* and then set up a time with me he grunted depleted by his outrage thus The Bronx New School was launched in 1988 and still exists known also as PS51.

It has been many years since we sat in the living room of one of the committee members heirloom quilts on the wall in this middle-income apartment in a labor union developed housing complex. She a writer for the *Village Voice* and her husband a sports writer for the *NY Times* was not lost by the already fearful superintendent who had read her scabrous stories about school board members in the Bronx now counted on me to shape a vision of him near celestial donning an illuminated halo. Of course the journalist astute observer of people in public office snickered knowing how she unnerved him how leery he became when as a member of our erstwhile committee she entered his office. He incessantly had the *Riverdale Press* breathing down his neck snooping around regarding him with observable disdain he at one point shared that the creation of this school might bring him positive press elevate his standing with school board members and even the Chancellor.

Following the lottery for admission there appeared a front page story regarding the opening of The Bronx New School for which there were twenty-five places for entering kindergarten students and as fortune would have it not one of committee members children got in. It had been a firm understanding that the committee would abide the lottery. Recognizing that having the children of committee members in the school was essential to its success and on the off chance ten slots were held off specifically for the offspring of the ten most active committee members. Opening a parent created and controlled school was in essence risky but without they're continued active participation the school would be undermined and sabotaged from day one. The next morning revealing that we had ten available extra places for students to a reporter from the *Riverdale Press* in the presence of the superintendent and most of the disappointed dejected and heart broken parent committee who upon hearing the news registered grateful and tearful surprise and delight. The Bronx New School became known appropriately by the committee as *the little engine who could*. No one including the superintendent had been informed that places were held off *just in case* for the committee members the *Riverdale Press* noting the integrity of the process and its boding well for the future success of The Bronx New School.

The Lottery

We held what is called a *controlled lottery* our goal to have equal numbers of boys and girls and representation from every corner of our vast school district if for the just twenty-five places for the entering class of kindergarten students. We designed an elaborate chart in which to register the numbers drawn randomly from the box. There had been an extensive outreach to inform the larger community about the opening of *The Bronx New School*. Committee members went to church meetings storefront churches community centers to spread the word. Part of the agreement for the founding of The Bronx New School was there would be wide dissemination a departure from the practice of informing particular primarily middle class parents when opening an innovative school or announcing other highly prized school activities.

Space the yawning cavern into which most innovative ideas in education are sucked aerated kicked smirking obstructionists *tsk tsk* with regrets. As we planned for the curriculum, hired a director, developed the lottery, we drove around with various realtors looking for a space, the district schools were notably overcrowded often the excuse for the pervasive mediocre or bad schooling. Identifying an outside space would involve going through an extensive leasing process the lurking trip line and enough to make believers of the committee we stumbled upon a sympathetic minister who offered us free of charge the rooms used for his Sunday school which had already been designed to code and could accommodate at most thirty-five students. Convening an emergency meeting in the said space we without hesitation thanked him agreeing to community service in exchange but promising to find a way to pay a modest fee for upkeep. The Superintendent seeing the commendation and approbation he was receiving by supporting the opening of The Bronx New School became its proud cigar chomping in absentia godfather.

The Bronx New School: Anecdote and Recollection

The incarnation of the Bronx New School in the 1980's started with protestations and ultimatums moving into tea and coffee home baked breads and cakes and occasional sips of wine in the living rooms of the ten member self-anointed female parent committee meeting over a year, weekly. Disgusted by their local public school with four year olds soon to be kindergartners at their knee they became *Refuseniks*' refusing to send their babies off to the school in their own neighborhoods no matter what the reading or math test scores.

I will never send a child to a school where children run around wild to the beat of a tom-tom believing they are snowflakes. Never will I send a child to a school where they sit stiffly in rows in itchy starched shirts or blouses facing a teacher without

even blinking an eye or speaking out of turn unless called upon. We ultimately landed someplace close to the progressive Dewey UCLA or Chicago Lab School model. The first director had come from Chicago and was well versed in this philosophy of education and had led a very successful nursery school to which some of the committee members had sent their children. The school would provide continuity for those families entering the school and seemed to appeal to the parents from *the other side of town* who had never seen or experienced anything akin to progressive pedagogy but were willing to give it a chance. Most of these parents and family members had gone to Catholic or public schools in the Bronx or in their home predominately Caribbean or Latin American home countries some had attended church run schools in the deep South where the warmth and inherent discipline of the philosophy resonated.

For Friday afternoons the parent committee initiated and coordinated a program, which brought in artists storytellers dancers and musicians to meet with the children while the teachers participated in professional development led by the director a considerable educator in her own right. Friday afternoons extended into Friday evening buffet dinners where all family members joined their students for potluck dinners and story telling. The storytellers were school family members sharing family stories to an enrapt Bronx New School community. The success of The Bronx New School in its cramped church basement quarters can be attributed in part to the ongoing Friday afternoon staff professional development and the Friday school community gatherings sharing community sings, potluck meals, and family stories.

FINDING A FEMALE LANGUAGE FOR POWER

Puking when made the Director of Community Involvement and Special Projects for this School District located in the Northwest Bronx nearly twenty years earlier. Almost exactly twenty years later catapulted nails pulled off fingers yanked from a job a sense of security and connection my own spidery web tying past to present to future derided spoils hailed a token of a school district victory uprooting one superintendent replacing him with another a Jew cabal of Jews for an Irishman and his very Irish cabal each spooled to a temple of religion. I felt and was in fact abandoned alone an anachronism mocked for never fully coming to terms with fully understanding that work in the higher reaches of the NYC Board of Education represented just a game of brinkmanship sacrificed merely a totem upheaval politics ridding itself of finally dislodging the Jews (Yes, Woody Allen).

Displaced by shifting power orbits to keep sane I told myself I was a martyr an image somehow comforting a poached rare bird. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Robinson, referred to anyone she felt special as her *Rara Avis* while bird sounds

swirled around our heads riffs from old birder recordings borrowed along with the stuffed birds cluttering our room on loan from the Newark Museum. With the new regime I was denied a professional existence nullified left without a designated budget line. The legitimacy the viability a bureaucracy gives you is your budget line without it you are a dead duck, defunct. I was a nomad wandering the payroll sheets checks generated from a payroll *dump* code. Falling into a secret canyon within myself depicted as a suffering *Joan of Arc of Public School Reform* gasping for last breaths trying to bring legitimacy to the life that had once asserted itself. I was dangled a *medusa* head of the vanquisher, a frontispiece of the spoils the bloody fist thrusting its right to hold hostage as threat of vengeance if just a whiff of interference or undermining of stalking or creeping around of the ousted regime should come. None came. Loyalty vapid vacuous vapor observing former colleagues flee helter-skelter sacs of gold clutched. I got dangled while my mind strayed into mythic narratives of heroes and martyrs without religion I was left with archetypes.

A memory I savor from way back in those early more sanguine years when a melon size fibroid tumor was growing in my thirty-one year old uterus, I had just taken the reigns of this nausea producing position and suffered monthly with excessive bleeding actually a mortifying level of blood pouring from me. The tumor was still budding but undiagnosed. About six months into to this elevated job surrounded by male entrenched subordinates sniffing for reasons to discredit and catapult me chuck me came the deluge a puddle the increased concentrically and immeasurably fell from me as I stood near the door. Escaping with a route of droplets traceable to the ladies' room moving horrified stifling tears until I was safely in a stall with a pack of toweling did not have time to get my purse stuffed with pads and tampons. Backing into the office upon my return to gather my bag and to conceal the stains on the back of my pants a cluster of Seychelles like islands I saw my male protagonists on all fours all three of them bunching clumps of toweling to wipe up the blood gagging uncontrollably heaving dogs as they rubbed. The only other female in the room the secretary who watched our daily sub-terrain battles looked on with an amused glance knowing she had to land right with whatever side prevailed. Quipping as I grabbed my bag, *see why women can't be presidents?* They looked up askew pelted with this off-putting taunting truthsayer humor familiar weaponry used to an art form by the Superintendent of the District and my most work-defining mentor. *I'll be back taking a lunch break* I suggest if at 10:30 in the morning. They put us in caves they dipped us in water *Mikvehs* to cleanse us is there no running from *anatomy, is it after all destiny?* Some ten years later had a full hysterectomy. Women in white pantsuits strut podiums pointing to the glass ceiling they need to shatter and I wonder these many years later no fibroids better pads and tampons does the body cooperate or sense a need for rebellion depending on circumstance? How many other women have

discarded slacks with a Seychelles spray or spill of an unanticipated flow spill of menstrual blood?

Advocates politicians throng the tables of debate with ideas plans formulas programs to reform public schooling but few of them ever really come inside where livelihood principles values beliefs intertwine marry. Public school reform was my poetry my madness my obsession my sunrise my morning glories. For twenty years I charged myself with creating and setting off new initiatives that held the hope of doing better by our ever-burgeoning thirty seven thousand charges in this school district located in the Northwest Bronx. I saw myself as an engorged nursing tit there to entice provoke and sustain petrified bureaucrats as they inched toward change. I tailored the job to suit myself and was given the space and room. Motives, motives are never fully known identifiable they are a tangle like a hundred snaking gold chains knotted together in an old heirloom jewelry box.

On Getting Power

Power my desire for it and the repulsion of that desire found its way into the following essay *Finding a Female Language for Power*.

Finding a Female Language for Power – Essay - 1981

Power always makes me want to throw up. I suffer from always wanting to be a good girl. To pleasing. To sitting prettily on Daddy's knee. Fetching slippers and pipe. Running fingers seductively through seceding hairlines. Submissive and coy. Moses on the mount. Genuflecting ingeniously, I wait for His wise words. Commandments to operate by. I am caught up in words, in history. Tangled in olde thoughts, olde miseries. I curtsy. I skip away. The gravelly voice, a gavel. Hearing Him, I step into military clothing, a hired hand, a mercenary, a girl going off under orders. The day being through. The clock ticking me toward home, I go in and report. Like a pup being trained, they give me a bone, a pinch on the arse, a hug, a good girl, and I am finished for the day. Good girl pleased and obeyed. So much for the boss lady, the veneer of pomp and authority, like makeup poorly put on. I choke, god damnit, on the mantel of my authority. I gag at being head of household, of being head, at the helm. Rather I am an appendage. Defined, my identity gotten by swapping off last names. Being in charge makes me nauseous, a boa molting, serpentining in circles as my other skin lifts off. I tried, damnit, to scratch off, to renege, to get off this predicament, to give it away. Girls don't like power! If they do they aren't girls. A power lives within me. It takes no divining rod to see it, to find it. A power seeped in a deep anger and a voracious hunger for

love. A power like the sun. For a year, on and off, I threw up when I became THE BOSS.

A vamp on a pedestal, one touch of Venus, pedestal power, denied sexuality, just a hint of cleavage, cleavage power, the possibility, always the hint of possibility held like catnip at bay. Men scaling mountains of longing, pitons, tongues, irreverent climbing up, upon. Worship. Idolatry. Always what is desired held just inches away. Pedestal power, inciting longing for what is always just out of reach, what is desired. Desirability defined by what is divine. The thick, deep buttery soft leather seat of power, an Eames Chair. Seduction in the swivel, the recline. Fuck sunshine laws and freedom of information. It all takes place behind closed doors. Who the hell hold the controls. The adored objects of desire. There for her scent and the incentives she provides. More celestial maidenhead, than head-head. More mistress than bride. More cunt than boss. More behind than before. Fantasy! Forgeries in signatures of authority when her name adorns the designation: director or boss. A fraud! Tits and ass power, power clothed in Chanel No. 5, a Maidenform bra and panties (You never know when she will show up or strip down) or a Halston sarong. Always implicit and imminent, does she go down and with whom? Like, whom does she report to? Angels dressed not I the diaphanous but in gray flannel suits. A prostitute in a business suit. Can you after all take something divine, something for nighttime seriously? He, who gives her power, has the power of His sexuality, His carnality. His desire for her keeps her imprisoned, prisoner.

A woman in power, an object of fear and derision. Categorized, defined by does she get IT? She needs IT! Oh my, what a way to speak of Momma. Or it is Momma: good Momma, bad Momma, feared Momma, and god-only-knows Momma. And everyone knows, Momma is a sucker when it comes time for her sons. In the seat of power, she watches the Prince run, and go, and become. Momma of the tit and the warm glass of milk. How can the lady become boss confront or contradict the boy turned man? She only, after all, knows from guilt. Momma is to be outgrown. Momma is to get affirmation and comfort from. Momma is to slam out on and to know you can always come home. Momma lets you have temper tantrums and get away with it. Momma is tolerant and forgiving, and manipulative and guilt bearing. Momma is a kind of subtle, silent, behind-the-scenes authority. But Momma was never a general of an army. Look what they did to Joan of Arc! Momma tells Daddy everything, relegates authority, tells on, does not wield a whip or machete or submachine gun. Momma stands behind the lines cheering on. Orchestrating. Choreographing. Momma's authority is never out front, in the open. Momma cannot protect us well, our territory, our space, our jobs. How can we trust Momma with a war map, strategies? Entrust her without public lives? Momma lives inside, to hold us and to keep us safe at nighttime. They called me MA at my job. MA! And when I had to discipline an employee, my heart curled into itself in great sympathy and HE whimpered, how can you do this to me? And

implicit in the whimper and the tears, hey lady, you best not fuck with me! BIG MOMMA! Naomi Barber

Finding a Female Language for Power 1981 tells of, affirms the struggle women have with and holding power and I believe if nothing else I was a warrior in this still ensuing fight.

“When Humility and Audacity Go Hand in Hand Corner Office” – Jacqueline Novogratz NY Times, September 29, 2011

The Back Story

I was catapulted into power one day in early 1973. *You're the boss! Go now do your job! I'll see you around*, he said. I began my tenure as boss with a revolution a *coup* to overthrow me. Like a collective *Grand mal seizure* the group of about forty individuals went into a panic a spasm a tailspin. Who would take care of them keep their jobs safe keep them in line? My predecessor as distinguished from the superintendent had been a big burly ex-football coach. We even called him *coach* they called *Ma*. He had been a military man. He had big expansive shoulders big hands. He was comfortable being at the helm. Nothing you could tell him or say to him would throw him. He was our rock. Nothing could be wrong if he was there. He was benevolent and secure. We were like puppies at play. He petted us when we came around told us *good job* and cheered us out into each day an ever kind ever strong good, good Poppa. Later I subsequently learned his insides were like a permanently bleeding wound. **His kindness** and ever-ready good nature his enormous capacity to give tore his guts to shreds. He was adored always there always responsible. No fissure in the action never a weakness showed. This beloved coach was like sod after a hard game of professional football on Sundays. Is this the shape power ought to take? I asked myself always a smile and calm so calm. Never angry always so controlled even when the staff morphing into mob ran went wild.

Reverberations spasming stomach overheard in the anteroom of executive suites, *I'd rather work for a man any day*, she universal said. It is unnatural for women to hold power. Women are witches. Otherworldly. Women make babies. That is enough of the world for them witches, bitches, vamps, whores, good girls, MOTHER. Aside from Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* where have so many eminent women congregated, been together, been recognized, not

despised? Men hold power a stick, a penis, a whip, a stanchion, ammo, and what a TIT!

Where to Begin? Hemorrhaging and Throwing Up. In my first months on the job, as shared I bled profusely on the office floor. Fleeing, I quipped, *see why a woman can never be President?* The men swabbed the deck and nodded in consent. Hemorrhaging and throwing up I didn't meet power easily. Be an autocrat. Be precise. Be exact. Be absolute. *Fire'em. Beat 'em. Destroy 'em.* Give nonnegotiable orders. Commands. Tell us what to do. Don't ask questions. There must be an implicit threat in every task assigned. What's the punishment if? I felt I was walking around in scenes from *The Mikado*, I was the Emperor, or the Lord High Executioner, miming was a real boss. A *Leviathan*. A is to B as B is to C, no shadings, no gradations, no chance, no risk, no choice, nothing open-ended.

Yes I took this all this seriously whether as a counterfoil against Ms. Mousy Cowering Wife or to survive to flex. Reflecting on motives dimmed the quest shouting out within. Now wait a minute, men. I put the skids on my hearing muffled my male advisors and tried to wend my way to finding my own voice. What exactly is a woman boss? How does one act behave boss? What does make a woman different unique? What are these qualities and how can I incorporate them into this level of responsibility? I had to plunge everyone into this exploration this quest for a *female language for power*. My search was their staple for authority.

First to plummet the depths of my abhorrence of power I began to understand that if I hadn't wanted to have power or great responsibility I wouldn't be in this position. And although power did seem to be a male noun it didn't mean that it was evil neither did the holding of it, neither desiring it nor its acquisition. I had to do something about that *good girl* that please Daddy sweet thing virginal at work and at love. I had to acknowledge and accept that it was a virtue to love openly and evenly and even passionately. It was the fear of men and not the love of men that condemned me us to the circumscribed to the tyranny of our assigned roles. Overthrow the tease, the closet seductress! Make way for the woman in the fullness of her being and the wholeness and wholesomeness of her sexuality and Momma, poor Momma. Everyone was not to be my child. My *tits* succulent with milk for my own two children that nurturance a memory fortification a source of inner strength and solidity a sort of job preparation. But *wet nursing* was inappropriate to sustain and support staff. I had to stop confusing nurturance with sustenance and support. The whimsy the irony did not escape me

sexuality sex lovemaking ritualistic necessary but pleasure desire my *Rubicon* as distant from me as *Sappho's* island.

The female language grew: flexibility, warmth, an abundant capacity to manage and balance many things at the same time an ability to shift gears a gift for listening and drawing out thoughts and ideas from others I could hear and include others in decisions. I liked informing individuals and teaching them about the ever-widening aspects of their jobs. Go ahead take chances make choices be open allow your imagination to wander into the complexities of the situation. I saw evolving a woman who was more authentic democrat than autocrat more comforting than punitive but able to be tough, ethically tough. Someone capable of protecting people, tenacious like a Momma lion at the mouth of a cave in which her cubs nap, ferocious when necessary. I took umbrage at dishonor. Honor thought a *male virtue* and something that joined my language. I learned I could fire when there was a reason that I could remain calm and able to deal in times of stress and havoc and pain. Uncertainty made me more predictable. And the fact that I was so carefully tuned to other's needs enabled me to help others avoid professional failure. I was able to redirect and advise before it was too late. No precipitous decisions, no absolute orders, no perpetual ignorance allowed, no implicit threats, no simmering terror, no stated temper tantrums and outbursts of rage. No *one hand washes the other* no deals no lazy sleaziness here, please no pent-up feelings waiting lurching lunging to cut someone to size and no castrating, pretty please.

Seven years later and many books by *sisters and brothers*, Friedan, Janeway, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and Sylvia Plath, I only vomited once in a while now and never again bled on the office floor. I had hard times and painful ones, been confused and devastated and always bounced back rebounded by the beginning of the next working day. Hardest of all was to recognize and accept that competence and strength in the *man's world* could also come from me and that I didn't have to apologize for the fact that I liked being in control, responsibly in control and that I could handle it. And most important of all that I could trust myself with power, with power entrusted to me. *You see the world always through rosy colored glasses*, one of my favorite colleagues liked to say, half deprecatingly half affectionately. *I refuse to be anything less than hopeful and open*, I always said. And the more I knew the more I thought that what I had to offer from this female body and female mind was a constant return to innocence and hopefulness and as my

awareness of this part of the *real world* grew so deepened my openness and my hopefulness.

Immediate and urgent an infant's needs supple and responsive to these pleas motherhood my training a metaphor for leadership my way urgent a world needing to be cared for with tenderness and sustenance. My breast and heart are powerful weapons against bombs and devastation. Not to taunt and tantalize with or subdue but to feel when making choices or decisions. Culture or birth the acquisition of nurturing qualities. It matters not. We've got history. The words come to me, the language forms. To be strong and interconnected, to be constant and unafraid of life, new life, our power is in our ability to bear life, creation lives in our limbs and with this gift and this knowledge, we can assume a responsibility, a female responsibility for governing both her and him.

Fourteen Angels

Background errata: She was a drunk. She was a bona fide and bonded *WASP* (*White Anglo Saxon Protestant*) from Greenwich, Connecticut. Fortunes flowed spring mountain streams of white wine never a dry or empty hand-blown Venetian wine glass went dry. Ubiquitous in households and offices scotch tape post-its invented by and manufactured by her grandfather. Scotch tape omnipresent extant an indispensable product inconceivable to be absent or unavailable startling to know the inventor's granddaughter and to watch her draw without notice on endless streams of money. Purchasing in one afternoon a dozen Venetian masks into the thousands to wear sipping vintage after dinner brandy. Our hosts mask museum quality with gems and feathers biblical purples worn as she danced among her wine and liquor soused guests getting up too close scaring them with her proximity and then off to the next guest hot flushed with escaping multi-liquored vapors. She liked that I was a *Jew*. Strange coupling birthdays within months of each other. For her motherhood an anathema her dark obsession monastic silence engulfed she suffocating her spurned daughter with lavish gifts artist embellished hand configured walls as in the notable residences on the British Heritage list. Ephemera artists washing down walls slow arduous etchings pastel scenes *Trompe l'oeil* the art to create illusions *indistinguishable our relationship from those mellifluous art forms*, she quipped.

I was a door to a larger wall an unfamiliar world once outside a rubbing a wash palimpsest washed over and over. Ultimately banished no longer the artist dubbed me just someone too sad to be near. *Reeking for sadness brings one down* no longer buoyant a deflated artist lost like air out of a helium balloon gone lost the art the

reflection of artist in me limiting my access she disparaged me. Lost ultimately among the Kosovo cliffs delivering on behalf of Refugees International satellite radios and other materials to the individuals caught up in Sarajevo. Time was stressful and although in earnest she and her husband were deeply engaged philanthropists she needed to get away, cut loose, free herself from the newly purchased penthouse she was renovating at great cost already damned deemed a huge mistake. That impulsive move along with the distasteful fact of a birthday in which she would become sixty near to sixty-two when her fortune would be freed of its tyrannical trust and come piling spilling out. Trepidation of another jaunt to Hazelden for alcohol rehabilitation the pressure of being so omnipresent for a hider a woman who break off from the day in a haze of wine drunken stupor could not tolerate the high beam of focus coming with the move and pending birthdays. Her sense of irony and the absurd dictated the way for a memorial service at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem conducted by the African American preacher of note, the Right Reverend Calvin Butts. Never so many *WASPS* stepping into the sanctuary from their waiting cars her laughter interspersed heard in the whispers settling into pews so ill at ease. *Not a part of me untouched by a surgeon or dermatology* she would frequently say breaking the covenant of silence blurting out with hilarity and shared in a daughter's homily.

Star struck enamored by a woman who referred to me as her *business partner* an artist educator subject of many mellifluous toasts then eerily dropped moved off center stage banished contacted in the shadow of phone calls and walks in the Conservatory Garden moments from my apartment. Anointed regally as artist Venetian glasses raised wine overflowing and then the silence more silent than Coventry. Strange cliff note that along with finding true love, elusive and unforgiving, wanted to be considered thought of as an artist. As in a leaf of an advent calendar her I was anointed so by a woman whose great gift was that of identifying gifted emerging artists. She was a seminal investor assisting artists daring artists. Examples found in: funding Marina Abramovic's exhibit to a Venice Biennial, for transporting Doris Salcedo's farm table woven with thousands of pieces of human hair to the New Museum, or Nari Ward's digs through Harlem trash to build or create sculpture with found objects relics of archival sites from Harlem's tossed and overlook lives. Black artists and women and gay and straight just on the edge the brink of wide acclaim owning Kiki Smith's *Body as Subject* affixed to her wall poignant and eerie early on. Confronting Shirin Neshat photo of women in full Burka pointing rifles as you entered her home walking through thick erotic wood hand carved swinging doors, Freud inside out.

I became her personal education-artist and *partner*, as she would say in a venture *14 Angels* for which we received *not-for-profit* and tax exempt status in a flick of a wrist money and power bringing us through in record time. *14 Angels* was launched

and the theme goal or mission changed as quickly and often as summer storms kick up in the ardent NYC heat. She enjoyed having me around and diligent to a fault, the fiery breath of my father and his ethos of *Good Works* (as in Calvinism) had me putting together proposals, which she read and discarded as quickly and frequently as she cancelled appointments and dates. *Cancel, cancel, cancel* she would state with a hearty laugh to her secretary who worked with us in her apartment in the acknowledged rich people's zip code 10028. Art abounded her collection growing week-by-week acquisitions made often daily \$60,000 here \$60,000 there. Invited often to visit galleries with her in Soho or Chelsea to note when she entered someone impeccably and fashionably dressed would suddenly appear solicitous as they were cool or cold or invisible to most other people drifting in and out of the gallery. We went regularly to artists' studios where she listened as if yoga master each artist pouring out a heart to her. She could sniff out the inauthentic or sycophantic and if one tried to curry favor off she precipitously went to her waiting limo. For an artist if a little unhinged but steeped in his or her own endeavor she would elicit detailed discussions of what was being attempted probing further into the what the artist hoped to achieve and then standing often abruptly would reach out a hand most often with a check for \$25,000 leaving before the artist became obsequious or overly effusive.

I was shadow partner court jester lady-in-waiting supplicant and by agreement to make sure she not get too drunk during the day and if sodden escort her to her bedroom pulling down the coverlet leaving her to wine doused sleep. Ecstatic illuminating insane inconceivable fate had lugged me into this enthralled and breathless reality. Flung into space from being an underling in the mission of the Barbarians at the Gate and before that heaved into penitence by bureaucrats modeling themselves after fighters in the IRA and before that a scold because I couldn't always be a soldier in the Jewish Pogrom army of my school system bosses. More amazing than the offer to come and work or be with her was that I said *yes* and indeed tempted her with all sorts of *doing good* proposals her husband present perhaps as filter and both taking me at my word. Never knowing if her husband thought she needed a more responsible playmate and overseer or that he believed we would actually achieve something of value in the world. No doubt they sensed a certain desperation in my demeanor bemused no doubt that I was lobbying to enter a world utterly unknown.

We travelled to Israel and to Brazil multiple times never have I had a friend or partner who so completely gave herself over to an experience. She an heiress but unlike visiting royalty given to pandering and abiding protocol she truly opened a heart and ear that is until the sun began to fall and an exquisite bottle or two of white wine always stowed in her luggage would come out her door shut an evening of sipping and stupor would ensue.

We went to Israel to learn about residences for teenagers for our proposed plan for *Neighborhood Residences*. We travelled to Brazil, once with the Reverend Calvin Butts to study a fashion program at Projeto Axe in Salvador Bahia Brazil. High concept for high fashion for teenagers who were found roving the streets of Salvador barefoot in search of food or change to bring back to families adrift in the wooden fabricated shacks along the outskirts of the town. Notable Brazilian fashion designers were invited to conduct workshops in which young people once acclimated to living within the ground rules of Projeto Axe, no more begging, coming to class each day, and attending a workshop regularly, were taught from pattern up to design and sew an array of relaxed and fancy dresses as if a line for couture. Annually the collection was presented at a fashion show in which these former street children cross-stepped knees at an angle down a catwalk at a variety of dramatic venues attended by the President of Brazil and others of Brazil's notable elite. We were duly captivated attending such a fashion show held at the Salvador harbor arias from the Opera *Nabucca* filling the night sky an audience held in enthral by the proudly prancing burgeoning fashionistas.

This event was revolutionary crafted by a team of lawyers and activists many of whom were jailed during the Dictatorship fighters for the rights of Brazilian children particularly those designated as *street children*. Projeto Axe was actually created as a political action offering opportunities for participation in a series of well-designed activities to the children of the most poor that had been flagrantly treated during the dictatorship. Projeto Axe had children performing in the circus dancing in a company playing in a band and developing a recycling center along with the creation of a line a fashion sold in the Axe boutique in the old recently renovated section of Salvador. Children were invited to leave the streets and become participants in the program staff sleeping often along side the children until the young people found their way to consent to step into another if strange reality one from which they had been excluded. Severe poverty set these children on the streets to beg and for a time until exposed the children were shot like gnats, rats around government buildings and tourist sights for intruding making people of means and stature uncomfortable. *We will develop such a fashion boutique in Harlem with young people designing urban street clothes under the tutelage of famous designers* she declared as we flew back duly dazzled and inspired by the fashion show. *We will buy a building a fashion house in which to show our clothes it will be a mecca for rich suburban youth*, she went on. Ephemera. Look we did for property write I did proposal after proposal with budgets for such an initiative. Dream spinner often I think to keep me interested and plugged in little did she know that I would have copied pages of the encyclopedia to stay thus housed and connected. Still star struck and orbiting a life that held no dream resembling or coming close to this reality.

Bye bye Bickerson's her husband would quip as we frequently got into the limo on the way to Bridgehampton fashion magazines back editions of *HELLO!* along with junk food to spend a long weekend in her newly constructed home. Once there her chef waiting holding out lunchtime Bloody Mary's following early afternoon naps the terrace was filled with an array of hors d'oeuvre chilled French wine to be followed by more wine over dinner followed by fine brandy after our sumptuous meal wine often there would be just the two of us. The home more beautiful than any I could ever have imagined held dramatic and handpicked pieces of art carefully set around as if the house had been constructed around it. Her bedroom concealed a secret garden with hand-painted frequently changed frescoes. On off times I would disappear into her art gallery with ever changing exhibits showing artists having break-through moments each piece as if lifted off the wall of the Whitney Berne or Venice Biennials. She was an early patron of the *New Museum* prominently exhibiting her gift of an antique muslin dress smocked with male public hair along with the old rustic farm table upon which Colombian artist Doris Salcedo wove a million strands of female hair.

Parting words: *Guess where we are going? To Kosovo with to bring satellite materials to the people in refuge camps!* This said with that unmistakable *Wasp* clip and her terrifying laugh rising like the darkness within much of her art and with that she hung up almost abruptly. Soon after The State Department called late one Sunday night and said an acquaintance of yours we believe toppled over a cliff in Kosovo on the way to deliver satellite material to a refuge camp. *This is not to announce yet.* I was stunned and yet not surprised that her life would end in this manner with her husband at her side this along with the inadvertent participation of a leading French refugee expert. Tumbling down a precipitous cliff within the *Stations* of great philanthropic respectability was artistic in its own right a perfect choreographed death for a women always verging.

A Farm in the Bronx

Conjuring the Bronx in those grim days when entire neighborhoods were riddled with burned-out tenements and...gunfire sang at sunset off the low walls of demolished buildings –Don DeLillo The Angel Esmeralda

On the Cross-town Expressway drivers passed windows with kittens lapping up the sun reclining against large earthen pots filled with flowering geraniums. Behind the craftily placed poster- like shades one could find darkened scar-faced emptiness window frames held up by singe and crumble. Mayor Koch

attempted to hide urban blight insurance fraud and scandal not wanting to upset drivers on their way to Wall Street.

Grandma, the 'shtetl' is a small farm

*A vacant lot
In the Bronx
All the buildings are burnt out
Or gone
The people's families are broken up
Or taken away
They are in prison, Grandma
This 'shtetl' in the Bronx
Was your home once
Far away
The place of small lives
The home
That gave you away
Grandma, we're growing vegetables
On the land
The plot is a rubble heap
Of old 'landmarks'
The soil is dead hopes and dreams
Scooped out people
Still counted when a census is taken
We have hoes and rakes, Grandma
Will your God
Govern and guide me?
Grandma,
This is Jerusalem!
And I am your Jewish child
The only one
The day of my judgment
Will come
Under an autumn arbor of vegetables and fruits
Built on the back
Of great disbelief*

*Naomi Barber
FORWARD – Sunday, December, 1982*

A Farm in the Bronx, Second Season, June 6, 1978

*We're getting unhurt here
On a street in the Bronx
Like recycled dead
We're pushing up through the ground
A tomato,
An eggplant,
A zucchini,
It's not just what meets the eye
Each of our vegetables
Is a marker for a reclaimed LIFE.*

Naomi Barber

**Una Finca in the Bronx - *Dream Girls* - Weekly Pot Luck Homegrown
Ingredients for Native Ethnic Delicacies**

On my daily mile walk in the neighborhood parks in London more pregnant with each daily trek I saw plots of land known as *Victory Gardens* developed during *World War II* to grow vegetables for the home front. Vegetables ripe and thriving as bombs dropped an image that stayed a decade or more after I left London and when given a chance to transform a forbidding rat infested rubble vacant lot into a potentially harvest rich vegetable farm *Victory Gardens* came to mind. A war had seized the South Bronx and if not surrounded by exploding bombs the neighborhood was riddled by arson conflated fires landlords burning buildings rather than paying up delinquent taxes. This desolate and vaporized vacant lot ultimately sprouted *Grade A* vegetables becoming an antidote to the despair and conflagration. It was often said that *a zucchini saved this neighborhood*. Strolls in London parks the touchstone and along with other neighborhood dreamers and resisters we had a *Victory Garden* grow. Bonds of continuity find their way as inspiration reaching within the past for that spark of recollection that shapes an action or an idea.

A Farm in the Bronx as it was called was a counter move by neighbors in fume-ridden proximity to engulfing arson attacks by creating a vegetable farm. Fear and

rage manifest in groups of unruly women tearing at each other following a volatile power struggle at a parent association meeting at the local public school. The slugfest spilling out into the street lining up as racial and ethnic Black and Latino at each other. Police caught in the sizzle the melee dispersed the raging women ultimately sending them on their way without a single arrest. The principal averse to violence or power struggles of any sort collapsing a supplicant on the slightest hint of displeasure or request from the District Office called the police from under his desk door locked and then woefully told the Superintendent what had broken out.

School District politics in the 1970's was one of obfuscation of *Realpolitik* or never let the enemy or other camp know of distress or vulnerability particularly on issues involving racial discontent divisiveness or warfare to be contained at all costs. *Go there and work something out!* The superintendent aware that I had been present at the parent meeting and thus an observer of the disconcerting and upsetting event called me into his office. The peculiarities and particulars of our relationship rested on his knowledge of my non-traditional or *non-kosher* approaches to *situations or trouble* and that I could mostly only think *out of the box* and knew he would inevitably come to my aid *take my back*. Finding another way to frame the difficult taking an action in earnest to subvert the bad with the good was a mode of operation we had worked out in my early days of tenure. We had a kind of absolute faith and trust in each other and a shared sense of humor that verged on irreverence and even wickedness. Given my battle orders or charge I made an appointment to meet with the parent association leaders the next morning at the school located at the smoky edges of the South Bronx. The South Bronx had become a national example of urban degradation and blight exploited equally by power brokers and political leaders.

The embattled and scared principal was locked yet again in his office opening it gingerly and looking as ashen as the buildings in the aftermath of arson. Sy I said *please join us at the meeting with parent leaders concerning the riotous and snarled relationships within the community a healing process will be put in place*. With that I twirled dramatically away from the office this part of my by now more perfectly executed political theater costume and cigarette et al. The composition of the group Hispanic and Black reflected that of the neighborhood the core of women had been meeting with me weekly to discuss family and school issues of concern. At each meeting we would share favorite recollections of our lives in native countries or in other regions of the United States. Everyone in the group had been a child somewhere else and still had family *back home*. We often spoke about how best to raise kids in this helter-skelter violent and dangerous neighborhood fire licking its flames within view.

Further on our agenda devising tactics to apply pressure on the school to ensure the kids got the best education possible.

Gales of if inappropriate laughter could be heard ringing out whenever discussing the nervous wreck principal who didn't feel comfortable relating to either teachers or parents. We worked tirelessly if with tensions to find common ground a common place within which to come together as mothers desirous of securing a better future for all of the children. As Victory Gardens had stirred something of intangible significance in me so did I learn that many of these women had lived on farm or had experience farming if from the Caribbean or the South often expressing a longing to once again fill their hands with earth and seeds waiting for the advent of the always surprising harvest no matter how scant. Indulgent and with due self-consciousness all around the room at a subsequent meeting I shared the poem newly written ***Grandma, the 'shtetl' is a small farm in the Bronx.*** *How about we grow a vegetable garden on part of the vacant lot adjacent to the school,* I ask the group. *Yes, let's* they respond each woman present filled with myriad ideas about how to farm it. *Give me a little time to explore how best to get this going?* I asked as we adjourned a flutter of possibility and excitement in our departure.

A neighborhood friend had a close professional connection to the Cornell University Department of Agriculture and gave me the name of someone to contact about the viability of our turning the lot contiguous with the school into an urban vegetable farm and garden. And in one of those moments of blissful symmetry the person on the phone almost with disbelief shared that Cornell had just received a federal grant to develop a series of *demonstration gardens* in the City with a particular interest in the South Bronx. Before concluding the conversation the person said *sounds just right and when can we come and visit?* Central to the success of a project was finding the right team in this instance the two other individuals selected not only held tight to a similar ethos but also by happenstance lived in the general neighborhood of the vacant lot. Sharing strongly in the value of standing back after clearly articulating a mission and ensuring its success by entrusting the ultimate control to the participants. Serendipitous our desire for a vegetable farm with Cornell University's need to identify viable neighborhoods in the South Bronx found us ready made.

The group of formally warring parents joined with some neighbors quickly galvanizing calling themselves the PS 59 garden committee. Within the week a professor from Cornell arrived accompanied by a Ph.D. candidate a student of Pomology (*The scientific study and cultivation of fruit. The Free Dictionary*) joined us to tour the lot followed by a meeting in the school in which Cornell agreed to

join forces with us. The principal stood on the outskirts of the room not wanting to be announced or introduced and listened bemused. The goals governing the *demonstration grant* were simple and direct: designated as a *community based sweat equity initiative* the identified groups would receive direct funding for fencing gates seeds garden tools or other requested supplies when clearly demonstrating tangible evidence that work leading up to the request had been successfully achieved. For example we had to clear the land find and bring with permission fencing found on other vacant lots to the site prior to receiving additional fencing and a secure gate. The far corner of a block long rat infested rubble lot became the site for our garden. Muscular neighborhood men drifted over and volunteered to gather the fencing help clear the land and pour Sakrete to install the fencing. In exchange we offered free sandwiches and beer, easily obtained in a vending machine placed in a neighbor's basement along with coca cola dummy coins activating the slide and clink of the cans. Our assigned pomologist was from the Caribbean and was a frequent visitor offering gardening advice as well as leverage items necessary for us to proceed. Prodigious sweat equity efforts brought new fencing a formidable locked gate and a continuous flow of supplies.

What the hell were you doing drinking beer barefoot with a group of questionable neighborhood men at ten in the morning, the very superintendent who had brought me a bouquet a flowers urging me to find other words and tactics to accomplish an agreed upon end, continued *I've got a complaint from the principal of the school* the very principal who never stepped onto the ever burgeoning farm peering like a gossipy old fool about the goings on. *I told him* the superintendent concluded *not to worry you were doing exactly what I told you to do.* Filling him later in the day I was sipping coca cola and yes the men had beer and they were putting the fencing around the perimeters of our future vegetable farm, recently named *The Farm in the Bronx.* Few have taken my back as he di and sadly for me he retired soon after that encounter. Within days of his departure I got summoned into the new superintendent's office this the very same man the former deputy who had stormed into my office calling out *who in the fuck is fondly Naomi?* This time *what do you mean you are putting together a vegetable farm on the land adjacent to one of our schools, are you out of your fucking mind, do you know the liability you put me under. This time absolutely no, I defy you no I order you never to go near that piece of land during the working day.* Okay boss, I said as I left his office.

Subsequently under the tutelage of Cornell University thirteen rubble lots were amalgamated and formed into an oversight not-for-profit known *The Open Space Task Force.* Three officers were designated, a former Irish American detective from Fort Apache the infamous South Bronx high crime precinct about which a

movie was made, a Hispanic poet activist who renovated gutted homes equipping each with a roof top garden and worm farm necessary to without pesticides enrich local depleted and misused lots and me. Agreeing to serve as secretary with the stipulation that my time with the Open Space Task Force would have to be evenings and weekends when not on the Board of Education clock. The Park Commissioner at the time, Gordon Davis, served as a self-appointed guardian angel. Gordon Davis supported our proposal to develop a string of community designed and developed vegetable gardens on these identified rat infested vacant lots located throughout the six planning districts of the South Bronx. We industriously prepared a proposal for federal funds and amazingly received a one million dollar grant from the United States Department of Agriculture this to fulfill the promise of the Carter administration to turn the horrific fate of the South Bronx around. Here to guide and lead the efficacy of the sizeable grant we three the extant officers of The Open Space Task Force. We elected as President of The Open Space Task Force the detective who carried with him a reputation for toughness and infamy recently retired took upon himself the process of developing a windmill farm and recycling center (this is in the late 1970's) this on the Southern most part of the Bronx edging on the Bronx River reviled and terribly polluted. The Vice President was the pot loving Puerto Rican poet renovating buildings complete with roof top worm farms and me serving as Secretary. *Our Farm in the Bronx* was often highlighted since it held the largest tract of land spanning an entire block from 182 to 181 streets between Washington and Bathgate Avenues. The other lots identified for the initiative were connected to community organizations with reputations for viability and success.

Soon after the federal grant was awarded the parks commissioner made me aware of the fact that our expansive lot was under the purview of the Board of Education and that I would need extensive permits if at all possible to further develop the land. Knowing the intransigence of the Board of Education at any level and the squeamishness of attempting anything out of the ordinary the lead skittish squirmer being my superintendent I looked for an alternative route. Already banned with a threat of a job loss if involved with this project during working hours I knew the superintendent would howl like an errant wolf should I ask for his cooperation the park commissioner offered a way to include our Farm in the Bronx and the entire block long lot in the project. The stipulation being that the land was to be brought under the full aegis of the Parks Department deeded for a period of not less than twenty-five years. Knots in stomach challenge as daring as *Evel Knieval* I guardedly removed this piece of land from the Board of Education and had it deeded to the Parks Department through a process called ULURP (Uniform Land Use Review Procedure) with of course the full technical support and assistance of the Parks Department. The Superintendent got whiff of this as he received steady

reports from the snooping sycophantic principal watching the land being tilled and turned from rubble to vegetable sprouts. Heatedly summoned into his office he demanded an explanation. He had turned me into a subversive a stealth warrior and no traces of me during assigned working hours were evident the daily oversight provided by my two partners. I told him watching his inflating carotid artery as he pounded his desk with his fists *but Boss I am not doing this on work time* and put down a sheaf of recent time sheets with locations.

He had just discovered that the land had been officially transferred to the Parks Department though a ULURP process from the Board of Education and that the school district no longer had control of the vast tract of land. Screaming out as if with pain in a frequency that could shatter glass *what the fuck is ULURP?* Further enlightening him I shared that part of our million dollar grant of which he was unaware was to develop thirteen vacant lots located throughout the South Bronx all of which were assigned for oversight to the Parks Department for a period of not less than twenty-five years. Concluding I shared that our site was assigned a disproportionally amount of the federal grant money due to the sheer dimensions of lot. With that as he sank into his chair said leaving, *I shouldn't be talking about talk this during working hours and twirled and walked out.* I could feel the heat of his alcohol-vaporized breath flaming dragon-like as I left his office. The legs that carried me toward my office wobbled like a newborn calf heart racing and hands trembling a junkie needing a fix whom was I single mother of two young children to dare a boss hanging intact by a thread? Nary a word about The Farm in the Bronx was again mentioned until much later when it was designated a national treasure by City and Federal officials. Acclaim for the projects kept me buoyant and employed. One can only imagine this alliance of ours in The Open Space Task Force here we were three rebels of such different hues and backgrounds soon into our partnership I realized they were incessantly puffing on a joint and I was always feeling a little woozy in their company.

Sweat equity got us fencing gates thick industrial gloves seeds and haulers to take the refuse lifted hoisted steadily and deposited to landfill somewhere in the Bronx where it would be sorted and picked apart by the ever swooping seagulls. Laughter boomed as we dug through the historic neighborhood waste and saw the ever-amassing fencing. Celebratory beers clinked as we put in a worthy gate and lock. Land cleared fencing up we began the process of planning our vegetable garden. Our Cornell pomologist equipped with black board and pointer lectured our group of local and resident farmers about the soil the possibility of erosion and the types of vegetables best to plant. Cornell's interest was to study the effects of urban pollution particularly from cars and trucks on vegetables grown on urban lots in highly concentrated and congested neighborhoods.

Our collective interest was to cultivate vegetables indigenous to our home countries or towns remembered with nostalgia a hunkering reaching back in time for such sights smells and foods. Contradicting or vilifying his recommendations was a regular and necessary part of these sessions. No sooner had he climbed into his car blackboard and pointer in tow than the heated arbitrated bargaining dickering began. Each farmer arguing for this or that vegetable necessary when preparing delicacies ingredients to recapture the flavors and dishes of the wherever of childhood before moving to of all places the infamous South Bronx. It was hard to imagine that this vociferous group of farmers shouting out opinions across language barriers asserting ancestral perspectives had been a body of brawling skin scratching hair-pulling rivals. Representing Southern black Caribbean black brown-skinned Hispanic many still immigrants hidden in the shadows of the undocumented had formed a group of loyalist gardeners and farmers. Encroaching ever closer the toxins and flames of fires advancing to this neighborhood. Somehow just at the edge of a building that housed many of our lead community organizers the fires stopped. Thereafter our motto and touchstone was how a *zucchini could and would save the neighborhood* from the filching hands of greedy and flame throwing predatory arsonist landlords.

And there on the corner of 182 and Washington our hands locked in hymnals of common song we found farming our common language if removed by generations and migrations. Harmony struck around vegetables the arbor of common purpose heated and decibel-lifting arguments ensued but this time about architectural plans rendered in the cleared dirt and land. Our guide our pomologist from Cornell persisted now presiding over these ever intensifying planning sessions demonstrating how the land sloped and how the sun moved over it providing a cogent rationale for a particular cribbing. To counteract or build upon his presentations two lead gardeners emerged a man in his late fifties Dominick whose house and porch faced the land who had come originally from the Dominican Republic and clearly knew vegetable farming. With equal canny knowledge Dotty a black chanteuse who after falling on hard times left Harlem for a small corner house in the South Bronx with a slice of strip grass and yard enough to plant a garden as she had on *her forty acres and a mule* in Alabama. Dottie with farm and song in her heart lived undisclosed in this corner house hidden behind a thick wooden gate soon welcomed us into her home whiskey whiffs lifting off her dusky voice. It soon became evident why she left her speakeasy in Harlem though we never found her sloppy drunk falling and faltering inebriated we never knew her completely sober either.

Emerging in the mix of neighborhood farm leadership came a tall stately very dark skinned African American woman who held a college and business degree. Rose moved to the neighborhood when she rescued two small babies from her hopelessly addicted daughter who soon after the move was found dead on the street nearby with a needle still stuck in her arm. Rose appointed or anointed herself the arbiter the president and the treasurer saying she would hold onto whatever funds and keep whatever ledgers as grants came in. And then movingly remarkably in concert with the core principles and tenets of *The Farm in the Bronx* she had about twelve keys made to the newly installed garden gate. Rose then went about distributing them to active members of the farming community and to neighbors who had windows facing the garden whom she enlisted to look out from their windows sentries assigned a twenty-four hour watch. Rose was a prophet a wise person who towered and kept the peace and found a way to soothe her aching devastated heart. A colleague and artist friend was commissioned to design and paint a mural on the wall of the school building that stood as backdrop to our cribbing and planting. The mural was as if lifted off a postcard of a rural farm on a sloping hillside in Puerto Rico depicting a vegetable farm in full bloom. There flourishing produce tended to by farmers in straw hats pruning and harvesting. Across the top of the mural in beautiful highly stylized calligraphy the words *A Farm in The Bronx* naming baptizing our garden in its entire glorious dimension.

In after hours the two colleagues that made up our triumvirate our team serving as lynchpin and failsafe met regularly. Both of these individuals had extensive training in community organizing, the woman Carol in a series of tenant to owner buildings and the man Sam a former hardcore rehabilitated drug addict in his late forties. Probing experience and the spiritual we understood that initially the garden had to be intact as the sun rose each morning that until the garden had a hold on the imaginations of the community members as viable and real. To ensure our dedication and our pact we made a promise with a blood-sworn finger prick that before the scourge of AIDS ended true friendship pledges. We remained loyal to that promise in the early days of the Farm each day farmers finding that not a vegetable had been bruised or pilfered. The Farm in the Bronx became sacrosanct if with multiple neighbors holding keys offering welcoming lemonade to onlookers. Early in the day before the clock struck six one of my partners both of whom lived within easy walking distance would check on the garden pulling any harmed or violated vegetable and within a short time found they could sleep beyond sunrise. In the summer of 1978 during a massive citywide blackout our faith was born out this when our *Farm* was in full bloom and not a zucchini got lifted from or bruised during a night of rampaging gangs shooting guns into the darkened sky.

The Farm was watered regularly always at the close of day and never to extremes by neighbors who would just appear key in hand with the hose that was unreeled from Dominick's basement across 182 street. When the wonderful arrays of vegetable were in full bloom the local garden committee organized an arbor celebration and a street fair in which vegetables were distributed free to neighbors. Fall Wednesdays had neighbors participating in events like salsa making contests or by having individuals demonstrate the preparation of back-home delicacies made with vegetables from the Farm. On a particular late fall Saturday we invited a local theater group to perform a full production of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange on 182 street replete with raised platform and police permits. Cornell gave our vegetables Grade A beginning in earnest its scientific research to see at what levels toxins from car fumes impacted our vegetables. Within the garden gates a wood hewn homemade table with chairs and a big umbrella welcomed conversation between seeding plantings and weed pulling always ready pitchers of cool lemonade and home backed cakes.

Word reached the Jimmy Carter White House about our Open Space Task Force and its oversight of thirteen community planned and organized vegetable gardens located throughout the six planning districts of the South Bronx. The White House needing to make good on its promise to rehabilitate the South Bronx offered us a million dollar grant to further design and develop our thirteen sites. Pot infused celebration broke out and we agreed that we would accept the funds after close consultation with our guardian angel the Park Commissioner Gordon Davis. Our *Farm in The Bronx* was going to be extended to an entire block and would be the largest community designed park and vegetable garden. Cornell our first grant maker was thrilled with the acclaim and The Farm in the Bronx formally designated officers: Carol, President and Treasurer, Dottie and Dominick sharing the title of Gardeners-in Chief.

The Superintendent learned of this generous grant from President Carter by reading featured stories in *The New York Times* and in every other New York City daily. Summoning me he said heated and flushed *is this your Garden so called Farm in the Bronx?* Yes, I responded. I thought I ordered you never to work on this on public school time. I haven't I responded simply. *How in the hell did this happen?* Sharing that invited by Cornell representatives from the White House had come to visit the *Farm* and some of the other sites followed by a meeting with Pedro, Jack and me this of course scheduled after I signed out of my day responsibilities to the School District. *Who in the hell are Pedro and Jack* he queried. *They are President and Vice President of The Open Space Task Force our*

new not-for-profit I responded. *And who are you in that mix? I am Secretary and Treasurer. You are what?* he screamed out beside himself. He wasn't even sure how to define a not-for-profit *you mean like the Red Cross* he queried.

The Superintendents provincialism was interminably unsettling his world limited to family, synagogue, the Board of Education and the Emile Society (the fraternal order for Jewish Supervisors).

What are your plans? He asked wilting and succumbing. *We are going to extend the Farm to the entire block and make it into a community designed and developed vegetable garden with an amphitheater and playground. You are what? I forbid you to do this. This land belongs to the school and the Board of Education.* Not anymore I said reminded him. Forcing him to remember that *it had gone through ULURP and been rightfully transferred for the coming 25 years to the Parks Department.* *You can't do this* he menaced. *It is already done* I responded. *I protest* he screamed out. *It is too late no one was there to protest at the publicly announced and hearing,* I responded. *I could fire you for this* he slammed down his fist. *Then do so* I said. This with a brazen dose of *chutzpah* who was I single mother of two young children without alimony or child support to forsake a job? Fred the Superintendent curtailed his murderous rage and impulse to rid me because of the multiflorous beams of light that came his way for projects under my aegis and leadership: creating small schools-within-schools, a parent leadership institute, teacher professional development and training success reflected in higher standardized test scores attributed to these endeavors. Finally, two of federal grants one for parent leadership and the other for teenage delinquency diversion were commended in the Congressional Record. Staring at me sullen and annoyed he turned his back on me and waved me off.

Development of the extended Farm, 182 to 181 Streets Bathgate to Washington Avenues, began in earnest in planning a series of raised beds for the community and beds assigned Cornell for research, an amphitheater to crib sloping land and to serve as a hub for local entertainment, and an adventuresome park for neighborhood children of all ages. Unexpectedly the future plans for the Farm met with a serious and contentious complaint. A neighbor living in one of the small row houses on Bathgate Avenue did not want drug addicts hanging around planting *so-called vegetables*. The person wrote the Borough President who contacted the Parks Commissioner who summoned us in saying he thought we had all of *our ducks in order* and that we couldn't *screw-up* because now the White House was involved. Back to their side of town my Open Space Partners shared a joint while I rushed off to Arthur Avenue the traditional local Italian neighborhood flush with markets and bakeries to assemble a basket of goodies: salamis breads cheeses fresh pasta sauce Italian cookies and cakes.

Along with my two neighborhood blood-sworn consigliore's knocked on the door saying that we had a copy of the man's complaint and had come bearing gifts and explanations. We showed him the plans for the ever-expanding *Farm* and took him on a tour of the original full blossoming garden on the corner of 182 and Washington Avenue introducing him Dottie, Dominick and Rose, the Farm President. He invited all of us back to his home to share the delicacies along with an intense give and take about the hopes for the garden and the neighborhood. As the sun set we an ever expanding collective stuffed to the gills with Italian treats watched as he wrote a letter to the Parks Commissioner and the Borough President in full support of the coming Garden. He quickly became Co-President pro tempore and would preside or govern over the upper Farm the other officers the lower garden. We became one intertwined entangled symbiotic farming family gravitating to our midst a large number of muscular good-humored men who would begin the work in earnest of clearing the rest of the land.

With due diligence I kept a perfect daily record of my time spent with the Open Space Task Force never overlapping by a minute with my working day often extended into the evening with parent and teacher and school board meetings. My co-conspirators signed off on my time sheets initialed by an executive assistant in the Park Commissioner's office. Promises of vegetables for the home table and beer kept the men digging and clearing and the new galvanized Co-President had treats coffee and Danish on a table in his open yard and use of a basement bathroom. The Ukrainian custodian in the school building wandered over during official breaks to garden. We were one interlocked happy gardening family. Our technical experts from Cornell suggested we build forty raised beds six of which they would have to continue to study the effects of toxins from car fumes on urban grown vegetables. So began the task of building raised beds resembling over-large coffins filling them with topsoil from mulched dirt from the wind farm and aerated with worms from the roof gardens. Which crops to plant became part of a series of heated and engaged community conversation decisions made as they related to culture ethnicity climate resulting in a full array of garden vegetables and herbs. Testimony to the connectedness to the Farm evidenced in the tenderness and care neighbors had as they pruned and watered. Bountiful lifting skyward strong robust and plentiful vegetables grew. Baskets of vegetables were distributed from the yard of the house of the Co-President who emerged as a strong and fully engaged leader meting out the produce in equal portion free to the neighbors. Each Wednesday someone would volunteer to prepare a vegetable dish, a local indigenous specialty. Ingredients for salsa along with spices were offered in a

presentation basket to an executive team from the White House who came to visit soon after the grant was announced. After the team toured the fully functioning corner garden our very vocal President dressed in housecoat rollers and slippers stepped forward introducing herself as *Rose the President* then commented *you do know that we haven't seen on damn dollar of the million yet*. This bit of *garden kitsch* had been rehearsed in anticipation of the vaunted visit. We were borrowing funds against the grant from the Parks Department days later a large infusion of cash arrived in a check made out to the *Open Space Task Force*.

The Farm in the Bronx provided the White House with evidence of its promise to help the South Bronx and after an early fall harvest festival nominated and awarded a special commendation for the design of our ever expanding garden and the viability of our produce. We were invited by the Secretary of Agriculture to a ceremony in the Arboretum in Washington D.C. to honor the Open Space Task Force highlighting *The Farm in the Bronx* for the quality of the vegetables and for the civic action it had become. The leadership group met and decided that Dottie along with two committed prominent parent leader gardeners would attend. As the day drew near I called Al, the professor from Cornell assigned as liaison and who would accompany the group to Washington. *Al Dottie is a drunk* I just intemperately blurted out continuing on as he was breathing hard *she is always drunk not a falling over drunk not a lay in the street drunk a chanteuse chain-smoking stand-up drunk this from morning to night you have to ensure that she is sober as she receives the award*. Okay his hesitant response.

Salsa was prepared and placed in an old *ball jar* fixed with bright ribbons as a gift for the Secretary of Agriculture accompanied by carefully written recipe from a grandmother nestled in a small seaside village in the Dominican Republic. Dottie surrounded by a good will committee from the *Farm* was dressed in a designer red suit with a Gucci bag packed with perfumes and lacey lingerie and a cocktail dress evidence of a past of lavish spending befitting a renowned Harlem society chanteuse. She and the two other importantly dressed women were ready when the car service picked them up Professor Al already in the car. They would take the train to Washington DC stay at a hotel to ensure that they would be composed and ready for the presentation the next day. Al called that evening to inform me that he had when Dottie disappeared perhaps to the hotel bar he reluctantly rifled through her things finding *whiskey in vials hidden throughout her luggage*. He shared that *elegantly bottled perfumes were replaced by shots of Thunderbird or its equivalent* Dottie collector of old perfume bottles had transformed them into miniature flasks. As he hung up he promised *don't worry, I will let her have just nips to keep her solid but not let it reach tipsy*.

The following day sober and in command resonant of a seasoned performer Dottie stepped up handed the Secretary our gift of salsa and accepted the award a plaque with a sheaf of wheat in deep hues of bronze. Al stayed settled in his chair unable to lift himself off afraid of the stagger and falter after Dottie's stealth swigs he had sipped the remaining whiskey until his footsteps faltered and his speech slurred unaccustomed to drinking this early on in the day and that with more than 100 proof. Dottie gave a beautiful speech she had prepared politically astute grateful but mindful that the honors were well deserved not because of the symbolic degradation of the Bronx but because a proud group of seasoned gardeners had created *The Farm in the Bronx*. She collected Al guided him off the platform and settled him on a bench just outside the Arboretum for him to take in the fall chill and sober up. Her wits had told her that we would not let anything bad happen and that she would not be disgraced she knew that we knew that she had fallen on hard times but never stepped too far away from her songstress past. Pealing laughter rang out on our *Farm* following the recounting of the ceremony in the auspicious Washington garden by Professor Al who stopped by to share the day's events. Dottie was sanguine as she listened on and back to sipping on her whiskey with a little lilt along with enormous pride. Cornell gave Professor Al a few days to sober up.

Come have lunch the Superintendent said one day and off we went to Arthur Avenue where we could rub shoulders and co-mingle with the mob bosses or characters that dined there daily. In another iteration, Fred was Italian and a proud member of the mob maybe a *button man* (colloquial for those members assigned to murder) but certainly an aspiring consigliere. He was at his best in this environment not like the scared rabbit in his office that held the reigns and fate of almost forty thousand students. In his plus column using his *Yiddish Cup* for the good he had foretold the future by bringing technology early to the schools and classrooms in the school district and this distributed fairly the only time in memory when the Southern and economically savaged part of the District was given equal weight with the Northern part. Recounted in opening paragraphs of grant request proposals in the Needs Assessment portion that this School District housed the wealthiest families in the Bronx Riverdale as well as according to census tracts the poorest urban congressional district in the Nation. Threatening to abandon the public schools and move to the suburbs kept the *Riverdalians* with a disproportionate amount of the budget but somehow divine intervention over the computer distribution provided for equity. At any rate we got a table at the restaurant reputed to be the favorite among mobsters accompanying us was the Deputy a woman loyal to the superintendent to a fault who took his rants and tantrums as if she was a medical orderly in a locked down section in a state mental facility. Although severe and stern and a little scary she respected my work and

deferred to most requests knowing they would lead to District acclaim and provide cover or *scaffolding* as they are wont to say for the compromised funding allotments and *god* knows what else.

How is that Farm going? He asked. *Fine* I responded with concerted formality. The Superintendent an avid reader of the *New York Times* made it impossible to avoid news of the burgeoning *Farm* still in the glowing aftermath of a Washington honoring anticipating within weeks a ceremonial ribbon cutting with the mayor, the borough president, the city council president, and other notables in attendance. The thirteen gardens planted and blooming along with communities galvanized and better organized. Jack and Pedro and I were by now fast friends they being flagrant and indulgent sharing weed in my company and I becoming inured or drawn in by contact highs. Positive and notable civic actions like ours brought out the politicians along with possible peril when esteem can morph into jealousy and contentiousness forcing old rivalries to tear out the heart of co-existence. In anticipation the leadership committee found ways to mediate the potential hazard of this kind of high profile recognition with ever more festive vegetable distributions frequent neighborhood-wide potluck early dinners with local talent performing at our amphitheater

Here at lunch in a restaurant a rare occasion a very contrite Superintendent twirled his pasta wanting in and struggling to beg off from his past bad behavior and the threats to my very work reality. He bathed me in kudos for the acclaim I had brought to the School District for all of the initiatives under my direction. Stumbling the subterfuge as thick as the stuffed cannoli's he understood why I had refused to carry the petitions for the erstwhile yet to be put in jail Stanley's borough president candidacy. Eluding as if behind a scrim that he had taken the heat the swift backlash for my recalcitrance from the leader of the supervisor's union and a principal he could count on for needed loyalty. Soon into the future the borough president and leader of the State Democratic Party both named Stanley ultimately served jail time though not in the same cell both being members of the same synagogue in Riverdale as the superintendent and deputy. Cutting into my *napoleon* I asked *Super am I released from having to do Farm work on my own time?* Struggling to respond *Yes* he said his face flushed the drink washing down the guilt and upheaval he felt at the grave misjudgment his fear of legal liability overriding his capacity to take mediating steps. I told Sy the principal of the neighboring school that you could be out *there* and *that students could help out with the gardening when and if appropriate. Sup would you like to attend the ribbon cutting would you like to be on the program?* And so we kissed and made up. Bitterness not affordable for a mother of two young children dependent upon

an income as slight as it was. Recalcitrance and rebellion always got the better of me *resist resist resist* my ineffable mantra.

The Farm went on growing vegetables Cornell continued to have its experimental beds distributions of produce made weekly in the backyard of the President of the Upper Farm in attendance Rose, the Co-President. The Custodian during his lunch hours pickled the cucumbers distributed to neighbors and school families. *Yes a zucchini saved the neighborhood* we told the reporters from a national network in an interview. As was common practice I moved on, as did my partners in the Open Space Task force, Jack, the detective contracting (green of course) in upstate New York and Pedro the poet to Riverdale the draw schools with high reading schools and strong reputations working at small contracting jobs. The Open Space Task Force dissolved each community left to provide oversight for its garden. Other organizations connected to supporting local initiatives offered help. The impetus for the Farm in the Bronx began with a poem a vision and a visceral connection to my own life and past in this case my lifelong struggle with Judaism and what it meant to be Jewish. So many years later miss the unlikely kinship of Jack and Pedro and the ever-loving extensive *Farm* family. Until recently drove by summers and could see sunflowers towering vegetables spilling over the raised beds individuals pruning watering and gathering. Learned sadly that the President who had opened his heart and his yard to the Farm had died but not after providing neighborly oversight for more than another decade and that Rose the President of the lower *Farm* had moved away after her grandchildren finished high school and entered college. Sitting around a table a pitcher of lemonade along with some bottles of beer were a group of neighbors looking as if they were taking a break from gardening responsibilities. Dottie died just as I was winding down time spent with the Farm. Then initial garden family came together for a small intimate memorial with big bottles of whiskey vegetables other delicacies and mostly silence as her scrapbooks were passed around and some of her favorite jazz records played on a portable boom box.

Quilts and Computers:

The Last of Life for Which the First was Made- Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!" Rabbi Ben Ezra, Robert Browning

Of course you have to know computers everybody has to know computers. She was emphatic and unyielding a ten year old in the fifth grade and a member of the planning committee. The committee was charged with formulating what the program in our coming partnership with over eighty year olds and fifth graders. We would meet two or three times a week. Horticulture dancing arts and crafts chess and chorus were among activities selected. Private times were scheduled when students could visit with an identified *special friend* in their apartment these individuals being residents in the independent housing part of the Riverdale Nursing Home. Representatives of the senior residences and the fifth graders of the local school shared a unique and touching openness and vulnerability as well as remarkable similarity in height. *Well we will learn computers if you learn to quilt the elders stated. Let's call this From Quilts to Computers* a student member suggested and it took. *From Quilts and Computers* commenced in early fall students going three times a week to the senior residence in a school bus.

In early spring the program held an open house for family members school leaders and other residents. On display pottery and oil paintings, exhibition social dancing specializing in waltzes foxtrots and square dancing. Guests found a chess match in progress, one of the residents being a ranked chess master, students and seniors assembling personalized quilt squares. Around the perimeters of the grounds spring flowers overflowed hand painted constructed wooden planters. Students and seniors read excerpts from ongoing exchanges on computers. Privacy closely guarded on specifics of visits to home apartments awaiting students always an array of snacks or specially prepared meals. Culminating the celebration was a large gathering in the Resident's dining room along with tea and cookies all the participants' members of a joint chorus sang rousing renditions of the Broadway show "Fiddler on the Roof." Duly noted that schoolwork flourished for the students and seniors displayed stalwart vitality and optimism in this crossing the tides of chronology creating an extended family in which flowers bloomed and love grew. *From Quilts and Computers* became a necessary and integral part of the fifth grade curriculum at this school.

As the program progressed it was deemed important to prepare students on the inevitability of the death of a senior if living independently and believed to be in general good health actuarially most were well into their eighties. Always aware and anticipating that in any coming together of individuals the untoward can happen. It was not an elder who died early on in our watch but Jeremy age ten after a four-year battle with leukemia. An incredulous pounding grief permeated the lives of each participant young and old as they helped Hattie, the senior and Jeremy's family cope with his sudden death it was believed he was responding to treatment. Hattie her own sadness mediated as she reached out the Jeremy's family sharing at a small memorial that she couldn't stop wondering *why why Jeremy and not herself? Why?* At the final event of the inaugural year of *From Quilts to Computers* the students spoke about how much they had grown to love their senior friends and a participant from senior residence said soulfully, *Never did I think the best times of my life would be now.* The *From Quilts to Computers* chorus concluded the ceremony with their resounding rendition of *the Land of Milk and Honey*. Students in the sixth grade continued informal relationships particularly with their special senior friend.

With a \$25,000 grant from the Borough President's office we engaged filmmakers to document the program almost from the start with the initial planning sessions. The video with an accompanying Guide would be available for dissemination. Highlighted in both core elements and principles found essential in creating other such *intergenerational* programs between host schools and neighborhood senior facilities. Red carpet screenings of the video were held at the school and for the entire Riverdale Nursing community to enthusiastic audiences and glowing reviews in the local papers. The documentary was entered for consideration at the International Film Festival by the filmmakers with the blessing of the planning committee. As a small group of representatives sat at a large round table at the actual event we watched as silver angels crossing back and forth around a room tense with electricity holding out hope to receive one of these much coveted awards. A cloud of silver arrived at our table and gave us a Silver Medal for our film *From Quilts to Computers*. Celebratory hugs and cheers as the award was given each person to hold. Well beyond any of our greatest expectations was that audiences well beyond the Bronx or even New York City would see a video of *From Quilts to Computers*.

Matisse's painting of *Woman With Flowers* sits on a shelf a near perfect replica in my room a gift from Tennie given me at the culminating event of *From Quilts to Computers*. Tennie had taken up oil painting when she was almost eighty and was a mainstay in the art workshop with the young fifth grade friends inspiring their artwork often producing surprising and wonderful pieces of art. Now in my early seventies I hold dear my Matisse and the warm and hopeful recollection I had of the time when ten year olds and women and men over eighty reached across age to find life transformative relationships.



Woman With Flowers - Matisse

Intergenerational programs proliferated in the school district
Principals liked the acclaim and connection to the community. A variety of
local agencies and nursing homes partnered with schools the fifth grade
continuing to be the desired one for participation with the exception of a
program with ninth graders and a local hospice in which the students were
closely guided and supported and a program in which second graders sat on
generic grandmotherly laps being read to.

The Last of Life for Which the First Was Made (excerpted)
Rabbi Ben Ezra by Robert Browning

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

Who saith "A whole I planned,

Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

As sure an end to men;

Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

What though the earlier grooves,

Amend what flaws may lurk,

What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!

My times be in Thy hand!

Perfect the cup as planned!

Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

Having Fun with Child Abuse

We the designated members of the *Child Abuse Task Force* informally referred to ourselves as the *child abuse dancers and singers* we were have fun with child abuse. Blasphemous! How else to deal with the morbidity the astonishing advent of children suffering such severe punishment cruelty and perhaps death at the hands of their parents and loved ones. Unbelievable! Unfathomable! Factual! First we turned the high beam on ourselves looking for answers. We were all parents and from wildly different and divergent backgrounds and cultures. Did we ever feel this level of rage? Did we ever crossover and feel sick a sinking stinking feeling that we had violated a Commandment trespassed a child? What had stopped us most of the time? How were we different from these people who surfaced into the system by way of a State Child Abuse Registry? Did they precipitate a crisis to bring the outside world to intervene? Aside from the psychotic who live dominated by armies of amoral voices what did we have in common with these perpetrators of such harm such blasphemy? We discovered we were they and they were us! Stress and the unresolved launched fists. Guilt and silence kept the gloves on. The having fun was a way to relieve the awful tension the awful pain we felt as researchers unearthing these little lanky truths.

With a sizeable grant we hired a documenter the same filmmakers who won the silver medal for their work on *From Quilt and Computers*. By now we were a team able to probe the difficult troubling unwieldy nature of child abuse to contextualize it. We examined cultural distinctions within family disciplinary practices. We separated out moments of despair depression and rage when the untoward manifested in harm to a child. Never abiding going beyond the reasonable in disciplining a child we talked about how crossing acceptable boundaries in parent child relationships could too readily morph into dangerous territory calling for strong outside intervention. We discussed how an open hand could at times relieve a tense situation between mother and child. Gaining city and statewide attention for our Child Abuse Task Force and its presentations we were given funds to create a film and an accompanying guide that would be worthy of dissemination through the country. During this moment in time professionals involved with children were being designated as *mandated reporters* under threat of legal action when not reporting even a suspicion of child abuse. Teachers social workers psychologists and physicians were required to take a brief intensive course explaining what and how to report given any suspicion of physical or even mental harm to children. Child abuse was becoming a public and visible issue and our approach was

acknowledged as on the forefront. Professionals in all fields related to serving children would be liable if they did not report even a worry about the potential of child abuse to a designated state agency.

The video was to be distributed throughout all fifty states. The filmmakers sat in with meetings of The Child Abuse Task Force prior to filming visiting a core of members in their homes as a necessary part of their research. The visits open-ended took place without children present. One of the filmmakers was exceedingly handsome the other with a rare amount of animal energy and sexuality. Having private visits with these men alone was almost too much for the mostly love and sex starved members of the Task Force a fact of which provoked much hilarity in our meetings. I had in an side bar conversation suggested that there was a deeper story to be told and if unearthed would enhance the film's impact immeasurably.

And sure enough a narrative of surprising and horrifying dimension was revealed during the actual screening as we sat around a table having a meeting of The Child Abuse Task Force. We were told not to pay attention to the camera to just proceed with our regular agenda easier said than done but we kept our eyes on the flowers and pastries on the table our usual fare at meetings. Suddenly Mary, not her name, interrupted the conversation and asked to hold the floor Mary the most scrubbed member of the group still in Catholic schoolgirl peter pan collars and pleated plaid skirts blurted that she had a tale a secret she wanted to share. Months before she had shared the same tale with a stunned gasping partially nauseated me. Never before in thirty-eight yeas had she ever revealed this before telling me. It lived like a lodged chicken bone like a thick black velvet curtain over her dreams like a hand from behind capping her mouth.

No one not ever had heard this but me. The film and camera rolled the faces of the task force registered an astonished disbelief and humility likened to the expression on the face of Liv Ullman in *Scenes from a Marriage* when he her husband told her that he wanted a divorce because he was in love with another women. We were perfectly dislodged from our reality tossed up high never to be returned again to the same place. And so it went that her father a merchant seaman had had sex with her for nearly ten years when home on leave while her mother was at church clutching rosaries confessing to nothing. This incestuous and horrific act went on from the time she was six until she was sixteen and thereafter with her younger sister as well. Her father and mother were both now dead but that was not what brought her to the telling

of this story she said it was all of our talk introspection our brave laughter our songs our search for truths with an abiding deep compassion. Empathy rose to a new level as we sat and listened enrapt. In my role as leader after this disclosure I found myself saying *a murderer lives within each of us a hand potentially moved to harm wound or kill a child of our own being whether by birth or adoption a murderer lives roams freely and at moments peeks to erupt but somehow it is contained held back and even our often too quick tongues can harm can be brutal destructive. What we have learned is that we need each other as witness and as friend. And when we see a woman a mother at a boiling point a tipping point we need to reach out a hand a warm understanding smile giving the mother a chance to settle down calm herself whether to dance or have her hair or nails done or make love. We need to build constructs so that when the bitter herb of destruction looms close and a child is in danger that it needs to be siphoned off. It is our obligation as a community of mothers to reach out for help and to find ways to intervene in the most cogent and least disruptive way. Children love their mothers (and fathers) if and even when they are victims of their abuse and never want to be removed or separated from them after the moment of heat rage and flailing fists passes. Concluding such a murderer lived within me and I was always grateful as I lay in bed at the end of a day that I had not brought unusual or regretful harm to my children no matter how unwieldy my inner turmoil.*

On His Twelfth Birthday, January 15, 1978

***Jeremy you little fucker
Listen hear me
This is the voice of you Mother
How dare you dig deep into my skin
Look toward me to keep you from falling
Little boy never far from my knee
I let you stay there until you were ready
To go your own way
Do you think it was easy
Letting you hold on to me
Never letting myself move far away
Afraid of your screams
If you saw me disappear
I kept in your sight
I stayed there for you to see me
Little boy do you think it was easy
Keeping your soul letting it grow
Feeding it from my body
Giving it breadth and force and weight
Do you want to know***

*What it cost me
To get you to be
Who you are today?
It came close my taking your small bones
And crushing them into a million pieces
The way they had done to me
Oh my God the self-control it has taken on my part
To let you grow
And now you're twelve years old
Your voice is less staccato
Your words flow not like little eruptions
From a stopped-up bottle
You walk the streets alone at night
Streets that frighten men twice your size
You speak truthfully
Your eyes have tears that are not afraid to come out
You are quiet and strong
And cheerful as a newly born spring robin
About to take its first flights
I can see you know I would never let you come to harm
Although I was the one you most had to fear
A murderer held you as she sang
Nighttime lullabies she cried with relief
Each time she tucked you unharmed
Into your bed at night to sleep
That is why I screamed so
When you asked for that extra glass of milk
I was trying to say I cannot be trusted any more
I have held myself together been tame
As much as I could endure
Now I need the nighttime to restore
My courage my strength
To keep the murderer contained hidden
For the next day
Oh Jeremy dreamy little fellow
You have gotten to be twelve
And I can see in your face your eyes
Dreams lifting up reaching out
To gain life
Oh Jeremy to my amazement my pleasure
You are on your way to being whole
I have not broken your will your soul
Number 11 on a basketball team
Only you and I know what that means
Number 11 my son my child
You do not have to worry about being wild
A spirit with no body no weight
To hold you*

*Your life can mean what it means
And I can come from beneath the weight of my fears
I did not kill you I can see
The madness inside did not overtake me
I was your Mother not a child
Dear God the devils the demons inside
Wanting to revenge the childhood mine
Taken once from me have been exorcised
Look! See! A life that was in my own body
Now stands on two feet
And walks away from me
Naomi Barber (given as a gift on Jeremy's 12th birthday)*

The film traveled back and forth across this country with an accompanying guide many times over a period of nearly twenty years. It was called *I Still Can't Say It* honoring the proud revelation. In present time one of our finest members is dead from breast cancer, another from old age. But our songs and our laughter they stay they stay. What follows are two pieces performed in multiple venues in the City in concert form by the members of the Child Abuse Task Force.

Child Abuse, the Child's Side

*Child abuse is fear
Fear of losing love
Fear of being hurt
Fear of setting it off
You walk on eggshells
You never know when it will happen again
The fists the bests the unleashed tongue
Child abuse is being frightened of losing them
Of needing them
Of not wanting to betray them hurt them
Child abuse is feeling absolutely completely alone
Caught trapped by fear
Building walls of isolation with silence
Child abuse is loving beyond the hurt
Waiting wanting to forgive
Not wanting the pain to build
To cold unforgiving icy rage*

Child Abuse, the Parent's Side

*It is fear isolation loneliness stress
It is feeling you're never perfect never right
It is feeling overwhelmed overburdened lost
It is feeling as if you don't count
You don't exist you don't matter
It is feeling complete hopelessness powerlessness
It is feeling as if there is no escape
No way out
It is picking on attacking someone
Who won't tell won't react won't leave you
Someone who needs you too much
Wants you too much
Makes too many demands when any demand is too many
When you have nothing to give
Nothing at all
It is beating out your grief your anguish your pain your fury
Your frustration
On drums of silent flesh
Child abuse is horror a nightmare
It is a fist a scream that loses control of itself
Into an endless unstoppable howl
It is fists that seem to run on their own motor can't be stopped
It is alarm horror
Self-hate because of the act
It is promising never to do it again
And finding it explode out like a runaway horse hard to control
It is trying to be stopped
But moving further and further away from others
It is the deepest anguish
Look for a way out
It is a parent needing for awhile
To be a child taken care of*

Naomi Barber 1981

District Created Video Productions

The Department of Education within moments accepted our offer to program one full hour a week on their local television station. It was to be divided into three twenty minute segments: *Check it Out* in partnership with the New York Public library consisting of book talks led by middle school students reviewing a favorite book for early teens and one for younger siblings; *Teen Talk* led by a local adolescent psychologist with a panel of ninth graders discussing issues of concern; *Superintendent Talks* primarily about the Bronx its history and local events of purpose. The shows a semester long were produced and directed by an art teacher also renowned in the art world as a videographer with shows at the Whitney across the country and world wide.

Ten shows in one day the film producer director insisting *that guy changes his hair color day to day in hues that cross a wide color spectrum* he continued. Thus with great preparation consented to a full day into evening of filming he believing it necessary due to his busy and committed schedule not because his obsessions to retrieve a hair color that made him seem most fit and youthful this against brew splattered facial canvas from his increasing reliance on liquor. The superintendent would discuss with a variety of guests and local authorities about the Bronx its history from his time playing stick ball on the Grand Concourse to the present as a superintendent of the largest school district in New York City and third largest in the State. The Grand Concourse produced numerous celebrities and notables coming from families primarily of Jews who moved north from the lower East Side as their economic circumstances improved the Bronx still thought of as rural but with grand architecturally significant buildings along the Concourse capturing a feeling of old Europe. The hour provided

the television station with some of its highest audience and thus they rarely if ever commented on a show previewed before it's telecasting. The artistic hand of the producer director elevated the content along with *Check it Out* and *Teen Talk* great favorites for family viewing. As with most things connected to the Board of Education leadership changed at the station and it became more of a cable station open to wider community and borough-based use.

Television

Superintendent Speaks

Having secured weekly television time on the Board of Education television station, we produced shows focused primarily on students and a time slot for our supreme leader the District Superintendent called *Superintendent Speaks*. The co-producer, a teacher who knew how to use a camera and was a professional artist in his own right, suggested a filming blitz when it became apparent that the Superintendent's hair color changed so dramatically week-to-week that it was almost impossible to identify him in the opening moments without feeling aghast and dislocated. Our show was to elevate him not to draw hilarity and disparagement from our greater school community. His scripts prepared for him his interviewees prepped and ready we caught him between hues of red and blond successfully producing a series of eight shows slogging through one overly hot early spring day.

CHECK IT OUT

Another of our shows consisted of book talks led by middle school students in consultation with librarians from the public library. First came books recommended for fellow middle school students followed by a read aloud of a book for younger siblings in pre-school through first grade. This erudite and rare collaboration of the public library and school system set precedent believe it or not and had a large following beyond our school community winning an award from the City of New York.

TEEN TALK

Led by a radical psychologist who met his teenage clients or patients without fee at lunch counters and in community centers throughout the Bronx. The students who gravitated to him came on recommendations from friends most

of who were out of school. Ultimately he organized a weekend, and summer hiking and adventure program for kids from the Bronx called **The Cat Rock Gang** one of whose participants graduated with honors from Morehouse College others followed similarly. The show **Teen Talk** was held in a discussion format where students discussed topics they selected and edited as little as possible to have them acceptable to the Board of Education station. **Teen Talk** also had a large following and encouraged discussion among middle school and early teens throughout the City often with more engaged teachers and guidance personnel.

As a result of these television productions the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) commissioned us to make a series of short educational video clips about current shows to be used as introduction to various exhibits of visiting students on school trips. For an Andy Warhol show the filmmaker found three sets of identical twins in our school district representative of our wide and diverse population and had them trained as budding gymnasts performing summersaults twirling and dancing in various configurations with moments of mock karate and wrestling. MOMA shared that this was one of the most popular short films in their education library.

MOTHER CIRCLES

Mother Circles were formed throughout the district with a generous grant from the National Institute of Drug Abuse. Another of these ideas crafted with simplicity and grace with no chance of funding that surprisingly passed the review test. Concentric mother circles started at the school house door with welcoming coffee and pastry and information guides in Spanish and English listing medical shopping and other important services each specific to the local neighborhood included was a glossary of important words phrases and sentences translated from Spanish to English to facilitate use. Next came offering within immediate neighborhoods helping hands offering cooperative services to accompany kids to and from school often with afterschool play and supervision opportunities. All of

this came from weekly meetings with small selected groups of women coming through an interview process. The groups discussed difficult moments parenting particularly in every day life acknowledging rough spots and discussing when empathic and light-hand or deft help could ease mounting tensions and doubts within a home. Offering this open hand became the challenge without a family feeling that their hardships would be betrayed and shared widely or were too proud or too upset to even open a door. The program became so successful over time that it was acknowledged by the National Institute of Drug Abuse as one of their stellar success submitted as an entry in the *Congressional Record*. Standing back I understood that its success was germinated in the tenor of the home or original group and its capacity to cohere with a transcendent kindness and compassion and to translate that into various and substantial plans of action.

PART II

***ENDING SORROW, INSPITE OF SADNESS** (Attributed to Paulo Freire)

PUTTING A HUMAN FACE ON PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM

We're the custodians
We bear the children
We bear the future
You couldn't buy us
You couldn't deviate us from
The path we had chosen
We think seven generations ahead
To make sure our children are provided for

Linda Cree, Kahnawake Tribe

NAOMI BARBER

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Education is the ability

To listen to almost

Anything without losing

Your temper

Or your self-confidence

.....
Robert Frost
.....

MAKING FOOTPRINTS FOR SCHOOL REFORM PUTTING A HUMAN FACE ON PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM

The stories I share are true or not true or close to being true. In 1971, at the age of thirty-one and the mother of two children five and two, I took a full-time job in a school district in the Northwest Bronx. The position was advertised in the Sunday Times. Scattershot employment past and without full professional definition, I set out on the venture described on the following pages.

Turning to the present the fall of 2010 it being the first time in forty years I did not return to a job following Labor Day and with that having at most three weeks off summertime's. When I am asked what did you do? I have said I was a public school activist or radical school reformer or worked in the area public school reform.

Perhaps the impetus is best expressed: Arthur Rimbaud wrote in a letter to his mother, he wanted *at least to have a son whom I could spend my life bringing up according to my ideas, arming him with the most complete education to be had today and who would become a renowned engineer, a man made rich and powerful through science.*

Leaving the Board of Education to work for the Fund for NYC Public Education

Taken from memory and journal entries, a blending of fact and personal recollection, the story of the creation of the *New Visions Schools*, late 1991 until early 1997.

She phoned me late one November afternoon at home. *Hi! She said. Piercing the day with an irresistible and intrusive informality. How would you like to direct an initiative to create brand new public schools in New York City? The schools will be small, span adolescence, and be called New Visions Schools. Come down next Wednesday and we'll talk. Okay! Bye!* And with that she hung up.

This combination of high voltage, nearly manic, hyper-feminine cajoling would become the staple, the arc under which she and I would ultimately work. Slipping the phone back on its receiver, I found myself dangling within a realm of magical thinking, urgent hopefulness, and pending doom. It was December 1991, feverish, flung on my bed like a million wilting cells, the jangling phone disturbed my self-indulgent suffering. Befuddled, was this real or imaginary? I was in that clammy space between wakefulness and fever. The unHINGING call burst upon a distraught despondency bordering on irrevocable despair, I was toppling the possibility of the fulfillment of a still very unconscious fervent wish enveloping me like a newly amassing delusional state. *Hi! Want a job? The job you always dreamed of? Good. Come down next week. We'll talk.*

During this time period, more precisely from September 1991 until then, I had been locked in the *Gulag* of the Bronx. Seized silenced rubbed out a hostage, a leftover, a remnant, of the vanquished. Resurrection and insurrection, voters in the school Board election had voted out the Superintendent for whom I worked for twenty years and brought in an unscrupulous team lead by an ex-cop. Petitions prior to the election were signed by the former residents of nursing homes now dead or memory compromised extant old and by unaware college students from the Bronx attending Fordham. This new Superintendent and his chief Deputy and architect had tried for years to unseat my Superintendent. Worrying about this incessantly obsessively, knitting and pearling compromise after compromise to hold onto their power, the vanquished Superintendent and his Deputy had knapsacks stuffed and ready for this inevitability with generous pensions and perks and fled to the fleecy golden banks of exile in Riverdale and Florida. Stealth stockpiling they

neglected to inform me and other loyal staff to have our have bags stuffed and ready to follow suit.

In the Machiavellian arena of public schooling in NYC vintage 1970-2001, the sylvan years of decentralization, it was common practice to silence or professionally slaughter individuals based on their allegiance and past alliances. This was a conscripted loyalty wrought strictly in my side or theirs vengeance and retribution. I was being pilloried as a totem, a symbol the milky white residue of misfired, plundered and perverted decentralization. The system born of idealism and inclusion of grassroots participation became a patronage mill for the entrenched stakeholders in public schooling – unions and politicians these arrogant warriors avenging their vainglorious ascent to power. It was now the opposition's turn reaching the helm holding now the glorious scepter of small time street-corner political club power. I witnessed the crude forces of change as the largely Hispanic population were brought out to vote by the Irish political insurgents to oust the deposed (mostly Jews) and of consequence to me perpetrators of my own disembowelment and banishment to a warehouse window-less room lock-down.

In 1991, I was made hostage tossed by brinksmanship the braiding thick inky smoke the wild fury belching from the fiery furnaces of hatred gamesmanship and revenge. These arrogant warriors needing to reek havoc, trash and wreck remains strewing the paths of their vainglorious ascent to power - reaching the helm, the glorious scepter of small time patronage finally to exert their street-corner political club power. To keep myself this side of being sane I imagined myself a martyr, a captured warrior. Denied as a professional, nullified they left me without a designated budget line, a nomad wandering the payroll sheets, checks generated from a payroll dump code. Fallen my secret self as the *Joan of Arc* of Public School Reform, languorous in a puddle of spoils, a show piece onto which the victors acquired the right to professionally trash a symbol manifest of the ousted regime with which I was so closely identified.

Gathering everyone around me as was our habit Friday afternoons when we shared some good stories and a glass of wine, I asked their indulgence to deliver a eulogy to my former, now defunct, work self before being carted off and placed in the invisible shackles and box of my isolation. Rather than read a poem of my own of which they had become accustomed, I read out loud from Dr. Seuss's book, *Oh the Places You'll Go!* "*So... be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea, you're off to Great Places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So...get on your way!*" I wanted them to

know they could and should ignore me to pursue their own livelihoods. I had always known that this form of harassment was just a common place and anticipated part of the treachery involved in public education.

Of note: fear of being punished, (as recently as September 2002 a school leader told me that her actions would lead her to being subjected to punishment), keep school professionals tethered to club rules, feet stuck in the fear of retribution, leery of being destroyed professionally along with the others who thought they could make change. This is an unforgiving, punishing system where children are sacrificed in exchange for personal and professional security. The rules are no less fixed than those of sacrosanct secret fraternities and breaking them is to provoke the kind of ire that most can't withstand, scared of the lurking attack dogs that lay just beyond the ominous gates of breaking rank. Forever kept from an alignment of ones' person and ones' work.

The battlefield the landscape upon which I found myself as a school district leader drove me toward the touchstones of symbolism and poetry, ceremony and custom, (*how but in custom and ceremony are innocence and beauty born? A Prayer for my Daughter, W.B. Yeats*). I wanted to have meaning in my work. Taking myself seriously and digging beyond the negative frightened armor of school based professionals daily took great fortitude and stamina often I would get bleary-eyed and teary forgetting what I was about and why I was there. As a counter move, I would place my work self in sequestered spaces, in isolated corridors, on slices of Bronx dirt, in living rooms, in Bronx family pubs, in local funeral parlors, in classrooms, in auditoriums. A poem or angry or consoling voice would surface in the hopes of triggering the imaginations and desires in others to step out to become visible in the face of children and to confront directly the faces of children. I took my raw nerve endings and a determined desire to make a better world and bushwhacked a path for school reform fastidiously maintaining what I hoped was an essentially female style of leadership. Poetry was the milk, trying to get inside the desires of others was the work ethic. Sentimentality without action had no role. I wanted to create a space in which mutuality and respect transcended a formal hierarchy. Broad shoulders, an unequivocal unmediated worldview, vigilant eyes, and the willingness to take full responsibility for my actions became necessary characteristics for me to have. And to my delight, the poetry became contagious as school people moved out of the orbit of the culpable and colluding.

Twenty years later, fixed as a mounted butterfly, a moose head above the executive suite door of the newly appointed Superintendent, I was part of the seizure, the tangible evidence of his capture and conquest, the plunderer's spoils. By way of background, in the upper most northwest corner of the Bronx, the struggle between rival Democratic political clubs was widely known. Chasing after each other by any means to get the power to distribute a bounty of patronage jobs. I had, in actual fact, been political fodder in the ruthless nearly twenty-year struggle of the school district's intransigent club politics. My own side did nothing to come to my aid because I had also refused to carry the petitions for their club's political candidates and representatives. The walls of Bronx Borough Hall were lined with photos of Democratic club ex-political leaders who had spent time in jail. Indictments spanned religious affiliation and ethnic group. This was no place for a nice secular Jewish girl.

You really are refusing to carry this petition for the Borough President on an ethical basis, you're telling me. You say you are physically unable to do this your stomach won't let you that you have no stomach for this? Well don't count on any of us working with you in the future, he said finally as I exited his office door and this was the team I was on. He was a school building principal and the school district leader of the supervisors' union, the CSA (Council of Supervisors and Administrators), he breathed fire dragon fire as anyone who knew him could attest. Shaken but without petitions in hand, I went to *Wave Hill*, the gracious and beautiful park on the Hudson where at one time Toscanini and before him Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) once lived. Gathering myself on a hand hewn wooden bench by the meditation pond, every harsh word every thing that caused doubt in my life surfacing, like ritual stones cast on water tapping into something Jewish in me I tossed small pebbles splashing on the array of lilies gliding on their pods wishes spoken just below my still quivering breath and fear fell from me I would not be bested. Returning to my office in the late afternoon, the Superintendent leached into my office having heard of the conversation with his henchmen his protector, *anything special you want Super, I asked, no just checking in walking around.* The Grand Jury, years hence, never summoned me. The school district wall of silence had fallen. *I never said it if asked* was implied as I left the leader of the pacts' office declining to do his bidding.

While in my public confinement, these rabid school leaders rifled my files trying to find something on me like *theft of service*. They called in the Inspector General, who found that I had once stepped outside the budget restrictions of a federally funded program to purchase a can of tuna fish for a

parent workshop for which I had not received the necessary written permission. Thirty million dollars of private funds raised during a twenty-year period and an unauthorized can of tuna fish stood between a perfect fiscal record and me. Being investigated in a time of turmoil can be construed as a particular badge of distinction. It can signify that one has risen to a certain level of controversy. (Bertolt Brecht once complained in a poem, *The Burning of the Books*, that the Nazi's had neglected to burn his books in the literary pyre, and begged to have his books become ash along with the others: *Burn me, he wrote with hurrying pen, burn me! ...Don't leave me out. Have I not, Always spoken the truth in my books? And now, You treat me like a liar! I order you: Burn me!*)

Of political note, nearly eight years after I had been trapped in this political conundrum, a federal grand jury indicted some of this same school district leadership for election fraud, for ballot stuffing, and for having nearly comatose, Alzheimer patients and unaware Fordham College students as signatories on their nominating petitions. It doesn't often really happen that *what goes around comes around*, but this time the tables turned, and the flagrant got flogged. Spitefulness and retribution were the snapping teeth in this world of local school politics. These battles for turf and position were bitter and bloody civil wars.

Your first compromise is your last one said one of the honorable school board members to my Superintendent. He thought he could sneak a little one by like backing the oppositions' candidate for board president, whatever ancestral vulnerabilities lurked in his body they all came storming to the surface. *I'm a real risk taker*, he would say slurping over what appeared to be booze drizzled words. Afternoons catapulted him. The deals he made to save his own neck were the vapors of poison cutting off the oxygen in his office lair. This peek inside which I share, and the liberties that I take to draw it out for you come from being inside the guts and soul and turmoil of public education from the dawning of decentralization. The level of petty plundering and small time greed, the double jeopardy of having to *cover ones' ass* along with the fear of retribution for *rocking the boat*, put students as one-dimensional faces on a theater scrim. On the highways and by-ways of the New York City teaching and administrative professional, two golden rules: *don't rock the boat and cover your ass!*

I would unnerve the deposed Superintendent and my immediate boss with my latest ideas. Ideas from which he would ultimately gain great public favor and notice, but at first hearing would send him into a heaving, raging, frenzy, screeching like a trapped animal, screaming and slamming on his desk at me. Having cleared his desk with his pounding, flailing fists and arms, he would dismiss me, meaning that I had his tacit permission to carry on. Ambition and survival instincts made him able to withstand the queasiness and submit to the new. The self-proclaimed risk taker becalmed, I would walk back to my office. Everyone on the corridor would stare with trepidation, with the frightened looks of children living with violent, boozing abusive parents. This price, a little temper tantrum, a ritualized consent, like lava, like ejaculate, a squirt spewing blessing, the greater the howl, the larger the vapor, the better I knew my idea must have been.

Children were being starved of a proper education by these political shenanigans. The public school leaders who kept me under their thumb sent their kids to Catholic Schools. The ousted District leadership, my theoretical co-conspirators, went to synagogue on the *High Holy Days*, and spoke of their right to power because of *Pogrom*. Often I was chastised for not doing their political bidding, which they knew, was not kosher, or even not fully legal, because of *Pogrom*. *What kind of a Jew was I anyway not to legitimize certain actions because of the onerous and heavy mantel of pogrom?* The word snake-rattled with self-justification. Theirs was a politics of entitlement rooted in a disturbing use of the holocaust. The group under whose foot I was now lodged saw themselves as IRA battlers, Irish warriors with an indomitable will and a death defying sense of entitlement. A loose pragmatic connection to the warlords of the Latino community gave this grab for power an aura of diversity. They say that politics makes strange bedfellows. These ferocious battlers, mirror images of themselves, muscled and threatened there way to becoming the feudal lords, the banana bosses, over the lives of more than 39,000 children. Caught in the kicked around sagebrush of this petty plundering, I chewed on the cud of my culpability while in political shackles. This grab for power presented the opportunity to hand out a variety of school district jobs to the foot soldiers in their crusade where promises were made. This was strictly a small town, a country of its own, within the greater metropolis of New York City. Demeaned, a rabbit's tale rolling around in the hands of randy, ribald religious warriors, my head an amnesiac's after a beating.

The greater the indignities, the more adamantly I clung to the job, refusing to quit or appear publicly broken. Envisioning myself as a political rebel, I went and retained the services of a major immigration lawyer, the INS being an even more implacable and intransigent bureaucracy than the Board of Education. He said he would represent me with no fee, being bemused and intrigued by the similarity between the common dimensions of my harassment with that of rebels in world renounced dictatorships. My calm exterior and broad smile belied an unstoppable trembling within. My body wracked resisting my situation, fury was racing around within my blood stream like belching larva from a yet to erupt volcano. Within this bubble of feverish respite from these unrelenting and insufferable conditions at work, came this quixotic, almost absurd call, *Hi, want a job to direct New Visions Schools?* As if I was delirious and hallucinating, I haltingly had replaced the receiver and returned to the comfort of the physical manifestations of my, crackling refusal to be subordinate, to taunting, isolation and pain. In a blinkered nearly delirious moment, fate came my way.

Once slammed into my swivel chair, I was largely ignored. I took it upon myself, if with my vow of silence, to turn the large, interior windowless office into an art gallery. Being the curator of a gallery kept the fires in me burning. Floor to ceiling paintings, totems, arcs, cave drawings, African American inspired, were soon installed. They were on loan from a friend and from a gallery in Soho, which sponsored emerging multi-ethnic, racially and gender diverse artists. Streams of visitors came by with some inane excuse to view the gallery. I became part of the exhibit, a life-size George Segal sculpture *mute woman seated at desk*. My office became the place to see. Aroused and awakening were the appetites of the current school leaders for the world beyond. The room became like a skin graft to the district mentality. Big leafy plants were placed next to the art beneath the artificial lighting. My next exhibit was going to be conceptual. An artist friend was in the process of video taping the street life outside the building, surveying and panning the Fordham neighborhood at different times of the day in surveillance-like detail. This a hologram redolent with street sounds. The tapes would be played continuously in a loop on the office walls as if looking out to the bustle of the Bronx Fordham streets. Art held the greater power deep in the graphics and thick tempura I could see my way out of this if with patience. E's phone call had burst in on my curatorial fervor, my feverish daydreaming, about the next exhibit for my windowless warehouse-like office. The art productions were the chicken soup for my survival a rangy imagination was still in tact. Without

conversation, my office mates felt sustained and consoled by the art knowing that I was still in there kicking about.

Fast forward: New Visions provided, as now private dollars do in charter schools and other current public education reform initiatives, leverage and access. As soon as individuals read the letterhead and the names of the members of the board of directors of the Fund, as it was called when I began to work there, I was invited with great deference and obeisance to make a presentation. The irony did not elude me, weeks before I had been silenced and placed in daily solitary confinement now I was swept in on the uptick of power orbits, intimations of which meant that should they cooperative and support this sweeping New Visions initiative we all could be in the same club working together not as shark and snail but as turtles moving to the sea for change a sea change for the greater public school good.

Come down Wednesday, and we'll talk. My heavy head nodded yes. And so before the New Year, 1992, swept in, I wandered off my sick bed for an interview with E. into what was to become my new verdant world. Already intrigued, the office was very far west in the heart of Greenwich Village, only a short block from the Hudson River. I was in a bit of culture shock, having rarely even in the good years stepped out of the Bronx during the working day into Manhattan, known in the outer boroughs as the City. The romance of the location was not missed. Sexually defiant individuals populated the charming antique brownstone lined streets drooping wisteria to filter the air. Billboards grabbed your sight emerging from darkened subway steps depicting same sex couple paradises across a near ocean sex shops with decorative codpieces lured passerby's'. Treks from the subway to the Fund meant confronting sexual appetites or sexual fears. Men kissing and holding hands, travel agencies offering sailing trips for lesbians, chainmail covering suggestively bulging genitalia in store window displays were the yellow brick road to what was to become my route out of public school hostage hell.

The offices of the Fund were corporate. An expensively arranged vase of fresh flowers flanked the receptionist. Almost immediately I was invited in. Courtesies quickly dispensed of, E. showed me a three-page proposal that had been solicited by and submitted to the Aaron Diamond Foundation. E. knew me little but was aware that I had been very supportive and helpful in one of the Fund's early projects. At this point, the Fund had been in existence about a year-and-a-half. And unbeknownst to me, a confluence of support to lead this initiative came from the Deputy Chancellor, a teachers' union executive, and the program officer from the Aaron Diamond Foundation. The union executive

was known to have a fierce sense of smell particularly for those individuals thought to be disloyal. He was still on a rampage on a blood-licking quest for revenge reaching back to 1968 when all hell broke loose in Harlem and Ocean Hill Brownsville. A wide base of forces representing the community broadly defined and rightfully outraged found their children entering school shiny and **January 4, 1992**

One of the senior officers of the UFT suggested I be invited to lead this new school reform initiative he was joined by the funding officer from the Aaron Diamond Foundation who had known my younger brother in the swell of 60's activism in Newark, New Jersey where he had started a freedom school. At one time, he promised when the right opportunity came along he would recommend me for a job. Ultimately, he worked as the alter ego, the architect, the inspiration, and the strategist with me on the New Visions initiative. And the third source of this support came from the Deputy Chancellor who had at one time offered me a job in his organization, Interface. He had an ulterior motive I was unknown to and unfamiliar with the school system's irascible high school division the part of the school system that reported solely to the Chancellor. I was being hired to find incursions into and change the high school division, to break apart the ice floe that resisted any change. Of equal significance to identify ways to bridge or better said disrupt the decentralization divide whereby grades K-8 were governed by local school districts the high school division under the direct supervision of the Chancellor. The New Visions initiative a strategic maneuver to create a seamless K-12 school system the illustrious even notorious members of the Fund Board depicted in the recent book *Barbarians at the Gate* Board gave the project an aura of power muscle and access as if by participating it would bring individuals closer to Wall Street take over titans – *nearer to God than thee*.

Plans were made for me to work from an office in close proximity to the Deputy Chancellor ultimately and gratefully this never came to pass available space never located. Set in a lair near the assigned liaison the Chief of Staff would have presented untold obstacles she torn between pleasing the new Chancellor to keep her job and her indigestible disgust at the kind of changes looming. Still the raw taste of the school system as it was before the decentralization wars when the high schools existed omnipotent and untouchable she being the keeper of memory and exalted champion. Without chair or phone line I was banished to the glories of the West Village the arctic blown off the Hudson and the nostril steamy provocations of the sex shops

lining Christopher Street off the subway line. This kind of chicanery was distressingly familiar. I knew only too well how the system worked if I had no first-hand experience with the high school division.

At our interview, the Director of the Fund explained that all of these partners wanted the *New Visions Schools*, at a minimum, to *span adolescence to provide environments for early teenagers that best met their needs*. She referred to a recently released Carnegie Report, *Turning Points* with which I was familiar and used as an important working document and referent. The reform thrust of this initiative in fact the goal was to find a way within this much divided and decentralized school system to have local school districts and the high school division work cooperatively to govern once created a New Visions School. Of greatest significance extending into both auspices would be brokered agreements, which had to be co-jointly signed agreeing to cooperatively support and supervise these new schools. Heretofore students were sliced along demarcation lines cutting into the rib and fiber of adolescence when friendships and singular adults could hold the tuft and marrow together within exploding bodies and minds. When a continuity of educational pedagogy and nurturance holding names to faces could web students from the sub-continent of poverty and political neglect providing students with viable access to a college and work future.

Within the confines of a distinct political orbit, New York City, there was no common ground shared between the high school division and the school districts except for a disdain and disregard for the business of providing discerning and honest education for the children of the poor. Even accounting systems crashed computers with their incompatibility. Two decades of decentralization voted in by the State legislature in 1971 to foster greater community control led to greater local political corruption and the building of an invincible Trojan-like horse the teacher's union proselytizing an indomitable force not to be tangled with. New York State Democratic legislators stood firm with the Union perpetuating an animus in schools in which the glassing over of eyes and the numbing of spirit and mind of students as the dusk of third grade came trolling every late June. Teachers scattershot repulsed by this sub Rosa flagrant educational abuse stayed mute for the most part working in spare rooms behind closed doors providing an honest day of instruction or if the opening a clustering of teachers settling into their own carefully guarded educational environments. Enlightened classrooms here and there do not make a school system or provide any continuity of curricula and instruction for students.

To reiterate or clarify in 1991 when students left the 8th grade it was as if they were moving to a different country another continent. At a time when young people as clearly stated in the Carnegie Report most needed the continuity of close peer and teacher relationships they were split asunder and fragmented. Once again the scales of economics and race tipped in favor of a truncated system. Private schools always were in some configuration of K-12 even if it meant being trucked off to a sister or brother boarding school. Further all of catholic education was K through 12 a system of a single pedagogy and a single belief system. Only we in the public school system had the hubris to lard and dismantle childhood development for the sake of bounty and local politics. Further in high schools throughout the City with entering populations of 4000 or more had less than 100 students graduate in four years with only ten or fifteen students receiving Regents Diplomas the academically quantifiable high school degree. One regional high school superintendent actually had all of his seniors' process down the aisle in cap and gown at graduation to *Pomp and Circumstances* to receive empty diploma envelopes. He said when questioned, *I didn't want these students to feel badly*. This was the egregious and sinister level to which high schools throughout the City stooped. Fortuitous forcing the hand for change while the mayor visited a particular high school of notoriety students were shooting guns at each other on the upper floors. Advantageous to our New Visions campaign sadly but predictably crises in every walk of life initially can provide the conditions for change.

The thrust of the job then was to find a way to span grades 7-12 under one if metaphoric roof providing for academic continuity for children during adolescence and to broker a governance arrangement between school districts and the high school district that would oversee such schools. There had been a precedent for this in the City led by Debbie Meier recipient of a *MacArthur Fellows Genius Grant* and founding principal of *Central Park East Secondary School* in an East Harlem school district in which Tony Alvarado was superintendent. All the time I had been in my Northwest Bronx aerie I had harbored a desire to work with and for Tony Alvarado the most provocative visionary, and least fearful superintendent in the City. The superintendent whom I primarily served hid under the desk behind thickly draped windows and did everything innovative surreptitiously so he wouldn't get caught defying his union brethren the Jewish mafia of the Emile Society and fellow Riverdale congregants. *Don't rock the boat don't make waves* his signatory song with a flag of loyalty covering his ass, *the CYA code for don't dare try change*.

Every project we did together was enveloped in the kind of intrigue involved in secret love affairs or dangerous, conspiratorial politics. The sub-text of his very subliminal consent to any suggestion of mine *don't rock my boat baby* knotted convoluted planning meetings took place in darkened corridors nobody as in union officials should be alerted to our plans and machinations their opposition would provide challenge and question his power. Luncheons broaching and brokering change were held on Arthur Avenue swathed in a nest of tables whose occupants were mob notables the mafia were his quest his protectors, his idealized kin as he softened his afternoons with drinks he mellowed into a mobster mentality. Weak-kneed pogrom railing Jews broke into Italian gangsters and mobsters at the whiff of whiskey and all of this during luncheons among the chosen Sicilian brotherhood. Stealth and never to blow off the ballast of his job security were the terms until a project received positive recognition that could stand up to scrutiny. Reassured that he could blow off diminish the force of any lurking opposition would he step from the shadows of his fears and go boastfully public.

Sitting face-to-face at our first meeting she rapid fire continued without taking a noticeable breath very lawyer like presenting final arguments *we want wide dissemination for our initiative within the system*, she continued. *We want to open the process up*. I was agreeable and suggested that an ad be placed in the Sunday Times inviting everyone in greater New York to create a *New Visions School* thus named in the original proposal. She looked on with interest. The initial intention I believe was only to open up the opportunity to individuals within the system and perhaps surrounding community itself startling. Long experience taught me that teachers in classrooms were kept woefully ill informed about opportunities to effect positive change within the school system believing that the true route to change was to engage the aspirations and rage of the community in the quest for better public education. Twenty years experience had convinced me that sparks of desire had to be awakened and welcomed within and outside a school building. A movement for true public school reform would only work if the impetus came from and was energized by those individuals parents family members and teachers those closest to the children. The potential for success then rested in the muscle provided by the corporate titans of the Fund's Board. Finally she said that the schools were to be *small, rigorous, and heterogeneous*. The very mention of a small high school sent public school officials into apoplexy the prevailing orthodoxy in the high school hierarchy was that students in small schools given the paucity of funding budgets allocated per pupil or per head thereby schools could not offer all of the opportunities of a large school like science

labs, sports' teams, ample guidance services. Changing the high school funding formula would require a legislative action thus fostering a cooperative pooling of funds from these new small schools so they could contract out for lab opportunities the use of gyms or obtain the services of local mental health agencies. Central to the creation of these new schools along with heightened opportunities for academic success was the fact that students would be part of a community in which teachers and administrators knew them by name. As the interview concluded my mind was filled with images of *sugar plum fairies* she promised to get back to me within days or weeks.

Note: It doesn't just follow that a small school will be warm and personable, but the chances are greater even by virtue of those individuals who chose to work there. Ted Sizer the educator had been heard to say that a school is a good school *if the children are all known by name*. Deborah Meier believed that *a school should not have more teachers than can easily fit around one conference table*. Early on I surmised that the very fact that 1000 freshman arrive to most high schools for the ninth grade with less than 100 students graduating in four years perhaps only fifteen students with the highly valued Regents' diploma necessitated winnowing out and thinning the ranks of teachers as the student population dwindled. On the contrary never was there a single position sacrificed lost the teaching population in the school stayed static as students fled or dropped out. Simple-minded examination of the sacrosanct budget led to a horrifying realization that it cost about \$150,000 for each high school graduate. The argument about big high schools being able to offer more was fallacious the budget provided the teachers union with a stable voting population. On occasional ambassadorial visits to local high schools had me witnessing more than once a teacher writing on the board back turned to a class of five or six maybe one or two chatting in the back or hanging out a window waving to friends and classmates who already had hit the errant streets.

By the time of our first talk, when I had been flopped into a casket and buried alive in the school district I knew that we could take students from the sink-holes of public schooling and turn them into thriving rosy cheeked pups. I knew that teachers and students in an educational enclave of their own design were akin to nesting angels atop a cathedral. And that, reaching in to find the dignity and desire on the part of teacher and student led to this happy public school occurrence. I had first-hand experience of watching small new schools germinate all with similar core principles comparable positive academic

success students drawn from the mainstream population. The possibility of working with New Visions Schools was enticing and provocative.

Changing norms and practice within a school was the ultimate strategic goal of the initiative to create small schools-within-schools tucked within corridors of middle school buildings principals agreeing because initially we took difficult trouble making students off their hands and out of the hallways as well as teachers, draft dodgers, not yet trained to hold still to have sealed lips never to undermine question or oppose a principal. These potentially grousing teachers were suppose to march lock step behind the teachers' union representative (UFT) whose job it was to lodge regular complaints and formal grievances against the principal always of course within tacitly agreed upon conditions staying just short of tilting the status quo. Ad hominem *Young Turks* war resisters would not hold to the *rules of engagement* thus the willingness of the principal to set them apart while the snarling teeth of the union members found it off season for disregard ridicule culling up a brew of otherness and suspicion. Off putting and unexpected these little educational enclaves flourished in a twisted turn of events these unruly disruptive the *great unwashed* objects of contempt by school personnel began producing dramatically high scores on all standardized tests.

No longer subjected to derision desultory on going confrontations shiny faced almost docile students appeared responding to kindness and respect and the extraordinary high academic expectations along with exorbitant additional instructional support wherever the academic lag. Further not only were many of these students already burdened JD cards (Juvenile Detention) but with often extreme and onerous family poverty. When families clamored to have their children placed in these little self-contained mini-schools wariness crowded the other teachers and the principal academic malfeasance loomed when in one small corner of the school students dramatically out-performed the rest of the population. Scurrying rats huddled too late to undermine determinate measures were in the public domain peeling away surreptitiously teachers requesting to become part of these teaching teams exponentially expanding the student populations and with students who still displayed a modicum of school decorum. The superintendent had achieved his end goal this almost miraculous turn of events warning principals that only worthy teachers presenting well scripted plans for instruction reviewed by his office would be given opportunities to join in this crusade this movement to up tilt the scurrilous scandalous academically liable middle and junior high schools.

Of seeming mythic proportion there were common principles in play that worked to change the instructional tide and although not all can be listed or quantified they followed: disenchanting teachers yet indoctrinating by the pervasive standard bearers of the status quo, an opportunity to build a sense of camaraderie and community among the teachers during an arduous planning process in which they prepared proposals for their instructional settings presented and defended initially by the superintendent and a small intact team finally a modicum of true autonomy supervision from the superintendent's office. Conforming to models where innovative organizations in their infancy were incubated and protected feedback always supportive and substantive sites were identified and common set of objectives and goals predominated. Substantive positive evidence gained wide recognition of course promoted by the superintendent telling of how students' difficult students at first had been lifted retrieved from the stockyards of public school failures. It was demonstrably possible to turn around failing schools into beacons of success the high beam turned on the complicity and culpability engendered in school failures particularly in the most economically pressed neighborhoods itself reflective of a much deeper troubling dangerous and cruel phenomenon. I was thrilled to be an agent and partner in this endeavor the superintendent's intention being clear from the first. In small pockets in the City similar positive educational change was attributed to the building of these small schools-within-schools as they became known. Further the knowledge and experience of setting up these little pup tents of educational success within the smarmy walls of public temples of learning scented my resume with a peculiar know how.

Following the interview for the directorship of the New Visions Schools though yet to be offered ebbed the despondency from being banished and shut away. Trancelike visions of myself blossomed there an emergent leader in a social movement much further down the road and on the job I ultimately got the extreme complement when I was likened to *Che Guevara* by one of the new school leaders, a former *Young Lord*, of what would ultimately be one of our fledgling New Visions Schools. In the meetings aftermath I saw myself given a more expansive and expanded opportunity to be a warrior the coffin lid opened omnipotent business leaders would provide the access for me to step out into the world of my own ferocious dreams. Much as I had told the chief of the Navajo Indian tribe in Window Rock Arizona nearly thirty years earlier, *I've come to offer friendship and love to the Navajos*, so I shared at the New Visions initial interview *that our academic challenge our crossbow ought to be to get every one of our graduates sufficiently competitive to be accepted to and*

successful at Harvard. (Within my secret self I believed they then could decode the insidious role Harvard had played in keeping them out. Then they would know.) Finally I was being considered for a job in which to design and lead a provocative perhaps radical educational initiative while being pulled from the bubbling kettle of my demise and with the designate *Barbarians at the Gate* providing me with access and cover imagine! Now in my eighth decade in deep retrospective reflection I am saddened by my then need to be so apple faced and righteous but then my rosy innocence served them well, they identified me as a *mother/nurturer* much as I had about myself (*milk given tit* more exactly when I started my work in the most northern school district in the Bronx when in truth I wanted to be seen as a *Joan of Arc* and remain touched in profound and deeply personal ways to be considered akin to Che Guevara.

As the interview concluded E said the job would be as a *consultant* for a period of six months as there were not sufficient funds at the moment for a full-time position. She, I was to learn, ever the shrewd businesswoman did not want to be saddled with someone she didn't want and she wanted a bailout if the initiative failed. I said I needed a *leave of absence from my job*. *If the job is offered you, it will be arranged*, she said. Then I was back on the late December West Village streets the wind off the nearby Hudson was harsh and unremitting. Disbelieving what had transpired I made my way back to my much-disliked neighborhood Riverdale, in the Bronx, and my bed. Two weeks later, she called me at the office. I was deep into my paintings, the spaces into which I climbed to survive the daily attempts to obliterate me. *We've got the initial funding. You've got the job. They won't give you a leave of absence. Starts on February 2, (1992).* And with that, she hung up. Without much thought, or any thought I walked into the Superintendent's office the very man who had refused the Chancellor's request to give me a leave and said *I quit. When?* He asked. *Right now*, I answered. And without his looking up, or my looking back, I left.

Single mother no trust fund no alimony three children, two in their twenties, and one just four, off I hopped into space launched but with no netting to catch a precipitous fall. Going to the Fund's office a few days later to fill out the official employment papers she said in a very brief meeting *Work at home work here we have a new computer for you and please have a completed RFP in six weeks.* She had broken into Mandarin or another unfamiliar tongue I had authored multiple and very successful grant applications none, which I wrote without the full partnership of a professional, grant writer. *Ouch* panic

hyperventilating I left the office got outside to catch a breath wanting to flee back to the sinister but familiar nesting of the district office from which I had just been released. What had I done to myself? Joan, the *Joan of my Arc* release yourself come give me the courage to enact what has just been below my lips wanting to breath free waiting for the wings to fly and here they were the wind shaft that would take me to higher places within and outside myself. Don't quicksilver flee to the familiar to safety be stalwart I said marshalling my inner resources I broke into a run to the subway.

Early in my tenure as Director of New Visions I met the new Chancellor, Mr. Fernandez, who let escape, *you are that one? It is you?* Followed by a guffaw. I wasn't the sinister dangerous person who had been scoured and expunged from the school system he was expecting. The Chancellor having held the entire District's budget for thirty-nine thousand students in escrow until I was made whole at least budget wise. I was not the clawing raging bully filled with rants and threats prototypical of the school system personnel in Dade Country Florida he had just left. True to those from foundations and other notable city not-for-profits aware of my work vouching for me he found that recently dormant twinkle in my eye. Then came my formal introduction to the Chair of the Fund's board and a managing partner at a very white shoe law firm. At first sighting my heart flip flopped it was the movie star *Ed Harris* it was his probing blue eyes his seductive wasp smile though he was looking steely-eyed and expressionless at a trembling graceless refugee of the school system. Skepticism writ large if three central individuals sponsoring and in support of this initiative recommended her.

Suddenly and seeming compressed time brought and installed a new computer in my home in Riverdale in what was the TV room. I was to commence forthwith to write the RFP (Request for Proposal) having weekly meetings with E more if needed when I would present what I had written. Alone at the computer of which my working knowledge was slight I had a crippling empty feeling waves of panic forcing me to step beyond fear and into action. I read and reread the three-page proposal solicited by and approved of by the Aaron Diamond Foundation and then from some deep well of proposal knowledge I remembered the words *Who When What Where and How* asked often of me as I sat with the school district proposal writer. Hitting a raw nerve knowing I had to find a fragment of a poem to begin with which would then lead me to a narrative containing all I wanted the New Visions initiative to be. Ultimately the structure and response to those five little words would conform and adhere. I realized if we were truly cutting new ground the

proposal had to lift off the page and entice. Intuitively grasping that this RFP process had to be a seduction holding the allure of pioneering cutting ground on a new frontier where the revelatory would map chart the way. Breaking with the formulaic creating a new paradigm for public education had to involve having the authors of these proposals believe that they were truly *lighting the fuse of new possibility* a quote from Emily Dickinson that Professor Maxine Greene often likes to use when asking students to think about teaching practice. I had my old spunky self back if dissolving into a taut hand-wringing imposter whenever presenting my work to E. Skepticism terse commentary but bids to go on shaped our meetings.

JUMPING WAY AHEAD OF MYSELF - THE END IS IN THE BEGINNING AND YET YOU GO ON...ENDGAME, SAMUEL BECKETT

In 1997 I left New Visions unnerved “crisis of faith” as Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts described my state when I consulted with him or leaving quicksilverish before they kicked me out or vanquished myself to invisibility whatever the truth I left as I had left every other thing in my life filled with vengeance and anger and need for retribution for what I really can’t ever know or pin down it may have an archival dimension be stuck in some Jungian archetype – whatever as they say I left.

However thanks to a Performa letter from the director who succeeded Beth Lief, Robert I. Hughes, another lawyer I received what follows – decoded you were here and you no longer are and don’t bother coming back you are idiomatic this is just to affix to the headstone of future resumes. The letter is dated September 30, 2003, I was by then working at Lehman College, Bronx Institute. It is currently October 2012 and I happily work nowhere but here on my computer writing to no one in particular but for myself sort of a dream come true.

Here, presenting: Exhibit A:

*New Visions for Public Schools
96 Morton Street
New York, NY 10014*

September 30, 2003

Sent to my home address

Dear Naomi,

Ten years ago, when New Visions first began our work on small schools, our ultimate goal was to bring small schools to scale in New York City. The Gates announcement and the Department's commitment to create 200 new small rigorous high schools suggest that our goal may well be in sight. As an employee of New Visions, you played an important role in building the knowhow, leadership capacity and city-wide demand that has made this moment possible. We know we have a lot of hard work ahead of us, but we are a critical player in this reform effort because of the foundations you helped to lay. The investments you made are really paying off.

*Many thanks,
Bob
Robert I. Hughes
President*

The following ad appeared in the Sunday New York Times in April 1992.

A CALL FOR NEW VISIONS SCHOOLS

Interested in creating a small, innovative public school for New York City? The New York City Public Schools, the Fund for New York City Public Education and the Aaron Diamond foundation invite interested individuals or groups to develop their concepts for New Visions Schools. Schools must: be small (500-700); serve grades 9-12, as well as earlier continuous grades (e.g. K-12, 5-12, 6-12, 7-12); and have an educationally sound concept.

To receive a Request For Proposal: call or write: Naomi Barber, Fund for New York City Public Education, 96 Morton Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10014. (212-645-5110).

On the Monday and Tuesday following the ad five hundred individuals called saying that they wanted more information and thought that they had an idea to create a school. After torrential tears and agony a brief cogent RFP was ready for distribution.

Consistent with and reflective of the essence of the New Visions initiative it was brief pointed and deceptively simple in its format. Asking direct questions with warnings that jargon would discount the submission. Imaginations were to fly free, think big reflecting a deeply personal vision of public education, as it ought to be. Individuals working in self-identified communities were invited to write a proposal. Proposals were to reflect the multiple perspectives of the very pluralistic members of greater New York City. Technical assistance and support during the proposal writing process offered on an ongoing basis. Phone call requests accepted limited to accommodating no more than ten groups at a particular time.

Excerpted from the actual RFP completed and distributed in April 1992 following the Ad in the New York Times and other papers:

What follows taken directly from actual documents used in the New Visions Schools initiative:

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

JOSEPH A. FERNANCEZ, Chancellor

April 20, 1992

Dear Friends:

The New York City public schools system needs more schools that educate and nurture students, successfully preparing them to become productive members of society. We are turning to the creativity and talent of all New Yorkers who have good ideas for small, innovative schools to respond to the attached Request for Proposal for New Visions Schools.

A generous grant from the Aaron Diamond Foundation has provided us with this unprecedented opportunity to turn to you and anyone else you feel might be interested to create new, successful secondary schools for the children of this City.

We encourage you to distribute the RFP widely.

Your comments or thoughts are most welcomed.

Sincerely,

*Beth J. Lief
Executive Director
Fund for NYC Public Education*

*Joseph A. Fernandez
Chancellor
New York City Public Schools*

New Visions Schools
Request for Proposal
April 1992

"Many things we need can wait, children cannot: Now is the time when their bones are being formed, their blood is being made, their minds are being developed. To them we cannot say tomorrow. Their name is today."

Gabriela Mistral
Chilean Poet

- *Each New Visions School should house no more than 500 to 700 students.*
- *We are looking for applications from the broadest array of talent in New York City...*
- *We encourage individuals and groups to develop collaborative plans with partners.*
- *Each New Visions School should include grades 9-12 and additional earlier consecutive grades: for example, k-12 5-12, 6-12, 7-12.*
- *The New Visions School may reflect an original or new idea or build upon an existing school or program...*
- *Each New Visions School will have shared governance arrangements between Community School Districts and the High School Division. These arrangements will be tailored for each New Visions School.*
- *Applicants will be judged on the merits and the soundness of their educational concept, the size of the student body and the responsiveness to the broad **needs** of students.*

...All good ideas for small, caring well-conceived education environments in which students can succeed will be considered.

The following recommendations and principles developed by the Carnegie Corporation, the Network of Progressive Educators, the Center for Collaborative Education and others are shared to encourage thinking about a set of governing principles for your New Visions School. Each of these is important to consider in the shaping of your school.

- *Students thrive in small-personalized learning environments.*
- *Schools improve academic performance through fostering health and fitness.*

- *Students learn best through direct experience, primary sources, personal relationships, and cooperative exploration.*
- *Schools pay equal attention to all facets of students' development.*
- *Assessment of school and student is accomplished through multiple perspectives.*
- *The school and home are active partners in meeting the needs of students.*
- *Parents, students and staff cooperate in school decision making.*
- *Schools build on the home cultures of students and their families.*
- *Schools encourage young people to fulfill their responsibilities as world citizens by teaching critical inquiry and the complexities of global issues.*
- *Schools help students develop their social conscience, appreciate the worth of others and face issues of race, class, gender and disabilities.*
- *Effective schools are not isolated but are connected with their community.*
- *All students regardless of race, native language, gender, nationality, or disability must receive a quality education and it is our responsibility to teach students the skills and knowledge that will enable them to compete successfully in a new global technological society.*
- *The vision of education is based on a commitment to preparing children for thoughtful and active citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society. This requires schools to conceive of themselves as people-centered communities that organize educational experiences to promote intellectual habits of mind and life-long learning, critical reflection, and individual and collective contributions to school and society.*
- *Schools enable students to have the widest possible options for further education and career development.*
- *In sum, schools prepare students to be productive, caring members of our society.*

The New York Public Schools, the Fund for New York City Public Education and the Aaron Diamond Foundation look forward to receiving exciting and important ideas for schools. These new visions Schools are being sought to give us all opportunities to learn distinct possibilities for successfully educating all of our city's youth. New Visions Schools will provide educational models which can be adapted and replicated in a variety of settings to assure that a full range of options will be available to the diverse student community as we enter the 21st century.

Timetable

<i>April 1992.....</i>	<i>Request for Proposal</i>
<i>May 1992.....</i>	<i>Series of technical assistance and information</i>
	<i>Conferences</i>
<i>June 26, 1992.....</i>	<i>Proposals due. Five copies (no faxes)</i>
<i>July 6 to July 17, 1992.....</i>	<i>Interviews with applicants (strong ratings in review process)</i>
<i>July 31, 1992.....</i>	<i>Ten planning grants of \$25, 000 awarded Intense technical assistance ongoing provided</i>
<i>December 31, 1992.....</i>	<i>Interim reports due</i>
<i>January 1993.....</i>	<i>Five possible ten planning teams selected To receive support to hire a project director</i>
<i>June 1993.....</i>	<i>Final plans submitted</i>
<i>July 1993.....</i>	<i>Curriculum planning for first six months to year</i>
<i>September 1993.....</i>	<i>New Visions schools open</i>
<i>June 1994</i>	<i>Final reports on initial year</i>

Technical Assistance (excerpted)

There will be a series of small technical assistance and information meetings held in various NYC locations between hours of 4 and 6pm. (Note: When given most technical assistance meetings are held in a large central location and open to all interested applicants, they are thought to be large and impersonal if obligatory)

“Builders of schools” (including parents, students, teachers, and administrators) will share their experiences. Representatives of the Board the Fund and the Unions will be present to answer concerns and questions.

Meetings have limited registration filled on first come basis if needed additional meetings will be scheduled.

A Series of bus tours (including box lunches) will be scheduled between the hours of 9:30 and 1 of existing innovative schools and programs in NYC. Bus trips will be scheduled based on interest and need.

The following are dates and sites for initial scheduled meetings;

<i>May 4, 1992:</i>	<i>University Heights High School in the Bronx</i>
<i>May 7, 1992:</i>	<i>Middle College high School in Queens</i>
<i>May 13, 1992</i>	<i>Urban Academy in Manhattan</i>

Form included for technical assistance registration, questions included aside from information about group or individual:

Would you like a bus tour of innovative schools, programs Yes..... No.....

**Are there particular innovative schools or programs you would like to visit, please specify,*

**Are particular issues or concerns you want addressed?*

**Any school or program you feel it is important for others to see (implied, or learn more of)?*

Request for Proposals (Actual Questions Posed)

Part I

In no more than ten pages, describe:

**The educational philosophy and theme*

**the student needs which school address*

**Concept for educating the students in your New Visions School: as examples, we offer the following: (looking over this it is as if playing school, an indulgence a bonbon a trifle – pretending – or more grandly thinking big digging deep and freeing up imaginations)*

**an accelerated learning concept-based school*

**a non-graded school*

**a weekend school, for students who hold jobs during the week*

- *a school includes periods of time on a farm*
- *a school geared for full participation of entire family*
- *a school focuses on particular disciplines for discrete periods of time (for example, four consecutive weeks of math)*
- *a school in which a group of students and teachers remain together for a number of years*
- *a community service school*
- *a school students involved in directly rebuilding the city's infrastructure*
- *a school linked to the publishing industry*
- *a school in which students work with pharmaceutical companies to develop new medicines*
- *a school which produces and display and performs works of art and music*

You may respond by using a format in which you send a letter to parents describing your New Visions School – the letter should discuss what gets taught and how: a description of the ideal physical space for school and classrooms; how students are selected; particulars about scheduling; the organization of the teaching staff; and methods by which students are measured...

These ideas are offered to spur the imagination, and to demonstrate the openness of the proposal request to a wide array of concepts for the creation of a New Visions School. Our interest is to identify exciting and worthy ideas for the education of our city's youth.

NOTE: *As much anguish in preparing this RFP it stood as a roadmap followed consistently and proving well conceived ideas (much like well wrought business plans) are essential in creating successful initiatives or start-ups if they can be altered or amended the central document need stand. With New Visions Schools when the group adhered to the vision without compromising its essential premise principles values and beliefs the school had the best chance for success particularly once these schools rose like blooms out of bulbs in early spring rivalries and those interested in breaking apart sabotaging and destroying could be withstood.*

Part II

Please address the following in a very general way. Responses should be as brief as possible.

- *What age groups or grades will you serve?*
- *From where will you recruit your student body (i.e. neighborhood, community borough, other)? You need not know at this time with what School district you will be affiliated with but if you do please state.*
- *What admissions criteria and methods will you use to select student population? (The New Visions School can be a neighborhood school.)*
- *what will be the composition of your planning team? How have you selected your planning team?*
- *How would you describe your ideal space for the school? Do you envision being in an existing building or leasing space?*
- *What ideas do you have for determining whether your school is succeeding?*
- *How do you see your staff interacting?*
- *How have you envisioned the leadership of your school? What qualities will you look for in a leader?*

NOTE: *Reading this now more fifteen years later feel as if I am in Never- Never land swooping around the skies a poor Peter Pan imitator the level of naïveté and innocence is daunting particularly after twenty hard years in the Siberia of the New York City school system – oh my! Cynicism or flagrant disbelief in the whole things makes me wonder how I got to do and formalize any of it and that is the question.*

Note: *A well-conceived concept is the most critical aspect of your proposal at this point. It is our desire not to have you deterred, discouraged by specific issues which can be worked out in the future. Particular issues of concern will be addressed on a proposal-by-proposal basis in specifically tailored technical assistance meetings. We will provide assistance for example in the following areas:*

- *The identification of a space or space constraints*
- *The identification and selection of teachers or school or school leaders*
- *The schools governance arrangement*
- *Funding or budgeting for the school*
- *Testing requirements for the school*
- *Credit or curricular requirements*
- *Graduation requirements*

The Board of Education and the Fund and the State Education Department will work with each New Visions School to insure that requirements are met in a way, which complements and supports the school's philosophy and concept.

Part III

Each proposal should be accompanied by a one-page statement which, describes your New Visions School.

Part IV

Each planning team/applicant should submit on June 26, 1992

**Five copies (no faxes)*

**One page biographies or resumes for key individuals on planning team*

**Names and signatures of key planning team members and mailing addresses*

**Name and address and phone number of contact person available for July 6th – July 24, 1992.*

“Birthing New Visions Schools”

By Beth Lief, Voices from The Front Lines, New York City,

Chapter 8

Thus, in the spring of 1992 we sent out a very public call to start new schools. Ads appeared in newspapers on and on the radio. We organized meetings and mailings. Sixteen thousand individuals and groups received our first Request for Pilot School Proposal (RFP), an invitation, as it were, to set forth their conception for a small, innovative school. We had certain non-negotiables small size (which we at the time defined as no more than 500 to 700 students); heterogeneity, connection to and respect for parents and community; and a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum, to name the most important. The Chancellor gave us the authority and private donors gave us the finances to award ten planning grants with the expectation of creating five actual schools. The response to the RFP was so overwhelming that RFP in 1996 resulted in planning grants to 30 teams. The initiative had grown to include approximately 50 schools by the summer of 1997, 20 of which were in the planning stages and planning to open in September 1997 or 1998. We continue to receive calls a regular basis from communities and educators about the possibility of our supporting more schools.

Board of Directors of The Fund for New York City Public Education as appeared on the letterhead in 1992

Richard I. Beattie, Chairmen
Beth J. Lief, Executive Director

Mary Schmidt Campbell
Sandra Feldman
Joseph A Fernandez
George Friedman
Bernard Harleston
Henry R. Kravis
Thomas G. Labrecque
Marilyn Laurie
Reuben Mark
Voctpr Marrerro
H. Carl McCall
J. Richard Munro
Amina Abdur-Rahman
Elizabeth Rohatyn
Felix C. Rohatyn
Donald Singer
Thomas Tam
Robert F. Wagner, Jr.
William S. Woodside

Auspicious Day: June 26, 1992 a day of such heat that gasping and gulping water was the only way to cope. We waited at the sixth floor elevator at 96 Morton Street through the early evening, as the New Visions Proposals were hand delivered. It was a Friday. Most of the staff had left for the weekend on hand beside me was Peter my current Ivy League assistant believe by this time he no longer needed his crutches an overzealous performance at soccer had crushed a leg, and then the assistant we had who came from a temp agency recently from one of the Caribbean Islands and understood nothing of what we were doing but she was stalwart. We had amassed bottles and pitchers of water constantly replenished which we handed each person stepping off the elevator as they panting exchanged some exhausted pleasantries glad to be rid of the proposal and on the way to somewhere else. It seemed that most of the individuals handing in a proposal were the lesser members of the team though

not just pure messengers. Occasionally we would hear beyond the beads of sweat dripping that preparing the proposal was one of the great experiences of their lives further at technical assist meetings or libraries or subways they had met others also in the process of writing a proposal and passionate about creating a New Visions public school. Joseph Grannis a professor at TC Columbia had said during one of my myriad interviews that the opportunity to create a public school provided a dream for a better world with an improbable possibility. At eight o'clock it seemed we had liberally extended the date and time for submission and told the security at the door that we were not accepting anyone else up to our office. The three of us with our own jug of water sat at a big table counting and coding each proposal before making ten copies of the two hundred and eighty two proposal we had in hand.

I called the boss who by now was in her country house who sounded quite overcome and more than pleased and asked me to make a list with the name of the lead submitter, pertinent information for future correspondence, and to fax it to her before we left for the evening. There were to be at least five readers for each proposal already lined up and then we had to reserve a copy for a locked file and then copies for the funder, the chancellor's office and Fund directors. Breathtaking the range of groups and individuals who prepared proposals the group of submitters seemed to be inclusive and representative of each segment of our greater New York society. The sun lifted over Christopher Street as the three of us walked to our respective cars or subways promising to reconvene in late morning to continue making copies and mailing packages awaiting a cover note from our boss. Saturday evening at the end of our day I took a box to my car with 282 proposals knowing that I as the anchor of this initiative had to read each one in a quiet and reflective space without the heat of the occasionally dragon fire breathing impatient boss her directives always clear her sense of time truly relative.

What follows are very expurgated notes taken from a yellow pad dated 7/3/92 the proposals just listed by code number the titles of which are long forgotten – this to illustrate the range of applicants –often the titles speak for themselves:

060 Progressive education with attentiveness to needs of urban youth of Latino and African American background.

066 Two social studies teachers Barnard graduates friends Teach for America -excellent use and integration of strongest principles of new pedagogy for primarily Latino population Washington Heights or Lower East Side.

062 Based on Walden Schools, Rudolph Steiner –“Bring to economically disadvantaged students the experience of an inspiring and beautiful curriculum which would ordinarily not be affordable to them.”

058 Correctional Educational Consortium – High School of Ethics, Law and Social Justice.

127 Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development –“Harness the resources and energies of student body population for the rebuilding of local and city infrastructure and the healing of the social fabric which creates community.”

088 The Electronics and Electromechanical Training Institute

079 The Home as School Program: Education of the Future – “Teachers as second mother.” Education in Series of Homes - directed toward Dominican Students -

082 The Urban Peace Academy – talk with students about violence coupled with martial arts.

085 Urban Boarding School – school for kids in group homes – members of Episcopal Mission Society –

078 The Workplace –cooperative school community adopted from De Werkplaats - Holland – Consent Management – Van Vlissingen no hierarchical leader –

052 *Quest – Community School – drawn from Bank Street College philosophy – refer to Roland Barth –*

070 *Transition to Work Place –particularly for developmentally disables or students who fail in school –*

071 *The Mamas Tingo high School –the Dominican Center for Reflection and Action – The Dominican Center was named in honor of Florinda Soriano, affectionately known as Mama Tingo, a Dominican Woman peasant, mother of 14 children, who was assassinated by a large landowner in 1974 fighting for her piece of land in the Dominican Republic. She became a national symbol of female courage, strength, and resistance.*

049 The New American Academy – multilingual and multicultural education –

043 Re-structuring America’s Schools – theme based academies –

029 Thoreau School –based on Evergreen model – Waldorf School

030 The Museum School of Technology – education centered on art and technology –

033 The La Guardia Greater Community - The International High School and Middle College High School –

028 The Analytical School, Family and Community – computer centered –

050 The Institute for Community Service and Community Development – strong connection to community –

048 The New York City Public School Repertory Company – open to all children –

037 Criminal Justice Academy – prepare students for jobs in law enforcement –

038 The New School of Self-Awareness – integrate Dewey-based and Campbell school for children who are sex abused or child abused –

- 048 Interborough Repertory Theater –
- 045 College-Bound Academy for Urban Youth
- 191 Harlem Boys Choir
- 188 Airplane Pilot School – submitted by Black Pilots organization
- 139 Cooper Union High School
- 046 New Visions – for students who choose to enter workforce after graduation and must compete with business –two-way language program – Chinese, Japanese and Korean – building competence in written and oral communication –
- 039 West Side High School – media arts - radio and video production
- 32 The Exploration School –learning through answering questions –
- 010 The Global Institute – takes on hard issues in political institute format –

The following open as New Visions Schools from September 1993 – September 1994:

BENJAMIN BANNEKER ACADEMY FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – Brooklyn

Students study social and political policy, urban planning, and work on long-term projects such as designing strategies for rebuilding their own neighborhoods and organizing their communities around social issues and action.

BRIDGES TO BROOKLYN/BROOKLYN COLLEGE ACADEMY –Brooklyn

The goal of the school is to develop students’ intellectual and social skills and to instill respect and pride for their community and borough. Extending the school to community spaces provides hospitable places for families to join their children in learning and experiences and to participate in curriculum development.

ROBERT F. KENNEDY HIGH SCHOOL – CSD 25 COLLABORATIVE – Flushing Queens

Students work and/or study at nearby cultural institutions and colleges. The active-learning curriculum requires students to assess community needs and work with teachers, parents and other mentors to design and implement in-service projects at hospitals, libraries, parks and other non-profit groups. A variety of assessment methods, such as student journals, portfolios containing samples of student work and employer evaluations are used to chart students' progress.

EL PUENTE ACADEMY FOR PEACE & JUSTICE –Brooklyn

The Academy's curriculum is project focused, linking community life experiences and issues, such as the environment and health care, with conceptual learning. Employing a dual language (Spanish/English) approach to instruction. El Puente's four cornerstone principles of holism, collective self-help, safety and respect guide the students an extended day program, a strong community service component and access to El Puente's Health and Wellness Clinic, Performing and Visual Arts Program, college/career counseling services and internships opportunities.

(Note; The Executive Director along with other Young Lords went on a fast until the New York City Board of Education appointed a Latino member.)

HEALTH OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM – Bronx

Students will learn about more than 250 careers in health care along with instruction in mathematics, science, English, social studies and geography.

THE LEADERSHIP SCHOOL –Manhattan

This bilingual school (Spanish/English) fosters a strong connection to students' ethnic and cultural identities while its academic curriculum and extracurricular activities are designed to help students develop problem-solving skills. Students learn by designing workably solutions to problems in their own neighborhoods and by applying problem-solving strategies to improve aspects of society at large.

THE LEGACY SCHOOL FOR INTEGRATED STUDIES – Manhattan

Its teacher-developed curriculum encourages students to become critical thinkers, challenging them to analyze multiple points of view on complex issues such as racism, class discrimination sexism and poverty. The school features the use of small cooperative learning groups, independent research projects, internships, seminars that concentrate on the close reading of selected texts and discussion skills, and the use of the New York City’s cultural, social and institutional resources.

LOCAL 1199 SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE – Bronx

Students analyze public health issues, public policy development and the international labor movement. Students are involved in hands-on activities that relate classroom learning to community service. These activities range from participation in labor and community organization movements to service as interns at local health care facilities. The school ultimately plans to serve as a community center, offering courses adult education and other classes seven days a week and providing cultural and athletic activities for all ages.

THE NEW YORK CITY MUSEUM SCHOOL –Manhattan

The school’s academic calendar is divided into 6 curricular modules. During each module, small groups of students attend classes three days each week in one of the participating museum the American Museum of Natural History, The Brooklyn Museum, The Children’s Museum of Manhattan or the Jewish Museum. Extending the classroom to the actual museum sites, the school engages students in student-centered activity-based interdisciplinary studies. Mondays and Fridays, students return to their “home-base” to share their experiences and engage in individual and group study in selected subjects.

OCEANHILL-BROWNSVILLE SECONDARY SCHOOL – Brooklyn

This school emphasizes the study of new technology and the arts while involving parents and the community in the decision-making processes of the school. Clusters of teachers work with the same groups of students over a period of several years. The school provides students with a gateway to jobs in health care, the arts, education, science and technology.

THE RENAISSANCE SCHOOL –Queens

The school relates traditional academic subjects to an analysis and appreciation of the geography, cultures, social history and economics of New York City. Teachers work with the same class for two to three years and work as together to plan the school's integrated curriculum. The school ask parents, students, teachers and community residents to monitor and evaluate students progress and the quality of school life, regularly revising its program on the basis of these findings.

THE ROBERT F. WAGNER JR. INSITUTE FOR THE ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY –Queens

The Institute's curriculum focuses on technology and art and their relationship to one another and follows the Middle-College High School model, offering students the opportunity to be a part of a college campus. The Institute challenges students to collaborate with teachers in every aspect of their school, including the development of its curriculum, assessment methods and publications.

SCHOOL FOR THE PHYSICAL CITY, AN EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING CENTER –Manhattan

The school actively engages students in studies related to rebuilding and rehabilitation of the city's infrastructure, including roads, bridges, buildings and subways. Students apprentice with engineers, architects, contractors, plumbers, carpenters, policy-makers and others whose job it is to plan, build, maintain and reconstruct the systems that make our city run. The school prepares students to contribute to the improvements of the city's infrastructure and serves as a model for similar schools across the nation.

THE SCIENCE SKILLS CENTER FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE ARTS- Brooklyn

The school is premised on the philosophy that science empowers students to understand the world and how it works. The curriculum emphasizes science as the key to helping students discover their individual strengths and talents. Individual responsibility is an important aspect of the school's program and a complementary mission of the school is to nurture student leaders.

**THURGOOD MARSHALL ACADEMY FOR LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE –
Manhattan**

The Harlem school integrates its academic curriculum with the study of social and political leaders committed to social justice and change. The Academy prepares its students to take ownership of their society and serve as leaders in its future.

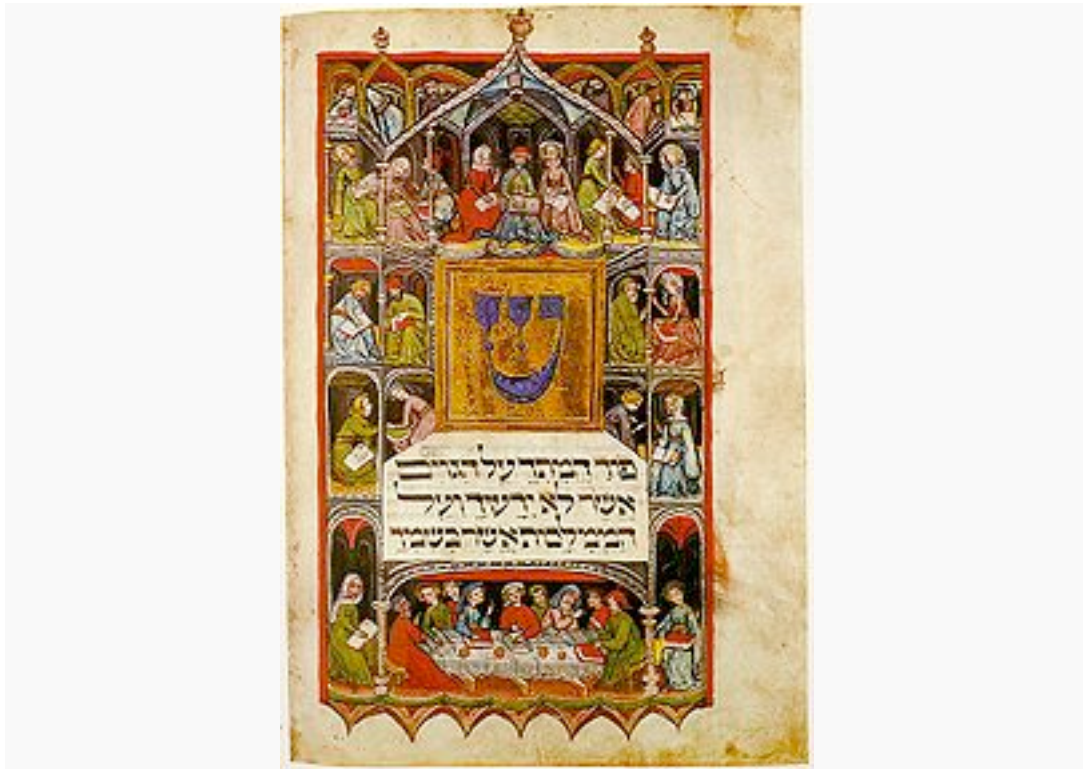
STATEN ISLAND SERVICE LEARNING ACADEMY – Staten Island

The school will prepare students for work and citizenship in a participatory democracy. All students will be linked to off-site learning experiences. The school will encourage students to go to college and pursue careers based on their community service activities.

Note: The above brief descriptions of the New Visions Schools which, opened during my watch were taken directly from the promotional materials prepared and distributed by The Fund for New York City Public Education.

Within a few years The Fund changed its name to **New Visions for Public Schools** after this signatory initiative.

THE SEDER TEXTS – The very text of the *Haggadah* read from on the Seder was revolutionary at its very core in its essence. At the most enlightened Seders I attended Jews of all ages gathered from every corner of the world each coming with an interpretation a story and song particular to his/her Seder table.



[Illuminated Haggadah](#), (14th century)

Relevant, when preparing the RFP for New Visions I decided we had to have famous quotes or lines of poetry to reach beyond the task at hand to shape to inform individuals and groups preparing proposals the principles at the heart or central to the initiative. And though most books begin with a quote or favorite line of poetry it seemed it was not done in the world of proposal writing. Anguishing as this process was for me I was adamant and yielding that there would be a quote on the cover. Work projects only made sense to me when a poem in the form of a vision appeared to me, then I knew what we were embarking on came from some inner dialogue some inner truth that could resonant with others not ideology but poetry. Never bold enough at the

corporate offices of the Fund to even let a poem of my own get born and come to life and light, I scoured texts for something right.

No Absolutely Not! Expressed emotionally emphatically by the Vice Chair of the UFT (United Federation of Teachers, responding to a quote from Emma Goldman, which appeared on the cover of the very first draft of the RFP. This was the first or initial review for the Advisory Committee. Admonished and put into my place, I came back the next time with a quote from Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean Poet. I got my way – a fragment of a poem on the very cover of the RFP if not my first choice.

They are as follows:

“I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody’s right to beautiful things.” Emma Goldman, Political Activist – Soundly rejected.

“Many things we need can wait, children cannot. Now is the time when their bones are being formed, their blood is being made, their minds are being developed. To them we cannot say tomorrow. Their name is today.” Gabriela Mistral, Chilean Poet – as it appeared on the cover of the RFP.

Jumping ahead, in 1995, along with staff of The Fund, we prepared the second RFP, *New Visions II*. Although it adhered to the form and process of the first RFP and there was now a new Chancellor, Ramon Cortines who fortunately supported the initiative and would continue the protocol of co-signing significant correspondence regarding *New Visions*. This time quotes were liberally added throughout the narrative. Riding on the good favors of the Fund’s leadership staff the success of ***New Visions I*** made me if for moments golden. What follows the quotes including in the RFP for *New Visions II*:

*“What the schools need is the push of the crowd.
What the crowd needs is the pull of the child life,
The school must become the people...
When the people recognize the possibilities of the school,...the school will become
a thousand times more powerful in fostering growth.”*

Angelo Patri, 1917, Italian Author and Educator

"In a regular school, they'd be like, That's it, your failing, goodbye. But here, they're like That's it, your failing, come on, get your stuff together. They're down your back. I guess that's what it is, like your parents."

New Visions Student 1994

"I carry books now. I carry a notebook with all my class work in it. I have all my notes from day one I started here. When I was in the other schools, I didn't even bother carrying a notebook. I just carried a book bag with a knife in it, ready, prepared to fight."

New Visions Student 1994

"Teachers have to understand enough about the cultures of the children they are teaching and about the culture of power so that they can make the translation necessary between the two. They have to help children understand and develop their home culture, and understand and acquire the culture of power."

Lisa Delpit,

MacArthur Genius Grant Awardee

Author, "Other People's Children"

"If this public sphere were dotted with scenes in which multiple voices were invited and heard, then the public schools would constitute a splendid site for public conversation. Public-sector organizations and social change groups and advocates would...enable young people to experience social problems as mutable, to position themselves as protagonists and makes of social history, to strengthen the sense of community and citizenship that schools intend to nurture, and to create among adolescents their own expertise and knowledge base which would migrate from community to school and back again."

Michelle Fine. Distinguished Professor CUNY, Author, "Framing Dropouts."

"In my experience, all children are strong in their own ways. Children who fail, whose lives are miserable, are made that way in and out of school because of some form of injustice. For that reason, fundamental change has to take place in school, and in society as well, so that beautiful lives are not wasted."

Herb Kohl, Educator Author "Thirty-Six Children"

“My hope is to reawaken concern for and belief in a humane framework for the kinds of education required in a technological society. It is to recall those who read to some lost spontaneity, some forgotten hunger for becoming different, becoming new. My hope is to remind people of what it means to be alive among others, to achieve freedom in dialogue with teacher for the sake of personal fulfillment and the emergence of a democracy dedicated to life and decency.”

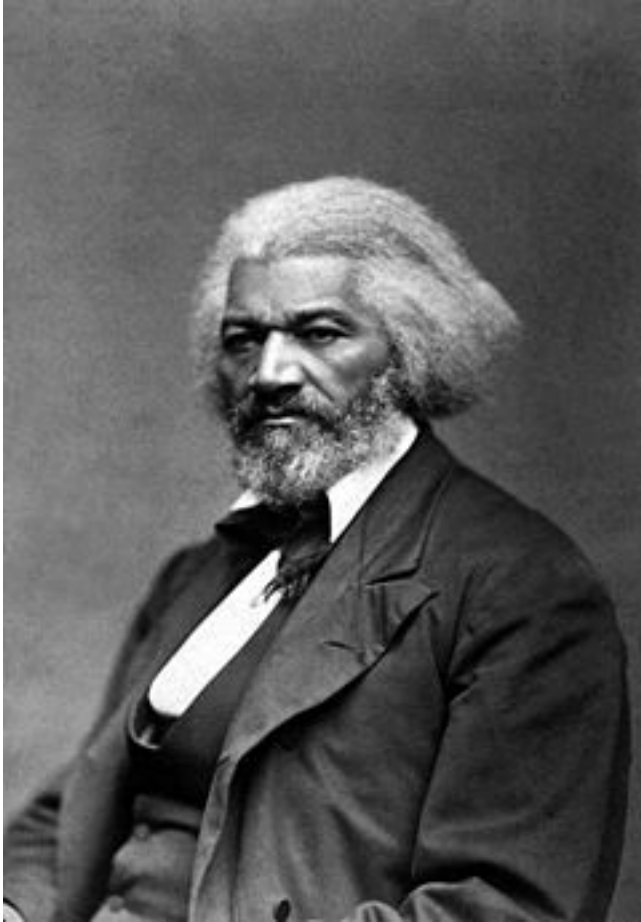
*Maxine Greene
Emeritus, TC Columbia University
Author, “The Dialectic of Freedom”*

“Every educational decision involves people and their world.”

*Paulo Freire
Brazilian Educator, Philosopher
Author, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”*

“I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit...In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their ignorance. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever.”

*Frederick Douglass
Orator, Writer, Statesman
Author, “Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave”*



Frederick Douglass, circa 1874

Note: Next year in Jerusalem...last words at Seder

It became common practice from the first for correspondence regarding overarching issues of the New Visions initiative to go out under the signatures of Beth Lief the Executive Director of the Fund and the Chancellor and it continued throughout the replacement chancellors as they came and went – Back in the school district I learned the impact of joint signatories power correspondence –

July 20, 1992

Dear New Visions Schools Applicant:

More than 280 proposals for New Visions Schools have been received. It is now evident that the New Visions Schools' project has created a great deal of interest in school reform. It would be difficult to identify a constituency in the city which is not represented among the applicants. The range and diversity of participants is quite stunning.

We find that we cannot adhere to our original decision making timetable and still do justice to your proposals. We are therefore modifying the selection process so that the range of possibilities can be carefully considered.

We ask your patience as we extend the review time. On July 27, 1992 we are meeting with our advisory committee to finalize the process for the selection of proposals for final consideration. This process will include additional reviews of the proposals and follow-up interviews. Before the process is over each proposal should have been read by an average of four or five independent readers.

We know that you will understand that the integrity of the review process is of primary concern. This is especially important in light of the wonderful diversity of these proposals represent. Final decisions will be made as soon as possible and should your proposal be selected you will be notified quickly. The interviews will be scheduled in August and September as you are available.

Sincerely,

*Beth J. Lief, Director
Fund for NYC Public Schools*

*Joseph A. Fernandez
Chancellor NYC Public Schools*

Recommendations for the New Visions Advisory Group came from Fund Board members, the funder, Aaron Diamond Foundation, the NYC Board of Education and leadership staff at the Fund. The Advisory Group was to be representative of New York City groups and individuals to have the widest breadth of input as the initiative developed. These individuals along with the Fund Board Members oversaw each element of the initiative.

New Visions Schools Advisory Group

Joseph Fernandez.....Chancellor NYC Public Schools
 Roscoe Brown, Jr..... President, Bronx Community College
 Emma Gonzalez..... Educators for Social Responsibility
 Pedro Pedraza..... Hunter College
 Donald Singer..... President, Council Supervisors & Administrators
 Charles P. Wang.....President, China Institute of America
 Carmen Valela-Russo.....Executive Director, High School Director NYC Public Schools
 Stephen Brumberg.....Professor, City University of N.Y.
 Sandra Feldman.....President, United Federation of Teachers
 Tim Minter.....Dean, Lehman College
 Joe Shenker.....President, Bank Street College
 Edna Suarez-Columba.....Director, Office Parent Involvement
 Talbert Spence.....NYC Board of Education
 Education Director
 American Museum of Natural History
 Arthur Walton.....Deputy Commissioner NY State Educational Dept
 Ann Lieberman.....Professor, Teachers College Columbia University
 Lucy Matos.....Director, Central Park East Secondary School
 Janet Lieberman.....Assist. to President, La Guardia

<i>Maritza Macdonald.....</i>	<i>Community College Professor, Bank Street College</i>
<i>Maxine Greene.....</i>	<i>Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University</i>
<i>Thomas Tam.....</i>	<i>Chairmen, Asian American High Education Council</i>
<i>Myron Harris.....</i>	<i>Psychologist, Director Psychiatry</i>
<i>Jean Thomases.....</i>	<i>Albert Einstein College of Associate Executive Medicine Director</i>
<i>Michelle Fine.....</i>	<i>Good Shepherd Professor, University of Pennsylvania - CUNY Services</i>

Each proposal had four or five readers. Three of the readers represented the NYC Board of Education Chancellor’s Office and executives from the Teachers Union and the CSA (supervisor’s union). Outside readers were drawn from corporations, libraries, churches, not-for-profits, youth organizations, and colleges. Disparate ratings brought in additional readers until a ratings consensus occurred. It was necessary for open-minded readings in order to encourage the widest array of proposals selected for additional attention. It was an obligation of the initiative to encourage ideas that were innovative and perhaps cut new ground, ideas that drew out “big thinking”. We did not want to squander this opportunity for public school reform on the tried and true. Ultimately it was hoped that five to fifteen new public schools would open that would serve as inspiration and possibility for better serving NYC public school students. Eventually the funder sought to **scale up** examples of schooling that brought the highest standard of instruction to the greatest number of public school students.

No one who read the proposal about waltzing and social dancing will know that our out reach did not limit ideas many truly unique forthcoming. Further by the incredible array of participants clearly demonstrated the interest in public education and the desire to have schools better serve all students. It was indeed a ground swell multiple perspectives for public education drawn from our very pluralistic City the guarding principle of New Visions Schools.

***Press Release: July 15, 1992, Fund for New York City Public Education
Call for New Visions Schools, Spurs Extraordinary Response***

"We reached out to all of New York for fresh ideas to educate the city's children," said Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez. The result has been a groundswell of blueprints for educational success.

More than a thousand New Yorkers –representing a broad spectrum of people expressing a deep appreciation and concern for the educational needs of children—have collaborated on 180 comprehensive designs for small, innovative New Visions Schools. Their ideas could revolutionize the way we educate young people in urban areas throughout the United States into the 21st century."

Following: Excerpted examples of stories that appeared in local NY City papers:

****NY Times, The Metro Section, Thursday, August 6, 1992 by Joseph Berger***

Plan Seeks Small Schools With Themes, Fernandez envisions 30 New High Schools.

Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez has embraced an effort to create Smaller, more thematic high schools and is committing his administration to establishing at least 30 of them over the next three years.

***NY Times, METRO, Friday, August 7, 1992**

Cutting the Big high School Down to Size

***Fernandez Joins the Movement to More Emphasis on Individual Teen-Agers
By Joseph Berger***

(Excerpted)

Large high schools, with their sweat-scented echoing gymnasiums and hallways chockablock with lockers have long been part of the national's mythology, the cheery locale of Archie and Veronica, Our Miss Brooks and The Fonz.

But a rising chorus of American educators is arguing that they no longer work, particularly for youngsters growing up in a society of shattered families and a pervasive distrust of authority. With three students shot to death in the hallways of Thomas Jefferson high School in Brooklyn, the mischief of "Happy Days" seems long ago and far away.

Now New York's School Chancellor, Joseph A. Fernandez, weaving ideas and efforts made by educational thinkers made by educational thinkers and community groups, has cobbled together a plan for creating 30 small high schools over three years that would focus on such themes as the environment or world trade. The aim is to start to break down the impersonal amorphous quality of instruction offered in the city's 124 behemoth high schools, the largest of which, Brooklyn Technical High School, has 4,600 students.

His schools, of 300 to 1,000 students each, would strive to be more intimate places where students and teachers know one another, where teenagers going through their inevitably turbulent passages can find caring guides.

Through the nonprofit Fund for New York City Public Education, several foundations have committed a total of \$1.5 million to his venture. Another \$1 million will be raised by the team of Deborah Meier and TheodoreSizer a Brown University Professor. The city will pay for the cost of teachers, equipment, and leases in line with longstanding formulas generated by overcrowding.

***New York Newsday, Tuesday, July 21, 1992, Brooklyn by Edna Negron**

By September, 1993, public school students could be attending a school with campuses in the city and the country, or a twelve-month school with weekend hours for students who work or institutions requiring community service an education reform group said yesterday.

The Fund for New York City Public Education reported that the school designs are among the 280 proposals competing for at least 10 development grants as “new visions” schools –smaller more personalized learning environments that have to include students in grades 9-12.

***THE NEW YORK TIMES THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2003 (Editorial –excerpts)
THE CASE FOR SMALLER SCHOOLS**

New York City is in the forefront of a national movement aimed at converting large, factory-style schools that often have thousands of students into smaller public schools where students have closer contact with teachers. The small-schools movement got a big boost yesterday, when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced that it would provide seven nonprofit organizations across the city with \$51.2 million, with the aim of creating 87 new schools along these lines.

Nearly three-fifths of the grant announced this week for small schools will go to New Visions for Public Schools, a pioneering group that has already started 41 small public schools in collaboration with the New York City Department of Education, its union partners and a philanthropic consortium consisting of the Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Open Society Institute. These schools are run with public dollars.

National data on small schools shows that they tend to be quieter and safer, with fewer dropouts and higher graduation rates. This trend held true last year in poor areas of the Bronx, where ordinary high schools, some with enrollments of 3,000 or more, had lower success rates on state exams – and drastically higher dropout rates – than the New Visions schools, which have enrollments ranging from roughly 75 to 150 students.

The Gates grant has given new momentum to this promising movement.

***NEW YORK TIMES, JANUARY 25, 2012**
CITY STUDENTS at SMALL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO GRADUATE, STUDY SAYS

New York City teenagers attending small public schools with about 100 students per grade were more likely to graduate than their counterparts at larger schools, according to new findings from a continuing study released on Wednesday. (Note: Referring to the preceding article in the Times in which they discussed the results of the research by MDRC financed by the Gates Foundation.)

Small High Schools Show Early Success

A study of two classes to pass thought New York City's new small public high schools showed those students were more likely to...

Graduate in four years

67.9% -----SMALL SCHOOLS
59.3%-----OTHER SCHOOLS

SCORE AT LEAST 75 ON STATE EXAMS INDIVIDCATING COLLEGE READINESS

ENGLISH REGENTS

37.3%-----SMALL SCHOOLS
29.7%-----OTHER SCHOOLS

MATH REGENTS

23.2%-----SMALL SCHOOLS

22.5%-----OTHER SCHOOLS

Source: MDRC

...an author of the study said, "It's certainly not just size, it's how the size is used. These schools were organized from the ground up in ways that would be extraordinarily unusual." (Note: my leapfrog heart wants me to believe that I somehow had a hand in all of this – certainly in the structuring of the New York based small-school initiative going back to days in the school district creating small mini-schools in the middle and junior high schools.)

"I wouldn't even dream of getting these results if these schools weren't small and structured the way they are, Richard Kahan found and officer of network of small schools, the Urban Assembly.

****THE NEW YORK TIMES, EDITORIAL, JULY1, 2012***

SMALL SCHOOLS

School reform advocates are rightly excited about a persuasive new study showing that New York City's small, specialized high schools are outperforming larger, more traditional schools, significantly narrowing the graduation-rate gap that currently exists between white and minority students across the city.

The study validates the small school policies of the Bloomberg administration, which has shut down 20 large, failing high schools and replaced them with more than 200 small schools, about half of which were the focus of this study.

...The new small schools, overwhelmingly in black and Hispanic neighborhoods, typically serve a little more than 400 students each. These schools have several other things in common. They have a rigorous curriculum. They offer a personalized approach to education, with teachers responsible for keeping close tabs on the performance of their students.

They are organized around themes ---law, science, social justice. They get valuable support from community partners ---colleges, cultural organizations or social service groups ---that give the students extensive experience with a world of adults outside their families.

The study (MDRC – paid for by Gates Foundation) – found that the average graduation rate for students in the small schools was nearly 69 percent, nearly 7 percentage points higher than the rate for students in the traditional schools. That means that the small schools erased about a third of the 20-point graduation-rate gap that currently exists between white students and students of color in New York City.

These findings are especially encouraging given that most of the students studied entered the small high school reading below grade level. The researchers plan to follow them through college into the world of work. The findings have breathed new life into the small-school movement. It should encourage Mayor Michael Bloomberg to replace more large failing schools and districts elsewhere to follow New York City's example.

**NEW YORK TIMES, JANUARY 31, 2012 BY MARIA NEWMAN*

*SEEING EVERY SENIOR APPLY TO COLLEGE –
PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE –BRETT KIMMEL
(What follows is condensed)*

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School opened in 2006 with grades 6 and 7. It now has 600 students, grades 6 through 12 and its first class is about to graduate. The schools which has received an A on its last progress report is part of Outward Bound's Expeditionary Learning schools and requires that every student apply to college. It's founder and principal, Brett Kimmel, 37, was an assistant principal at Intermediate School 143 Eleanor Roosevelt, with which the school now shares a building on West 182nd Street. Mr. Kimmel's salary is \$140,000 a year.

Q. You're about to graduate your first group of seniors. Does that say your school has been a success?

A. When our graduates come back four years later with their college diplomas, then I know we're successful.

Q. Instead of parent-teacher conferences, at your school you have student-led conferences. Tell me about those.

A. We have the kids prepare a portfolio from all their courses. The student has to be prepared to talk about examples of their work in the conference, which lasts 20 minutes, and we do them three times a year.

It takes place with the student, their crew leader and a family representative.

Q. What made you want to start your own school?

A. I loved teaching and loved the impact you can have with kids and families, but I thought if I surround myself with good people and open my own school I can potentially have a greater impact. It's kind of going back to that education reform thing.

Q. What does that mean to you now?

A. I think it means creating place that has more of that systemic impact, that changes the life trajectory of a number of kids and that's going to be a quote-unquote, to die for place for teachers and to be the kind of place that everybody wants to be associated with. I thought, if I surround myself with good people, we can do this.

Q. Do you think a lot of success in schools is personality driven?

A. I think it's a combination of having exceptional leadership and have tremendous teachers. But in addition to that, we've been able to engage our community, our families, our kids and get them on board as well.

Q. What do you say to the claim many reformers make that you can educate children no matter what their socioeconomic standing in life?

A. I think its absolutely true. We're living, breathing example of that. Our sixth graders come in, on average, about two years below grade level in reading and math. Yet every one of our seniors just applied to college – every single one of them.

So what do you do in between? You work tirelessly and you set very high expectations. You have that no-excuses approach and mentality to say, it is our job over the course of seven years to work with our kids and families to get them there. If we don't do it, then we fail.

Note: Did I just dream this interview up? What he said the essence motivated every attempt create/build a structure for a school the possibility it held but sadly/sorely what I learned if the leader and teachers didn't have the drive the substance the academic urgency of offering the highest most competitive instructional program with almost other-worldly hands on heart in support – whatever it takes – love without qualification not sentimentality but hard nosed sleeves rolled up hard unbearably touch day in and day out schooling – schooling that endured and kept its promise that a structure was merely an empty place – like buildings left half built when the money runs out or the investors go bankrupt.

**NEW YORK TIMES, FEBRUARY 9, 2012 EDITORIAL*

SUCSESSES OF SMALL SCHOOLS

School reform advocates are rightly encouraged by new data showing that New York City students at small, specialized high schools are more likely to graduate than students in large, traditional high schools.

The findings, part of a continuing study by the non-profit research group MDRC, offer hope for reformers trying to save children from dropout factories in the poorest communities. It also vindicates the small school strategies of the Bloomberg administration...

The City is currently locked in battle with teachers and community groups that continue to resist closing large schools with failing records. The latest data provide sound evidence that small, well-structured schools can make a difference.

****NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED – OCTOBER 11, 2012***
“HER ‘CRIME’ WAS LOVING SCHOOLS BY NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Twice the Taliban threw warning letters into the home of Malal Yousafzai, a 14-year-old Pakistan girl who is one of the world's most persuasive advocates for girls' education. They told her to stop her advocacy ---or else.

She refused to back down, stepped up her campaign and even started a fund to help impoverished Pakistani girls get an education. So, on Tuesday, (October

9th), masked gunmen approached her school bus and asked for her by name. Then they shot her in the head and neck.

"let this be a lesson," a spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban said afterward. He added that if she survives the Taliban would again try to kill her.

In recent email to Times she wrote: "I want an access to the world of knowledge." The Taliban clearly understands the transformative power of girls' education.

Essay New Visions I, El Puente Graduate, Female – First Class - (excerpts)

Education to me is a process of liberation, and self-discovery....For me school is a place where you can build solid friendships , and learn indispensable skills. ...Despite past terrible experiences in school, I have been able to succeed and now my love and need for knowledge are so great that I plan to spend the rest of my life in college! Just kidding! In reality I plan to continue my higher education until I receive my doctorate, teach everything I learn to everyone else I can, and then travel around the world to learn some more! But...there was a time when...

Puberty came to me like a thief in the night and robbed me of my childhood. I menstruated twenty-five days after my tenth birthday. ...I went from little girl's ruffled pink dresses to skin tight jeans and shirts. ...School was not a priority to me any more. ...Was more interested in boys than in school, my grades started slipping. A few months later I was so far behind that I thought it was impossible to try to catch up –

I started cutting classes all of the time. Of course my parents knew nothing of my school cutting days, and when they found out they were furious! I was scared, confused, hurt, and angry.

I held in my anger and never spoke of it. I was like a walking time bomb that would explode any minute and when I entered high school (not El Puente) explode I did! I slipped back into my school addiction, truancy. ...this school felt like a dead end. ... I felt as if I had failed everyone including myself; I knew that I could not continue being that way, so I decided that I had to change my whole personality and with it my school. There was no way that I could get a good learning experience in there and in order to get the best out of learning I had to transfer.

I had heard wonders of El Puente Academy for Peace and justice. According to my best friend's family: "Everyone is on a first name basis, the classes are small, and the teachers are passionate and dedicated."...I walked into my interview with the confidence, honesty, and determination that I needed to get my message across. I told them my story, explained that I had undergone a great internal change, and guaranteed them that I was going to be an A student. ...I got accepted, and my life has never been the same.

Now, three years later I am bright, motivated, creative, intelligent, determined, dedicated, inquisitive, fun-loving, strong, open-minded young woman who has the strength to succeed against all odds. A young woman who dares to question everything and everyone, and always stands up for what she believes in, even when others disagree. Someone who struggles to find within herself the strength and courage that she needs to face-head-on and conquer any challenges that may arise. No longer do I let anyone tell me what I can or cannot do.

El Puente's goal is to provide students with a well-rounded education by exposing them to cultural, community, and global issues in addition to their academic requirements. It encourages students to challenge themselves, and allows them to take control of their education. The vibrant classrooms thrive with knowledge and passion on the part of everyone. ... We learn to be leaders of today rather than waiting for tomorrow through direct hands-on experience in leadership training, community and environmental activism, and holistic self-empowerment....It is only natural for me to continue my education at Sarah Lawrence...Sarah Lawrence will allow me the freedom I need to do so, to come into my own. Like John Dewey, I also feel that "education is life itself" and that is why I plan to spend the rest of my life educating myself!

Would you have ever guessed that this articulate, passionate, motivated, young woman at one point hated school?

G-----

Always just beyond the range of spit always just outside just barely acceptable tolerated but not welcomed power orbits kept me at arms distance – what was it about me? Task at hand – she is motherly nurturing – keep her until her intensity her passion wears off, wears thin – useful for the sprint – not long haul – punter not player – just always outside team – kicked to the curb – something about me is indigestible – stomach turning – probe probing...may die without answering...

These are not children. They are not from my loins. I would remember them. I am the mother of nothing. Language used to alienate keep me at a distance – salvo with a wicked underbelly – mother of nothing – underbelly – shadow person – shadow puppet – you claimed always to stand behind – I always did stand behind or under or beneath – I remember nothing except when I do and then it is as clear as a face mine after a mirror being windexed. Power provides access – see invitation to forum held by the The New York Times Publisher.

****The Board of the Fund met with the Executive Editorial Boards of each of the local New York City newspapers, The New York Times agreed to host a forum: The following is the invitation:***

*Richard J. Beattie, Chair,
The Fund for New York City Public Education and
Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr., Publisher,*

The New York Times

*Cordially invite you to attend
a forum to discuss
New Visions Schools*

A major public school reform initiative in New York City

*Wednesday, April 21, 1993 4:00-6:00 PM
In The New York Times Auditorium
229 West 43rd Street
New York City*

*RSVP by April 12, 1993 Cathy Ortiz The Fund for New York City Public Education
212645-5110*

Reception to follow Executive Dining Room

***New Visions Schools
Panelists***

*Dr. Madeleine Grumet
Professor & Dean, The School of Education
Brooklyn College*

*Monte Joffe
Music Teacher, PS 69, Queens*

*Louis Garden Acosta
Chief Executive Officer
El Puente de Williamsburg*

*Anthony J. Alvarado
Superintendent
Community School District 2*

*Reverend Dr. Calvin O Butts III
Pastor, The Abyssinian Baptist Church*

*Dr. Michelle Fine
Professor of psychology, CUNY Graduate Center,
Senior Consultant, The Philadelphia Schools
Collaborative*

**Note: Examples of cover notes accompanying New Visions proposals
June 1992**

*June 26, 1992
Ms. Naomi Barber
Fund for NYC Public Education
96 Morton Street, 9th Floor
NYC 10014*

Dear Ms. Barber,

When I was 16, I thought only people over 30 died. I thought you had to live a full lifetime, work, have a family at least before you were eligible to die.

Tonight my 16-year-old son and I wept together at his friend Derrick's funeral. Derrick was a good kid on our block who may have gotten involved with the wrong boys, but didn't deserve to die in a gunfight over \$250.

Derrick's mother and I have been friends since our boys played together in a sandlot in our project's park. When I went over to hug her and looked into her red eyes, I saw myself. It could easily have been my Kyle who was killed in the second-floor stairwell of the junior high school by a kid who dropped out of eighth grade.

I can't sleep tonight, Ms. Barber. I've been thinking about how to reach the youngsters of our neighborhood and school district for a long time. I'm submitting my ideas for building a Central Harlem High School as a New Visions Schools proposal. I believe this school will begin to excite young boys like Derrick and Kyle who find school "boring" and unchallenging. We can't afford to lose another mind.

*Sincerely,
Mrs. Sarah J.*

A Testimony of Life (Alienation)

*I have grown up amid
broken bottles and flattened
beer cans
hopscotch and ladies
drawn in white chalk
on the sidewalks
double-dutch, freeze tag,
thirteen under the moon,
hot peas and butter, and
late summer nights of
kick-the-can and
ring-a-levio*

*i have grown up amid
street gangs, the black spades,
black pearls, saigons, savage
skulls and nomads
rumbles, knives, guns,
chains, and sticks
murderers, thieves, rapists,
pimps, prostitutes and
whores*

*i have grown up amid
welfare checks and
overdue bills, roaches,
rats, peeling paint,
and six to a bed
a working mother
and a missing father*

*i have grown up
and away from it all
sleeping one to a bed
german wine, lacoste shirts,
and monogrammed sweaters
fraternities, sororities,
beer parties and rock music*

*cottages on the lake
and trips to the vineyard*

*i have grown up
to poetry, politics, art
and literature
career services
ivy league dreams
of phi beta kappa
and summa cum laude*

*i have grown up
and away from family
i belong to the group
of poor but educated
waiting
i can never go back home
so in limbo, I hang*

sleeping one to a bed

I was born in Charleston, SC and raised in a small community on Edisto Island before I became acquainted with the New York City Public School System. I came to new York to be reunited with my mother and siblings. I attended the public school from kindergarten to 12th grade. Although I was always in the academically advanced classes, there was little indication that I would go to college. In high school I met teachers and doctors at the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Clinic who encouraged me to finish school and go to college.

I chose Mount Holyoke college. I had planned to go to medical school, but heated discussions with women from different economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds soon made even chemistry seem a little dull. I became interested in why people think the way they do. In the fall of my second year, I took a course called "Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion. I now have a Bachelor of Arts in Religion. Much of my free time in college was devoted to writing poetry and acting. I performed in at least two productions annually and the final production of "Gullah," by Alice Childress, was later aired on Amherst Cable.

After College, I managed a development project in the non-profit sector of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and a marketing project in the private

sector for Reuters Information Services, Inc. I have also been active in the educational sector, my teachers encouraged me to come and discuss my college experiences with their classes and I recruited at least one woman each year from Walton to attend Mount Holyoke. Later, I served as the New York City Coordinator for Minority Recruitment for Mount Holyoke College for two years, until I left New York.

In 1991, I left my position at Reuters to think about the direction of my life and to write. I participated in a national Outdoor Leadership course in Kenya last September. We spent three weeks on safari, sailing in dhows (ancient East African boats) and hiking in Maasailand. At the end of the course I stayed for longer with a Kenyan couple I met on the trip. During I left Kenya, I had resolved to work in the school system.

Cheryl Y. Gadsden – The Vanguard School

June 30, 1992

To: Readers
From: Naomi Barber
Re: Review of New Visions Schools Proposals

Schools Thank you for agreeing to read and rate the New Visions

Proposals.
Attached, you will find:

Proposals bearing code numbers _____
Rating forms with code numbers corresponding to these
Proposals

A copy of the New Visions RFP – Request for Proposals

The responses to our RFP was very enthusiastic; about 250 proposals. The reflect time, imaginative planning and thought and a concern for the education of New York City's students.

Individuals and groups were asked to create concepts for small, innovative schools, which, focus on the adolescent. The schools must include grades 7-12. Your participation is vital to identify the strongest proposals for the advisory committee.

In early August, we will inform you of the ten successful applicants.

Please return the completed rating forms, attached to their respective proposals, to the Fund for New York City Public Education, 96 Morton Street, 9th Fl, New York, NY 10014 by July_____. (We understand that the time to review the proposals is brief and intense.)

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Naomi Barber at 212-645-5110. Thank you. N, B,

Note: When this memo was sent it was thought there were only 250 proposals for review, ultimately 282 proposals were reviewed. The funder, the deputy vice-president of the UFT, and the Director of Development at the NYC Board of Education read every proposal and made notes. The Executive Director of the Fund and her Deputy also read each proposal along with me. Potential readers were contacted by phone or with a personal visit, i.e. the head of adolescent services at the NYC Public Library. Out reach during the proposal process was so intense that many individuals and groups contacted or met with during that period requested to be readers. Readers represented a wide swath of New York City individuals from corporations, law firms, not-for-profit and youth organizations, college and university leaders and members of religious groups. The vast and inclusive out reach was reflected in the breadth and range of the New Visions Schools proposals submitted. Remembering from the time when we recruited children for our Bronx New School that inclusive and out reach as expansive as possible lead to equitable and diverse participation.

In the pursuit of the greatest openness and transparency consistent with the entire New Visions initiative readers would know who other readers were and those who submitted proposals would know who the readers were if not of their particular proposal rather the pool of readers and would be aware that each proposal was read by a member of the Board of Education and the Unions (UFT and CSA) as well as by the funder and the leadership staff of the Fund as well as members of its Board and the Advisory Board for the New Visions School initiative.

Perhaps the stains of my rapidly flowing tears is still evident, night after night as I tried to prepare a scoring grid I wept. The part of my brain boomeranged any thought or suggestion of preparing or even knowing what a scoring grid was. Over my shoulder two in-house lawyers and Ed Harris. No internet at that time (1992) or that was within my purview to use, thus struggling through much like a caterpillar to a butterfly, the following was produced with acclaim from the bosses, those above me.

The structure of the very initiative got individuals to part with loyalties thus readers at the highest echelons of the Unions and the Board often gave lower scores to their closest colleagues and higher schools to those deemed enemies or outsiders and the very openness called on a kind of integrity in the rating and interview process. With one or two exceptions, ratings were honored, if there was a suspicion that one of the primary tenets of heterogeneity would not be honored or if the awardees needed to be fully represented of all of the racial and ethnic groups in the City and to spread out through the boroughs then their were weighted preferences – always felt a little uneasy and queasy about this – but could easily be closed off or silenced.

**Fund for New York City Public Education
96 Morton Street
New York, NY 10014
(212)-645-5110**

RATING SHEET

_____ Code Number
_____ Reader

In the overview of the RFP, it states on the first page that "Applicants will be judged on the merits and the soundness of their educational concept, the size of the student body, and the responsiveness to the broad needs of students." The applicants should be judged with the greatest consideration going to their vision or educational concept. Each criterion listed in the RFP should be measured with a scale weighted 1 to 5, 5 being the strongest:

Scoring Key: (Strongest) 5 -fully incorporated and demonstrated in proposal

- 4 - Criterion included, but needs development**
3 - Some inclusion, but superficially treated
2 - No mention, but could be incorporated
(Weakest) 1 - Not mentioned, would be hard to incorporate

To what degree does the concept: (1-9)
Score

- 1 Reflect a small, personalized learning environment;*
- 2 Improve academic fitness through fostering health and fitness;*
- 3 Encourage students to learn through direct experience, primary sources, personal relationships, and cooperative exploration;*
- 4 Give equal attention to all facts of students' development (cognitive and affective; body, mind and values);*
- 5 Assess students through multiple perspectives and methods;*
- 6 Insure that school and home are active partners in meeting needs of students*
- 7 Have parents, students, and staff cooperating in school decision-making*
- 8 Have the school build upon the home cultures of students and their families;*

9 Encourage students to fulfill their responsibilities as world citizens by teaching critical inquiry and the complexities of global issues of race, class, gender, and disabilities;

Applicants were asked to consider the issues which follow the following items (10-23). The responses should be judged in relation to the degree Of their consistency in developing and implements the concept or vision.

10 The age groups or grades served;

11 Sensitivity and focus on developmental issues as they relate to adolescents;

12 Recruitment of the students body (i.e. the neighborhood, borough, community ,etc)

13 Admissions criteria and methods identified to select student population;

14 The composition of the planning team and how the planning team members

are identified and selected;

15 The description of the ideal space for the school and if it is to be housed in

existing building or leased space;

16 The plan or thought given to staff interaction;

17 The description of the leadership of the school; qualities defined as important

for the leader;

18 To what extent is the concept well-conceived;

19 To what extent is the concept imaginative and inventive;

20 To what extent is the concept centered on students;

21 To what extent will the concept provide students with skills and knowledge necessary to be fulfilled and engaged adults in the 21st Century;

22 To what extend does the concept demonstrate use and adaptation of pioneering technologies;

23 To what extent does the concept exhibit an idea capable of long-term success;

In the biographies or resumes of the key individuals, to what degree do they:

- 24 Define their ability to implement their proposed New Visions School;*
- 25 Indicate and demonstrate their interest and commitment to the issues explored in the proposal;*
- 26 Show the experience or background to develop their concept;*
- 27 Indicate that the individual (s) can sustain the arduous task of building a school, can follow through well and consistently;*
- 28 Respond to a broad range of educational issues?*
- 29 Respond to the broad needs of students, particularly adolescents?*
- 30 Relate well to the community;*
- 31 Demonstrate the capacity to work collaboratively;*
- 32 Effectively utilize resources;*
- 33 Have the capacity to be flexible and dynamic and can, over time, preserve and protect the integrity of the concept or vision;*

Scoring: Excellent: 185-145
Good: 144-120
Fair: 119-99
Poor: 89-0

READERS COMMENTS:

Are there specific questions you would like asked of applicant, should they be identified for an interview?

Please list:

RATING SHEET GRID
NEW VISIONS SCHOOLS

CODE NO. Excellent Good Fair Poor

Dear Reader:

According to your collective comments and ratings many of the New Visions Schools proposals ought to be developed into New York City Public Schools. Existing resources and funds limit the number of schools that can be opened at any one time. However, because of your overall very positive reactions to the proposals the Fund for New York City Public Education and the New York City School System are in the process of identifying moneys and resources to fund additional New Visions Schools.

More than twenty divergent groups were involved in reading and rating the proposals. A pool of nearly fifty proposals received scores grouping them into the highest range. Planning team members with complimentary concepts are being asked if they would like to work cooperatively with other applicants. A number of applicants have started this process on their own. Many of the individuals who engaged in this initiative would like to continue to be part of it even if they are initially not awarded planning grants.

A catalogue of New Visions Schools concepts is being prepared. If you have particular thoughts about the publication, please contact Naomi Barber at 212-645-5110.

Again, thank you for your contribution to the New Visions project.

Sincerely,

Beth J. Lief
Executive Director

Cc: Joseph Fernandez, Chancellor, NYC Public Schools
Stan Litow, Deputy Chancellor, NYC Public Schools
Norman Fruchter, Aaron Diamond Foundation

Following is to share critically excerpted thoughts written by Debbie Meier following her reading of the New Visions Proposals - 1992

Debbie Meier who at the time was the most acclaimed educator particularly around urban public school reform in the City and in the Nation. She was a winner of a MacArthur Genius Award and used that as an opportunity to further the educational prospects of urban school students relying primarily on principles of progressive education. Debbie Meier had created a public school in East Harlem in a neighborhood known as troubled economically and with acknowledged high crime rates. The school was able to draw much of its school population from more affluent families committed to public education primarily from the Upper West Side. The popularity of the school was described in loft words as *miraculous*. From the beginning of the New Visions initiative it was understood that involving Debbie Meier was consequential for its success educationally as well as politically.

Following are excerpts of comments made by Debbie Meier after reading some 63 proposals drawn from a pool of 282. She did not write about proposals submitted by teachers' known to her or working in her school or those of close professional colleagues or those from a political organization within her school's community.

Most of these comments are cogent and prophetic!

7/26/92

Dear Naomi and Beth,

I read 63 proposals -----I guess you have over 70 still in the running!

Thoughts

I. District 4 in the heyday of its starting new schools – have rarely started more than 2,3, maybe 4 new schools in any one year. Why? They argued in favor of doing it gradually and carefully, despite that fact that few of those schools were intentionally “break the mold nature” in nature, nor involved any complex relationship between Districts or school people and nonschool people. And many of those schools were less than great successes – once started many ran into immediate problems and others gradually drifted back into quite traditional mindsets. They remained a cut above the average only where because they were small and offered choice of staff and parents – thus guaranteeing themselves some edge over the large involuntary neighborhood school.

...What are the factors that (a) make current NYC public education leaders creating a new school is worth taking a gamble on – what qualities are they looking for and how do they “check

them out"? and (b) how many do they think are feasible at any one time and what criteria do they base these numbers on?

II. I keep going back to the experiences I had and the colleagues I know best have had. We all had clear and compared to some of the NV proposals more conventional approaches! We had considerable experience as tradition breakers as well as practitioners and a group of colleagues peers and "godfathers" to protect and support us. And we had considerable extra resources – both because we opened in lush times and because we had some special funds available. ---- And it has been very tough for us to keep heading in the right direction not getting sidetracked or pulled back toward more conventional solutions. We are always feeling as though we are going up a down escalator! I'd feel more embarrassed to admit this if it wasn't clear that compared to most schools around the nation we look wildly radical and even seem successful.

III, With these factors in mind I have gone through the NV proposals one to see which ones seemed worth taking to the next stage – interviewing and investigating – with the possibility of their being able to open a real school for real kids in the fall of 1993. Two I have listed separately those that I thought had good ideas, serious organizational or other kinds of support but were a long way from being a real school, or needed to be folded into another proposal (they had one or two wonderful ideas or background experiences that would be helpful to a more comprehensive school proposal).

Thirdly schools not sufficiently innovative for this proposal, or should remain strictly high school or were not proposing to do something that the Board shouldn't in its usual way take on as its own task or simple require the Bd's okay to do – were "just" a nice idea that ought to fit into the usual Bd. Operating procedure. **The Fund can play a critical leveraging role here.**

In the first category I considered whether the ideas were innovative – not one of a kind, not unique, but a departure from the conventional practice. I didn't assume they had to try to be original. That's not what's needed. Rather we need to pay attention to what is already known and works. I also considered whether they were, more or less, in keeping with the general educational reform consensus regarding teaching/learning practices – although I made a few exceptions. In deciding that a school was innovative I considered whether the innovative aspects were strictly in areas requiring huge additional financial inputs or were conceptions that could be carried out under more or less the usual financial package available to city schools. I also noted if they met the NV requirement of sensibly overlapping two conventional Bd. Boundaries (secondary plus) had involved people who had some expertise in the educational of children and whose proposals indicated an awareness of the importance of some practitioner expertise.

In interviewing this first category of people it's important to check out whether their expertise is real and reputable – are they highly regarded – and to ascertain what the group would do (of if they'd still even be interested) if there were no proposals from the Bd. or the Fund to finance their school on an ongoing basis above and beyond the usual allocation formula. Was their interest, in other words, based on their assumption of an implicit promise to fund their wilder however delightful ideas? (Note how many propose solving the problem by keeping in kids in school longer hours and/or keeping the school open about two to three times as long!) Admirable as all these are, if they assume their success is dependent on such factors that are not offering us much in the way of a realistic hope at this period of history and will only get a ho hum from other would-be reformers. "So what's new?"

Note: The Board of Education had a special pre-determined allocation for the opening of new schools ranging from planning time, books, furniture, site preparation and staff.

Of the schools mentioned by Debbie Meier for consideration to proceed to level 2 the following became New Visions Schools in round 1 or 2.

- *Museum School
- *Intl HS/Middle College K-8
- *School for the Physical City
- *The Essence School
- *Urban Leadership
- *Saber Es Poder
- *El Puente
- *The Renaissance School

Schools that have good ideas or good people and should be encouraged partnered with someone? Help an existing school? Develop proposal for another future opportunity? Seek funds later or elsewhere?

The following are some examples only:

- *Local 1199
- *Latino Leadership

SCHOOLS THAT MAYBE COULD/SHOULD BE DONE WITHOUT NV SUPPORT:

- ***Bridges** -(Note: known as Bridges to Brooklyn on Brooklyn College Campus lead, Dean Madeline Grumet (known for writings on feminism – *“Bitter Milk: Women in Teaching”* 1988)

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

Then there are some questions: (what follows are taken from notes and excerpted for length not content)

I think most of these schools are planning to be larger than they should. When you interview them, ask them what their ideal size would be. Maybe they are said 500 because you used that number. Again the research is clear. 500 already requires a bureaucratic organization.

Our experience is that under 300 is the right size, not over. All of these would have a greater shot at succeeding if they were under 300. –Most of the good private or public schools around the country are very small indeed. (The Colon model, Sunset School is interested in, solves this by making each team a school unto itself.)

The criteria are that the major **daily life governing body** can exchange views easily and talk things out quickly and over time. This is particularly true for a school that intends to be radically different and offers “average” and at risk youngsters the kind of education few imagine they an aspire to. That means a staff who collegial obligations extend to less than 20 fellow staffers. This operational governing body needs to be close enough to the action so that the decisions about the life of the schools are made by those who are implementing their decisions – workplace democracy so to speak. Broad policy, even hiring decisions might be made by a broader more inclusive body but the real living decisions about curriculum assessment rules and regs etc need to be in the hands of those on-hand day in and day out. Some of this can be accomplished by creating subgroups in the school with considerable latitude. But that doesn’t work very far unless like the German colon model the smaller subgroup keeps the kids through the entire process. In effect the subgroup is a school itself. The evidence, particularly for high schools is that the staff must have both individually but more importantly collectively a lot of autonomy. These two lessons – re: size and autonomy – are important. They are well-established by research.

SUMMARY:

Does any of this long-winded summation help>

The critical next step is carrying out an extended “investigation” that will help you figure out who is most like to be able to carry out their ideas on a pretty much standard budget and produce something sufficiently interesting and important

So that it will encourage others to follow suit. Their ideas should not have to be unique. Once they get if CPESS (Central Park East Secondary School, the school Debbie led and created) among others doesn’t become “models” that help others. That’s the importance of this whole task, to replicate good ideas so that others will begin to say “hmm, if they can do it, why not us?” We don’t

want copycatz but we surely want to use what exists to help make it easier for the next round; still easier for the one after that; etc. etc.

In fact, **“hmmm, if they can, why not us?”** Should be in back of your head at all times in selecting schools. We want to start a mindset about what is by now known to be good practice –but rarely practiced. It’s not at all necessary to be so way out, nor does it require having some single interesting idea (peace, environment, history, and animals).

In fact, kids being what they are, and quite unformed and unfinished at 13, their schools need to be both coherent and broad in conception. Not “comprehensive” in the old sense- offering specialties in everything – but comprehensive in the sense that they will support children’s wider interests, talents, curiosities, passions and not create a single ideological or career straight-jacket, even a benign one.

Enough! BASTA as one of the proposers says! Deb

P.S. I’ve sent a copy of this to Marcia (deputy director of alternative school division of which most of the unique and collegial school leaders and schools were part of.)

From the onset New Visions contacted almost everyone known in the galaxy of school reform coast to coast, perhaps none was closer than Debbie Meier along with Anthony Alvarado (deposed Chancellor formerly Superintendent of school district 4 where Debbie created her school and which fostered under his leadership a group of small schools.) As New Visions entered the world of public school reform with its Board of powerful business executives of known for daunting if stealth takeover practices compelling and inordinately attractive as they came storming into this world of public school reform gangbusters. Debbie of great acclaim as a MacArthur genius grant awardee was well connected to the liberal political world of The Nation to which she was a frequent contributor and the national network of progressive educators. Her words and feedback made enormous and critical impact. It also created a turf war a scuffle between the entrenched school innovators and New Visions, which rode into town with ads in newspapers sending out some 16,000 announcements of its call to create public schools. Debbie both constructively wanted to share her wisdom gathered from long champion reform but also to bring us into her web. With some of her genius grant money she started a campus coalition to harvest and build small schools based on the principles of

Central Park East. Whereas we wanted to have some fifteen schools ultimately thirty or more placed in neighborhoods throughout the City unique and single-minded if under the New Visions umbrella, she wanted to house a series of small schools both elementary secondary and high school under one roof in one large school building. Ultimately New Visions morphed into 21st Century Schools with a huge infusion of monies from the Gates Foundation, I had left by that time, in which they slowly emptied out a high school of notoriety and failure replacing it with a series of small high schools created in almost the exact same way with the same RFP process of the first and originally New Visions Schools in 1992.

While in a different job I was asked to sit on an interview committee for a series of small schools being proposed for the Bronx I was thrown back on my heels to see that long after I had moved on (and pointedly did not look back, mythic my need to move one without peering back over my shoulder) I was interviewing candidates to open new schools in the very same manner as was created and initiated by me and the New Visions advisory group. Tensions flared in those early New Visions years between Debbie and Beth and I assigned myself shuttle diplomat to garner Debbie's good ideas and gather her input as I assuaged reassuring her that we did not want to take over the entire New York public school system but wanted to join with her in creating more public schools that served children with the highest quality instruction and schooling that our methodology might differ and that We might ascribe to a wider set of principles beyond those of progressive educational community but essentially we agreed in most significant and fundamental ways. Now looking back in the luxury of moving beyond a work world I only feel gratitude for the bravery and stellar contributions of Debbie Meier which extended far beyond New York City and that late in her career she left New York to start a school in Boston when New York in fact no longer sadly valued her contributions. Replacing oneself is difficult at best, it seemed it was extra hard for Debbie Meier. In my work life of much less moment than hers I always from the day became leaving and finding others to replace me perhaps not noble but as self-serving as Debbie's inability to see beyond her time in the lead.

SUBJECT: NEW VISIONS SCHOOLS

Dear Applicant:

You were among the people touched by the call to create New Visions Schools for the students in New York City. At this point a series of readers a series of readers did not find that your proposal was ready for the next stage in this planning process. Recognizing that there are many more than ten strong and innovative proposals, an effort is being made to secure additional funds. It is felt that the considerable thought, energy and creativity reflected in these proposals can not be lost to the New York City school system.

If you would like to continue developing and refining your concept; finding like minded partners or school districts with whom to make contact; participate in particular professional development workshops, please return the enclosed, New Visions Schools: **A Next Stage** form to Naomi Barber.....

Sincerely,

Beth J. Lief
Executive Director

**New Visions Schools
A Next Stage**

I want to continue developing my proposals.

Yes.....No.....

I want to make contact with individuals on planning teams developing New Visions Schools.

Yes.....No.....

I want to participate in professional development workshops.

Yes.....No.....

Name

Affiliation

Address and Phone

Openness inclusiveness and ever widening outreach was important if New Visions Schools was to have a wide and lasting impact on New York public school reform. Powerful and well-connected members of the Fund's Board kept the New Visions initiative in the press and uppermost in the minds of business leaders in the City. Ground swells for better schools for all students came from groups and individuals who became committed to applying universal public pressure to improve schools for all students. The conversation and the consciousness had changed reverberating well beyond the City. No longer strange to think that self-identified communities of individuals from all walks of life should participate in the creation of a public school or to sustaining the effort to build increasing numbers of New Visions schools.

The above excerpted letter is a demonstration about the ultimate plan to *scale up* to universalize the impact of New Visions and to create many more new schools based on the essential principles of New Visions. In 1996, a second New Visions II RFP was issued once again to overwhelming response. New Visions had found its way into the reform school landscape and increasing numbers of individuals from all walks of life wanted to participate. Teams who submitted unsuccessfully in the first New Visions initiative lobbied hard for success in this round.

Note: Fifty New Visions School applicants were invited to come for interviews. A range of possible questions was sent to teams that said they wanted to continue on with their application to create a school. Support preparing for interviews was offered any group if requested.

Sample Interview Questions

New Visions Schools

EXPLANATION

These are generic questions prepared for all the planning teams that will be interviewed as finalists.

Not all questions will be asked of all applicants. The panel of interviewers will identify particular questions from the list in advance of the interview.

Priority will be given to proposal specific readers; comments and questions.

A set of these questions and the proposal specific questions and comments will be sent to the planning team finalists in advance of the interview.

Technical assistance and support will be made available to planning team members preparing for an interview.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Why do you want to do this?

What /Who is the fiscal agent for receiving the planning grant?

Who from the planning team will continue to be involved during the planning process, and in what ways?

Who from the planning team will actually be working in the school and in what role/capacity?

To the extent that you will need to recruit additional educators beyond the team to work in the school, what characteristics, experiences, expertise, and interests are you looking for?

Are there people on the planning team who will be working as an employee of the New York City public schools for the first time when the school opens? If so in what capacity? Would they be prepared with technical assistance and support to meet the relevant New York public school credential requirements?

What do you see as the barriers to successful implementation of your particular school? How do you see overcoming them?

*In what neighborhood would you like your school to be?
Do you need assistance in establishing relationships with a school district
And/or with the high school division?*

*How critical is it to be in a particular neighborhood?
Would you be open to establishing your school in a similar neighborhood
Elsewhere in the city?*

*Given this will be a public school with the usual budget constraints are there special staff positions special equipment special facilities that are not generally found in schools which are critical for the implementation of you school?
If so do you have any ideas of outside funders or organizations that you could contact for help and contributions including use of facilities outside the school building?*

For students to receive a high school diploma it is necessary to complete specific courses credits testing and graduation requirements. What are your particular needs For assistance and support in these areas?

What are the most important things that you want graduates of your school to be able to do?

Describe what a high school senior project might look like?

*If your school has a particular theme or philosophical outlook that shapes the focus of the school in what way will it be integrated with the overall curriculum?
Please give specific examples of how you will relate and connect this focus and theme with core subjects.*

How does the specific theme or focus of your school address the needs and interest of New York City students?

Give specific examples of how the adults connected with your school will address and meet the special needs of early adolescents (i.e. ages 11-14).

Note: Barter swap dicker only three questions:

Is this a good idea?

Can this team realize it?

Should we have one

Translation, a school like, this in our galaxy of schools in our New York City –

Interviewers were drawn from the highest by request echelons of each participatory group: Board of Education, Union leaders, members of the Fund's Board, and from the New Visions Advisory Group.

Catered to the nines!

Following each interview, the above questions –

Notes taken held tightly following each interview

Teams summarily eliminated following interview, those held in esteem by any member of committee held for later discussion following interviews

Over a three day period, nearly fifty interviews, each lasting for twenty minutes - at the end of each day, those with the most favorable reviews were noted

After the final interview and some late afternoon tea followed by good wine and good cheese –

Discussion or arguments for the favored groups were intense and personal and often individuals arguing against or for groups not necessarily in their bailiwick on their team in their camp – voting against own professional interests –

The results were as follows – these applicants were awarded planning grants though still no promise of opening a public school but as they say in gaming, they had reached the next level in the New Visions initiative.

Planned to open September 1993

Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development (Brooklyn)
Team leader: Assemblyman Roger L. Green

CSD 25 Collaborative – (Queens) Robert F. Kennedy Community High School
Team leader: Dr. Arthur Greenberg, Superintendent, CSD 25

Thurgood Marshall Secondary School (Manhattan)
Team leader: Reverend Calvin O. Butts – Abyssinian Baptist Church

The Legacy School for Integrated Studies (Manhattan)
Team leader: Haven Henderson, Teacher

Local 1199 School for Social Change (Bronx)
Team leader: Carol Joyner, Child Care Fund, Local 1199

El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (Brooklyn)
Team leader: Frances Lucerna, El Puente Director

Note: Frances Lucerna and Michael Johnson (Science Skills Center were granted scholarships to attend Bank Street Principal Leadership Institute to ensure that had the necessary Credential to qualify for principal if elected in their unique New Visions Schools

The Renaissance School (Queens)
Team leader: Monte Joffe, Music teacher local elementary school

School for the Physical City, An Expeditionary Learning Center
Team leader: Jay Iselin, President Cooper Union College

The Science Skills Center (Brooklyn)
Team leader: Michael Johnson, Professional Engineer

The Middle College Institute for the Arts and Technology (Queens)
Team leader: Cecilia Cullen, Middle College Principal

Planned for opening February 1994

Bridges to Brooklyn (Brooklyn)
Team leader: Madeline Grumet, Dean School of Education

Planned for opening September 1994

Health Opportunities Program School (Bronx)
Team leader: Miquel A Garcia, Jr., New Directions in Community
Revitalization, Inc.

The Leadership School (Manhattan)
Team leader: Diana Caballero, Puerto Rican/Latino Education Round
Table

The New York City Museum School (Manhattan)
Team leader: Sonnet Takahisa, Education Director, Brooklyn Museum

Note: Recruited Ron Chaluison for Bank Street Principals' Institute and during course of planning year courted with flowers and wine Sonnet Takahisa to join as co-leader or co-principal – ultimately when the school opened she agreed to leave her position at the museum and join in creating the school. Students spent half days for three month periods at: Brooklyn Museum, American Museum of Natural History, the Jewish Museum, and the Children's Museum of Manhattan.

Staten Island Service-Learning Academy
Team leader: Frank Pomata, Governor's Office of Volunteer Services

Oceanhill-Brownsville Secondary School (Brooklyn)
Team leader: Michael Vega, Superintendent CSD 23

Note: school district where upheaval during teachers strict was greatest and pitted black activists against primarily Jewish teachers

Note: New Visions Schools opening September 1993/4 were not included in the regular High School Directory, the application and resolution process occurred after the date for submissions to Directory. However this served us well - a separate Directory was issued listing the New Visions Schools and this process continued through the second RFP New Visions Schools II the selection process and the opening of these schools.

Fund for New York City Public Education

MEMORANDUM

DATE: *March 14, 1996*

TO: *Beth*

FROM: *Naomi*

RE: *Number of Students Applying through the Educational Options Process to New Visions High Schools for September 3, 1996.*

<u>School</u>	<u>Number of Applicants</u>
Benjamin Banneker Academy	570
Robert F. Kennedy H.S. (CSD 25)	475
El Puente Academy	300
Health Opportunities Program	730
Leadership School (Latino)	358
Legacy School	292
Local 1199 School for Social Change	686

Renaissance School	220
Robert F. Wagner Institute	436
Science Skills High School	1,425
School for the Physical City	272
Thurgood Marshall Academy	232
Total Number of Applicants	<hr/> 5,996

Obvious interest for schools without history test scores or in some instances no permanent site, schools listed in an afterthought Directory. However, these were shells, structures, and institutions in an infancy born through a ground-breaking public school creation process. The real test would be sustainability and for the entire endeavor to scale-up. However, in the end it had to be about constancy to the highest academic standard, instruction so demanding that each student would be qualified to apply to and succeed at Harvard or its equivalent. Each student taken from where he/she entered whatever the level of skill and academic preparation and be brought forward through intensive and supportive instructional help. The curious odyssey of the original fifteen will be told focusing on just a few. The landscape of public education was irrevocably and irretrievably changed by the nature of the New Visions initiative if they but for one or two did not have resilience and staying power and achieve the vision as stated in the original proposal, New Visions Schools galvanized and awakened and enlarged participation in public schooling in the larger population. Saddened by the failures but they serve as worthy case studies and the desire each successful applicant embodied was true if the effort did not bear that out.

One of my favorite first round proposals came from a group of high school students entitled: **SABER ES PODER ---KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**
A call to youth to unite the world

The applicants were members of Youth Force – a Neighborhood Youth Leadership Center of the Citizens Committee established in 1988.

Youth Force challenges young people to move beyond their own and adults' expectations. In a world where youth constantly hear that they're "too young too inexperienced or too rowdy" and are encouraged to "listen and learn in order to prepare to be the leaders of tomorrow." Youth Force recognizes youth as among the leaders of today.

I would like the definition of school to change. School first and foremost should be a place to foster community, a democratic community, enhancing activism, inquisitiveness, and curiosity.

Secondly and equally important, school should be a place for genuine education where needs and wants are catered to, where youth don't come out of school with a list of credentials, courses forced down their throat, where they forget the information they memorized the year after, the month after, instead of what we were going to be learning that term.

I think kids who don't know how to respond to this tend to take a very negative attitude and be resentful of the authority figure. I mean it seems to be in human nature when you are treated without kindness that your response is aggressive and resentful.

Note: Above introduction to the proposal written by a student at Stuyvesant High School recognized as the most competitive and highly regarded public high school in the city, state and among the best in the nation.

In closing...

The development of a school designed and run primarily by youth doesn't discount the valuable skills of adults. But if we consider schools as places that build courageous, caring, responsible leaders, then we need opportunities to practice our leadership skills. We are continuously frustrated by the fact that despite our energy, creativity, and expertise we are routinely excluded from decision making and leadership just because we are young.

All we're asking is the same opportunity for inclusion and respect. You have ten proposals to fund. Fund at least one – it doesn't have to be this one – just fund at least one that was put together by youth. Not one where we were “consulted” - We're not some focus group, or consumers, or clients!! We are the reason that school exists, and we're just asking for an opportunity to take our education back.

*Alexandra Unger
Stuyvesant High School*

To the best of my knowledge all of this will appear revisionist Chancellor Fernandez's contract was not renewed in February 1993. Pending foreboding, he was the co-signer of letter announcing the New Visions Schools initiative and now our chief bureaucratic cheerleader was leaving. Familiar with the Central Board resolution process most of the projects in the school district were supported by private and public grants necessitating first a local School District resolution and then a Central Board resolution in order to accept any funds no matter the amount before a project could commence. Now our entire New Visions initiative was in jeopardy for we had to go before the very same Board members who had fired the Chancellor to approve a resolution to open even a single New Visions School. At risk the initiative, some said we should only put the five highest ranking schools up for resolution I fought to have all 15 included knowing this was one time only. We put into effect a major lobbying effort alerting the Board members that this initiative had national implications for public school reform and that unions and corporate leaders and local politicians were joined in support of this effort. Press attended flashes went off when the Central Board of Education voted unanimously to support the ongoing planning and opening all fifteen New Visions Schools soon after they had not renewed Chancellor Fernandez's contract.

Securing this vote meant that the schools when opening would be real public schools paid for with real public dollars that they would receive allotments for furniture, books, teachers, and a director ultimately a principal and that the private dollars would facilitate training and curriculum development but essential funds would be there following a formula for setting up any new schools and keeping all schools functioning. And if the formula were faulty it still would be activated on our behalf. This was a monumental achievement for this new initiative in its infancy -

Historic in proportion – proposals gotten from the population at large reviewed through an entirely open process increasing participation in public education exponentially would now become official public schools.

The following excerpts are taken from pages of my journals or spiral notebooks kept religiously to document aware that something of historic proportions was in the making. Six years later as I exited the Fund, renamed New Visions for Public Schools I took all of the notebooks and journals with me. *You can leave them here*, the boss said cagily. They were all safely in boxes in my home by the time she uttered those words.

2/18/92

I don't begin to know how to describe the experience of the half-year. Now that it is over, I can only say that the lazy, indolent side of me enjoyed being kept from doing anything, and the self-destructive, self-doubting side of me was fed like a laboratory rat, the fat the girth of self-destruction implodes. Note: Six months before, while vacationing in Maine, I was informed that my job had been eliminated from the School District budget. No warning. The newly elected Superintendent wanted to have his own leadership structure. And the Superintendent who had just been voted out of office made no provisions or protections for any of his loyal staff. Although, he and his deputy were very well taken care of. Their golden parachutes were in truth made with golden threads.

Naomi is an eagle, she needs to soar, said the very man who kept me in captivity, who obliterated my working past, destroyed my papers eliminating all evidence of a work history, who kept me in a windowless room, rifled my papers calling the Inspector General to investigate me for *theft of service*, and *conflict of interest* the cruelty, the sadism of my incarceration, the tumbling

and entangling of me, immersed like a baptismal child, in *Standard Operating Procedures* of the Board of Education. The lengths this man was willing to go to threaten and frighten me. How to make sense of someone deliberately trying to break your spirit and discredit you so that you will do his bidding? How to go beyond that? What retribution? Where does my anger, my pain, my tattered and frayed psyche go for a restorative, where do I plunge the thick and angry knife meant for him? Without being an object of pity, I must purge. And, he was my neighbor, and on the Board of the Co-op. in which we lived. The levels for possible terror were mind-boggling. Without seeming self-serving or self-righteous, or priggish, in my mind, I tried at work, perhaps with trembling hands, and a quaking voice, and with poetry to make children always central in all endeavors. The cudgel of my interpretive and ever evolving conception of power was to treat staff with great demands, but great respect. Now in the spin and twist of a teetering and tottering and rotating Naugahyde office chair, I saw that I had become a lightning rod, a zapping light for the swarming administrators that came circling like froth filled mad dogs on a not dead yet carcass.

Twenty years in this school district in the Bronx in my mind and in the truest Calvinist sense of the word I was soldiering on I had been performing *good works* creating greater equity and justice for the thronging immigrant children crossing the borders from south to north pouring into our Borough. What I came to know was the danger in a Jewish drenched bureaucracy of being a secular Jew acting as a disciple of Calvin after all I was the descendant the daughter of a man who executed with exacting precision and the precepts of *Good Works* with the deepest and most scrutinized integrity. Ironies of all irony my neighbor who virtually held the key to my cradle (coop) was the head cop (he had been a cop) assigned to breaking me, wild thing me.

Goodbye, I am leaving. But you haven't been granted a leave of absence. I know you said no. You will be hurting yourself financially and every other way. If this was job security I was willing to step off the cliff. With a outstretched hand pulling it back untouched turned went back to my artist's garret, asked the gallery to come forthwith to remove the art and all of the commensurate trappings, took my bag stuffing in some pens and pencils, all of my real work papers had been removed in the stealth of the night and brought home or taken to one of the Foundations in great support of me as evidence should the Inspector General's office continue its errant pursuit then swirled out to the elevator to leave the confines of the 8th floor internment camp forever.

Goodbye for Awhile, Leaving Big Job Number 1, February 1992

*You came originally from a rib, a deep howl
A dream that wouldn't be denied
A mother's breasts newly swollen with sustenance
Time decades, two decades time
I have lived in this house of work
So many hands souls dreams thoughts
Combine with mine
This work of ours
A mosaic a collage a composite a distillation
We lived a collective of individuals
Forged around a unified vision
Which kept deepening and growing
And still deepens and grows
Only now I will not be an active voice
But one from a past tense
My heart constricts with this ending
Blistering often from opposition
We have always managed to carry on
I expect as I look over your shoulders
Hear about you
That the "places you're yet to go"
Have yet to be imagined.*

Naomi Barber

Family life and the need for an almost religious zeal magnificent obsession to make things right for kids can kick marriage and family life to the curb. Political retribution has taken a toll. Standing tall while my spirit erodes. Dangerously close to thoughts of suicide, I know this is the time to take an action. Walking out on all of the institutions tethering me set me free. Eerily, ecstatically free the jump-side of containment, metaphorically shouting and leaping for joy. I am near erratic, wild, part disbelief, and part fear, exuberance that verges on an uncontainable mania.

B took me in. She compact rich strong down-to-earth ambitious in ways that I could never be. She took me in called me. My legs are still like new calves wobbly weak. I am stepping over myself. She took me in invited me to put together the new schools initiative. B is a litigator. I appeared at the Fund the day after her apartment had been gutted by a fire. Was this an omen? She sent her regrets and the deputy directory with whom I was familiar greeted me. Was I covered with smoke singed on a new horizon a new dawn can I meet her faith in me? Questioning was the after effect of the recent tyranny of School District. Two female lawyers and a woman who acts as if she created the template for female lawyers run the place. Lesbians go for drinks at the local lesbian bar Henrietta Hudson after work lesbian partners embrace each other as they step out. What a world I stepped into. The closets were deep and secretive in the Board of Ed. bureaucracy the whiff of stepping off the bed of heterosexuality and you were tossed into a munching lion's den. This was the aberrant not right world of hypocrisy. Will I step from the odors of decay mortifying killing me the stench of bureaucratic incarceration and vindicate the choice or will I be frozen fixed to this spot a relic of a past slowly being forgotten unable to embrace the fact that I have been given a new day? So much of the pre-verbal motivates promotes and undermines change and decisiveness.

2/ 20/92

I have crept out of a cave. My eyes squint, smear the luminosity the gaze the brilliance of pure, light. Remembering not to look directly at sunlight. Out of dark bleak black cruel darkness into welcoming vibrant white light. I squint. I pause. My jaws locked in a tight smile. The kind foreigners wear when they can't understand a word.

2/ 27/92

After the shoot-out at a Brooklyn high school moments before the Mayor arrived

*Pray for those of us who are living on.
Children are killing each other in school
Committing big people's crimes
Perhaps they are extending a truth of this time
We have sewed miserable seeds
They are arching up, angry like a gnarled fist*

*Splattering off, like lava from the earth's bowels
Venom, blood, bile
These are our children
It is right and just
That the murders are in the corridors of schools
What a mockery, what treachery
What traitors we are
Our truth and beauty are the coffin nails
Lying to rest children we had killed off
In spirit and mind
Way before a gun's bullet
Strayed off like semen
Spitting off, up into the air
The cave, the birth chamber, the hollow port
The lining expunged
Is the evil, the culpability in each of our now grown lives?
And, in breaking news,
Two students get shot in the corridors of Thomas Jefferson High School
Third student shoots himself or gets killed.*

Naomi Barber

Barely on the job two weeks and the penultimate tragedy happened giving me the opening the opportunity to go on the offense. No one in the high school division or in the school system at large could deny that there was a need for change or reform at least no one could openly oppose any steps that spoke to making schools safer for all students. Even the cynical and opportunistic knew it was time to jump on the bandwagon of reform.

I have my nails done. Politically correct hands seem part of the uniform at the Fund. I am learning.

March: Early weeks on the new job.

Strong winds. People I meet move me. They are all white. They must be brought to their next level of performance. It is there. Debbie Meir speaks to everyone everyday to hold power keep her group together to touch base, and reach out. She is a powerful force must be attended to. At the Fund we are all twisted up about her.

Still March.

Writing an RFP (Request for Proposal), blundering, I didn't even know what they were talking about when they asked me to write one. One what? An RFP? Oh a Request for Proposals. I had read many and with a proposal writer had responded very successfully to many, tallied about thirty million in grant money, public and private over a twenty year period. But as I learned quickly with two lawyers and a fox for supervisors I had to get used to writing briefs and having my writing regarded as such. I who have playfully described myself as *Molly Bloom in Ulysses* with sentences that extended forever peppered with metaphor and anecdote some connected some disjointed minus any punctuation my high school English teacher would have apoplexy all those ballistic missile looking grammatical diagrams long lost to me. As with many things I am not a close observer of details. Close watching, scientifically calibrated detailing is not comfortable state I missed typos while editing letters. I do not know if it is that I am inattentive to detail impatient a combination always rush live with thick fast staccato brush strokes. *I am that fast talking woman with a slow moving man* that I read about somewhere. (Rita Williams-Garcia?)

One of the BIG THREE bosses, but make no mistake, there is only one *Numero Uno* yelled literally at me at work, *You have committed the number one cardinal sin here, sent a proposal out without our (the big three) reviewing it. What if we couldn't live with it?* She was referring to a grant from a Foundation that I had transferred to the Fund to protect the staff and the program from the plundering witch hunting administration in the school district I had just left. It seemed on the surface all too perfect if it worked out, I would be able to spend one day a week at Athena, (a project to help families headed by women make a successful transition from homelessness to autonomy, and economic viability.) Her scolding me sent me skittish into reminiscence about the place I just left. Soon, I hoped this reign of terror in my life would be over. The new school district deputy superintendent raided the Athena documents (Women bringing wisdom and beauty to the City) fortunately I brought the authentic papers to the foundation what he took were old out of date drafts useless in any hearing. Confiscating papers coupled with storm trooper tactics of the taunting supervisor and neighbor would stay with me forever. Note: Athena, gained wide recognition as a stellar project of a major foundation supporting formerly homeless families as they relocated into renovated community developed housing all part of a national *family preservation* movement.

Punished because of my loyalty to the deposed superintendent the former superintendent this Irish warrior was trying to break and scare me threaten my job to get me to work for him. *Naomi is an eagle, she needs to soar* he would say over and over a mantra as he weighted my wings tethered my heart shamed me with seclusion curtailing my access to work. Almost seven months of being eliminated terminated obliterated vaporized my personnel records stolen and put on probation for one year after 20 full years of continuous employment they managed to short circuit my tenure rights by six months limiting my ability to collect a full pension plunging me into an irredeemable sordid history punitive egregious. I don't leave places and people without upheaval further evidence havoc at endings rests with me. This tribal grand inquisition and hubris now at my new job wrought me sent me back to the neurotic hook of my recently left job.

The possibilities of creating new schools are startling. My imagination has yet to stretch into them. They are daunting. And I clearly and almost solely have the possibility and responsibility to create these. I developed and distributed an announcement to post in every conceivable corner of New York City. ***A Call for New Visions Schools - Small, rigorous, heterogeneous. Must span adolescence. Call us if you want to create such a school.*** Bold colors, heavy stock paper, the flyers were everywhere. Wanted this outreach to have the feel the resonance of a theater of open call for auditions as in the pages of *Backstage*. The bosses stood back, the name of the Fund was everywhere being closely identified with such an announcement.

April 1992

Solicited from the funder a long list of essential contacts. Phone calls made to the Puerto Rican Round Table, Parent Advocates, Board Members, and scheduled dinner date with Debbie Meier for continued shuttle diplomacy and to gain the benefit of her insights, as well as her approval for what we were doing. She was with a force to be reckoned with, and had an invaluable perspective and necessary questions. She believed that schools were better left to professionals. I thought they should reflect the participation and perspectives of the community. Multiple perspectives derived from the pluralistic society at large would insure more effective schools. The aspirations and the desires of parents and families must have an urgent connection to a school. Its practice must be informed by their desires. The school must reflect a perspective that melds with the students' community and culture. Divergent our tenet that all students, with the exception of those

designated mentally challenged, should be prepared to be accepted at and succeed at Harvard should they chose to do so. This cut at the liberal's rib smacking of elitism however watching them drive off the set of their rhetoric is to see parents depositing students in private school and to freshman dorms at Harvard or its equivalent.

The hypocrisy at times tattered the sleeves the academic robes of the liberal and notable public school icons and educators. These dinners with Debbie helped to clarify issues for me. The dinners with Debbie got me to see why she was important and how she built a significant place for herself nesting within the pipeline (popular education word) of individuals which would lead to her being awarded a MacArthur Fellows Genius Grant getting her a national platform to advocate for enlightened urban public as defined by herself. Another significant person to contact also the recipient of a MacArthur Fellows Genius Grant was Lisa Delpit who wrote the book *Other People's Children* the title of which speaks for it. Her publisher The New Press unapologetically liberal and not-for-profit was in a position to throw the high beam her way. Publicly acclaimed urban school advocates (rural children tossed in) one African American and from the South, Lisa Delpit, and one Jew rising from the attentive fury of the New York intellectual liberal left Debbie Meier. With Debbie bi-monthly dinners to build a constructive discourse between our school reform initiatives and to temper enflamed cross-haired egos as my boss a lawyer had stepped full tilt into the educational reform arena.

Lisa Delpit became an early presenter in our original New Vision series *Loft Talks* co-sponsored and held at *Teachers and Writers Collaborative* in Union Square. The talks directed to early co-conspirators in the creation of these new schools primarily teachers and new leaders designate. Feasting on freshly baked turkey good wine and home baked cookies in this intimate setting we explored how to dramatically and positively change the world of education for all and primarily urban students. Herb Kohl founding member of *Teachers and Writers Collaborative* was the bi-coastal co-host of the *Loft Talks*. Herb Kohl was another significant figure in the New York than national school reform community for standing tall as a new teacher with the blacks in Harlem in the uprising against the predominantly Jewish teachers' union following with a book, *Thirty-six Children*, which became one of the seminal works to guide future and what was considered as enlightened educational practice. (Decoding: be fair and judicious to poor black and other students.) Mike Rose, *Possible Lives*, Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts*, Walter Dean Meyers, notable bestseller of teenage novels, and like-minded individuals lead these by

invitation only *Loft Talks*. Walter Dean Meyers talked of his fury at his stepdad who died without having even opened one of the books Walter Dean Meyer had authored only to discover too late that this man could not read. As he recounted tears flowed and a pledge to question all pre-conceived notions and suppositions.

Open conversation and dialogue in settings of grace and dignity were for me the benchmarks of the New Visions initiative. From the moment of the issued NY Times ad calling for individuals to step forward to create a public school, a thoughtful responsiveness ensued. Not that mad-dog trance of public school bureaucrats racing threw hallways and byways elbowing past all a look of life-threatening desperation bated breath as if the ticking time bomb end of the world rested in their hands they salivated reproach and intimidation if knocked into and grunted when greeted anticipating a question or a need to interrupt the flow of their mad dash to nowhere. This was the stone soup the soupcon of public education, desperation reigns supreme, nothing can happen everything is forestalled until we get the current catastrophe disaster under control as the deputy superintendent told me repeatedly this job is twirling a million plates holding them in mid-air from falling this is *Henny Penny* hysteria forestalling action as if a conspiratorial underground agreement made it dangerous to have anything positive or anything to ruffle the status quo occurring in any or every school day. Inaction stalling circumventing tactics to hold tight maintain the status quo at any cost students children be damned. No one read Camus here inaction turning the leaf on each day undisturbed except by occluding that nothing happened here forestalling because of the crisis, the crisis the stone soup boiling over in the cooking pot disheartened. I never wanted to look back to the salivating desperate looks the parade of pretenders that make up much of the bureaucracy the union representatives and the teaching armies of the New York City public schools.

This New Visions initiative would reflect and be defined by *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me Thus Far* (Adrienne Rich) to which I held on tight. Every golden rule of obstruction that so captured the non-action or the oppressiveness of the Board of Education would have its mirror image captured in this social movement for change as I defined it to myself. When identities were concealed and never a name appeared attached to anything no one authored binding rules and authoritarian rules and regulations they were just like *because I say so*. Here in New Visions everybody who wanted in or to participate had to have their name aired like clothes on the backyard line. Everybody who wanted to participate in authoring a proposal would be given

technical support in a banquet like setting. Open house three nights a week with a smorgasbord of delicacy and heavy Jewish sandwiches along with a technical team of the most idealistic and least ideological teaching and leading professionals I could find. They were given honorariums for their work and hawk eyed I would watch to see even a glimmer of cynicism or withholding to cross their lips.

Never understood, twenty years of wondering, why teachers did not stand outside school buildings in flank keeping students out of their failed institutions or how students in high and some middle schools had to come through airport like scanners to enter a building that so destroyed their chance for any viable education or educational future dangerous streets dangerous schools dangerous lives. Every which way these students turned they were as endangered as any individuals deemed unworthy by a dominant society and culture. Good that rage and anger still swirled the blood stream as I climbed from the wreckage of public education to a frontier crafted on civility and the deepest commitment to *equity and justice for all* New York City public school students or so my idealistic heart perked.

Contact liaison from Chancellor to review RFP, review selection of advisory, and pre-reading committee, help develop review questions about experience, practice, and point of view, and the way to achieve widest dissemination. Prepare text on my own for ad in the NY Times, Amsterdam News, El Diario as well as local Asian newspapers. Skittish feelings and at times the roar of an out of control furnace fumed my way at the Fund with and about placing an ad of such a broad nature in major local papers offering opportunities to submit proposals to the general public at large, tugs of war are inevitable. Rev. Youngblood, leading Baptist preacher from Brooklyn remains elusive, never returning calls. Continue to contact groups as far ranging as Merck Pharmaceuticals, NYU, Rockefeller University, Brooklyn Children's Museum, Bell Labs, NYC Partnerships, CUNY leadership, Chase and other major banks. Almost any name referred to me I track down some with understandable connections to school reform some with no obvious tie. Like an Israeli diamond cutter, I slice the stone in every conceivable way to take in the light, give off an eye searing sparkle.

Prepare a technical assistance directory. Develop agreements with consultants like pre-nuptials. Leaving nothing to chance or misunderstanding, nothing is left informal everything is committed to notes and *memos of understanding*. Promised myself that all participants and ultimately proposal

readers had to agree to be public about their participation. No secret readers nothing undisclosed not *if you say anything about this I will deny it* a common garden variety everyday threat believe it or not in the offices of the school system leaders. Readers and technical support would be drawn from the widest swath of cloth within the City. Tightly woven networks would exist in public ways the cloakroom would become open in all connected conversation. Members of committees had to come from the highest echelon of leadership in whatever walk of life they represented the Chancellor or a close designee, the President of the affiliate unions or their deputies as well as any corporate leaders or civic participants. Naïve still about the ways of the corporate power world I underestimated their capacity for stealth and that flexing their power meant often-surreptitious signals sent my way that initially I misread. *Barbarians at the Gate* provided access but never the desire to yield to the idealism and whirlwind energy of the *Joan of Arc* on her stead leading this revolutionary social movement. They gave me my due a seeming open road but pulled on the reins ultimately I got to read their points of pressure on the confines in which I was to operate.

In my heart and mind I was the Eisenhower of this army for school reform but got tempered quickly and left to tarnish like low-grade silver. To the beat of my firm stepping feet as I weaved myself through the glorious West Village Streets to the office each day I would chant the following mantra *don't let anyone steal your thunder no one will steal my thunder* it works quite well with quick stepping feet and marveling eyes at being out in the open and commuting through Jane and Little West 12th Streets and eye popping desire arousing Christopher. To say I took myself seriously is to under-state to say I didn't relish this opportunity and had been preparing for this moment in the sun would be to limit its significance in my heretofore life.

Writing the RFP (Request for Proposal) is one of the more riotous adventures I have ever had in my life. It is without referent. Three simple pages of a proposal application to a funder who had solicited the application undergird this effort. We all have agreed that the schools must be small, minimally span adolescence, are rigorous, and be committed to heterogeneity. Wide dissemination is open to interpretation. Initially it was thought to extend only within the school system and neighborhood or corridors of supportive local community organizations. My thought and urging was to open the process to everyone in the greater New York area. Although this idea led initially to temper tantrums, and unequivocal refusals, ultimately I held sway. As the idea seeps into the consciousness of the individuals around me, it becomes like

there own hearts beating, they're own blood coursing. I guess that is a sign of true success when an idea is so thoroughly embraced that everyone believes it originated with him or her. I neither have the time, the inclination, nor the opportunity to claim authorship, or copyright. Versions of the RFP mount like ticker tape. Version and revision, attached in an appendix, made and remade. Quotes from Emma Goldman for the cover stricken like blasphemy by the leader of the UFT, quotes at all on the cover of an RFP were without precedent. *I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful radiant things. (Emma Goldman.)* Prostrate hyperventilating the head of the UFT needed to blow off her reaction into a paper bag, no never Emma Goldman, never she heaved.

Poetry, a fragment of, was necessary to set the tone, to establish an ideal. Springing from days at the Seder table instructed that a gorilla sub-rosa warrior code was embedded in the text the notation subtle discrete. I was a Seder warrior. Script subtle fragment poems sported the secret of unsettling of a reform of a revolution to come. Arm wrestling the opposition down a poem fragment by *Gabriela Mistrial* a Latina rang right: *Many things we need can wait, children cannot. Now is the time when their bones are being formed their blood is being made, their minds are being developed. To them we cannot say tomorrow, Their name is today.* This poem drawn from a book of collected poems by Latina women to communicate that particular consideration would be given the Latino student population in our public schools one which we were failing miserably criminally. Twenty years in Bronx public schools gave me first hand knowledge of this educational malfeasance present as students stooped with despair restless in their ill-fitting classroom chairs a big person in the front of the room barking out nonsensical words in a language they were rife to understand. These the very children who translated readily for their parents at public assistance offices and in family court were excluded or virtually ignored at school where officials tacitly agreed they had little academic or intellectual capacity or possibility. I was raw with our failure to serve their children well or even adequately.

Each night the ultimate boss and I would be like Summa wrestlers wrangling about each word. As frustrating as I find this, and as tiring, I am excited to have the benefit of her legal mind. I am preparing for war with poetry and narrative, she is preparing for legal conquest with a brief. Somehow, the text fell in line somewhere between her persuasion and mine. And then the incessant rewrites based on the feedback from three necessary readers, the Deputy Superintendent, the funder, and the Senior VP of the UFT. The

perspectives of these three were like the tangled web of the PLO, ISRAEL and some well-meaning arbiter from the UN.

As the sun set on the Hudson the hues flowing through our offices staff off to Henrietta's or wherever I could be found crying. Crying with frustration and fatigue I was warned by the funder alter-ego to take my tears outside and not to be seen as weak or falling apart I was after all leading a visionary (New Visions Schools) education reform initiative. Mostly I sat in a neighboring park adjacent to a local church pulling myself back together not daring to go to a bar any bar for a stiff scotch didn't want booze lacing my weakened condition or courage and would at times hover outside Henrietta Hudson's Lesbian Bar though never entering. I felt attracted by the warmth and ease inside if not the sexual orientation of the women lounging the bar although my fraying and tattering home life could lead me to hunker for close bonding and contact with any caring individuals willing to respond to and not disparage or drive me on almost to the point of breaking apart.

Again I was confronted by a raging temper tantrum throwing boss but this time the clicking heel of demand veering on the sadistic kept asking for me to be more and more forthcoming more excellent for *my personal best*. The deputy director just quaked at the thought of reprisals should anything go wrong with any of the ideas I was suggesting to be put into action. Is it just Jews that let off steam in this way and then walk off quizzically wondering why one looked so disabused? Quips about handcuffs and whips in her Louis Vuitton brief case could be heard just beneath retributive breaths. *Don't disregard me because I don't have a penis* shouted out the gay deputy at sunset on a particularly frustrating day she a woman who had known the director since their undergraduate days at Barnard. And during a particular interview of a AmeriCorps applicant from Nebraska who fell face down in a faint on the table brought back only by smelling salts and water upon hearing the director bellow, *don't worry she likes me* said the staff member and interviewer. Revived he left quickly and falling into the elevator never looked back.

There were a series of turnstile assistants assigned to me each an ivy leaguer or the equivalent thereof each newly minted college graduates each willing to work the same fifteen hour days and each powerfully and directly connected to one of the *Barbarians*. Although I thought myself a ferocious and strategic leader of this movement for change I was a loving and nurturing mentor working shoulder to shoulder heart to heart with each of these young people. One a beauty from Texas and from a notable and powerful family became

unfettered while I was out preparing for a site visit from funders at the Abyssinian Babtist Church in Harlem when I arrived back at the office she was heaped all six feet of her on the floor prostrate I didn't know whether to call an ambulance or the police. Through her deep guttural sobs I understood she had been redressed by our leader who had a case of nerves about the pending visit and did not see the evidence of our preparedness much of which had been delivered to the church by me earlier in the day. The leader had left for the day but the phone rang and it was this stricken young woman's mother who with a thick drawl said she was on her way to NYC *to beat the shit out of the boss to break her jaw how dare she?* Found it hard to temper her fury just beneath the surface in full agreement with her however I begged she give me a day in which to work things out and garner an apology by phone within twenty-four hours. I got the boss to meet with me before 8 am not surprising to be there between seven and eight am each day. She got the wrong she had committed and said she would apologize to the young woman and get her mother on the phone but that after the meeting that day which was of paramount importance to the future of our initiative and its viable funding. She did placate the mother on the phone with the daughter at hand and me just inches from the phone and then invited me to lunch on the following day to make repairs we ate Pad Thai at the local restaurant and when I offered to pay she stormed saying *are you going to take this away from me as well?* Never got the full gist of the statement or anger. Paid the bill in full and let myself get reimbursed.

And then soon after I started working about six months in when I was offered the job full time she asked that I do a presentation for the Chair of the Board who also was a managing partner at a white shoe law firm and the lead *Barbarian* it has to be short she warned *he never listens for more than three minutes*. This meeting was after the ad appeared and we were launched as a major force for education change in the city. All weekend with a stop watch I prepared my three-minute presentation that was to take place in their illustrious offices the symbols of power everywhere. I spoke for three minutes got my usual trembling hands under control and reigned in an unexpected poise and composure. And then he looked at me, this Ed Harris look alike with piercing blue eyes and asked is there nothing more. Knowing this would lead to drooling and trembling on my part I said no this is it and stood up to leave the boss remained behind. I hit the Upper East Side streets and leaned against a building a success.

Near the end of my time at New Visions, my choice, and almost the promised six full years in that employ I asked for a couch, the entire office was being redecorated, why *do you think you should have a couch* she quipped sarcastically *because more people come to meet with me than with anyone else* I responded off handedly. *No* she said *only officers get them, the people whose offices front right on the Hudson*. Ironically all I have ever wanted was a room on a sunset. The Jensen and Lewis warehouse was next door. I brought in a box from which a couch had just been unloaded and set it up as a virtual couch with a big sign saying *this is not a couch for sitting it is a virtual couch a piece of art*. Her advance team came in to look and ultimately she appeared *tomorrow there will be a new couch in your office, but I like this one* I said. By then I could look her in the eye and give as good as I got. Though deep in my heart I had enormous affection and respect for her and thankfully did not come from Nebraska but Jewish Newark New Jersey where a mother would shriek and tantrum almost daily. Actually I learned an awful lot from her and in my mind lead a glorious public school reform initiative and believed and still do that I was a warrior if she found it in herself to refer to me as a wonderful nurturer.

Scrubbed the jarring nature of her running commentary and anxiety about whether I was legit or a kook who would ultimately bring her down, I proceeded each day, *this is my thunder, my moment, not to be stolen*. I listened well took in what she said and continued to move my way amended and hedge clipped. Proceeding to arrange open teas for applicants, bus tours to schools thought to be good in the pantheon of the disgraceful, and served buffet meals open sessions to help anyone interested in preparing a proposal. The openness of the process sent the bureaucrats into a tizzy it ran counter to every principle of operation to which they held tightly. Mounting approbation for the initiative from an ever-increasing swath of the generic public along with flexing in favor of the project from the *Barbarians* brought disciples of the old system to their knees feigning humbleness with an overhang of zealous cooperation. Intransigents transformed into *bobbleheads* discerning in their flank that upheaval had come ultimate subversion leading back to a drawing board. Randomness had no place in this quilting bee there was a master plan a master strategy each piece each action fit as it were one of those mentally challenging five hundred piece puzzles. This not a *fuzzy* liberal toe dipping into democracy with a small *d* rather a blood and guts initiative with the undercurrent of spring mountain thaw running to streaming rivers and sea beds. Here the possibility of moving beyond a hyperbolic moment to a social movement of apocalyptic change in the school lives of New York City children. Decentralization ran amuck power grabs of interest groups so small against

the giants of the *Barbarians'* world squashing squandering even a scintilla of the hopefulness at its dawning in the early 1970's.

With the decorum of *High English teas* counter to the bagels and cream cheese or plates piled high with delicatessen and overly rich cookies were scheduled in each borough. Every aspect of the initiative to reflect a distinct departure from common practice small gatherings for technical assistance were scheduled in each borough led by acknowledged if controversial deemed successful public school practitioners. Individuals interested in creating a public school and writing a proposal were invited on bus tours following a submission of a written request attesting to the serious nature of their participation thereby weeding out spies or just individuals with a spare day and random curiosity. The luxury buses held twenty-five individuals who were given opportunities to tour what were thought to be the City's best and most successful schools participating in open exchanges with leaders and faculty. Some of the schools toured include Bronx Regional, City-as-School, Cross Roads, Computer School, PS 234, Brooklyn New School, the Ron Edmonds School, International High School, Middle College High School, IS 218 in School District 6, and Central Park East Secondary School.

Given the size of the school system there were a paucity of exemplars. Each site was screened first with detailed planning sessions with the leaders little as possible left to chance. Each of these school visits left me with questions doubts and concerns troubled by how often scattershot and dissembling the essential if guarded closely mission. In some instances it was evident that the leader and teachers just wanted out of what was considered the regular school system without having to probe how to change things principally finding a sinecure a way out of the hubbub of squabbling unions set in the discursive upheaval of turbulent student unrest. Most of these small schools were clustered into a rump loosely configured organizational unit known as the division of *Alternative High Schools* meaning they primarily took in rough or *undesirable* kids exceptions made for recent *limited English speakers* or new arrivals to our shores.

Buffets are regularly scheduled to assist individuals with the writing of their proposals. No one is turned away. No manner of help is denied. With one stipulation, the seminal ideas and perspectives had to come from the authors of the proposal. Stepping on this much unprecedented new ground, amuses some, forces cynicism into the open, peoples' true inclinations rise to the

surface, and at the Fund I elicit moments of shattering panic, suspicion, contemptuousness, and a boisterous rapid fire opportunistic marketing. From someone who had worked within the barbed wire of public education, these new reactions are at once thrilling, enticing, and frightening. My courage clamors for more daringness, while old fears and self-doubt attempt to squeeze me shut. Inflaming causing distraction and surfacing doubters particularly liberal darlings of public school reform I would end every presentation with and every graduate of a New Visions School should be prepared to attend Harvard should he or she chose so. This sent the liberal elite shivery up the spine into apoplexy paroxysms of tongue clicking and finger wagging. My *barbarians* liked it though it resonated, they had yet to scratch their skin to recognize that Harvard kept out the great unwashed so that it could bring in the barbarian offspring in disproportionate numbers recent studies attest to and that there really was no room at the top for more than a token or two and then where would the jobs be? Refashioning society to be more equitable and just was only not on the table but would be thrashed to bits by the swishing tail of a hunger-tormented crocodile and the thrashing wings of an albatross. The liberals refuted it because they only crept their own children into those lofty higher institutions sacrificing everything while they espoused the City and State system of colleges and universities, public for the poor, their way of maintaining a connective tissue and a loyalty to that which they espoused. Oh the demon hypocrisy every which way.

Arrange for a summer training institute for successful applicants. Teams will be asked to create a working curriculum for the first six months if roughly laid out plans and for the full school year. Leaders and teachers from deemed successful schools will serve as workshop leaders and provide technical support. Teaching teams will receive small grants to develop the curriculum and can opt to work on their plans out of the City (one group went to Martha's Vineyard with all family members and another to Boulder, Colorado) this being evidence that this all was a break with common practice and a new day. The training institute would be conducted in early August after the teams had met. No school could open without having their curriculum approved by a committee of the highest school and union officials. This terrain was always tricky to stoke imagination of people who believed their way the Holy Grail took prying and the whiff of acclaim from the *Barbarians at the Gate* along with the editorial boards of the New York Times and other local papers. All bases had to be covered to let imagination vision and a sense of hopefulness that these new constructs would bring to flourish or to exist at all. Contact Teach for America to see if we can make some sort of arrangement for

teachers when schools open. In its earliest iteration, Teach for America started officially in 1990, it was in its barest infancy in 1992, and the first groups of recruits were the virtual offspring of the Board of the Fund and the *Barbarians at the Gate*. Ivy bled education Rorschach splattering privilege coupled with a spirited optimism and desire to give-back made this a teaching team of newbie's a perfect complement to our budding New Visions Schools.

Felt the spine tingling tensions and sparring that would come when veteran teachers were paired with their hothouse flowers shiny as new apples with a profound sense of mission and hopefulness. There would have to be a balance within the teaching faculties in these new schools which by mandate would be small start off with no more than one-hundred students and a team of five teachers with one administrator. Bias on my part lead away from stocking these small schools in their brave infancy with teachers who if with good will for the most part still swallowed hard with discomfort leading the necessary field trips through museums and libraries spending their truncated visits hushing students who were asked to fill out rexo's hopefully with questions that related to the site specific particularities of that cultural institution.

Where I used to feel a sorrow filled compassion to the teachers who had to climb from immigrant and usually economic strife to esteemed teaching positions I also saw the limitations of their childhoods in New York few who grew up on the streets of the Bronx or the other outer boroughs ever ventured forth to explore Manhattan and even more glaring the few that gathered the courage to ascend the steps of these lofty museums were most often greeted with coolness they were not really welcomed. Having seen the lethargy and the limited horizons of much the current teaching army in the Bronx at least the lack luster imaginations the paucity of enriching experiences as children museums still filled with discomfort and students escorted through with *Rexograph* sheets and endless shushing by the teachers leading the field obligatory field trips after all this was New York City. This made a composite of limitations rather than extending and expanding upon history and literature by walks on the wild side the side in which imagination reigns and embellishes where the danger of the untoward the flush insights of the arts the commentaries and reflections of life could jar and unnerve and raise questions and perk curiosity they steered clear or kept students' noses deep in numbing questions to fill out as they quickly streamed by the Michelangelo's and Rembrandts and Picassos. Teach for America teachers could serve as a perfect antidote control of the Chancellor has the patronage/loyalty quotient imbedded in its distribution. The middle school must rely on its local

superintendent for such largesse. School Districts behind a scrim of lightly veiled equitability distributed greater funding in surreptitious and undisclosed ways to the closest they could come to a middle-income neighborhood. At a moment in time, I led teachers on field trips, carefully constructed voyages out of their classrooms and out of the borough of the Bronx but to places like the show rooms at Bloomingdales. Good educational practice means to start where the students are, from here we sojourned into the Met and MOMA. We planned for the trips leaving nothing to chance from how we would enter the portals of the esteemed and formidable sites to what we looked forward to seeing and how we would look for specific detail – we were social scientists on a field trip on a probe. After we convened to detail the visit and to raise questions perked questions after the visit not flat-bedded on *Rexograph* sheets. I was as newly hatched as the Teach for America participants at that time and as energetic and brimming with optimism and joyfulness.

Discover great inequity in high school and middle school budgets. The high school budget directly under the central administration of the Chancellor's office justifying this disjointed allotment as *we need them to maintain a viable public school system* decoded we need them because they vote in school board elections. Reading and math scores were the litmus test for funding levels since there still was no fair and just way to attest to a student's school success. Witnessing far too often middle and elementary school principals regarding horse race sheets, just out of *Guys and Dolls* or on the phone with their brokers feet on desks reading the stock market sheets spread all over their desks held the reigns in failing schools rarely visiting a classroom to preserve whatever conscience they still held onto and being doted on by an array of bobbing darker skinned breasts women serving as their parent leaders or school aids a job handed out by the local patronage boss. Teachers mumbling handed out *Rexograph* sheets and often sat reading newspapers or doing their check payments. Witnessed first hand these class one misdemeanors unperturbed by being witnessed so callous and so sinister was this union and local politician protected school system.

Flamboyant outfits on my part got them to disregard me mockingly defining me as caricature and that I while addressing them flagrantly smoked Pall Mall or Galois (smoking was still not banned in schools and I was at heart still in an adolescent rebellion). *Clothing is everything you are what you wear* my impeccably and conservatively dressed mother would continually warn agreeing deliberately choosing outfits that were meant as protective garb if I looked weird and wacky I could easily be disregarded *how foolish to regard me*

in that way as I tugged the internal school balance underneath their feet and started tilting the school to academic strength and loving teaching teams when their buildings tilted beyond their control and the norms changed they took their noses out of their horse racing sheets but by then it was too late. There were teachers of good will who were just as disgusted and nauseous as I usually those defecting from military service, this was in the early 1970's and these young men wanted or mentally needed to put in a good days work in front of the classroom even if they didn't know what they were doing or were ill-prepared. By the time of my incarceration in the District and before my tenure at New Visions there were twenty-six of these high functioning small schools-within-schools as they were called led by proud teacher leaders and regaled by principals who could claim their viability and thus the viability of their educational leadership. (Mary Anne Raywid, professor at Hofstra at the time, did much of her early research on small school communities within school buildings on our ever-increasing small teacher lead schools.) Teacher autonomy, teaching teams of there own choosing, and curriculums developed by the team over time were cornerstones of these small aggregate schools. Ultimately noteworthy middle school principals turned over the entire process as they entered into agreements with teaching teams within their own schools to transform their building into a series of contiguous small school perhaps with themes.

Funding for high schools is much richer. Though am quickly uncovering the ugly truth of high school operations. In schools of 4,000 students (or more), only 100 or less complete school in 4 years, and only maybe 10-15 graduates receive a Regent's or academic diploma. In real, raw math terms, each graduate costs about \$100,000 to \$150,000, such exorbitance for such grave failure. There is no one raising a blip of objection on one of our dinners I share this with Debbie Meier who clicks her tongue yes and continues to use this as a template a tablet of her own making. Will never know if I was the source of this information at its inception or that it had been held sub-rosa by all. It is tacitly forbidden to broach this. I see myself walking on increasingly more dangerous ground. School District --, its treachery nearly mortal wounding was a preparation for this. The stakes are higher, much higher. Thousands of humpty dumpty's would shatter if this information were widely shared. There was a sacrosanct budget formula a living document divined by the high school office never to be questioned or traced for efficacy or prejudice. The formula *the formula* even the liberals or alternative high school members claque in unison about the funding formula the tablet of least transparency and efficacy ever devised in the public school system.

Visit the UFT leadership and make presentations. Every word written that was shared with UFT leadership, Chancellor's office, and the funder, becalmed the roughest waters. Presentations to potentially antagonistic organizations became friendly if leery, individuals believed that they were in on the inner, most secret track. People like to think they are on the inside. The larger need to make schools that would work well for kids mediated against any frustration or cynicism or exclusivity. *We are the club that we wouldn't want to belong to if they asked us to be members.* The very openness of the process blunted cut off the scent of danger that and a seat at a table with the countries most ruthless and cutthroat business people. Ultimately we are enslaved by our desire to rub shoulders with the rich and famous or infamous in this case. The *barbarians* held me in some kind of distant as keep your distance admiration for they saw their surreptitious and unscrupulous ways unsavory tactics expressed in this New Visions initiative. What they missed was the strategy was founded as in foundry in a life long desire for equity and justice for public school kids as weak-kneed and namby-pamby as that rings and that I had been plunged into Dante's circle of darkness by ruthless bureaucrats and emerged undaunted and that fearlessness is what they sniffed or smelled that was the aura and that the intent. Inclusive schools meant inclusive reviews and participation that is all there was to it. Form new schools policy committee. Work on development of evaluation for new schools. Arrange site visit to Superstar Plus, the UFT mainstreaming classes for regular and Special Ed. Particular attention to recruiting and mainstreaming Special Education students is a priority in forming new schools.

Lists are solicited from all youth groups in the City. Every advocacy group, the mayor's office, funders are contacted for master lists. The RFP will be distributed to every organization in the City involved with children and young people, as well as advertised in local papers. Ultimately, we mail 16,000 proposal packages; duplicates are kept to a minimum, through the use of a professional mailer.

Contact groups with specialties in curriculum development, American Social History Project, writing process people, whole language advocates, technology pioneers at places like the Dalton School, New Youth Connections, Ed. Video Center, and any others that were referred or uncovered. Part of this job is undercover or investigative work. Part of this job is making connections, like a huge, five hundred-piece summer puzzles, sections are filling out. Professional

gems and programs were ferreted out and asked to join in this mad-hatter dance for public school reform.

May/June

Readers are selected from as wide a birth as possible. If an idea of this nature, welcoming everyone to invent a school, never existed, and if we ask only that it reflect what can only be imagined, the possible but not yet, then who could step off the place of their own self-interest, their own professional obligation and connection, their own schooling past, to judge a proposal on the merits of the concept or vision, and the desire and capacity of the authors to create such a school? The reader's list, growing, reflects a true representative group of New Yorkers, from students to church groups to college presidents, to architects to librarians. The readers reflect the range of individuals who are expressing interest in creating a school. Each proposal is to receive four reads, including a union official and an employee of the Board of Education.

Preparing a grid for readers and a rating system is one of the more terrifying events of my life. I sit as the sun drifts off the day, the Hudson sucks it into its stream, as my stomach knots and tightens. The single block separating us from the Hudson pushes us away from the entrance on blustery winter days, and invites us to watch the spectacle of the days' end. No day has a dreary dull slip off daylight. Drafts of grids lay crumpled like unused text for a novel by a dispirited author. Fairness is the benchmark. Occlusion is the hidden code word beneath and between the lines. Fair and objective or so the chant goes it goes as far as it can. This group of power players suave and impeccably and lavishly groomed never intend for anything to be fair and objective except for the appearance there of. These were not the brutish types from the Board of Education, the fist slugging blue-collar babies whom upheld the noble tradition of club politics and the concomitant patronage as if to a respirator. I was used to thugs. I was not used to smooth like silk, like thousand thread-gauged cotton, *barbarians*, as other barbarians affectionately knew them. Reading the implied became part of the job. *If you repeat this, I will act as if I never said it*, or something of this order was a subtext. Grids, scores, grids, wrong grid, wrong scoring so the fury flamed as they days dipped into the grand Hudson day after day. Readers would know whose proposal they were reading and judging proposal applicants would know who read their proposal and how it was rated and ranked. This was the other startling part of this process, complete openness and transparency. Constancy to a grand vision or strategy riveted me, each rival turn off-center sent me back chills storming my knotted insides I insisted on the integrity of the mission at hand like one of the

science fiction extra-terrestrial visions the peyote inspired insight I saw everything clearly as a piece and wrenching couldn't part from tampering with any of it. The compromises would come later as I exhausted myself out and became almost allergic and frenzied and even yes fearful of remaining at New Visions, as the entire organization was now called, and through the next RFP process remembering to send proposal packages to those I had promised fair readings and who had been left in the cold but were still clamoring. Finally a grid unmarred by tearstains got prepared. This in a place that reflected an ethos of feigned integrity its board members being either sinister bureaucrats or union leaders or takeover kings.

Proposal preparation technical and moral support buffets continued to the last days of submission. No one was turned away. No manner of help refused, from writing the actual words for the inexperienced to translating for individuals unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with English. Jargon and the contrived were frowned upon and would lose points. Buzzwords were strictly forbidden. Words were to be simple, direct. Dreams and visions and the offshoots of the imagined resonate best in words that are perhaps poetic or dramatic but not contrived and synthetic. One could not outsmart the readers with more of the usual. Hopefully the array of readers would mediate against being entranced by the formulaic, or even turned off. If the readers were sufficiently representative, the content of the proposal would ultimately hold sway. If there were two widely divergent points of view on a proposal from *hate it to must have it*, readers were going to be sought who could temper the extremes and find a watermark. I am so fully present in my reflections and assessments and in reading the winds to guide the process so that it never compromises its integrity and singularity of purpose that I live as one with the event unfolding. I exist within the process and although from exhaustion and from battling off those whom I have engulfed, if reluctantly, in my daily re-conceptualizations, those who have been told to watch me, I am undeterred, implacable, adamant, if infuriating.

Against the neutering tide of school reform I begin to see what rough trade I am involved in. This is big business big politics. I am allowed to tamper around the edges like an edgy child being glimpsed through a two-way mirror. Enlightened research and statistics cut me slack. But I feel in my gut don't tamper, read the tealeaves, this is the change of appeasement, this is the change to reflect and reaffirm statistical tracts of teacher training institutions. There is something of the stench of imperial gloss around here. Not to jostle an imperial order within our society is the subtext. I am involved in a

treachery a leering jeering condescension for all of the people like strung popcorn on the Board of Education payroll but without a real desire to bring enlightenment and change to all of the children. The existing school districts were outliers. I knew that their power had to be dislodged and broken open but I knew that out there were worthy people waiting to be rescued.

Change, I had to confront, is bogged down and encumbered by a politics of contrition and indignation. It is caught up in a web of intransigence that lifts out of a sooty bog of research and statistics, rife with a persistent and insidious need to maintain a certain order within our society. The rhetoric of reform subdues the unprivileged as they are unwittingly relegated to territories that exist just beyond the realm of possibility. Urban and rural public schools are designate sites of internment and exclusion, fostering the subjugation of children along income levels and skin tones. Well-honed yarns of brighter opportunities obscure a pervasive and intractable classism and racism. It is against this dogma, this rhetoric without pain, passion, rage, uninformed by broken dreams and deep betrayals, against words that are cold and pseudo-scientific that I rail. It is the cold unblinking need to fix with expediency and pragmatism that I yell out. My words do not rise out of an institutional legitimacy, but from an urgent heart, and eyes that have seen too deeply into the horror of our fixedness. I have stood in the world, which lives without searing compassion and urgency. I have been in the just so far spot that swirls change like dust particles in shafts of light. Stifling and limiting children who are poor and dark skinned does not provide sufficient force for the paucity of real choice that abuts and provokes action and change. We do not see unequal educational opportunity as a plague. Too many of our own children are safe and kept apart.

Poverty and its concomitant withheld possibilities live like a planet outside, well outside an orbit of our everyday lives. School reform is the gated community of a society that is unable to lift itself out of entrenched habits to exclude. School reform is the bottle breathing, wine waiting a taste. School reform is rough trade, rough trade that brokers no chance for real change. School reform is politically expedient rhetoric to assuage, calm, and placate the besieged. An opponent with an occasional raised fist, an occasional random striking out, a fuss, protest, a surly outburst, and an accusatory tongue wielding the dangerous word injustice. But as in solstice howls to the moon, it is the lonely wolf howl into an empty cold white void. There will be no change at the end of the rainbow of reform. The will, the political will does not harbor it. Impatient and pragmatic, we obfuscate the unequal suffering children in our

society. A force keeps the deeper toned children on the color spectrum, and the poor ones, undereducated and with limited possibility.

Note: In 2010, Mayor Adrian Fenty and thus Michelle Rhee lost their chance to reform the public schools in Washington D.C. because they introduced a way to evaluate teachers a multi-dimensional way that would lead to ridding the schools of teachers who were inept or inadequate or harmful to students wrecking the hierarchical distribution of who stays and who leaves by duration in the system with tenure granted after three years.

School reform is our cover up, our contrivance, and our bonbon to assuage the need to seem earnest about doing better. We never get to the end of it. Full literacy full opportunity for all children, the implications are too onerous, too daunting, too unsettling. An inability to look deep within will not tolerate it. A desire not to change or challenge prevails. More simply and directly put, if all children could choose and attend a school that equaled the best of a diverse range of private schools in our society what would happen? What would the implications be? It is to there that we do not do not choose to go. School reform is the mist on the windshield before the fog lifts on the way beyond the sunrise to the City, to the places where we let sleeping dogs lie. And I am compelled in my own swirl of absurdity to stand in a self-proclaimed common space and speak my story, tell my thoughts, share my observations. I have no reason, no one asking this of me, and in spite of my inclination and more public self to be stone silent, I write, write enveloped playing *Tango by Astor Piazzolla*. In a common space of my own making, I speak out.

Through my gauzy perceived innocence at my new job in the heart of barbarian darkness (as in *Barbarians at the Gate*) my desire heats up. I become determined to put a public face on public education and school reform so that this time there is no squirming out of the inevitable. Neither vouchers, nor choice, nor more teachers, nor better space, nor rump small schools will build the road to significant change. A fundamental truth must blunt our rhetoric, shift our sight, and detonate our paradigm. To be confronted is the face of a child of children who get less, far less when we know in the moment how to do better, far better. Only then, will decisions and policies be made that will benefit the children who *do not get their own* in any way now in our public schools. When the bluing face looks up at us gasping for oxygen and is choking and we force our lips on the stilling mouth and pump our own breath into the wilting, expiring body, only then will we feel the true compulsion to do

what is right and equitable by every child. And then the havoc of true change will truly ensue.

Beyond the school scanner a world exists as extreme and dangerous and inscrutable as any outside the school doors. There is a need here to fill the reformers with the sense of urgency that they have about procuring placement for their own children in the best schools. I want to compel people outside the school gates to step out of and beyond their everydayness to get on the bus and ride south to sign up people to vote, to take to the streets fist wielding suffragettes, AIDS activists, insurgents who live in worlds of tangible disregard. I want to find a way to go beyond parlor indignation to nausea. To build up an intolerance of what exists and become alive with urgent action, the beauty and necessity of compulsory education as the linchpin of a democratic society with schools that lift off the parchment of our founding documents. Not schools in which they are silenced, rivets driven into their talk. Censors stalk booklists. Scrim of false testimony fall in front of their eyes disguised as history. Glimpses of truth are as elusive as water on a desert floor. Predators desensitize their desire to be in the center of the earth. Children are thrown off course of their own futures and dreams. I want us to speak out together of the right of each child to a good education. To the right to be soothed, to shape dreams, to have the tools to heal and to make poetry. I want along with you to take away from children the wildly unsettling and confusing knowledge that teachers were being paid to steal their future, to stifle and unsettle them. Teachers are like nails being ripped off fingers, so pulled are they from their humanity, their sense of common decency.

Recently, I heard someone say, "Make them (the poor) crave to get to a better class, that'll motivate them. This may sound cynical, but it'll work." Just once, if the tables could be turned, if that person could be rotated on the spit of his own contentions, if there were a way to burrow down into what is human within. That is the dilemma, to bring into the open the pernicious and insidious so that it cannot become manifest as the superficial and appeasing. How does one dredge up anger and action in a society of good words yet indifferent and poor deeds from so many? I want to find a way to take that person on. Co-conspirators, ideologues holding so tightly to their absolutes, self-righteous and patronizing dangling hope before the mouth of a starving baby too late to be revived. We need the agony, always the agony of a mother who cannot look into the eyes of a child - waving goodbye as she enters a school building dreams like cataracts milky and fading. Imagine waving to a child as she enters the building of a school deemed a failure by the NY State

Department of Education if for a day an hour a minute. How can we ask this of anyone? Seeing backpacks still in plastic wraps, parents grabbing uniforms off well-ordered racks in a store in East Harlem called Young World threw me over the edge of my own complacency. No invitations to speak out will ever come my way a rave of passion from a person of no particular standing. Lingering by the cash register watching some hard working parents pay, knowing that beyond the school house door lives despair and disappointment, neglect and intellectual assault and deprivation, I can't any longer turn away. I invite myself to speak with you. We have not gone deeply enough, really know the toll and the upheaval, if we respond equally to each child in our society and provide the same opportunities for a challenging and effective education. My passion my intensity my excesses like overgrown brush overblown overheated invisible inciting no one but myself – and I do not write for posterity – or think anyone will ever read this – desperate and despairing, alone – I write to stay alive – although that part of me dims too.

One can be a combatant in the world of power and come apart in the corridors of a school system bureaucracy. It is neither as grand, nor as obvious. Even the perceived most powerful have fallen. Putting face on school reform, my face, your face, ours, then, maybe then the will, will follow. And with these feelings and thoughts, wild flowers on morning vines, this uncontrollable urge to make the world better is the story of how New Visions Schools got created by the community at large in New York early in the last decade of the 20th Century. On the cover sheet of the Request for Proposal in April 1992, the following quote:

Many things we need can wait, children cannot. Now is the time when their bones are being formed, their blood is being made, their minds are being developed. To them we cannot say tomorrow, Their name is today. Gabriela Mistral, Chilean Poet

An implicit *Freireian* undercurrent, a riptide of left talk rumbles beneath the surface of these words, like a sea that looks mildly jumpy that has claws beneath its murky gray. From poetry comes the impetus, the reasons why. The implicit and tacit point the way. Bureaucrats ask questions. That's their job, to disconcert, to dislodge. Murky and distracting, the intention is to unnerve, arouse suspicion, and fan the fires of paranoia, awakening dormant feelings of untrustworthiness. Their job is to let sleeping dogs lie, to not stir the waters of discontent, to keep from letting anything get unsettled, changed. The irony, in the world of education in which questioning is central

bureaucrats quell and still the act of questioning. Out of necessity, bureaucracy is a closed system. Unnerving the bureaucrats, but also to engage them and get them to relinquish their superimposed and doctrinaire roles, from the onset of New Visions we worked in a pristine and overt manner to a fault. We were so transparent and consultative that ultimately any sliver of semblance to operating as usual became elusive and even strange. How quickly bureaucrats adapt. How difficult to find that nexus in which cynicism lies a sleeping dog and carefully wrought strategy can predominate and prevail. The gridiron, the template, that which provides an indomitable foundation for this kind of work and action is a malleable vision, not ideology, not rhetoric, although it is easy to slip into those births, and think that the spring board is righteousness, but only vision that is inclusive and expansive will hold at the juncture where cynicism breeds flippancy and ultimately inaction and contempt. Always challenge and probe the reform the good-doers promulgate – you can tell by how they romanticize the plight of the poor, painting always with pastels.

With this in mind totally non-hierarchical, participatory committees governed the entire New Visions initiative, like flappers in the '20's we removed the stays, the corsets, and let our selves kick high and fly free. Gathered around the representational table were all those individuals who held power or the power to unstring, dispel, and subvert. *No to a quote from Emma Goldman on the request – for - proposal cover, those most closely associated with the teacher's union insisted, oh all right for the poetry fragment from Gabriela Mistral, although we don't usually put poetry on the cover like that.* Obviously, many of these individuals had not garnered the subversive nature of liturgical texts.

Reciting the Passover story is tantamount to perpetrating conspiracy. The bible is filled with stories of resistance in the face of the Goliath's, the bad against the good, unexpected, non-traditional loyalties and alliances as with Ruth and Naomi. And so the fragment of Gabriela Mistral poetry provided a subtext, the code, the out reached hand, what was implicit in the (RFP) invitation. Yes reluctantly to ads in newspapers papers inviting the entire City to submit a proposal to create new public schools, even the *great unwashed* and the unruly, thinking magically that only teachers, only professional educators, would get the code, would see the ads and respond. Agreeing to keep the schools small, rigorous, untracked, and open to everyone, the committee seduced into relinquishing their control and laid aside their persistent hacking need to delve into and chart out the implications of

everything. The punch, the veracity, the revolution lay in those words: small, rigorous, untracked, and open to everyone. No one in public education had ever consistently achieved any of that. Punching ahead to a decade later, 2002, one of the most successful New Vision Schools is in a fight for its life a fellow New Vision school principal recently told me, that the Superintendent was trying, forcing them to make it into a school for the gifted and talented – is this success or failure? The real politics of public schooling yield to the loudest, even if it is to transgress a basic principle espoused or an inviolate promise.

Spotty and mostly overly precious demonstrations of what was possible in City schooling, of which much was made, often more illusory than real over the last twenty years lay the groundwork for change. Not to sound mean and cramped, children flourished for the most part in these schools if the leaders' ambitions were without limit. High velocity visibility was a politics of its own and it is small and stingy to put it down. Protection comes from wide public acclaim. Even the precious needed protection against the unruly predators at the unyielding steely gates of change. (Note: Debbie Meier armored by a *MacArthur Genius* grant and Anthony Alvarado, by far the most impassioned and empathic and visionary of all school leaders in New York City was slaughtered on a scaffolding of his own making underlings were found painting his house, doing domestic chores without remuneration and on top of that lending him money – or so the story went.)

New Visions perhaps because of the thick bond colorful posters inviting all inclusive participation or the ad in the Sunday Times or the sixteen thousand RFP's mailed to any group in the five boroughs with even a tacit connection to children and young people. Power brokers orbiting always for profitable opportunities entered into a world they believed was paved with yellow brick roads of gold. (The corporate power brokers ultimately found their niche in the recent phenomenon of public charter schools, which needed huge infusions of private funding because public funds could not be used for any capitol expenditures (buildings, heating, etc.). As the privileged had come to expect for their children and believe to be their right soon off the pages of the New Visions proposals there would be a range of viable schools reflecting the true pluralism, the range of perspectives of the families in our City in which apple-shiny faces of children would pirouette about exciting and provocative questioning and learning.

When the thick stock posters in pastels and primary colors announcing the *Call for New Visions Schools* appeared absolutely everywhere, church lobbies, supermarkets, bus stops, utility poles, building foyers, washrooms, and when the proposal package – sixteen thousand – addresses gotten from every source that had a roster filled with children and family names – Request for Proposal packets arrived with the quote from Mistrial, people believed that the invitation was real and authentic. Thousands of New Yorkers started playing at creating a public school, searching deep in the leagues of their personal histories, their imaginations for that idea of what school would be like if it nurtured, formed community, demanded mastery, and stood for social justice. The what if, the *think big*, the largest from the deepest most ancient space, that place where one knows, realizes one is finite and to ensure a legacy could create or recreate a world in which people now considered faceless and expendable can go on in new found personal glory and accomplishment.

And on one April Sunday an ad did appear in the New York Times and followed in other local papers calling, inviting individuals to invent a public school and on the next two days – to the great disbelief of the still skeptical - more than 500 people called to get more information. The doubters the skeptics were not *Barbarians at the Gate* for nothing suddenly saw they had stepped onto a gushing well had dipped into the cold spring water of gold nuggets and I was driven on nearly mercilessly like oxen tilling with a yet updated plough. I learned there were marketers and workers and I was doomed, to be relegated to facelessness, to pushing the hand with the pen by a passion and intensity that always threatened to implode and so reluctantly I once again became that invisible hand-maiden the huge tit the wellspring of mother's milk the great boulder-thigh nurturer and not the sword brandishing Joan of Arc. I never strayed far from the mark my image was fixed whatever my gifts passion intensity or vision.

The brutishness the ambitions, the toughness, the sense of entitlement of leaders of The Fund as it was then called rubbed against my intractable sense of unworthiness like a lingering life afraid, tottering on the edge of indecision on how alive to be, always tottering on the edge grateful to not explode into visibility and obviousness into a kind of vital and tangible recognition of a public acclaim for being at the route cause of success. The bullies bullied, I worked harder and harder and left only when the work had exceeded beyond all expectation and I had receded into irrelevance in proportion to the raging bullying to build the mobile and advancing Trojan horse. As I departed the Annenberg Foundation awarded this movement for school reform 150 million

dollars and ultimately New Visions was given multiple millions by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for a variation on a theme: multiple small schools within one large school building renamed 21st Century Schools. However, a very little modified RFP was used to create these small schools along with the same participation of the many and the same interview and review process. Whatever may be claimed I have the first drafts of the New Visions RFP on my home computer. The RFP spread like wild flowers a colleague or so I thought asked for a copy to use in Chicago never giving an ounce of credit to anyone of us in New York: *plunder and plagiarize that is why the good lord made your eyes but always call it research* or so Tom Lehrer wrote and sang.

What am I adding to a story that has been told and re-told many times, I ask myself. I don't know I answer. My fingers refuse to quit is all I know. My story persists, wants to be told. On the most sweltering day of June 1992, 282 proposals stacked up like a thick pile of flapjacks arrived, foreigners on the shores of Ellis Island. Sixteen thousand proposal packages reaped nearly 300 applicants from unlikely pairing of dozens of teams of people. Proposal packages were mailed out to anyone who requested one, or to any group involved with youth or families, we blanketed the City. Groups of people began to gather to talk school. Like massive quilting bees, a milling and brewing at a Living Theater piece, political cell meetings, people congregated to think of the *what if*, about the shape a school would take if from scratch, if from imaginations one would grow. *Suddenly, it is as if a group of best friends sprung up in strangers' living rooms*, one applicant commented. There was allure, a cache about creating a school. Not willing or wanting to squander opportunity or chance an urge for a better world, one with a personal dimension became evident in the proposals. Regret being an early warning of loose footing. Our deaths lurk everywhere. They are with us each day.

On an October day in early 2000 and small schools swell still multiple amoebas in an amniotic bureaucratic sea. I am far removed from their formation - on a walk back to my home through the Northern most end of Central Park coming toward me a boy about five or six in an impeccable Burberry-like trench coat, the temperature skirting 40 degrees. Lifted high above his head, like the vessel/goblet of Sunday church wine, or the palm on Easter Sunday, was a branch with about six fading, crunchy leaves, yellowish or brown. He was lifting his knees up high as if prancing a man was about twenty steps ahead. And he was shouting to the sky. I looked at him and smiled. *Want to see something beautiful?* He stopped and asked me. I shared in response, *and soon all the leaves will be red and purple and then crunch*

brown and yellow to the ground and thanks so much for showing me and you know what else is very beautiful, you! He skipped on, still holding the branch high and turned back and said, *it's because I've got this raincoat on!* Not wanting to sound syrupy and falsely sentimental, I wonder what will happen when he bursts into his classroom waving the twig and shouting out for everyone to look? And that is precisely the question?

NOTE: What follows are taken directly from daily composition notebooks. They represent my reflections as they occurred as well as pertinent quotes and information that struck my fancy as I proceeded down a much-uncharted path. Fragments. Notes. Building blocks, a work in process with experience, grit, imagination, and a little chutzpah to guide:

June 20, 1992

South Bronx Coalition of Churches patterned after similar group in Brooklyn under the leadership of the Reverend Johnny Rae Youngblood. Connected also to housing efforts like his Nehemiah Houses in East New York. Part of a national network supported by the International Areas Foundation (IAF). They want to have a good school. Bulwark of community. Part of St. Augustus. Advisor - development director of Catholic high school. Issues. Not direct competition, South Bronx Academy, not restricted to families of South Bronx. Open selection. Parents, 125 students. Community life department - work South Bronx, action: kinds of issues facing families, training families to be active in issues related to community, housing/police. Question - role of Church in public life? Radical. Catholic worker. Voluntary - poverty, Christian values non-violence. Give powers to the poor; not sign up to be in charge of housing, health-care. Clergy in Latin America, Liberation Theology - Public life training for adults - Pastoral life for adults. Activate steering committee, ten people - Professional ministers caucus, values and ethics. Questions of moral education put back in public domain. Connected to Church. Different values. Ethicists. Key value issues. Existential presence. Reflex. Theological Texts - Quality of life. Religious traditions. Biology. Racism - Theology of Public Life. Put our faith in action. Issue: separation of Church and State...

June 20, 1992

Caribbean American Family Services.
Creole. Access. New Organization. Affiliated with St. Luke's Church.
Resources bring with them? Next Wave Schools.

June 23, 1992

Group of Upper West Side Mothers - Want gifted school. We grapple with word. Mean it more broadly - Hard to get consensus. Told them the emphasis was parents' role in governance - Heterogeneity an issue.

June 23, 1992

School District 9 - Director of Proposal Development answers only to Superintendent. Partnerships. Submitted a proposal to Dept. of Education for federal grant under title of 21st Century Schools. District directed. Trying to decide whether to align with Alternative High School division or the Bronx High School Superintendent - Critical issue if have seamless 7-12 graded school.

Note: the Alternative High School division was formed by rump group of schools lofty exclusively linked liberals chip on shoulder self-righteous break away from high school division to form their own alternative high school division where they played by created different set of rules and budget formulations. These were the reformers, had to align with them while working at the same time with high school division and ensuring that they were not suspicious of my alliances and motives. At least the mainstream were forthcoming, the reformers had disdain for community and high regard for their own opinions and school programs the last thing they would espouse was to prepare students to chose to go to Harvard tenuous the relationship of the alternative school community with the Fund (*The Barbarians at the Gate*). One group clamoring for the rubric of a democratic common space and the other for the rhetoric of one for the great unwashed, the masses - the hypocrisy cut both ways. St. Bernard's teas for mommies and lunches for Brearily mom's these were the linen covered tables of network and repose.

Meeting blues - ahead the content dizzying and indecipherable: Budget expert, director of instruction, head of reimbursable programs here. Results based education model. Thematic. Olympics, everything revolves around - Evaluation. Performance based. Likert System-based. Collaborative. Cross-governance. School-based Management. Non-traditional - like a Scarsdale school - Entire demographics of District diverse. School-wide project.

Business agencies. IBM - involved. Bronx Academy - City-In - Schools model - High School, Municipal Governance Corporate School (IBM) Human Resources/Parks/Arts Partners Metropolitan Academy in Brooklyn. Montana/Oregon - Montana middle school, Oregon, International Consortium, District elementary school - District 9, worst/poorest economic - Superintendent finalist, Austin Texas for Superintendent's job. Data - Middle school movement - Harlem Street School - Milliken, top floor, Department Store in Atlanta - Leader to be selected. Director/co-director. Training 350 teachers this summer in State initiative - Sylvia Ashton Warner -parenthetical. Like a sweeping paragraph-less solipsism of education speak - dizzying! Claptrap. Rot. I am sickened as I listen. I have that smile when in a foreign country and everyone around speaks in a different language as you smile on feigning understanding -This the bouillabaisse of gourmandize proposal talk. If I hadn't worked in the Board, I wouldn't understand, no less cope - Everything under the sun, to come, and then some. No one cracks a smile. Gobbledygook. More than seven years later they are in a morass of failure. The Deputy Chancellor, chief chef of that concoction was driven out, and went to the greener, much greener, pastures of IBM.

June 23, 1992

Visit Rindge School. Boston. Mapping City where services needed. Redesign. Build physical model. - Walking and engaged or experiential math.

June 23, 1992

Visit School District 15. Although Irish and she Puerto Rican, they mimic a Jewish married couple - The Superintendent a supplicant - sweet, weak - She, the Deputy, a tiger. Powerful people of the enlightened political brew live here and have been on the School Board. One member also serves as the liaison of The Diamond Foundation, the source of the funding for this initiative. Always how small and tightly knit these circles...

June 24, 1992

Assistant Principal from Brooklyn High School. Add global curriculum - Regents' scores. Wants to break away.

June 24, 1992

Meeting with the Chief Financial Officer, High School Division. Discuss how to fiscally articulate and rectify and coordinate district and high school budget allocations - Budgeting systems distinct. (Is this one school system?) - How to

apportion district contribution, high school contribution, average teachers salaries in high school, and in districts. Basic support: principals, guidance counselors, paraprofessionals, and secretary. Instruction: kids X periods of instruction at \$30.74, maximum class size, 34 - Alternative high schools, ratio 1 to 16. Need new funding formula -Basic support > services > % higher > reasonable set of figures. 100 to 750 students create thresholds. Smaller schools per capita more. Dollars divided by teachers' salary. Cut every school by same amount. Need budget adjustment - Reasonably organized - More small schools, more budget adjustment, against everybody. Antagonize unless there is full funding of the formula. THE FORMULA. The sacrosanct formula, which this gentleman made up, devised. This is not a tablet handed down from the mount. (**Note:** My eyes glaze over, the syntax the bread and potatoes of this discussion is *we don't give a flying fuck for this initiative and this is how we will keep the controls.*)

Dizzying – the gospel of funding according to this budget architect – loaded with protectionism – it didn't take me long to figure out his definition of equitable funding – never get rid of anybody in the high schools although in schools of four to five thousand there are only one hundred left by the senior year - keep everything in tact. I figured it cost about \$150,000 per graduate at this rate. But the funding formula is not to be touched or tampered with it is equally fair to everyone – in the high schools that is – unlike in the school districts where it is done on a hierarchy of favoritism and neighborhoods. But by his logic, he was absolutely right. Students' hefty disappearance rate aside - every high school got the same thing. This funding formula that he created of which he was justifiably proud - seemed not to be created by him - but handed down to *Moses* along with the *Ten Commandments* it is inviolate. Like moss or fleece or mold, I actually am getting an attachment for him – he actually believes what he says and sees no hypocrisy – no fatal flaw.

New Schools: One shot, amount spread over 3 years – OTPS (other than personal services) - \$100,000. Formula, new one, negotiated. Small School Formula must be equitable. Need New Formula Committee, the director of the Fund, my boss, suggested.

And I'll order and warehouse furniture for everyone, he volunteered. *Ordering furniture is part of the creation of a new school; it needs to reflect the vision, the mission,* I say. She, the boss - eyes crossed. *Don't push on the only ally, the only person in the system speaking in real terms.* In his way, he is the only one who seems capable of thinking about reform and understanding its

implications. If the FORMULA, his funding formula seems immutable to him. He actually can think outside the box - Although everyone espouses doing that to me. - He just wants the box to be of his own making, and under his control. And I trust him. Her word was always final. The way she saw the world, I learned I had to see the world – if inside I sputtered and simmered. He did relinquish and have schools request the furniture they believed best reflected their educational vision.

June 25, 1999

Debbie Meier, MacArthur Genius Award winner - celebrated urban educator with good reason. Like tendrils on a flower or expansive urban tree roots she was connected to the liberal power elite across the country – including owning a country house on a piece of land that was virtual a collective of the contributors and leaders of *The Nation*. She positioned herself well. But granted she was a necessary and important force and voice for the positive possibilities of urban education. Advisor. Good – voracious yet sage protagonist. Issues: Relationship of Center (hers) to the Fund. Different approaches of Fund and Center. Have five, ten, and fifteen and twenty year plans - ten new schools now. Phase in ten to twelve more. Then charter schools. (How fortuitous, no wonder she was a genius, *Commentary* - October 1999.) Mentored by one of the new schools, use those as prototypes.

Note: Her model would set up a series of small schools within a single high school building, therein the transformation. However, all the small schools would have to by mandate ascribe to her philosophy of education and pedagogy. Ultimately the model took hold if not caste exactly in her own image ever after.

Debbie quotes: *Don't say staff development and training. Say growth. Important what happens in instructional process. If people haven't experienced this kind of education, how will they practice it? Don't use word progressive.*

My boss and this Debbie were sniffing around each other like potentially wounded untamed she animals with a brood back in some nest. Unrivaled in the entire country, this urban education genius – this pioneer – this woman extraordinaire – and she was – was unwilling or reluctant to share, relegate the limelight – yield her leadership place. Along comes my boss, the spider who sat down beside her didn't frighten her away but drew her into a hefty combat zone. I am the self-appointed shuttle diplomat – the go-between. We

can't antagonize this Debbie after all, *The Nation* supports her – she won a MacArthur genius award for her work. Plus she does have a lot of good ideas and insights – real good old-fashioned left leaning liberal arrogant in her rightness but clearly to herself right in her rightness. She had a strong paternalistic/maternal streak in which she was a firm and absolute proponent that only educators should shape education and that there was no room for the meddler the parent the community in the business of the curriculum multiple perspectives reflecting our pluralistic City meant to her, her perspective sacrosanct and right and my boss the female lead *Barbarian at the Gate* with me the perennial shadow running back and forth.

Note: ultimately they saw a useful alliance and with the *god forbid* entrenched right wing supported group of Ex's ex principals and district office superintendents and officials housed at the conservative think tank –The Manhattan Institute. The two women bonded to get the Annenberg funds to perpetuate the movement, their moment of school reform. Soon after these groups merged I left. Motives asunder, but I knew waste and cynicism had grabbed this movement the moment for change around its ruddy neck, when the acclaimed left, the funds would be squandered and rarely get to the desk of a still inquiring third grader they became their brothers' keeper they became mirror images of the system they wished to replace. I moved on, no better but before becoming miserably disheartened and bitter. Further and disheartening, the roles of the major forces in education would change in the movement toward Institutionalization, which to me meant nullify and void that democratic participation in the process (that word) of creating new small schools would be left in the hands solely of the leadership of both unions and the Board of Education bureaucracy.

Mother Earth nurturer-in-chief left rather abruptly to salvage whatever pride and to keep intact the pretext or pretense of being a brilliant strategic warrior and leader extraordinaire. I had or to run from feeling diminished, still don't know the answer to that.

June 25, 1992

Victim Services Agency 1983: - Project Smart - School Victims Assistance Program. Intermediate School - Teenagers the most victimized group. Violence homes, streets, school - Infusion school, multipurpose - Conflict resolution, school victim assistance program, and *Safe Harbor* -Give kids an opportunity to discuss violence, every aspect. Creating an atmosphere, give schools staff person - *Project Being Healthy*. Provide one crises counselor m-

Also martial arts -Victim never to blame - curriculum interactive and course on violence in literature - My thought to survey literature with violence as theme or as central. Fit in. Not overburden. Team-teach. Teachers take course in crisis counseling. Teachers get stipends.

Note: I had long worked cooperatively or in partnership with Lucy Friedman first of Victim Services Agency and then President of The After School Corporation founded with general funds from George Soros. Together we discussed the above programs, at one time co-directed a middle school in the Bronx, and ultimately gave me the opportunity to create the template for *The After School Corporation* also known as *TASC* at a particular visit years after the programs were flourishing and exceedingly well funded with a national voice I was referred to as their *Mother Creator*. There I am again a succulent nurturance-baring tit impulses toward equity and justice always wind up at bountiful breasts.

June 25, 1992

Next steps:

Letters receipt of proposal

Line up readers, 4 per proposal

Set up charts on computer

Get messenger service for readers

Establish proposal advisory council.

Set up dates of interviews

Meetings in September for all successful applicants.

Develop letter to readers:

To: Readers

From: N. B.

Re: New Visions Schools Proposal Review

Date: July 11, 1992

Thank you for agreeing to read and rate New Visions Schools Proposals. Attached you will find proposals with code numbers, a rating sheet for each proposal, the RFP.

The response to our RFP was good, about 300 proposals. Each proposal reflects time, effort, and most importantly concern about the schooling of New York City's young people.

Individuals and groups were asked to create concepts for small, innovative schools focusing on adolescents. Schools had to include grades 7-12, but could house pre-K through college.

And advisory committee will hold interviews and make the final selection in the last week in July. Your rating is vital in order to identify the strongest proposals to present to the advisory committee.

You will be informed of the successful applicants in early August.

With questions or concerns, please contact Naomi Barber at:

Please return these proposals attached to the completed rating sheets to the Fund for NYC Public Education.

It is understood that the time for the proposal review is brief and intense. Thank you.

July 5, 1992

Meet with Brooklyn tutorial
Harlem Boys Choir. Good.
City Volunteer Corps reader.
Advisory: Most deserving now. Efforts made real. Award now. Next stage.
Try. Funds own choice.
Honorable mentions. Segregated pedagogues

Categories of Schools represented in initial group funded, thoughts on:

CBO, Districts Non-aligned groups. Individuals.
Youth Force. Important to consider.

What kinds of schools do we want to demonstrate the array of educational opportunities that can exist under the rubric of public education?

Universities, CBO, District, Inclusion, Cultural Organizations, Pedagogues,
Religious, Work-related, Career, Immersion, Unions, Themes, Urban
development, etc.

July 15, 1992

School Reform via RFP...New and good schools result.

Volume, Quality, Every Proposal gets 3 readings.

Building schools

Extend process...Announce

Set up 50 interviews...10 get planning grants, put in categories, Board picks

10, Fund picks 10

Set up interviewing committee and dates for interviews

Put together press packet

Note: This has become an educational movement. Norm F. reads all proposals

Every group receiving an interview has an opportunity to hear the nature of the questions and to get prepped – all know, most come.

July 15, 1992

Stephen Phillips - Superintendent Alternative High School Division

This is a City at Risk. Take the big schools that are not working, the large comprehensive high schools.

Take over a large failing high school. Keep the kids. Excess the faculty.

Rent space. Stop taking in new kids.

Preferential UFT transfer plan get rid of faculty, graduate students out.

Match CBO and Teachers, Teacher and District and Principals, Teachers/CBO

Phase out large high school.

Join District and High School Division.

1992, Debbie Meier did exactly this, she phased out two failing high schools and created smaller schools within. At one school she created lower and upper schools and a teacher-training center. At another she created a series of small high schools.

Have timetable and advisors.

More Listening. Professor at TC, Columbia (Professor G.)

Bring community service into community in a structured way. Social science and career, service. Democracy: see themselves as participating citizens, service to others, recognize obligation to society-at-large, have power to affect things. Styles of learning but one in small teams group work, cooperative learning. Stoneham, study education and school centerpiece of community). Not so much for direct utilitarian. Benefits to poor. Students for Educational Opportunity. Good community service, meaningful job.

July 21, 1992

Meeting High School Superintendents.
Evaluation.
Budget...benefits, money for project directors
Alternative High School Division, Stan L., Deputy Chancellor
We need new kind of structures. 7-12 office at the Board.
Staff Development for the Board
Go directly to participants
Participants select staff development.
Accountability
Funding
Technical Assistance NCREST –TC Columbia U.
Small schools need to relate. Superintendents want to be part of the process.
Dual governance.
Leadership Training, process of inquiry, reference, RIGOR/NURTURE.
Peer support, outside support, groups' get together, and mentor
NCREST (my note, overly ambitious, get organized)
First week of school
Teachers, outside groups, Superintendents
New Schools Coalition, Campus Coalition, New Visions, High School Div. New
Schools
Planning model
Hard people lead/ teaching strategies
Person...support
Backward planning, transitional office.
Advisory Board. (Board begins to bureaucratize, co-opt?)
Formative evaluation, resource brokering,
Teachers Center for school leaders, especially system's leaders.
Jump to November 1992

November 12, 1992

Renaissance School
New High School in Queens opening 1995, there will be six new schools. UFT
Chapter Chair and Queens High School Superintendent...Port of Entry.
NO SPACE IN QUEENS.
SPACE BECOMES THE ISSUE

Citicorp's Building? Parents bring their children to work, school nearby?

Boulevard Theater, Real Estate Agent, Newmark Lewis?

Put lease request as capitol project, in capitol budget.

Proposal goes before Office of Management and Budget, Nov 16

Need to contact School Construction Authority

Identify space,

Long Island City School opens in 1995

Need 110 square feet per student

Boulevard Hospital Space easily converted to a school.

Send in Form 1 to start process.

Citicorp's Building, Real Estate Agent, Phil.

Need a Fall Back Plan...Phases

Superintendent of Queens High Schools is a knot of contradictions.

She hosts luncheon for teachers with linen table cloths and real dishes, and talks about how she wants to help identify space, tries to ingratiate herself and demonstrate she is the better, more trustworthy superintendent.

Renaissance School

If they give me an apple, I take a bite. The self-effacing leader-designate told this aggregate group of parents and teachers. The little band of teachers, who with him created the vision for the school out of chants in prayer rooms before Buddhist artifacts nodding in consent. The humor did not elude the parents who had entrusted their children to this school without history, without permanent space, created by a group of teachers led by one of the community's favorite teachers. He was the local music teacher and their children felt safe and inspired enveloped in his songs. What lay just beneath the light heartedness of the exchange was a spiritualism that lifted itself in eerie, atonal sounds at the beginning and end of each day. This little coterie of teachers was Buddhist of a particular Japanese sect. Defected Jews and Christians, lapsed Catholics, and others had come together to pray in spare rooms guided by the script of a departed Japanese whom they told me was like Dewey. Skittish about religion, an anathema to me, I could see their goodness, and sense of community, and their ultimate capacity to handle anything dealt to them in this process of forming a school. The parents, by the very open, gregarious nature of the dialogue also demonstrated a basic sense of belief in them and trust. Already, trust is a strange and strong departure from the ways

most parents feel that send their children to public schools. They know the converse, do not trust, and do not entrust. And they are right. And here a school barely more than a dream and vision, a place with no history was a school to be trusted. The implications are daunting. Belief in what doesn't yet exist, rather than place your child in a real school in which you sense and know can and does do real damage. Here at least one could hope.

Note: Ultimately the Renaissance became an early 7-12 charter school, successful academically, and the first team infused their Buddhism in the very walls of the school with a spirit of intense joyfulness and student appreciation with students' out performing most peers in Queens and in the City. The leader, Monte J., tape-recorded the experience of creating the school during his commute to and from the school it became his very doctoral dissertation at Teachers College. The school was co-lead by a parent.

Back to the Queens Superintendent: Two issues were on the table. One was space, and the other heterogeneity and the commingling, the true coming together of the widest cross section of students drawn from every dimension existent in the City, and more specifically in the Borough of Queens.

Given that many of these families were among the newest immigrants to New York City, it was interesting that they were being asked to grapple with and understand the implications and commitment to true diversity in a public school. The other issue, space, and the fact the infant school was a guest, euphemistically speaking in its current site, an already overcrowded neighborhood public school, did not seem odd to people evicted or fleeing from countries in which for a variety of reasons there was no room or space for them.

What had not yet been revealed was how vile the conditions of tenancy would be. There is a misguided belief that schools own the buildings they house. Citizens, and the taxpayers own the buildings they are part of the municipality, on loan to the Board of Education. However, squatters are spurned. Toilets, cafeterias, custodial service, and drinking fountains are denied them. Passes are necessary to go from one sector to the other. In buildings, a form of *Apartheid* has been adopted. This little insurrection, this little band of insurgents would have to learn to transcend the daily indignities and harassment, if it were to stay alive.

Acquiring a permanent space meant that these individuals would have to go out on the high seas of the open real estate market, locate a space, negotiate at least initially with the landlord, and then design and oversee a renovation. The very nature of this odd sojourn is antithetical to the very nature of, the essence of the Board of Education. Never dreaming that parents and teachers would prevail in the ruthless and cunning procurement of a permanent home, they were set free on what was thought to be a futile and crippling odyssey. Harassed by day and denied room to breathe or move about, they were charged with the responsibility of finding a new home. Now anyone who has read even the scantiest bit of history knows that the bitterest and most vehement wars are fought over territory and space. To the immigrant parents, and to the most economically disadvantaged families, this quest was intriguing but not strange threatening but not uncanny. The politics of creating a new school meant finding your place, physically within the system.

These inventors of education were on their own. If anybody ever gave a gift, an opportunity to cut teeth, get sea legs, develop stamina and fortitude, to become deeply politicized, it was this charge. The irony of being given nothing but a little corner of a building in which to hothouse incubate, knowing eviction notices would be pre-eminent, set the group on fire. What the school system did not realize is the very vehemence that brought these parents here, was what would fuel this quest. Local politicians who depended on these votes, got into the fray, local merchants banded together to keep these customers who vouched for on-going commitments to their children's school lives in the neighborhood, and those local political clubs that just like a good fight, or the Catholics who do not like public schools, or the public who no longer believe in the viability of an institution which has too often failed them, rallied to help find a space. Future jurist, and voters, future citizens with knowledge and questions would be groomed in this school and in a space worthy of this charge.

The director of the Renaissance School said that the entire community would work to locate the space, to design the space, and be necessary to the vitality and viability of the school. One of the mothers, an architect, was charged with the design process. The design had to reflect the vision of the school, which was committed to developing future leaders for New York City, for a democratic New York City.

Now the borough of Queens is the port of entry for most new immigrants to New York City, as many nations as exist within the UN, so do they live and come to Queens. In this new infant school with a *population of less than 200*, there were *fifty-four language groups and cultures represented*, not counting the ethnic and racial and economically diverse residents of more than a decade. Fires in bellies for better lives had not subsided or been subdued, the dreams of new lands, new opportunities for children were like hot coals under the feet of the educators. The impetus for this school to work was filled with the fervor of individuals who had risked everything or who had fled real danger. And in the search for space, there was the possibility for lessons in civics that are never taught in citizenship classes. The underbelly of the City came alive and engaged in this pursuit.

Ultimately, a local lawyer and politico without children, and a strip of merchants, and a group of parochial school parents banded together to obtain a space from a landlord who had abandoned his department store and in which existed the dry goods of Russia just after the collapse of communism. It seemed like a front or a stage set. The landlord also was totally out of reach. Through some undercover sleuthing, it was discovered that he was a felon owing huge amounts of back taxes, and a hard working Italian laborer who just happened to get his hands on some prime real estate.

Infiltrating his life with hand-made gifts, cakes, children performing songs that had written just for him, and a scale model of what his building could become if he would only lease it to us, and nary a Friday without encircling him as he reached for the end of the week. We prevailed, not without all of the rival politicians voting together for our getting this space leased. Turmoil and high tensions at the Fund were blunted by these sojourns with the stalwarts to stand tall and shoulder-to-shoulder and to marvel moved that what I had only imagined was manifest. Hard core politically strategic action devised by the participants both young and seasoned in the battlements of local and often small victories from hummus to pizza to kosher hot dogs with sauerkraut to sushi and round Macintosh apples from the aprons of stores owned by Pakistanis always on the phone these were the warriors who wrapped a celestial arm about the shoulder of the owner with explicit vows of silence about a past revealed just to gain his consent.

So the Buddhists chanted, the parents organized, and the politicians found something that could join together to believe in, that further ingratiated them with emerging voters. The space, it is there in Jackson Heights Queens on a

street with forty different nationalities hosting restaurants. The space reflects a combination of progressive pedagogical principle, and a place for a coming together of architecture conducive to gathering and defining common things, common ideas, and an uncommon strength to prevail. Throughout the building soft colorful pillows and benches for students to contemplate the world revealed each day and in which they knew they could grow and grow it.

Of the initial fifteen schools that were created out of New Visions Schools Round one, twelve got spaces, one stayed in a school building but had students spending most of their time in cultural institutions all of which modified their spaces to accommodate the students, and two are in the process of the next level of space acquisition. The teams both of which grew out of incorporated community based organizations will own the space, which the Board of Ed. will lease for the school, which they created and still oversee. This is by far the most revolutionary change in the way the Board of Ed. does business to come out of the creation of these small schools.

In communities in which banks have red-lined out the possibility of home ownership the advent of groups of the red-lined encamped individuals creating a public school holding a long-term lease and designing the interior space to reflect the school's vision sets precedence and can only spring from the places where poetry harbors. Having a school reflect the ethos of the collective parent body and to hold the essence of an educational philosophy in a physical space is common in elite circles or upscale suburbs. Equity and justice rumble without contrition deep within this endeavor, the Renaissance School. The significance of this achievement is still too broad to grasp except reflectively slowly perfectly apt for a Buddhist group of lead educators. **Note:** During the entire process of creating the Renaissance School we never uttered the word Buddhist or the connection of this creative team to anything so Eastern so foreign the original proposal would immediately have been disregarded as submitted by a group of profligates. At every twist and turn of creating the Renaissance School one keenly felt a desire for democracy and a sacred space the realization of an ideal the just beyond the cusp of possibility families sought when they came freely or were chased or evicted to find a freedom a better place the chance for a better world for their children in the Borough of Queens.

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Binding as a New Vision school was that there be diversity and heterogeneity in classrooms in fact and beyond rhetoric or subterfuge. It is one thing for the families to send their children to one school, but many of them never intended to have their children in one classroom together, maybe next door and around a lunchroom table or in a gym or in the playground, but not when formal classes and lessons were in session. The phenomenon of *separate but equal lessons* is known as *tracking* within schools. It is the height of class discrimination, it is our very own caste system, and it is as intractable and intransigent as a belief in public schools. It is why we tolerate public schools, because our children don't really have to learn side-by-side with someone poorer whose family has scant formal literacy.

To have the rainbow of faces in a schoolyard or auditorium is one thing. Here the tinsel began to fly. Here the chanting in private undergirded provided an expansive tolerance for an unruly but civilized and uncompromising conversation. Students would be kept together, mixed up together in all classes, small group work and projects, at the heart of the school pedagogy all would hold a range of students. This was an unbending and unyielding tenet of the New Visions agreement for the school. Parents who couldn't abide would have to leave the school. At a meeting of the Renaissance School one mother sobbed. She was very black, her clothes were clean but looked off the rack of Goodwill she cried because her child was the one to whom they were tacitly referring her child was the contaminant, generically speaking. She felt appalled, apologetic, but determined to get more for her son, for her son *to get his own*. The parents sat there in their own grief. They're own hopes and dreams drawn to hers like love driven mating couples. *It will work, we will make it work, don't cry mother, we all want the same thing.*

On a Saturday following this exhaustive and emotional school wide conversation The Buddhists met in the home in which they had established a prayer space. I joined them though not in the chanting and kept looking at these strange Eastern gods and goddess, the ritual Buddha's, a little Jewish twinge came over me, although never practicing I knew we were not suppose to worship craven images and was this one? If I could have freed up my mouth and throat and tongue, might have joined in. Democracy got a victory, a rallying call, and a chance, even embellished by Japanese Buddhist chants.

The self-evident is what eludes us in school reform. That architecture should reflect an educational vision as should the furnishing that the school budget should be tied to the educational concept, that governance grew out of the vision and mission, that the way teachers work with each other and students all, all must reflect something central, something collective in common which everyone shares. Structures are mutable and necessary to fit these items around, like draping a mannequin. A vision is expansive, but at its core it doesn't change, a totality and interconnectedness of purpose and action and mission. Rebels run amok speak in words like these, not proper school people. We came up with the phrase, *essential director*, to describe the leaders' role. The Renaissance School was to be governed by committee, by a collaborative school governance committee and community. Communication, collaboration, consensus were the watchwords. They wanted articulation across the curriculum. A health clinic with a strong emphasis on nutrition was to be installed. This was all to be put into the *memo of understanding* with the school system. Little did the world outside the tight knit enclave know that these thoughts started forming into words, more formalized thoughts in wordless, timeless Buddhist revelatory chants.

Scuffle: The lid blew off, when it became evident that as part of the New Visions initiative parents were to sit on the committee to select the leader. *Never!* The Queens superintendent said. *Never happen! Why?* Father X on the committee asked. *Because I said so,* she replied. Next day a poem of indignation, of father love and lullabies, of war marshaling songs arrived at the Chancellor's office. *What's this?* He called me to ask. *A fervent father wanting a place at the bureaucratic table,* I responded. *What's his number?* The Chancellor, now Ray Cortines called him and thanked him and guaranteed that he would be there a member in good standing of the interview committee.

Soft porn or sharp pointy tits jutting salaciously from a virtually sprayed on sweater with a head of thickly coifed hair as if with extensions, blood ruby red lips and heavily rouged cheeks, this the woman who was the Head of the high school division. She was marshaled by the Chancellor and agreeable as his personal agent to execute the orders to install the parent representatives at the table. She waited patiently refreshing her lips and spraying her coifed hair to keep it in place as the Queen's superintendent huffed and puffed pacing around until she settled into a chair along with the rebellious committee from the Renaissance school to pick a leader. Prior to this moment leaders of schools were selected solely on the recommendation of the polity as long as qualifications were in place, easily gotten, the job was one of patronage. The

head of the high school division along with a bowl of fruit, soda, coffee and a bountiful tray of Italian bakery cookies took on the weighty responsibility of leading in the selection of a leader for the Renaissance school bringing the meeting to order. Candidates selected from a pool of applicants were invited for interviews, ten in total and ranked at the end of each interview. And as the day drifted into dusk it was deemed that the beloved music teacher and the titular head of the planning and proposal committee the man who *couldn't bite from an apple* without according to himself falling on his knees a supplicant left with the committee the principal designate.

The Renaissance School in June 1999 turned seven and had their first class graduating from high school. All of the students would be attending college. The original Buddhist chanting team stayed in tact through volcanic upheavals chanting their way back if bruised to cohesion. It remained wildly inclusive with parents and community members holding sway and with a fervent platform. The Renaissance sits on a site on the Queens's merchant strip the department store once a seeming front for a Russia black market and an Italian builder who now sat on the school's advisory board and can be found sitting among the students in avid discussion about *where the moon goes once it is bid goodnight or about exactly where the Balkans are*. Meals are open events where a local lawyer brings his Italian-speaking mother in for lunch once a week. The lawyer never had kids, now considers these children his. The architecture mother brings future clients to see her work. There are bright, primary colors, little nooks and crannies for students to meet and read and speak. Rooms are arranged around public spaces, and clustered for cooperation. Different floors belong to different grade levels, although there are plenty of spaces for students of all ages to convene, and so to the faculty.

What once was a department store where one could count the panties, the bras, the blouses, the coats, and the smocks used often by the wives and mother-in-laws of laborers and recent immigrants to cover their simple dresses are gone, the owner and holder of the lease brings family members and new arrivals clears his throat and wipes tears bubbling against the lids of his eyes, *this is why he came here* he claims, working six days a week to build a city where, where the children come together cheerful and radiant with the new knowledge they get every day. What a coming together politicians, merchants the local Catholic clergy and people from almost every corner of the world where children flourish and yes perform according to standardized tests beyond grade level. And still it is not widely known that the inner belly, the inner soul the primordial vision lives within some controversial Japanese

form of Buddhism *Soka Gakkai International* of which the essential question is: *what each of us can do now to benefit those around us. Peace and the transformation of society begin from the exercise of this spirit in our immediate surroundings. Based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. - SGI Quarterly July 2009*) New York! New York!

Note: The Renaissance School went on to become a charter school. It still holds its promise now fifteen years later. The director received a Ph.D. from Teachers College Columbia based on his texts, tapes recorded as he drove back and forth to school from his home in the Bronx. The tapes told of the daily experiences in creating the school. As he attested *he bites the apple if offered* so he leaves nothing out as he ruffles through his feelings and closely reviews the doings of the school. Perhaps it was the teachings of Buddha but distributive and shared power had a large role and the patience to listen to hear each of the members whatever age of the Renaissance school community.

EL PUENTE ACADEMY

Tracking down nearly every lead given me about some outlier out there who would create a terrific New Visions School, I was given the name of LGA who after daily phone calls yes I will give him the message remained more ghostlike and fictional than real. Among lessons learned it was that these very irascible one-of-a-kind individuals remained true to their singular modus operandi difficult to reach and unwieldy and resistant upon first meeting most of which were by happenstance or serendipitous. At a scheduled meeting of the Latino Round Table which received funding from the very foundation that funded the New Visions initiative and could not turn my request to meet down I found myself in the presence of perhaps the twenty most notable men and women who had been warriors in the army of the *Young Lords* these were individuals feared by their threats of far reaching upheaval of the establishment almost any and every New York City bureaucracy. Infamy followed them forward and was kept fresh like an old dear plant with lots of sunlight and water past notoriety pushed them into positions of power their activism from radical bomb throwing threats to dominions of Christian love soldiers in the Calvary of indomitable fearlessness and non-violence. No longer thrown when people meeting me in my position of Director of New Visions and a representative with a calling card of *The Barbarians at the Gate* chuckled or snickered or poked one another or sent glazed eyes rolling around the room and their heads I was no one who looked like I should be designated *the one*. And although no longer dressed in a cross between HAIR and West Village

Bohemia but more like secular liberal Jewish intelligentsia from the Upper West Side. As the members of the Latino Round Table introduced themselves to me regaining their bearing there he was in full luminescent flesh LGA, blurting out ungraciously *you are LGA have you any idea how many times I have tried to reach you to no avail?* Breathing stopped for a moment at my forthright appeal and indignation, *can we meet right after* he asked guardedly unmasked as unresponsive before peers and colleagues of great historic prominence.

And so began a long and productive relationship in perfect synchronicity he and his El Puente community captured the essence of New Visions, as I understood it in my heart of hearts. LGA and his now wife FL along with a few other graduates of the Brooklyn based Young Christian Leadership organization lead by a priest who embodied the essence of liberation theology espousing love as essential to resistance and the challenges to political power and upheaval. At one point during a work session of the proposal LGA looked across the table and said and I quote *you know who you remind me of Che Guevara* my heart stopping - words for a woman who believed herself at times as Joan of Arc not an overflowing milk engorged tit but a warrior a true warrior and at the time until now I believed he meant it.

And although LGA had gone on a hunger strike after he had gained an additional fifteen pounds to protest the fact that there were no Latinos on the Board of Education gaining a seat for what turned out to be a perfectly orchestrated protest, he became a favorite of some of the very bureaucrats he unnerved and with Christian love threatened. El Puente opened in a Church building they used for their well regarded and well funded youth programs centered on human rights the arts and community health the full capacity was thirty five students and although in another part of this document is the quest the futile quest for a space of their own this pristine school turned out to be a certified New Visions gem.

In 1997 El Puente held the graduation ceremony of its first class of seniors in the newly and grandly renovated Majestic Theater (Hugh Hardy architect) part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music performance art complex. Here a deeply and profoundly tale unfolds.

A Child is Killed Just Moments from his High School Graduation

Bobby S. was shot. He died on April 27, 1997. He was to graduate from El Puente Academy of Peace and Justice in June 1997 a member of their first graduating class.

*Another child has fallen, shot dead, gone. Gone.
You will want to know the circumstances of his death
Was he a good child or a bad one?
Was he one that we'd just as soon be rid of? A gnat.
He was a student of the El Puente Academy of Peace and Justice
He was a proud student.
He was small and close to the ground when he arrived in ninth grade
Through some odd-ball chance process
He looked like he arrived on another planet
Appropriately disconcerted
He grew real tall as his body became at ease in this new world of his
He accomplished a great deal, he yielded, he learned
He grew tall
Soon in two months he would have danced down the aisle at the Majestic
Theater
To a Corinthian drum roll
And in pomp and ceremony receive his high school diploma
A real one a deserved one
Not an empty envelope as they did at the neighboring zoned school
So the students could feel what it was like to walk down the aisle
At a graduation they did not graduate in and for appearances
And for delusion and lies and deception
No Bobby was to graduate with an earned diploma
I had Mozart's Requiem on when I heard the news
I guess I was praying without any particular reason
Now I had one
El Puente proud sister proud queen of schools
For four years Bobby was loved and had demands made on him
He rose to the situation just look at how he grew so tall
El Puente sacred ground sacred place
A lifetime was lived there for Bobby
His spirit will be at the Majestic his handprint on a diploma
A drum roll some fanfare for his successes please.*

Naomi Barber June 1997

Postscript. In a theater drenched with tears and the heat of the June day Bobby's father walked down the length of the theater and claimed the diploma. And the graduation ceremony started with a dance around an altar on the stage with a photo of Bobby, chocolate candy bars and other teenage artifacts that were artfully scattered. Candles burned and dripped. Offerings of love were made to initiate the beginning of the commencement. It was the overture. His father did not trip. No voice breathed. Sliced off a page, this school rose up on the aspirations and defiance of people weary of scooping up dead young bodies, preparing rituals for their ascendance and prayers of their goodbyes.

At Bobby's Funeral

I have been privileged to be present at black church services throughout my life connective tissues extending family friendships experiencing unsettling rage at racism love affairs affinity and ultimately as an often welcomed guest at the Abyssinian Baptist Church by the Pastor, Reverend Calvin Butts who at the advent of my father's death invited me to come on a Sunday with my daughter at which time he asked the entire congregation *to pray for our friend and her daughter for the recent loss of a father and grandfather.*

I am not black. I do not belong to a black church. I do not belong to any religious organization. I renounce formal religion although my youngest child is a Christened member in good standing of the Catholic Church, a faith community as it is called of Catholic followers of *Catholic Liberation Theology* and my granddaughter is a *Chorister* at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. And as in the lives of so many I have had the *blessed* love of a black housekeeper-babysitter who was hired by our father to protect my younger brother and me when our mother spun into ritualized manic threatening destructive rages, often daily.

As I walked respectfully through the throngs of black people wanting to go into the Tabernacle Church on Bushwick Avenue in East New York many of whom would be standing mourners encircling the entrance of the Church I felt a deep trembling power of sorrow rising from within Bobby S. not just another kid dying on the streets of East New York from a gun wound reported on some back page of the New York dailies he was a student who I saw often on my visits to the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. Bobby was a pioneer as were the forty other entering students in the initiating year of this New Visions school located in Brooklyn the just off the ramp of the Williamsburg Bridge. El

Puente a flag ship New Visions School in which the promise of its original vision as written in the proposal was brought to an even more glorious fruition. The curriculum all original and created by the staff and ultimately with input from students held to a fierce academic standard with fearless questioning and probing of all aspects of class presentations building toward a true connection to and commitment with the ideals of *Peace and Justice*. Students were preparing for their graduation with each of the forty students holding an admission letter to a favorite college. Bobby was felled walking home at dusk from a church activity by an accidental bullet not quite two months before the graduation ceremony.

Police cars were stationed like Swiss Guard just offside the crowd providing an aisle a corridor for the family the mourners. They were there protecting in death what they could not did not protect or stop in life. Random bullet shots straying like a lame mad dog in gyrating randomness looking for solace, requite a host a supplicant. *Bullets do not always land on targets at which they are aimed* the Preacher stated. This mad dog bullet careened into Bobby's heart and fell him in moments. Gone obliterated walking home just walking home watching an altercation for moments when he inadvertently ceased to exist. The contretemps silenced shadowy figures dispersing as the splicing gun singed the air and knocking him down into the dirt. He was seventeen. Seventeen.

The mother wailed dressed all in white. *I'm sorry Bobby, so sorry. I'm sorry Bobby. I'm sorry.* Her voice magnified with each wail riveting and curdling the hearts of all the mothers of children there. A mother who could not save their, protect their children well enough, who could not be there a target for the straying shot. *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

The sisters, five, and the teenage classmates, forty strong, they too wailed but their cries had a different resonance a different timbre. There was a howl. *How? How? And why? Why? And how much more can we take?* And how can we know this, understand this? We are too young. We are too young to be this bleak, to see or know only darkness only fear and only the certainty that more of us will be claimed by bullets that stray off course. They the children seemed inconsolable they had the blessing of the church community to free their sorrow into the open air. They joined the mother in a cacophony of grief. It was Mahler. It was James Baldwin. It was Mozart's Requiem and Verdi's and Bach's and Britten's with Wilfred Owen's poems of child soldiers' deaths. The

futility. The inevitability. Our children are our soldiers. Only this war where Bobby fell is undeclared.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, --
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Wilfred Owen

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on. The Battle hymn of the Republic*

The Church deaconesses in tulle with hats off center looking like bird's nests or perches or spring bouquets stationed themselves around so that they could guide the service being alert to any griever becoming prostrate they were prayer handmaidens. We were to follow their waving hands their gestures a chorus of responders as preachers and singers and speakers made Bobby vivid shaped a meaning for his death shape reason from the obscure and daunting. Hands and arms at right moments waving like wheat shafts in spring and summer breezes. They were all post-menopausal widows. Life was no longer a mystery in the same way. They were mothers in and to and for the church. They had the long view. Decorous women in white lined the isles framing the

service. Handing out Kleenex and fans and programs although they ran out of programs. And the fans advertised with color photos the funeral parlor.

Bobby brought us all together. Just take a look at who is here today. Look at all of us assembled in one place. This is the meaning of his life. It is sitting with us all together. He had that power that command. The preacher opened with that observation. *I saw Bobby's smile before I saw Jesus whenever I entered the sanctuary* the preacher said. He was always there first. *I brought him home in infancy from the hospital the first and only son of the loving and proud S's.* This preacher the senior one had a wash of white bushy hair and crumpling face tears washed his cheeks like gentle rain. His heart was trembling you could hear it in his voice. He was the light. He could not dissolve so that we could.

The parents and family sat to the right of the aisle. Frances and Louis co-directors of El Puente sat to the left flanked by the senior class and their facilitators the designation they gave to teachers. This was a joined family after the vows of commitment had taken place. This was a large extended southern family at an annual reunion. The family of the school and the family of the child were joined irrevocably undeniably freely and *let no man blow asunder.*

Bobby's parents sent Bobby to El Puente, which reached beyond neighborhood church the familiar anticipating that it would become the ballast, the blueprint an architectural rendering for a better future Bobby's daily journey to school an excursion across continents language groupings religions ethnicities the conglomerate officially from East New York to South Williamsburg. He travelled to a school, which at the time of his application through a lottery system existed only on paper and was included in a brief write-up in a high school addendum of new schools slated to open in September 1993. *El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice* a New Visions School dedicated to human rights was resonant and their Pastor knew that the founders of the school had been part of the Christian Youth Movement led by an inspiring Brooklyn Catholic priest this choice was a commingling of imaginations.

One of forty students in the entering class of 9th graders Bobby S. believed along with classmates that he was a pioneer and founding member given the opportunity and sacred mission to build a precedent setting high school for New York City. Every day student's entered a former church a thin strip of park at the entrance to the Brooklyn side of the Williamsburg Bridge. School building restrictions and an expansive interpretation of code limited the

student population. Parents were a welcome part of the school community aware that they too had a role in building this school. Bobby's parents were frequent visitors to El Puente and formed a strong and viable relationship with the faculty and the co-directors. As they observed Bobby grow in stature academic success and height their relationship became one of trust and love one could say with hindsight that their choice of El Puente was divine. Gabriel's horn blistered the sky with the sobs of grief expressed by his fellow students at his funeral here combined a sense of hopefulness and despair as eyes riveted on the body of Bobby dressed in Sunday best as he lay in the open coffin surrounded by horseshoes of floral bouquets with respectful and heartfelt messages.

New Visions a crap shoot of the sacred and profane bringing forty students together in a celestial moment each selected through a lottery who now spilled out of a church following a closed casket thirty-nine classmates whose sorrow palpated with a nuanced purity and wisdom. Watching the exiting students at the Church door I felt a profound sense of pride and vindication knowing that however New Visions moved into the future that I had been part of an undeniable force for significant public school reform. I know if with stunning future failures the New Visions Schools initiative would stay true to its core principles and original mission as it moved through the inevitable course of metamorphosis and change. That New Visions at its essence was something inviolate and immutable something sacred as witnessed that day in East New York at the funeral of Bobby S. his coffin flanked by his birth and church family and his extended school family each distraught and determined to remember that it was a kind of unnerving faith that brought Bobby to El Puente and for the leaders of a South Williamsburg youth development program to have the nerve and courage to create a public school which would require an enduring vigilance and commitment.

Bobby spent four years at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice and two months short of the pageantry awaiting him in the graduation ceremony he was dead. The ceremony was to be held at the Majestic Theater just restored to host theater works by the likes of Peter Brooks. No doubt Bobby's last four years was spent in a holy land on holy ground where love is defined and alive and unafraid and he in spite of blocks and doubts and the reverberations of doomsayers down corridors of past school experiences Bobby learned to read and know himself as a student. Bobby. *Bobby of smiles who knew everyone in the school community* the principal of the school said as she spoke at his funeral.

Death the resolution it brings prints vivid as life disperses and grief lands so separately and uniquely tumbling interrupting breaking into all of us over and over and still unfathomable *where is grandpa* my granddaughter age 10 asks *I don't really know maybe no probably locked safe in our hearts and minds*. Bobby for me became emblematic the amulet a touchstone for New Visions and my intense if short-lived tenure and in my imagination I stumble across a withered leaf at dawn dreaming back through life I think of his time and now mine accelerating toward Apocalypse.

Genius Child

*This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can -
Lest the song get out of hand.*

Nobody loves a genius child.

*Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?*

*Nobody loves a genius child.
Kill him - and let his soul run wild.*

Langston Hughes

There is a place. A school. But the streets are not ready yet for the genius child and it did kill him and his spirit is now wild within us un-daunting unceasing unforgiving.

Bobby's father walked down the June graduation aisle. Clasp the diploma he mounted the steps back to his seat. Who among us can grasp the enormity of this moment in time? Who among us can understand the implications for us if we let go beyond a sob?

I have faith that the fanfare the drum roll will not be in vain. And Bobby's life will be a prompt for when what is equitable and right and just and decent will become the norm the ordinary.

Portraits of First New Visions Leaders

Ruminations: Not one of the individuals who became leaders of the first New Visions Schools were known to me. Requests to track them down from the various constituent groups led to their inevitability should they submit a credible proposal. They were idiosyncratic had caused some kind of a historical political rumble or had risen to acclaim on some political calculation moving them from the shadows of obscurity becoming headliners claiming monotheistic success over a prescient issue like Regents Test Scores and this from the shambles and rambles of public education deep in Brooklyn.

So many to create a new school so few to lead one – imagination will or a subterranean pull. The vacant soft spot to undermine and blow up the initiative bureaucracy's last lick...

Superintendent Creates New Visions School

He was a lap dog he hid under the desk then as the clock struck end of school day he bounded out with buttery leather stylish sporty gloves to leap into his Jaguar and burning rubber peel off to his uncontaminated place in the suburbs pristine lawn garage for three cars and door with lion head knob. He hid all day coming up for licks and pats when the head of his school board entered his office the chief adjutant who would give him the orders for the day. He was the darling of the liberal public school advocates he was Jewish and he dressed like a broker and spoke like a banker and worked like a chided whipped supplicant a dog ruled into submission by fear his fear losing his job his position for which he whored and begged and sold his soul. When he finally had fulfilled all of his accrued pensionable time, this school leader was rewarded by a place at NYU in the school of education with others collecting fat pensions who had during their tenure had sucked the system dry well protected by the mob policing the status quo.

Rare Entity Progressive Educator and Black Radical

Shush! Don't tell! She was a Black Panther when she lived in Oakland California. Pure speculation but people say an alter ego of David Hilliard, party leader, who might be the father of her son. She had purple black eggplant skin she was tall, large imposing proud legs arms strong well-shaped muscular

upper arms no doubt a warrior with an Angela Davis mountain high *Afro*. And she was the darling, *The Chosen* of the leading luminary progressive educators. Black progressive educators rare as *dodo* birds. The myth of her led to paroxysms of awe genuflections she could do no wrong. Her team was herself. She was to be included everyone had a favorite that got lobbied for she was a must! Her proposal was unruly sprinkled sufficiently with the rare code of the true progressive. She showed up alone for technical help or interview preparation. At the final interview the committee sucked in hard and wagged their heads as she rumbled her Dewey simulation her cunning deliberate words along with her rough commanding voice. This darling of the liberals this untouchable didn't know what was to come.

She got her space designed to her specifications right on downtrodden 14th Street near the Salvation Army. Up a couple a flights all hell kept breaking loose. The stealth warrior tried and true bureaucrats who didn't give a damn for deep purple eggplant skin and held no awe for the Black Panthers if they even knew about them. They sent her the cruelest craziest high school mostly boys with girls who notched their belts with their knives following fights. Somehow they knew they could get the movement at the knees cut it off with this untouchable. Frenzied and out of control they moved in nothing good going on there they spewed licking chops wild cats after a kill. They toppled her here the time is truncated but the story stands. Propped up as a token an emblem a symbol she cratered and the institutional brats looked on clicking tongues wagging their faces with the feigned grief that comes when the surreptitious stealth system steals back some of its place its territory. Don't know but more than likely some black principal rules the space on 14th Street and all became quiet on the Western front. Disruption came at a price and her head was offered nary a protest her liberal advocates sporting turned backs.

Glad Handing Master Manipulator Passes as Visionary School Leader

How to take a titular Mayflower true blue Wasp revered and head of one of the most important and historic New York colleges of distinction who in good faith joins as a partner with what was known as the Alternative High School division (enlightened and progressive educationally) and within the time large *Yahrzeit* candles burn out destroy a New Visions School which on paper lifted into an almost holy mission the interlacing of architecture infrastructure and small group instruction with a focus on math and design and have it implode as explosives and expletives take down designate structures. How to take a state of the art building with exposed inner mechanical inner workings easily

accessible and observable as students went on their daily walkabouts and scrub it clean of any dream of vision. How to plunder a vision the chosen leader school reform *Zelig* compounding killing the life blood of a school while using the safety of a school day to live out a love affair dubbed as an experiment in collegial co-school leadership. (Note: New Visions was run by a few off the chart or behind the closet door love affairs. Often I would giggle to myself that all of this school reform business was to keep people who were involved in wild frenzied unstoppable fucking from getting noticed. I was the pawn the excuse for these torrid love affairs – oh, *As the World Turns*.) At any rate this bastard used the school as a plaything he got years of training rising up through the ranks, the Jewish ranks of liberal enlightened educators he was in the vanguard the leadership henchman of the Alternative School Division, which changed and broke rules or brokered other rules at whim.

Clashing currents electrified the air within the building the parents, the teachers working to the bone, the students saw their hopefulness reflected in the architecture the very structure of the building. Students, teachers and students were constantly buoyed by the eminent president of the college and lead of the team while the sinister undercurrent of the lovebirds the co-school leaders with the full tacit support of the alternative high school division who like rats ate away at the essence the very fabric of the school vision. The leadership team along with parents sat together around a table crisis after manufactured crisis presented by the principal and his cohorts this was a game I knew too well the hit was on the kill was in process and strangely this member of the University Club and all the others in which kin of original settlers met seemed unaware of the play going on and with innocence and openness continued to offer viable options to resolve the current crisis.

This school leader when he was ready waltzed out waving his tidy and hefty pension his girlfriend sent back to her borough, Brooklyn, and driving the school into a fatal collapse. The school was finally closed down dashed the incredible moments of possibility quashed the genteel true believer never a mention of the school in the half-page obituary recording his death in the Times. About a year after leaving New Visions he called my home and asked me to lunch in one of his clubs he reflected back to me my better selves and we parted with a warm embrace as I walked off I realized he knew all along he knew. About the bad ending of this New Visions school I am still bitter. My throat parched by the number of times and ways I tried to warn everyone and anyone I could get to listen about the terrible end this school was coming to and everyone turned a tin ear and looked away. The system needed this

fractious and sinister school leader or they owed him either way in my mind he epitomizes everything I found disgraceful and hateful about the school system and when I walk by the site near Madison Square Park my heart these many years later still aches as I avert my eyes and cross to the other side of the street.

Ying and Yang Fraternal Sisters: Co-Principals

She was nun-like peter pan collars kilt like skirts a catholic school product her partner or co-leader or gulp co-principal had a daughter piercings and tattoos with a full drum set centerpiece in a loft space in the antique trendy off Union Square neighborhood. Her partner cunning with survival meters coursing her blood stream offered her loft for our Loft Talks the designee knew to capture an emblematic moment in New Visions history. These two about the same height and weight one holding a lamp above catholic and arch conservatism dressed for church but on the Upper East Side, the other in Barney's Coop both an aggressive ambition to become high school principals joined at the hip they offered for two principals' salaries to replicate the fashionable and over rated and under reported Middle High School model. And we *must have one of those* the creator or inventor of early college education: a woman becoming a national phenomena in the school reform business branding her creation Middle College High School as a national breeding ground for accelerated learning skipping high school or most of it to move from middle school to college or community college and this for the poorest the neediest and the least performing.

Here were the two faces of Eve each had one child riveting them to daily life outside the school walls each holding the fort for the other as one of them disappeared to tidy up whatever was amiss in her life. What a partnership! What a formula magical whimsical and filled with more bull than a cheating and lying husband, these two regal ladies had been born from the hip the lip the espousing princess of this magical formulaic schooling. And then the most bruising part, they were given a building which architecturally followed precisely the dimensions of their ideal school conforming precisely to the tenets of Middle College principles' of education. Walking to this building in Queens never knowing which of the sisters would be there was walking toward a scene from Saturday Night Live satirizing and trivializing the entire New Visions initiative particularly the part where students at desks would be in almost Zen harmony with their building that cladding the curriculum was

dribbled symmetrical cement and again the inner workings of the plumbing and heating system stood out bulwark of enlightenment.

Denouement: As they dubbed me nurturer in chief I kept these bitter pill feelings embroiling and roaming my insides like rancid food like ideas gone rancid and filled with harmful and life terrorizing E coli. The indifference and harsh and punitive treatment of students in large high schools meted out by Deans who whored until they got out of classrooms was kinder. New Visions set up a lofty front for the multiple equator lava spewing crater tumbling and boiling over love affairs waiting to be consummated after fucking love desires are never this hot and unruly and now to trample on students' dreams topple turn a back to foster the hopes squander golden opportunity and this duo these two hateful and contemptuous co-principals predictably after they had secured pension rights at the highest salary let the school topple close down the miraculous building reeking ultimately of the stench of the sinister. I look back weak and bitter garnishing for ambition run amok sponsors for enlightenment as corrupt no worse the politicians promised nothing but to have a greater bundle of patronage to distribute this Middle College crowd rode the backs of shiny rhetoric and highly polished apples serpentine temptress nationally coifed tresses. I fill the sordidness still erupting in the pit of my stomach smashed dreams possibility used to tempt to self serve I ruminate where was my ambition my responsibility was I too silent or too small and precious easy to trample upon by the Barbarians at the Gate

Born to Unnerve

Born to unnerve this *Johnny One Note* once again a feckless chase from a recommendation for one of the tribe of advisors I had as my daily bread. Calling emailing letters to no avail got his attention and then low and behold at one of the borough meeting technical assist workshops this in Brooklyn a stout African American stood up at the Q & A and asked in a most skeptical and irreverent voice what about...already finding me and my presentation another tease phony come-on by the *Jewish Liberal* sect. When he said his name I called out startling even myself (as I did at the Latino Round Table) *you are M.J. I have tried contacting you daily in every way except by carrier pigeon bringing guffaws from the attendees (crowded).*

We agreed to meet after the meeting was adjourned and so began the push pulls of my relationship with M.J. who tried in every way possible to stretch rules, submitting far too many pages in his proposal no matter the warning

and then taking up a disproportionate amount of time for technical assistance. His claim to fame, after church on Sundays in his basement he would prepare middle and junior high school students and others for the NY State Regent Exams. He was an engineer by training and for employment and on Sundays after church (Saturdays as well) he would tutor children from the church and his greater Brooklyn in Regents preparation. He knew his math he knew the tests and he knew the politics of Regents and his singular claim to fame he rode like a kite on an uptick wind was that he had tutored a fifth grade girl from church who scored the highest score on math regents of anyone near her age and maybe up through high school. Her picture standing next to him was in all local Brooklyn papers including if I remember correctly one of the daily pulps. M.J. was a good Samaritan a worthy church member the tutoring or Regents test preparation a testament to civic participation an advocate for high standard test driven education for his community, primarily African American. Parents swore by him and the liberal anti-test community pulled their hair at the roots prostrate. And he wore his black identity with a vengeance. Of course he was one of the awardees in the first set of New Visions Schools, his proposal compelling if overcrowded and his claim to fame irresistible particularly among bureaucrats who hated and mistrusted the liberal educators in their midst.

After opening the school he conducted weekly Friday afternoon scholarly presentations at which time guest lecturers would talk about the world or history or anything of the work they were doing most often related to African American identity (most of the students at the school were black). The *piece de resistance* came during one of his weekly presentations on this Friday I was present along with the stormy erratic ever suspicious vice president of the UFT ever ready at the battlements for another racial flare-up if more than twenty years after the school riots. He was a terrific ally and support of the New Visions initiative being a pragmatist and politician at heart. The Director of the school had invited a professor from Columbia who spoke about Egypt being the home the birth place of civilization detailing his presentation with charts graphs and handouts the significant point being that civilization as we know it was shaped had its origins with *black peoples*. This *scholarly* Friday talk sent my UFT colleague and advisory board member off the cliff, he stormed out slamming the door and for three hours that evening I had to talk him out of closing the school down (only months old) and having the Director thrown in bureaucracy jail or placed in a holding pen.

This UFT leader still raw and dripping in resentment from the black UFT Jewish wars just preceding decentralization all of which I was too familiar. Finally I threatened him that I would call the *Daily News* and *Village Voice*, I had ins and expose him as a race baiter unable to move beyond the late '60's his anger spilling over into a vitriol that was daunting. Finally he agreed to lay the matter to rest believing I would do exactly that his pragmatic political ambition held him back. He lived horrible in its essence with a fear of exposure enemies constantly conveying a rumor of his sexual orientation even in the early 90's were unforgiving. Metaphorically holding hands into the sunset as we brusquely walked on leaving spaces behavior exhibited by all of us when having to shut off shut down powerful detrimental reactions huffily scooting off to bathrooms for some deep breathing. Pragmatism lead to forced civility and the flower was let to bloom and the myth of the Regents scores bore more weight than ever imagined as the riff between the communities qualifying for Title I school support edged toward standardized tests while the liberal progressive educational community tried in every possible way to disrupt the legitimacy of any standardized test. Still fixed to this day the coinage of the realm the landscape of public education deemed successful rests in standardized tests: we are webbed still to test scores.

Religious Wars

Gimme that Ol' Time Religion...follow the Drinkin' Gourd...Amazin' Grace...give a hand to the lord...when Israel was in Egypt land...

I got an invitation to create a public school he stood at the pulpit waving the invitation, who in this congregation wants to join me creating one?

Are you NB I am CB I received this invitation to create a public school I want to do one. Okay when do you want to meet?

Part of the New Visions initiative was to offer an open hand to each and every person or group who said that wanted to create a New Visions School. There were a variety of formats and levels of participation: school visits, small technical assistant workshops with refreshments, buffet dinners open to anyone who wanted help writing the proposal. Individuals prominent or notable to funder, the *Barbarians*, the Board or the Union who stood out, as eminences in the City were red flagged not necessarily to open a school but

deserving of a special personalized reach out and CB a high profile religious leader of course qualified.

Any time I would mention off-handedly to my boss that so and so expressed an interest she raised her brows and waved me out and then immediately called the chair of the board of The Fund and the *Barbarian in Chief* to disclose the information raising his expectation and connection to the initiative. The funder was gratified that we had struck such a vein of overwhelming wide inclusive interest and each steward of the New Visions initiative increasingly believed it was inherent in his or her imprimatur to my mind though offered out loud to those claiming of first divine rights. I think it was a multiplicity of actions from affixing bold simply stated posters in every bus stop and centrally located crossroad to mailing out 16,000 invitations to everyone who ever said the word school or child in the greater City. The ad in the Sunday Times and other papers offering an open-ended opportunity to create a public school sanctioned by a confluence of top leaders of the Teachers Union, the Board of Education, business, and the foundation world. Foremost I think it was the *RFP*, which to my mind was a form of *ART* the possibility of a transformational act inspired by a document composed as if it was directed personally to anyone interested in preparing a proposal.

Rumination: Blood drawn in the form of consternation came from the liberal educational community existing successfully on the fringes of public schooling with disproportionate power taken from them their *Mojo* it was a coup it was a hostile takeover by the kingpins the Barbarians. Without a step missed hearing their ignoble Shakespearean rumblings invitations were widely offered for them to play a role with consultant fees known also as co-option which they called inroads, it worked!

Getting back to the pastor who really rose above the fray and reigned across the city and the nation akin and equal to the *Barbarians*. Committees were put in place proposal drafts were presented the lead committee was not reticent about asking for help and on the given due date a proposal was submitted. Invited to attend Sunday church services as a guest I would inevitably be introduced to the entire congregation including international guests as a friend to the church community and a bond of love, authentic love, grew as I worked along with the very hands-on pastor on this. As I set in a pew I saw his belief in God was deep, deep and old as time as creation as *Adam and Eve* and I knew in that sanctuary on Sundays that the very spirit that had imbued individuals brought here as slaves with a God given inner strength.

Of Note: Physical manifestations of faith and indomitability rose on Frederick Douglass Blvd. in Harlem at the entrance on 110th. There stands a powerful and formidable sculptural depiction of Frederick Douglass enclosed partially by a wall with water falling telling of the route of the North Star leading runaway slaves out of the South. Scattered on carefully cut large pieces of marble significant quotes of Frederick Douglass who came from being a slave who could not read to a major statesman who among other things believed in equal rights for women. Just ten blocks north on Frederick Douglass Boulevard a towering statue of within the folds of her clothing Harriet Tubman moving her escaping slaves through the morass of traps toward freedom. Into this symbolic landscape I held a particular hopefulness for the success of this New Visions School. The good pastor had no way of knowing that as a girl I had challenged the country in a front page *Newark Evening News* letter after the horrific murder and trail of *Emmett Till*, my contemporary. Almost prayerful I wanted us to have a nationally noted successful school in Central Harlem aligned with the Abyssinian Baptist Church although duly separated according to the dictums of the country's Constitutional separation of Church and State.

Easy enough to see that I was enamored, an understatement, but not blinded by the missteps taken over and over by such a noble group. First incredible to me they held onto every cautionary word as they developed the school of the highest level of bureaucracy of the Board of Education and the vanguard Union leadership with a steadfastness almost innocent and naïve by never questioning the very individuals anchoring the status quo of which our initiative was meant to challenge and subvert. Meeting after meeting the team evidenced absolute faith in the advice of individuals who virtually drowned the kittens at birth the wreckers of public education in Harlem who could be heard referring to the students in Harlem as *those kids*. The very groups blaming poverty single-mothers and the usual standard aspersions to lift off the hook of guilt or blame it was just *impossible to teach those kids*. The very same kids sitting in classrooms glazed and dead-eyed by the third grade that were lobbed off the rosters of public intention. Colluding in this misogynous educational neglect were a local congressman and other politicians and if this pastor railed against the tyranny of public miss-education in Harlem in his Sunday sermons he was still held in sway as he began the journey of creating a public school.

Remarkable that at the suggestions of the eminences at the Board of Education individuals to lead the school were put in place all of whom were African American and most with records of being malleable and easily manipulated and then to my amazement the committee rode these individuals who meant well to distraction to breakdown to failure as they strode through the school the imperious inspectorate observing the unruly nature of the place. In this school in its early infancy kids were running rampant in and out of the building hanging out in small groups listening to music snacking there wasn't even a pretext at orderliness. Chaos reigned and teachers ultimately, some very worthy and idealistic just caved in physically and turned a cheek and the Interim Acting Principals continued to get castigated and upbraided by the committee and as each verged on collapse and mental breakdown relieved of their position another African American soldier was put in place none of whom belonged to the Abyssinian congregation for the most part attended a Baptist church in Brooklyn or Queens. Feeling increasingly uneasy about this and often meeting with the Pastor to express my concerns we were assembled at a meeting with the current Chancellor who was an African American woman (she an insider and a wily and pragmatic appointment by the Board of Education and who after leaving New York City took down the school system in Atlanta and before that Newark) was chiding the good Reverend sitting on my left elbows touching how the committee had to get out of the way of the leaders and let them lead now matter how far flung or disconnected to the central vision of *Social Change*. At this particular meeting after leaving being a wreckage of broken school leaders he agreed to follow her advice like a lap dog loyal and unquestioning and though I don't think she had ill-will the mockery of his school failing under the heap of disaster after disaster by now very public was catnip to the leadership scoundrels at the Board and the Teachers Union.

On the way back as was our habit alone in the car with him I said *Dr. B. this is your last chance I will ask to have the school closed if during the next month I sense that it is not only a unworthy place but a dangerous school for students and teachers I will shut it down with an hour phone call warning to you. The only way to salvage the place is to have the head of the committee and the head of your church advisory board who is also a fully licensed administrator in the Board of Education accept the reigns of leadership to serve as principal.* He said nothing just listened his breathing labored as someone troubled and then at my stop waved goodbye with our small gesture of a hug and friendship kiss as if we were relatives and by now we sort of were.

Predictably in the following weeks the school was increasingly chaotic it was just out of the pages of *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and the interim principal a fine religious woman would sob at the close of each day bones aching from the lack of sleep and the constant goading and stress finally I made the call, *it is over today unless you bring in SJ*. Now SJ liked being the head of the committee and did not want to leave her sinecure job somewhere in the special education managerial staff for which little was asked and less given and not an unusual phenomena in the scattershot hierarchy of the Board administrative team. SJ had all the right state issued credentials was a formidable presence as only a woman who was the lead of the parish community could be. She and her husband by-hand renovated and restored a glorious Harlem brownstone in which each of the elaborate wood doorframes and fire place mantels were preserved and protected. They were childless and took in and adopted formally and informally dozens of children from the community. What could go wrong finally the life blood of the church would be invested along with its commitment to creating the best public middle and high school the City had to offer and a model for the rest of the country of the possible.

The fable had not such a happy ending for it turned out that indeed SJ was a glorious leader who could talk any funder into giving a grant and who gave a rush to the white liberal establishment by her sense of camaraderie but it turns out she knew nothing not a wit not a speck about education or schooling and was reluctant to share power with anyone who did for she had learned the rhetoric the words the ever changing flow of vocabulary governing public schooling but it would just *slip slide* away as soon as it was implemented put into practice. Ticklish talking to the Reverend that his most esteemed partner in the parish and beloved educator knew nothing about schooling and although could lift the profile and the public approbation she would further drag the school down the sink hole school failure if she didn't identify and hire an instructional leader. Long after I left New Visions I heard that finally there was an individual an educator whose responsibility was to build a viable and credible education program and in the parable that is New Visions I saw a version of an Aesop's Fable an irresistible need to trust the fox opine tongue drooling at the root of the ancient biblical tree.

The Thurgood Marshall Academy on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard sits directly above where waiters' roller-skated at *Smalls Paradise* and now where the International House of Pancakes served ample dishes of pancakes slathered with butter and grits and bacon. It is on this site that a significant piece of Harlem architecture and history that a school building came into being. The site was owned by a development fund controlled by parishioners and members of the Abyssinian Church Development Corporation. Precedent setting this was the first time an organization successfully submitting and opening a New Visions would own the building which housed the school. The building was to reflect social justice, community participation, democracy and technology in equal measure and the entire design process was participatory in excess expressed in brick plaster and mortar the look of democracy and social justice. Thurgood Marshall in portraiture reigned over the integrity and soon a building existed in which there were technology support spaces and convening and gathering places and a gym fit for a NCAA team and classrooms which could be opened for collective teaching and a cafeteria contiguous with the pancake house. Having lead the design process I would say it was reflective of the very essence and strength of the Abyssinian Church parishioners and their pastor. As I moved off the project the school was still on unsteady grounds academically with a resistant and proud principal more publicist than school educational leader and an exacting rib of the church organization and therefore not an easy candidate for constructive criticism. Since the last time mounting the local bus riding away from the corner of 135th and Adam Clayton Powell find I rarely wonder about the status of the school. I have moved on but in my heart is always the wish for the *Amen Corner (James Baldwin)* to reflect and wonder if we above all are offering students the very highest academic curricula and if not when?

"To love the Lord is to love all His children—all of them, everyone!—and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!" (Amen Corner, James Baldwin)

Documenting: CALENDER - REGULAR CALENDAR MEETING - WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2000 - 3:00 P.M. - Board of Education -

Item: 36 -REQUEST FOR A LEASE AGREEMENT FOR THE PREMISES LOCATED AT 200 WEST 136TH STREET, MANHATTAN FOR THE THURGOOD MARSHALL ACADEMY FOR LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE, DISTRICT 78

RESOLVED,...for the use of the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change - Board of Education deems appropriate, for a period of

(30) years from date of occupancy - at a rental of up to \$1,373,121.00 per annum...

EXPLANATION

The Division of High Schools has requested the use of the premises for the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change. The school, part of the first round of the New Visions program, was created by the Board of Education resolution on March 17, 1993. Now in its seventh year, the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change has developed into a rigorous, successful academic secondary school.The Abyssinian Development Corporation is a not-for-profit community and economic development organization and rent will be a function of debt service and operation costs only. Abyssinian will contribute \$910,000.00 towards project related costs. In addition, Abyssinian will retain 5,000 square feet of the facility for retail use that will be restricted to used that are compatible with an educational facility. (Current Occupant, International House of Pancakes).

The following are the pertinent points of this lease:

<i>Landlord:</i>	<i>Abyssinian Development Corporation</i>
<i>Education Operator:</i>	<i>Thurgood Marshall Academy for</i>
<i>Learning and</i>	<i>Social Change</i>

CORRESPONDENCE: Letter sent to Dr. Butts, February 10, 2004

Dear Dr. Butts,

The first thing that struck me about the new building was that it was filled with light. Students could climb or descend on that wonderful staircase and see the sky. In building number one, we were in almost perpetual darkness without windows and struggling to find some light. Now a decade later and the school seems to have found its instructional footing. S. seems buoyant and ever resilient and brilliant at her job, and the school has an incredibly wonderful and amazing new home. The building kept its promise architecturally as if lifted from ideas of social change, the teachings of Thurgood Marshall, high technology, and the Harlem Renaissance. I was incredibly moved on the Saturday before the opening when S. met me there and let me wander around as workmen put together the finishing touches. Wow!

Having just started a new job and finding myself in Phoenix, I was unable to attend the opening, my loss.

Hope you are feeling well again and that children and grandchild are in fine shape and that most of all P. is well. I am proud of my association with the Abyssinian family.

Sincerely,
NB

SPACE WARS

Ah *the Tripwire* inevitable. Red balloons released hosannas lift resolutions to start all New Visions Schools unanimous vote on March 17, 1993, by the very school board that had just fired its Chancellor. A feeling of deep goodness permeates but in the shadows the benched bureaucrats lurk high-fiving all brimful grinning Cheshire cat but oh the stubbed toe the red balloons caught on wintery twigs and branch the overarching dilemma we have no place to put these New Visions Schools! *Visionaries in Exile nyc's small-school movement* the cover of *METROPOLIS*, September 1994 sold at the MOMA store and other such venues of art and erudition. Scaffold, metaphoric, provided by an invitation only panel discussion of the *nyc small-school movement* sponsored by the editorial board of the New York Times and by a series of front page stories on the emergence of these small and hopeful New Visions Schools if opening in very temporary quarters. This evidence of the access and power of the powerful and connected while cowering in the corners of its high beams the

bureaucrats struggle shamelessly to hold onto the status quo allocating and regulating space the powerful trump card in hand.

Referencing: Nearly twenty years in a school district held me in the imbroglio of *space wars* in the formation of small schools-within-schools in the seething dangerous middle and junior high schools assigned three to four rooms in some corner of a top floor of a building a form of apartheid ensued students were told to use bathrooms often located in basements students needed specially coded passes to use the assigned staircases and were at often excluded from cafeterias relegated to meals in classrooms the gyms were only available before school hours and finally teachers were tacitly disinvented from the teachers lounges and cafeterias and often told they no longer held a place in a car pool. Twenty-six small schools in almost twenty years later (1972-1992) the tables turned and teaching positions in these small schools were coveted and the principals of the buildings regaled because of the disproportionate high standardized and high attendance rates produced in these schools. Struggles were bitter and monumental adversarial forging strong alliances within the schools and across buildings to colleagues and fellow students in the mini-schools and as the Deputy Superintendent once commented *you do know dear that you are grabbing a much too large share of the district budget for your schools*. I was the titular or assigned principal the schools being led by teacher leaders. The supervisor's union held the line blocking the establishment of positions for administrators and principals for these small schools. Teachers often through some enigmatic union ruling were forced to give up salary increments in exchange for the freedom and dignity they said they gained by having if small a public educational enterprise to shape. In 1991, in the school district one junior high school located in the most dangerous neighborhood for gang rivalries became the first to house only teacher initiated and led small schools. In a school building in the most impoverished community in the District, from which families fled when they had even the scantiest means to do so, nested a small school with City-wide and National regard for its overall academic excellence (high test scores) along with instruction in Latin and a very competitive chess team which received a grant to play challengers in Russia. For this school families crisscrossed the district fighting to have their children admitted no matter the neighborhood blight.

Finally, the second parent initiated small school, the first in Brooklyn, travelled the high seas of commercial real estate finally finding a Church next to the main branch of the Bronx public library at a very low maintenance fee to

incubate while they waited for the building they leased with the support of the District to be renovated and built to specification. The architect of note was a student's father, who in the design and program reflected the input of the entire school community of how they imagined the school's philosophy and vision to be executed in a building. The Central Board architectural unit swallowed hard at having outside designers in a primary role but in the end provided a necessary oversight without circumventing the design process leading to a successful Certificate of Occupancy. Havoc reigned at the completion of the beautiful school building in the school district so overwhelmed by space needs bureaucrats attempting in every devious way to replace the school population of record with one of their own attempted to cripple the school by dismissing the much admired director (though warned, she never had received her state certification). Historic and news worthy the uprising and resistance from the parents and community of this small school now fully established in the building it found and designed and never ever did anyone succeed in taking this building from this parent generated small school.

New Visions Space Wars: Predictably space became the Gordian knot. Just as we knew to rush the Board Resolution process to ensure that each of the New Visions schools could open should they prove ready by well-delineated committee standards: six to twelve months of curriculum laid out week by week, with materials and texts, leader in place, teaching team selected and a space in which to open. Decisively moving into or rather squatting in any space that could be found as long as it was within the community designated to serve and the borough predictably the sordid sabotage antics ensued examples follow: hottest day in June, water fountains cut off on the floor housing the school and students not permitted to go to higher floors, this made the *Daily News*: EMS had to find a circuitous route to get to a student who had fallen ill on a top floor of a school building, this was the opposition imposing intra-school apartheid-like artificial boundaries to get the school to fail. The collective New Visions school community bolstered by determination to succeed against all odds devised sub Rosa or gorilla tactics to withstand intra-space warring while they located permanent spaces.

Adversarial host schools inspired the building of a bulkhead the motivation for these budding schools to prevail overcoming blatant hostility with a ground swell *no matter what* to persevere. Of greatest significance, most moving and gratifying personally for me, soon into opening of each New Visions School

there existed on a drafting board a well-honed design prepared collaborative with a reputable architecture firm which reflected the ethos the principles the essence of the teams *Vision*. Further each New Visions School would ultimately move into a space of their own which would be leased by the Board of Education construction and renovations paid for by the Board's construction authority. The interior of the school would reflect the theme or vision from classroom configurations to corridor design and furniture and furnishing selections to the colors of the paint used throughout. Pausing for a moment to think of what a radical departure this was for all public school buildings prior to this time and a staple or given in private school education.

Fury and Heartbreak: Turn of the Century Architect Charles B. J. Snyder designed school buildings of great classic beauty: "I cannot see how it is possible to come nearer perfection in the building of a public school," (Jacob Riis, 1902, *The Battle with the Slum*). Tantamount to the success of the New Visions initiative was that whether curriculum, school community, parent participation each part had to adhere as a whole the physical dimension of which was the space the site the interior to the external cladding. The building stood as symbol of cohesion of vision implementation into action. Unthinkable, the very structure that held the veracity of the vision toppled the school ate away at its guts its intestines vermin parasitic subversive compromising adulterous with a system for which it had a mandate to change becoming complicit eroded at its base its center lazy elliptical self-serving greedy solipsistic leaders once legitimized with the proper papers and citations crumbled appeased and in effect incinerated the very essence the very vision that got them the molten waxy seal fermentation obliteration and to the victor gorgeous personalized structures and buildings into which they could look beyond the anonymous faceless students faculty already too numbed and silenced trivialized to care.

Buildings are *sites of remembrances*. Culling up a beginning point for an education that reaches beyond to what is yet without definition. Without building and space, without place, without familiarity with the familiar, there are just a collection of strangers standing on ground that is about to come apart, a fault line in a personal history, that will swallow up, make disappear that unique presence, that inquiring mind, that unbelievable unknown infinitely promising child, slammed down upon like a trunk on a finger, like the lid on a box being thrown tossed into an unfathomably unknowable and unremitting sea, space and content, dream and vision, a physical presence and an invisible but palpable one, one in the same. The turn of the century

architect, Snyder, call public schools, *the palaces of the people* and, then, reverentially design schools that resembled ornate palaces. How many children have walked through a public school portal to harm and indifference? Families without alternative hand over their children to the brute force of anonymity and steely impersonality.

Shadow puppets move inextricably against walls unnoticed neglected empty gestures pretext enlightenment and education. Schools designated unsavory by the State Department of Education. Space as metaphor a cornerstone of substantive public school reform. Sad squelched any innocence an imbroglia the sinister led the lazy big huffing puffy blundering poke heads who like bluffed herds abandoned New Visions. Hard lesson all fronts all elements move in unison a choreographed pieced a chorus line of Rockets – jets misfiring the lag too great – structures without substance persistence tenacity perseverance collapse on themselves and that is what happened to my mind but don't ask me for any specifics of failure or decline – I have not followed.

And space was the *Launch Pad* for building the army of resisters who with strength and strategic prowess carried off a sustainable school reform effort. Our New Visions School will exist in a building designed to our specifications drawings and plans will come from our imaginations, our vision, our philosophy, and our mission. Stalwart and intrepid protecting a physical space seizing and corrupting dreams and idealism rarely resist the force of cynicism but mark the leery breath of gargoyles and grotesques protecting a building of one's own design school. Around large tables in the Board of Education's Department assigned to planning for new schools and building renovation New Vision's teams sat prepared to present a set of specifications and considerations for the development of their space landlords were already prepped and ready to negotiate with the Board of Education on behalf of the team and this became the least inflammatory part of the process of creating these schools. Ultimately each school got its own site its own leader its own faculty and rose and fell based on the purity of the vision or as in *Merchant of Venice* lifting from profit and usury implicated in motives that were self-serving rather than from altruism a implacable desire to create a better world however contrite lifting from a belief in equity and justice.

I hate the murky feel of bitterness that is the aftertaste, but too often I get jobbed reluctantly into the role of inspirer in chief, when I see myself clearly as a political strategist. The arena, the patch of land I have swathed, is school reform. Becoming visible to myself has always been my *bête noir*, my

dilemma. The despair at the Chancellor being kicked out loomed like a thick pollutant in the offices of The Fund elliptical shadows bearing off the currents of the Hudson. It was nightfall, it was the collapse, it was doom and finality, strike the set, close it down, turn our backs run from the upheaval after all these are these are the anointed City fathers and mothers who all are beholden to all who want to tip a toe in public good works and turn schools to a better favor. These celestial luminaries had teeth had origins that reached back to the Borough Presidents the erstwhile political parties and party leaders to the church to the synagogue to any who glad handed and swapped deals as children sweltered in the heat and stench of indifference or worse plunder. Those who fired could not be confronted it was amazing to watch power brokers *Barbarians at the Gate* become supplicants especially since they all lined their pockets and filled their limousines or Mercedes with money that came from the private sector whatever that might mean the lines and boundaries got hazy and fudged here. The only thing familiar to me was the smell of fear, the fear I had seen in pearl drops of sweat on the brow of my former boss and superintendent the knocking of his knees the tom-toms of trepidations the mouth curdling with compromise and the garbled negation of anything that had the taint of conflict and I could feel for the Superintendent it was his job after all the pride of walking the streets and entering his synagogue almost demagogue-like the prestige the monies and the golden parachute that would line and fill his pension with the trinkets the *gelt* the *gelt* gotten with no guilt ever his collapse inevitable his financial future secure.

Here we confronted the collapse of our entire New Visions initiative because a book about a young girl living in a house with lesbian partners *Heather Had Two Mommies* was included on a list of books recommended for reading by families and teachers alike. The uproar the upheaval roaring forth from the throats of the collective New York City religious and politic community was deafening resulting in the firing of the Chancellor who had been an avid and constant supporter of New Visions. In the shadowy sunset at a New Visions Board Meeting the hesitancy to move on was palpable messiness was not in the bargain in the mix business guarded its quicksand destruction of others during demolition takeovers behind veils of thick and sumptuous velvet drapery. *Wait I say emerging from quiver and timidity please do not renege now we have the chance to go for all twelve schools to become public schools the Board needs to do something positive and worthy to vote for and we have achieved enough public approbation to be just that vehicle for them to retrieve their reputations as representatives who care and believe in the best education for all students.* We will prepare an omnibus resolution that will include all

schools and alert the Board Members that we have an item that will provide them with the possibility to restore public faith in their cogent and responsible roles as guardians of public education. Standing on firm ground apt witness to the arable amoral arbiters of power in public education that by necessity had to have an opportunity to *giveth* when they had so cravenly *taketh*. The *Barbarians* liked it and we proceeded to have an omnibus New Visions resolution, which created the possibility for all twelve planning teams to open public schools given certain very clearly wrought and reasonable benchmarks. Triumph great press obfuscated the lean and mean firing of the Chancellor and we as twelve moved on the *monopoly board of chance pass jail directly to go*. March 17, 1993 a New Visions marker public approbation the chance to *pass jail collect two hundred dollars* and move on to *go*.

In the aftermath we sipped fine red wine at a local village French bistro he, the funder and I. His eyes beamed he had been right to recommend me for the job although he hardly knew me and I did become in his mind a radical stalwart intrepid strategic fighter for the just and right. He stood stalwart by my side if in the shadows as is protocol for a funding officer. Madly and consistently and tirelessly consulting everyone on the master list became essential to build and maintain a certain comfort level with supporters if as a spirit and nurturer and not hardcore reveler and strategist.

Spaces were identified, fights launched, strategies devised. The System, impressed by our earnestness, and sensing our intent, worked along side. Legislators crawled our walls like new ivy, leases got unfurled like independence day flags, architects drew plans for hours of indulgent, philosophically relevant design talks, color must reflect culture, space must mirror intent, like a bank of architectural philosophers, we went on and on, as ground broke and buildings rose, as building renovations began to resemble the written words of a vision, a plan. Springing up like a bouquet of hopeful flowers, in each borough, in unlikely reclaimed buildings, spaces for children emerged. And the planners walked through with arms full of blueprints and *scopes of work*. The planning teams began to wear hard hats as handily as mortarboards, as easily as wielding chalk and assigning books to read. Each fight was deeply personal but there were universals. Never was an inch sacrificed if it undermined the vision of the school, never was a color dulled or mixed, never a light dimmed or repositioned, never a stairwell inappropriately place. Space was the text for the vision of education's rendered forth. And never try to take a space from anyone. How becoming politicized in the acquisition and construction of space forged an indomitable community of

force, conviction, capable of sustaining, of enduring. This kind of knowledge, this coming together had a physical dimension, can anyone actually tell if a child truly learns anything in a school day? Can you deny a brightly colored door jam? (Harsh and Painful: without acute documentation, I am aware the spaces were pilfered and taken over ultimately particularly when the school failed what ever forces were at work to undermine and disrupt.)

The Building that Got Away – El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice

...On the way to Peter Lugar it the building rises enviable lofts just spit from the Lower East Side and steps from the hip music scene in Williamsburg...

We infiltrated the *Lubavitcher* hierarchy on behalf of a roughly tossed together ecumenical group of community activists, former *Young Lords*, the Brooklyn diocese, health and youth advocates and *Satmar* Jews from the larger neighborhood gathered around a draftsman table at a retained architectural firm. Led by a married couple from the community who grew up in the Christian wing of the *Young Lords* and who had with a committee created a very unique New Visions School steeped in the divining veins of universal human rights. An abandoned pock marked old factory building windows like sockets sight ripped out was the sight of the desired building we were determined to lease from two *Lubavitcher* brothers who sniffed the renaissance of this the Southern part of Williamsburg and could feel the clinking gold coins of development in hand. Although Jews do not believe in proselytizing this sect storms the world to turn up lapsed Jews or found Jews and lines the shopping corridors of Manhattan with *Mikvah* vans (observant women needing purification can enter and step into blessed baths for ultimate cleansing) blasting out renditions of Jewish tunes. It turned out that my mother's twin brother provided generous support to the *Lubavitcher* religious community in honor of its leader *Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson* about whom the religious community believed was the embodiment of the Messiah my uncle always sitting to his left at their annual fund raiser. Losing favor my uncle agreed to scout out information about the two *Lubavitcher* brothers who held our real estate fates in their tight fists. Multiple meetings with lawyers and other unnamed representatives held them aghast as we straight faced released tidbits of insider information potentially damaging to them during these elaborate serpentine negotiations.

At a final court hearing when we lost the building forever the *Lubavitcher* real estate team time never learned who had ratted them out and how we held such classified information about their inner workings, their leadership

rivalries and power struggles. Sadly, that did not get us the building dispirited we walked away from the courthouse two years of laborious efforts brought to naught. Today a renovated building of lofts lights up reaching across the Williamsburg Bridge always a bitter reminder of the almost *could have had* another in the pantheon of New York City real estate lore another convoluted story. The *Barbarians at the Gate* marveled at our ability to infiltrate the *Lubavitchers* at the highest leadership levels never once suspecting me the girl who learned to keep silent and hold a poker face as the source. Still I wince at the fate of this building and how through so many design committee meetings we could almost visually imagine what was going on in there hour to hour, day in and day out.

The Story of a New Visions School: LOCAL 1199 School for Social Change intertwined with a RICHARD MEIER BUILDING housing a prototype SPACE SHIP residence: may have been used for the movie: Dr. Strangelove...2001: A Space Odyssey: Denouement: Correspondence giving up the ship the dream the hope and why...

The essential question: can a dynamic forward thinking, pace setting, politically dynamic and nationally connected labor union create a public school in NYC, a union obsessed town? To clarify, NYC has an “agency shop” school system, everyone is in a union, like it or not. Teeth, eyes, medical benefits, salaries, and working conditions are negotiated by the union the school connected unions are one of the partners in an often-unwieldy marriage – union and school and administration: connective tissue – symbiotically joined. To think otherwise is to be greatly, egregiously deceived. It is hand in glove.

And the partners are locked in an invincible, complicitous contract to maintain at all costs the current status quo. And along comes “frog and toad” on a wispy summer day, comes a union brandishing the spirit of *Caesar Chavez*, defiant, resistant, enlightened, a union driven by the person and professional growth of each member, if anarchistic and disorderly. A union joining in finding and supporting appropriate child care, including on school holidays and vacations, a union willing to enter a clause in its contract to encourage parent members to visit and participate in their child’s school life on work-time, a union representing people primarily of color with a primary focus on worker education, full literacy and job development a union whose members are primarily city residents whose children go to the local public school, 1199 a union with an active art gallery and art and writing program for its members.

1199 a union truly committed to democratic practice valuing each opinion giving always a fair and patient hearing. Looking backward with the long arm of hindsight, it was democracy that cramped the style, collapsed any possibility of going beyond. Pragmatism, data collections, and malfeasant impatience drove the engine which mowed over recklessly the talking mouths, the conversation, the ambience of trying to build trust, and a capacity to truly listen and hear the other, others, including the children, not just Performa, but for real.

Once again a New Visions team with such a clear and strong ethos, akin to that of the Abyssinian Baptist Development Corporation and the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Peace and Social Change, the improbability of infusing an individual chosen to lead the said school who is not of and from the community particularly when creating a new school from a vision. And although the committee leadership was drawn from the vanguard of 1199 never missing a planning meeting, they interviewed and selected or had imposed on them two or three leaders in turnstile fashion rotate through the school in a brief three year period. Unlike El Puente and Science Skills Center where leaders drawn from the centrifugal center of the proposed school and who agreed to return to graduate school to get State mandated certification in order to serve as principals of their said schools, 1199 continued like ducks bobbing ceaselessly into a circular pool of water, to obtain leaders from an already branded ready to serve crop of leader-role hungry individuals. Massive confusion unleashed when these elliptical individuals drifted off the bedrock entrenched public school orbit into a strange and almost unworldly reality.

Observing the predicament the dilemma was to observe to warring mothers, pre-Rabelaisian. This was the moment after Chancellor Fernandez was fired for recommending the book "Heather Has Two Mommies" about a committed lesbian partnership leading a family a moment when tolerance and inclusiveness were stuck in subzero freezers. The leaders and subsequent teachers cycling through this infant school were viewed as intruders moving beyond borders of staked and inviolate territory. This was an archetypical war of ancient dimension. The teachers union and the school system locked in a spasming coitus – lockstep and dialogue, the acid and water of an impossible partnership formation.

Some of the machinations were in the form of: an agreed upon student-centered curriculum formulated into two-hour blocks of time, reduced like gravy into neat forty-five minute period of unrelated, compartmentalized, fractured, and unconnected course offerings, planning time for groups of teachers eliminated by course structure, hand chosen teachers believed to be on payroll never entered into the system. This insidious undermining, this ambushing so apparently obvious so blatantly cruel so uncaringly cruel form the imprints of an absurdist drama foredooming the demise of the 1199 School for Social Change.

This union advising a presidential committee on the politics of national health care kept losing its way, the vision getting blurred, the stamina faltering, thrown by each attempt at sabotage or subterfuge. Lost. Lost in conversation. Defiant, adamant to converse, to maintain a democratic process through the dilemma, the drama, the amazing maze of unapologetic, blatant autocratic paradox played out posse-like, miring their vision like pea-thick fog, torrential gloom, so spilled the Dostoyevsky muted grays of bureaucracy.

Conversation may be the bedrock of true love but a system has no tolerance no time for talk. And yet, like Joycean streaming sentences minus grammatical pause, like Irish bar talk, like sleepy afternoons at Parisian cafes, the committee leaders from 1199 persisted in giving each individual at any particular meeting the unbridled tempo of their reflectiveness this, taxing even to believers, to fellow reformers. An arrogance of purpose blinded them against the erosion of their very principled and singular vision for their school. The ardor for honest hearings from all participants kept them from acknowledging the power of the stealth warring school system and its mandate to hold tight to the status quo and paramount to keep another union from encroaching on the UFT singular and absolute strangle hold control on the New York City school system.

Local 1199 engaged in a poignant pursuit for the “right leader” this unkempt odyssey, the foghorn blasting its way through Scottish-like out-island mist, eluded this bastion of urbanity and sophistication. They searched for a person with an affinity for social change and an enlightened Dewey-like child centered pedagogy for which democratic practice was the springboard in each step. And to an almost combustible frustration unlike the church affiliated group I was unable to break through and prevail. It was clear that the lead of the 1199 committee never missing a meeting the person with passion and fire for the

vision should have been the anointed first director of the school certainly in its infancy. She could not would not leave her union cabinet level directorship if for a year or two to build the school and yet to the point of being consumed almost eaten alive by the establishment of the school her spirit eroded her energy ebbed she was absolutely unable take up the almighty cudgel of first leader.

The school six years in the making was finally abandoned by its birth mother, futility and frustration finally forced flight. In the end, the members of the planning team simply didn't or couldn't or wouldn't step come inside. The process, a purely enacted democratic practice this with a vengeance, was the moat they wouldn't cross. Democracy or equal footing equal voice became a holding pattern masking an underlying reluctance to truly jump in with two feet and become fully responsible for a New York City public school. Love in the conditional, in the contingent doesn't, can't work.

Included is a letter to the Chancellor informing him that 1199 is leaving the venture and asking to have any reference to the union removed, eliminated, deleted. The detail and the thoughtfulness embodied in the letter attest to the virtue of participation in this kind of act. Their truths rest on their joining in, if it did not work out right for them in the end. This alone, this letter is sufficient to warrant an action like the New Visions initiative to exist. New Visions brought groups outside the New York public school system inside and thus whatever the outcome to have a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to or detract from a public school's short and long term success. First is the letter sent informing me that they would no longer be part of the creation of the 1199 School for Social Change:

Dear Naomi Barber,

It has been a pleasure working with you and we greatly appreciate the efforts and support that you have provided us over the years.

However, it is with deep regret that I must inform you of our decision to withdraw our name and support from the 1199 School for Social Change effectively immediately.

The attached document chronicles the experiences that justify our belief that our partnership with the Board of Education has been (and would continue to be) ineffective in providing the quality of education that meets 1199 standards.

Our union maintains a commitment to public education and will be looking at future options. We will also continue our efforts to support 1199 youth and the broader community, especially this year.

Thank you again.

Sincerely,

CJ, Chair, 1199 School for Social Change Planning Committee

What follows are excerpts of the document submitted to the 1199 members from Dennis Rivera, the President and 1199 Executive Council dated June 1998:

1199 is immersed in youth and education issues: We have much to contribute to the building of a school that challenges and respects young people, their families, and communities. Therefore, we responded to New Visions' 1992 request for school proposals. We committed ourselves to working from within the public school system to effect change for our students and, by example and involvement, the entire system of public education.

We believed, and continue to believe, that 1199 has a compelling responsibility to continue our tradition of commitment to both social change and education not only for our members but for our broader communities and our world.

OUR CONTRIBUTIONS

We have contributed an average of \$125,000 each year for the past 6 years while working aggressively to institute, support, and demand collaboration, academic excellence, and social change within the 1199 School for Social Change.

While our contributions and successes are substantial year after year, we have met resistance in each of the key areas of our vision ---Collaboration, Academic Excellence, and Social Change.

RESISTANCE TO THE VISION

Our actions demonstrate our commitment. The Board of Education has demonstrated little commitment to our vision and indifference to our attempts to move toward the vision.

MOST RECENT CRISIS

Following is a sketch of the latest on a long list of situations with which we have dealt. Crisis has been the norm. We are regularly responding to some crisis or another leaving very little time and energy to build the school we envisioned.

THE PRINCIPAL'S APPOINTMENT:

Leadership is a major factor in building the school.

The Chancellor of NYC public schools was to appoint one of two candidates to serve as principal.

However in August 1997 with no appointments made and with no consultation with or warning to us – the school's superintendent (in the Bronx) permanently appointed a principal to the school. The person 1) was not one of the two candidates from the C-30 (principal hiring) process, 2) he was fired from his previous school because of academic conditions there, and 3) he did not have our approval.

THE TASK FORCE

We solicited an immediate meeting with the Chancellor. When we finally met with the Chancellor he created a task force to investigate and make recommendations in response to our issues with the school.

THE CHANCELLOR'S LETTER

After numerous attempts to obtain the follow-up meeting with the Chancellor, we received a letter from his office indicating that all issues were resolved by the Task Force and that therefore no meeting was needed.

After one year the school continues to have a leadership crisis.

The school has no leadership, no collaboration, no academic excellence, and no social change. But the basic message from the Chancellor is that the school should proceed as it is.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We cannot continue as is.

We now believe even more deeply and with more conviction that 1199 has a compelling responsibility to the children and the futures of our members, our communities, and our world. This belief leads us to recommend that we invest energy and resources in planning and researching strategies for creating an 1199 School for Social Change.

Our consensus is that we will be unable to actualize our vision within NYC Board of Education at this time given the history and politics of the current situation. We should take immediately begin the process of withdrawing our name and support from the 1199 School for Social Change;

Sincerely,

1199 School for Social Change Planning Committee.

SEDUCE AND ABANDON –THE INEFFABLE BOROUGH OF THE BRONX AND ITS TAKE ALL PRISONERS NO EXCEPTIONS MADE!

Public schools are always in need of repair and of someone to blame. Failure is they're business maintaining it with a high level of consternation and perplexity is their job. Running in place on a treadmill glistening with sweat panting like a prostrate dog on a summer's day after being nearly annihilated in a locked care is the posture. Furrowed brows, monitoring armies, people running through halls as if carrying the decisive pint of blood for a nation about to lose a beloved leader is the norm.

Abutting this, a wildly ambitious bronco of a man a restless much married homegrown Bronx boy. A man sophisticated in worldly ways, having held and run for elected positions and having worked for some corporate titans. Most recently involved in housing and youth programming in a part of the Bronx rising out of the ashes of a decade of catastrophic alleged landlord arson set fires. Neighborhood revival this lone star loner sleeves rolled perfectly manicured decided to craft a New Visions school. He was firmly ensconced in the Puerto Rican Democratic Party establishment. As a student at Fordham in the '60's (those '60's) had taken over the President's office, along with others, to stage a protest and sit in. Rebellion lined his past like so many of these emergent New Visions schools designers and architects still with the taste of rebellion finding a new mature front for expression that of creating a public school.

My grandmother had eighteen children and a pig farm in Puerto Rico. She took equal care of the pigs and the children. My grandmother knew in order to feed her children she had to have healthy well-bred pigs to sell. This was the fount from which he often drew of introductory comments.

He ensnared a well-known proposal writer whose specialty was health care and health education to respond to the RFP enticed the President of the Bronx based City college to serve on the committee (a person with well articulated Latino roots) recruited a former Hispanic female track and field Olympiad serving now as the chief executive of external affairs from the largest Bronx hospital to join the committee. The Bronx was spare with proposals, so this rose quickly to the top. Local 1199 had been coerced to locate in the Bronx, with hindsight a great mistake given the ultimate sad fate of the school.) The Bronx was notorious onto this day for having its political leaders no matter

religion or ethnicity cycle through the prison system the treachery of this borough cannot be underestimated or overstated.

Attentive ever to the need and political reality of working on all fronts at the same time *all cylinders firing* he met a Latina finishing up her doctorate of education at Harvard and forthwith offered the position of principal of his yet to open school. Precipitously she dropped out, never quite revealing if it was family commitment or a sudden aversion to this part hustler part mover. (At some point in the annals of public schooling she did land a plum job as principal of some school worthy of note.) Another shoe fell when the very President and lead of his committee withdrew the promised space on his CUNY campus to open the school this after the appendix New Visions High School Guide had stated clearly that the school would be housed within the rural like grounds of the said college. The name of the school Health Opportunities Secondary School served as a big draw in the Bronx since the hospital system throughout the Bronx was the biggest employer of family members. When the school system offered a space in a high school with a rap sheet as long as the one at the Fort Apache police precinct the committee wisely reneged and decided to put off the opening of the school until the following year. The prospect of a high school focused on health careers drew an outside number of applicants thrown into a state of disarray and having to find *catch-as-catch-can* openings in other high schools throughout the City.

It must have taken enormous almost heroic presence of mind to defer the opening of the school with such advanced play and excitement exacting, as it seems an unbearable internal pressure on this particular individual so much so that he fled he disappeared he seemed to *fall off the face of the universe* except for one fleeting call to my home number from somewhere near Santa Fe, New Mexico. The team he assembled, including a representative of the President who withdrew his campus as a site for the school kept meeting wedded by now to the vision for the school and a heightened desire to be a committee to open such a health career related school.

As the next school year drew near the Superintendent in the Bronx offered them another space in which to locate the school. This particular site had been a warehouse renovated recklessly for an early childhood center vacated expeditiously actually fleetingly because of the poor air quality and the distinct probability of asbestos dust commingling with the air. Some inspectorate cozy with Bronx officialdom sanctioned the use of the building for *older students*.

The committee reeled in by the Bronx Superintendent who well documented oversaw a greater proportion of high school failures than anywhere else in the Nation. Quickly gathering up a group of applicants from a pool of rejects all with the proper qualifications but turned away even by the most sinister of schools looking for leaders and as the interviewing committee came to the table a good hour and a half before the first scheduled interview they were served a feast of catered Italian delicacies straight from the most famous of all Italian eateries on Arthur Avenue the heart of the Italian restaurant and market neighborhood in the Bronx. Peppers and sausages and lasagna spitting steaming juices in the foil of the pleated containers on raised canisters were waiting with actual high school students recruited as servers. Raised desert plate of stacked Cannoli and Napoleons sat in the center of the table coffee served to taste by the students. This was a true Bronx seduction. And as forks lavished lasagna and mouths water on the sweetness of Cannoli in like John Wayne swinging saloon doors, in strode the missing leader sitting down in a chair just at angle to the head of the table, the Superintendent all mouths were aghast. This little bit of *Gorilla Theater* staged prior to the meeting after he got a mouthful from me for his irresponsible disappearing act. He had even interviewed one of the candidates prior to the meeting at my request the only possible leader with the kind of qualifications necessary to lead the opening of the school.

Settling into interview mood the committee as rehearsed asked the pre-written questions of each candidate the time allotted twenty minutes per interview and ten minutes for if rough committee discussion. There were ten candidates in all. And as the runaway leader and I had met before hand so had the Superintendent and his team to identify an individual over which they could have complete control but who on the surface would be acceptable to the committee and the theme of the school, health careers. After an hour of squabbling following the interviews more sweets brought out, the committee voted on the Superintendent's choice, a very dark-skinned man in his early thirties whose family had moved to Guyana from India as indentured slaves. The man was one of fourteen children, devastatingly handsome, seemingly sweeter than the pastries, self-effacing, with a bedazzling smile and absolutely no experience doing anything except being a wonderful uncle to a multitude of nieces and nephews and as coordinator of a Bronx borough-wide AID's education initiative. He would be given a temporary license to serve in an acting capacity. His looks were mesmerizing his lack of experience not even a worth a mention he could be manipulated like no wolf ever achieved in all of

Aesop's Fables. The leader could not register much of a protest having disappeared so flagrantly and the rest of the committee could not resist this candidate's apparent charm all opposition *melting into thin air*.

The school year began with a wild frenzied protest. Parents who initially had expected the school to be located on the campus of the local four-year City University Lehman College nestled in the only local semblance of the Corinthian with pastoral greens among arbors of wonderfully old trees. Inadvertently even to the second addenda to the High School Directory the system had neglected to change the location of the school unintentional malfeasance? Parents instead brought their 9th graders to an airless, windowless badly converted former warehouse in the heart of a pimp-controlled drug riddled neighborhood. The prostitutes were serving as school crossing guards many of whom may have been parents or relatives of the entering students. Imagine trampling on an expectation of parents with such scandalous indifference families craving for the early teenagers to be students in a high school with a health career theme on a verdant college campus now to enter a building threatened with condemnation and found flagrantly short of providing a healthy environment for students by OSHA the Division of Occupational Safety and Health the Board of Education securing waivers because of the manufactured crisis situation. The Bronx High School Superintendent held in awe-struck esteem the *Barbarians at the Gates* and didn't want to cause further upheaval by having the opening of Health Opportunities having delayed by another year. Parents simmering with rage unglued by reality of their faith turned bad torpid bile over spilling their mouths. Here the first day of high school in what should have been a condemned building. The mild mannered with GQ good looks acting principal stood at the door greeting parents and students jaw taut eyes brimming.

Next legion in Board of Education sabotage protocols, every single one of the teachers selected in good faith by the planning committee and trained for two weeks with private dollars by a team of education consultants led by the gorgeous leader with strong Guyana roots failed to show up on the first day of school as if disappearing in a sink hole of car hacking shops just a block south of the school. They just vanished showing up in their stead were recruits of teachers potential inductees for the Board of Education infamous *rubber room* - spaces in sub basements where teachers tossed from schools for flagrancy kept each day to fulfill the allotted contractual school time while legal experts wrestled with their union representatives about the future course of their professional lives as teachers. Thumping fists found no object upon which to

thrust their rage the grinding grizzled Bronx education establishment had gone missing as well they're prop this former *AIDS* educator left to take the brunt.

Finally the system planted a spy to serve as the executive assistant to the wet behind the ears leader visited once daily by her lesbian lover the executive assistant to the high school superintend where head cocked to yield to whispers they each day would plot ways to disconcert and unnerve the leader. This was a full court press of disruption not the kind the reformers like to frame.

Valiantly our gorgeous sweet like nectar leader carried on day-in-day-out classroom visits looked upon by the students more as an uncle and by the teachers as an object of derision. Teachers feet a prop desks read over stock reports and sports columns like middling entitled business executives barely looking up when the director walked in students folded their heads on their arms an ostrich pose to hide from the horror, the pelting cynicism just beyond the tossed bunched up balls of newspapers perusing finished.

The planning team aware of the awful hoax perpetrated on the new school kept meeting frantically to explore options the vagrant lead of the team back at the head of the table his first strike desperate attempt to make amends was to run a full sports program on Saturdays in which he was the first coach. The students came to life during these Saturday sessions where they would be alerted to the fact that the planning team was fervently trying to turn things around.

Meanwhile in the penultimate cruelty of vise twisting bureaucracy the gentle soul from Guyana was assaulted daily by his shortfalls: no paper work in every form and variety that the school system rolls out like soiled toilet paper to entrap. The dazzling smile disappeared fear gripped his incisors bulging tautly against his jaw line this loving uncle's heart constricted. And with a final sinister irony the erstwhile planning team mired in their own confusion and humbled by intimidation asked this sweetest and most earnest of all individuals was told to leave forthwith and in a state of utter exhaustion close to a complete irrevocable mental collapse he let himself be shoved out the backroom exit door.

And then in the height of self-serving appeasement the Bronx High School Superintendent asked the swashbuckling Versace looking model originator of the proposal for Health Opportunities with nary a school-system credential to serve in an acting capacity as Director of the School shadowed hour by hour by an education consultant esteemed in the progressive school community with one caveat the current teaching staff be kept temporarily in place and retooled or reconstructed. Of course the ambitious grandson of a pig farmer in Puerto Rico eagerly agreed to all terms as if he were in on the cabal in the first place. Dizzying and sickening to observe all of this in my charge to no matter what make sure these New Visions Schools in early infancy succeed particularly in the Bronx a landscape of notorious school failures it was arm to arm combat and ardent hand wrestle the High School Superintendent and the emissary the representative of the *Barbarian* - me.

The tourniquet twister the one condition made by the newly appointed leader that he have a posse of at least six parents by his side at all times along with the education consultant – granted. And he did turn the school academically around, and he did, like a mythic figure lead the students and their families into a new site built to specification to reflect a school fit for health professionals in training. The man was in his element dickering for a good deal on a long-term lease and executing an architectural plan fit for a multi-thousand dollar private school population. The building reached the lofty height of green educational architectural and technical design award worthy. The kitchen which was to be opened for weekend family meals and celebrations was regarded blue chip with the likes of Waldorf and other four star consulting chefs. The colors of the walls throughout the building were warm and Caribbean in feeling and texture. This Health Opportunities High School was a real show place.

Trophy building couldn't have a poseur as principal so the Superintendent forced him out because he didn't have the legal certification to be a high school principal – precipitously withdrawn removed, the leader's temporary acting status. And as his wont he again disappeared somewhere in Upstate New York. By the time this took place I was in the process of terminating my position with New Visions feeling weary and dispirited as a mentor elliptically said, "I was having a crisis of faith."

The building languishes on the banks of the East River not far from Yankee Stadium the current iteration of Health Opportunities has been on the schools under review by the State Education Department with threat of closing.

Imagine the building has been recycled multiple times akin to the individuals who recently bought a Wright House in the Southwest as a tear down so the turnstile education teams occupying the building enjoy the state of the art gym for their own purposes when the students leave each day saving up their energies for a solid workout. Sounding a bit cursive and bitter here and wondering where my own culpability rests glad to have been given a pass to leave New Visions when told I was experiencing a *crisis of faith*. Spending time reading and writing these days finding optimism in the anonymous faces of individuals on subways or buses or the street with whom exchanges of heartfelt greetings are exchanged. Niggling in the back of my mind the fate of the beautiful inside and out gentleman from Guyana the other guy did go get himself retooled and credentialed and now oversees as a principal a middling non-descript neutered small high school somewhere in the Bronx.

Another School Story: The Academy for Community Development – Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development

The lead of the planning team a state legislator had been a teacher. He had tried along with others to create an all black school for boys. The system screamed its rejection like a lion with a thorn in its paw. He was *at home* with whites and *white liberals* but disparaged the role white liberal reformers had played in New York City public education, the paternalism and the insensitivity to a community's point of view rankled him.

This experienced legislator and planning team leader brought together a diverse and representative group of partners, including, a white parent leader and resident of his community, a seasoned community development activists with international reputations, and local school board members.

Once again the lure the bait the belief that at the helm of a public school no matter how innovative no matter that it grew from a true grass roots soil that a bona fide fully bonded and certified principal had to be identified and selected to lead the school. How often standing on the sidelines watching this dance of false legitimacy thinking the creators of these schools the authors of the proposals started losing their nerve as the portals opened to students and felt anchored with a *real* principal in place. From long discouraging experience, in public schools leaders rise out of dues paying and a certification process that numbs, customizes, as if, all schools were Mac Donald franchises.

The first leader/principal drawn from this pool of bonded and certified applicants was decorous and system bred he was known to be system specialist in administration. He kept to rules like molten lead. He spoke as if anaesthetized in a Dale Carnegie course. He had a sweet side but his fondness of literature and whatever spontaneity existed within him never orbited out until he got to Exit 16 on the Throughway. He was frozen and incapable of deviating, swerving off. The agile Legislator almost suffered apoplexy trying to eke out a spontaneous gesture. Relegating him the leadership role, having a dysfunctional planning committee, the legislator could not make up the difference even by teaching a course at the school himself every Friday.

Banishing leader one, the legislator found his way to leader two. The particular gentleman was pure system as well. But this person was emblematic of African American pride with a vengeance. Jazz tones followed him everywhere he had a diamond earring, wore a *fez* and always had a swath of *Kinte* draping his shoulder. If you wished him a Happy Thanksgiving he told you how African Americans celebrated Thanksgiving. He engulfed others in an overarching *black nationalism* but one that seemed to fit comfortably giving a tolerant dimension to the school system. This principal, had like the legislator, been an activist during the '60's, and had even behind the virtual back of the school system run an all black all boys school within the school in which he served as principal. So discrete was he that no one knew but the students, and their teachers. He was the father of six boys. His real affinity was to sports. He personally coached the boys winning basketball team and on Saturdays and to the delight and astonishment of the planning team mandated that the young male athletes participate after every game in a male only discussion about being a black man, a respectful and strong black man in the world.

The stumbling black was the central theme of the school to which the legislator was committed, community development. *Give me the curriculum* he said when confronted with displeasure by the legislator *and I'll pass it on to our teachers.*" This principal understood the vision not at all. Community development for the legislator was providing training arenas to students to incubate a sense of power and future direction, a politicized and experiential education.

In a five year period, Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development welded together through a cooperative co-leadership principal to legislator a viable school graced with a new site reflecting much of what had

been the dream and vision of the legislator of the meaning of inclusiveness and community development. The building was generously open to the community for sports and meetings and art studio. The students had ample opportunities to participate in an apprentice capacity in a variety of community development projects most of which ultimately brought benefit to the neighborhoods in which they lived. At a lunch date after having the Fund now called the as New Visions the legislator regaled with wonderful stories of the school presenting me first with a large and colorful bouquet of flowers.

Note: Have not by choice followed the fates of the original New Visions Schools can look them up on the Internet. Mine is a story of origins, observations and reflections purely subjective in nature.

The House I Live In - (The House I Live In - Song written in 1943 by Abel Meeropol)

What is America to me?
A name, a map, or a flag I see;
A certain word, democracy.
What is America to me?

The house I live in,
A plot of earth, a street,
The grocer and the butcher,
Or the people that I meet;
The children in the playground,
The faces that I see,
All races and religions,
That's America to me.

The town I live in,
The street, the house, the room,
The pavement of the city,
And the garden all in bloom;
The church, the school, the clubhouse,
The million lights I see,
But especially the people;
That's America to me.

The house I live in,
My neighbors white and black,
The people who just came here,
Or from generations back;
The town hall and the soapbox,
The torch of liberty,
A home for all God's children;
That's America to me.

The words of old Abe Lincoln,
Of Jefferson and Paine,
Of Washington and Jackson
And the tasks that still remain;
The little bridge at Concord,
Where Freedom's fight began,
Our Gettysburg and Midway
And the story of Bataan.

The house I live in,
The goodness everywhere,
A land of wealth and beauty,
With enough for all to share;
A house that we call Freedom,
A home of Liberty,
And it belongs to fighting people
That's America to me.

In elementary school, Mrs. Schwartz, I can still see her standing very bow-legged moving her arms and hands as if she were a puppeteer and we song birds sprung from her own imagination. Above was a song we sang a chorus of sixth graders as if the fate of the country hung on the articulation of the words and the lifting of our voices. That song seems apt in describing what New Visions meant to me to my life. What follows are thoughts about how for me New Visions cut a new path if in one moment one small anal of public school reform.

New Visions Salvos: Precedent setting: processes were put in place to identify a leader or principal, select a teaching team, develop curriculum that met State standards but uniquely expressed a school's vision, all students were selected by lottery. Leaders and teaching teams were identified and voted upon by a representative participatory committee entrusted to identify individuals who best reflected the school's vision. One can only imagine the consternation of the administrators at the Board of Education who had used in perpetuity the selection of school principals according to a rigid code of ascendency if never fully articulated or written there were certain immutable givens *paying ones dues* tariffs never fully delineated but understood. Obstructionism none to subtle reigned supreme as committees met and the New Visions processes were put in place the tripping wire fell even those who in other walks in life were known to be stalwart and tenacious causing *Visions* to wither as so many water starved flower beds and in time after exhausting any alternative sustenance turn on itself and succumb corrupt and ungainly. Not many were as aware of the treachery within the Board of Education believing that deal making no matter principle or ethics belonged in the high-risk world of financing. Lessons stung caught off-guard even the most savvy of the Barbarians on the Fund's Board. Throughout part of the narrative are stories of stumbles failure and ultimate demise.

Precedent setting: brokered agreements between District Superintendents and High School Borough Superintendents were signed, this the linchpin of New Visions Schools to span adolescence with a seamless transition from middle to high school in a single overarching educational institution with a singular philosophy of education. It was a New Visions mandate that schools be small with no more than one hundred students per grade, that schools span minimally grades 7-12 although could include grades K-12 and that classes be heterogeneous *tracking* by school performance or test results without exception forbidden and militantly at first maintained. Predictably informal reading and math groups were assembled which included students who held comparable test performance.

Precedent setting: never had an entire City been invited to submit a proposal to create a public school with full level of support for a successful submission, with minimal pitfalls or traps here, identifying readers that cut a wide enough swath a challenge since new ideas often innocent imbued by a sense of optimism read by cynical status-hawking eyes would ultimately lead to

sinister dismissive mocking rejection. All proposals were read by the chiefs or specific approved of designees at the Board of Education and both teachers and supervisors unions with an additional set of two readers, five in all and all readers had to be identified by name and affiliation. Consensus was built for each proposal additional readers sought until agreement on the submission was achieved. The very transparent nature of the initiative inhibited often to paralysis conspiratorial deal swapping aware that the very essence of Hegemony is its entitled absolute hold on the release of information and its obscured layers of secrecy. The quote on the proposal cover and interspersed throughout the second New Visions RFP led to at least a poetic understanding of the purpose and openness of the process. Ultimately it was the RFP, which became universalized throughout the country. New Visions with sizeable grants from the Annenberg and then the Gates Foundation provided support primarily to transform high schools into smaller schools housed within one building, 21st Century Schools, as they are called, using primarily the same inclusive RFP process. If for no one else evidence of my earnest and heartfelt drafts and final copy of the first New Visions RFP rest on the hard drive of my computer.

To my mind New Visions put innovative public school reform structure in place but except when there was a true adhering melding of school personnel to the vision for the school where the school was of a whole cloth a tapestry held together by a single abiding narrative. If it was stated from the onset that all students ought be prepared to attend and successfully graduate from the college of choice, including Harvard, in most cases the standard of academic offering fell far short from the sinister and cabalistic subversive incursions to the available pools of individuals often inept or undereducated or provincial.

The Question: Did the New Visions initiative come to mean anything in the realm of *public school reform* a trio of words almost completely null and void overwhelmed by overuse and the predations the entrenched?

Did the first New Visions schools succeed or fail – everything rested on the quality of the teachers’ relationships with the students and the high demands of an uncompromised and uncorrupted curriculum. Too many of the schools had rough beginnings some failing embarrassingly and miserably and some soldiering on when getting too weary led to quitting or being unrecognizably co-opted. It is too sad and too difficult for me to look up the fates of the first fledgling schools. I am left with some wonderful if uncanny stories and ever brimful with a sense of hopefulness still know there will be forthcoming

individuals to light the slow fuse of possibility a quote from Emily Dickinson often referred to by emeritus education philosopher, Maxine Greene.

Camus, The Plague:

-We can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace.

-Once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended.

-If there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love.

NY Times Thursday January 26, 2012 “City Students at Small Public High Schools Are More Likely to Graduate, Study Says.” By, Winnie Hu “I wouldn’t even dream of getting these results if these schools weren’t small and structured the way they are,” Richard Kahan (founder and chief executive officer of the Urban Assembly, a network of 20 small high schools and middle schools.)

NY Times January 30, 2012 – Seeing Every Senior Apply to College, Brett Kimmel founder and principal of Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning - Requirement: *Every student apply to college...*

What do you say to the claim many reformers make that you can educate children no matter what their socioeconomic standard in life? I think it is absolutely true....Our sixth graders come in, on average, about two years below grade level in reading and math. Yet every one of our seniors just applied to college – every single one of them.

So what do you do in between? You work tirelessly and you set very high expectations. You have that no-excuses approach and mentality to say, it is our job over the course of seven years to work with our kids and families to get them there. If we don’t do it then we fail.

REFUSING TO BE DEFERRED

An Evaluation of the Dream and the Practice of New Visions Schools

Michelle Fine, Principal Investigator

Funded by the Ford Foundation through the Public Education Network

Submitted to New Visions for Public Schools - September 1996 (excerpts)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From our brief, and somewhat surface glance at the New Visions Initiative, we are taken by the breadth and depth of short term accomplishment and also by the grand scale journey that lies ahead. Within these schools lie the critical elements of high quality public education for heterogeneous students. Across these schools lie the critical elements for system wide reform. A small set of thriving small schools is only an accomplishment if they carve the way for other such schools to emerge across New York City –in every neighborhood, with adequate autonomy, made accessible to every child, and help accountable to serious academic standards for all.

...Because these schools like other small secondary schools in New York City are national pioneers in the small school movement and are among those schools in New York perched to provoke systemic change, we end this documentation with a list, growing, partial, but nevertheless urgent, of issues which deserve attention for New Visions and beyond.

1. *Systemic Supports*
2. *Collaborative Partnerships*
3. *Professional Development*
4. *System-wide Reform*
5. *LEP and "Special Needs" Students*
6. *Technical Assistance to Community-based Organizations or Schools Within Schools Interested in Becoming Small Schools.*

We, collaboratively with New Visions for Public Schools (Fund for NYC Public Schools changed name to New Visions) framed our evaluation around four questions:

**What is the vision of each of these schools?*

**How does the teaching and learning in that school reflect its original vision?*

**What is the role of parents/community in shaping the school?*

**How has the larger system supported/obstructed the development of the school?*

This is the story of an Initiative designed to create “what could be” in the public sphere. We offer this document towards three ends:

**to illuminate the challenges which confront schools and communities eager to sustain partnerships, collaborations, and educational improvement within community development.*

**to raise up tough questions of teaching and learning as narrated by educators and students.*

**to demonstrate that when schools and communities hold the public school system accountable for the delivery of high quality education for all, the New York City system as presently constituted does not consistently deliver –certainly not at all levels, for all boroughs, across racial/ethnic/class groups, with equal commitment or resources.*

Not satisfied surviving as “low profile” alternatives, the New Visions schools sought to demonstrate “what could be” and provoke “what must be” system-wide for secondary schools. Toward this end, the schools have distinguished themselves with the following characteristics:

- 1. An incredible sense of unbridled possibility, deep ownership and commitment from multiple constituencies.*
- 2. Relationships between and among students and faculty flourish.*
- 3. Democracy on the ground.*
- 4. Relentless and courageous leadership.*
- 5. A sustaining vision.*

These schools are willing to trade autonomy for accountability. The primary issues upon which this sustained reflection should focus include:

- *space*
- *moving or being evicted*
- *governance*
- *hiring and assurances for stable personnel who want to be in these schools*
- *budgeting*
- *school growth*
- *accountability for student outcomes*
- *"dumping" of kids and teachers*

The New Visions effort is a bold act in the late 20th century. Amidst national calls for privatization and vouchers, dismal medial portrayal of public schooling, depleted and depressed urban communities, and a fraying public sector, we find in these schools well springs of hope, vision and intellectual energy. Suffused with passion and covered in scars, these schools have moved forward, committed to making a difference.

SYSTEMIC ISSUES THAT MUST BE FACED IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS

By Naomi Barber, Director of New Visions of Schools, New Visions for Public Education (note: included in this evaluation by Michelle Fine)

What follows is a litany of circumstances, of conditions that must be met in order for these New Visions Schools to last beyond the brilliance of a shooting star, to be a more than a quickly glimpsed and eclipsed August meteor shower.

- *To build and hold a faculty together*
- *To establish a leadership which is responsive to the governance body and committed to deepening the vision*
- *To establish representative and accountable local school governing bodies or councils*
- *That each school have as much autonomy as possible to create itself, build its curriculum, refine its pedagogy in response to the needs of the students...*
- *That the arts provide the basis and interior lining of all studies*
- *That each student has the opportunity to participate vigorously in an array of sports experiences*

- *That the spaces reflect educational vision and provide places for families to learn together*
- *That gender, race, culture and class are seen as sources of energy and pride and fully inform the curriculum and general life of the school.*
- *That original or primary sources are the texts used, and a high degree of literacy is the focus of all school work.*
- *That all students experience their burgeoning power through increasingly more complex community, neighborhood, and curriculum based projects, that the vitality of the neighborhood is enhanced by good works*
- *That research and documentation grow out of questions and concerns within each school and enhance reflection and dynamic school growth*
- *That schooling is broadened to be defined to embrace the fostering of community and economic growth and development; that community viability become part of a more expansive, wider definition of school*
- *That at the heart of each school is an overarching and unbreakable commitment to equity and educational excellence. That student graduates have educational competitive competence and an unbending commitment to social justice.*
- *That schools reflect multi-perspectives like many succulently thick-stemmed lily pods floating on pluralistic urban seas, bound by a common set of democratically derived principles. (note: did I say that??)*

None of the above conditions are possible or conceivable within the current system of the Board of Education.

TRANSFORMATIONS

Student's Story

“And the church. Being that this is a building that looks like a church, it's not like a school.. I used to be like Yo! I want to go to a real school, I don't want to be here. It was like – what we come here to pray? The whole thing was weird. But now I see that the structure...the physical surroundings goes perfect with everything else. The whole thing is different from any other high school. It was different from PS 50 and PS 84. I was used to getting textbooks, doing questions out of the book...little questions here and there, you answered from the book, you looked at the book. And when I came here it was different. Like – you had to analyze stuff...You went outside, you worked with the community. At 50 we didn't even go to trips, we just sat there and looked at the teacher and he taught

us, and that's it. You were supposed to learn from one person. And here we have more than one facilitator (teacher) in the class sometimes.

I wrote a poem. "I don't think I know who I am." It's really weird to think you can know yourself what you would do in every situation, where you want to go to college what classes you want to take. How do I know?!

*Who am I?
Should I know? Shouldn't I know?
The only that that I know is that I'm 17, female, intelligent,
a Latina and not a Hispanic
I know the facts, not who I will be in the future.*

The Facilitator

A lot of people approach the arts very skeptically. They say they can't draw, they can't do these kinds of things. They don't know anything about this kind of engineering or construction work. A lot of people, it was the first time they used a saw or a drill or any of the materials we used. So I think it's very empowering, even if people aren't going to become artists, which most of them aren't. But to look at something that seems to be impossible and actually to be able to make it fly.

The Director

"Before students can learn, they have to be able to get in touch with their passion. What do they really care about? What do they truly believe? What has been their experience – in their community, in their life? If we can see the classroom as a kind of portal – through which students can explore and express that passion, freely and safely, then we can start talking about learning, and about developing a love for learning."

Afterthoughts: Parents

You know I think that these schools are works in progress, and that we're going over bumps and we're going over holds, and we're doing this and everybody is saying "One day this will be it. This will be the best." And you're saying that these days and years go by. But happens to the trailblazers, the kids and the families who early on committed themselves to this idea of reform?

What keeps me going? The co-directors of my school keep me going. They haven't lost the vision, they are willing to listen to criticism. And the dedication of most teachers working with what resources they have. And my school takes all kinds of children, not just the "A" students, but kids that have been struggling. What keeps me going? Because when I saw that kid walk in to our school and when I saw that same kid leaving, I saw a different child.

What follows an excerpted UFT Report on Small Schools prepared in 2005. Amazingly it bonded my story from the very beginning in 1972 as if on parallel tracks. The dimension added, the personal, a look from the inside out. Naomi Barber

**REPORT OF THE
UNITED FEDERATION OF
TEACHERS
SMALL SCHOOL TASK FORCE
MAY 2005**

Members UFT Small School Task Force

Co-chairs

Joseph Colletti - Special Representative for Educational Programs
Peter Goodman - Liaison Small School Support Network

**Small School Task Force Report
May 2005**

New York City is no stranger to small schools. It has been a leader in the creation of more than 250 small schools, the bulk of them secondary, over the past quarter of a century. Throughout its history the United Federation of Teachers has supported, along with many other reforms, the creation of these small schools. Their astonishing variety of themes, educational approaches, student populations, partnerships and problems offers a chance for innovation and experimentation, and a way to address the wide variety of student needs and interests in New York City's schools. The small schools often provide opportunities for teacher voice in a personalized, collegial, collaborative and professional work place. For parents and students, small schools provide another choice in the public school system.

Open Society Institute gave a \$30 million grant to New Visions specifically to transform large low achieving high schools into small secondary schools, combining tough academic programs with **youth development principles and community service**. A major feature of this "New Century" initiative was the mandated **involvement of each new school with entities outside of the school system such as universities, cultural organizations, corporations and community organizations**. Over 50 New Century schools, most of them sharing space in existing school buildings, have opened in the past three years. In September 2003, the Gates Foundation expanded the number of outside partners with an additional \$50- million grant for small school creation. In addition to New Visions, portions of this grant went to several new organizations such as the International Partnership Schools, Outward Bound, Replications, Inc., the Asia Society, the College Board, CUNY and The Center for Youth Development and Education, expanding the number of organizations involved in new school creation in the city. In February 2005, the Gates Foundation and the Dell Foundation announced an additional \$32-million donation. At the same time other groups, in collaboration with the New York City Department of Education, have opened small schools in various locations such as corporate office space, college campuses and existing schools. On February 1, 2005 Mayor Bloomberg announced the opening for September 2005 of 52 more small schools, which will bring the total of new schools created under the Klein/Bloomberg administration to 157. Their stated goal is 200 new schools by 2006.

THE CURRENT PICTURE

Now, small schools have moved from an experimental stage in New York City to a core strategy of high school reform. Small schools are replacing or in the process of replacing many long standing comprehensive high schools and creating a major role in the system for outside funders and agencies who advocate them.

WHAT THE SURVEY SHOWS

The survey of small-school chapter leaders, and of chapter leaders in affected large high schools, confirmed that members are indeed feeling the negative effects of this rapid and poorly planned scale-up.

UNION REPRESENTATION AND MEMBERSHIP SERVICES

@ The UFT should facilitate the creation of building level and citywide networks of small schools and host school members so they can share experiences, problems and solutions.

into the excellent chapter leader training that is currently provided, a mentor system of new small school chapter leaders and experienced small school chapter leaders could build up the knowledge and confidence of new small school chapter leaders.

CONCLUSION

The UFT anticipated many of the problems caused by the unplanned creation of small schools by the Bloomberg/Klein administration. The December 4, 2002 UFT Delegate Assembly resolution stated our commitment to "encouraging a variety of educational settings for students and staff," but decried the lack of foresight and planning. This continues to be our policy. It is the hope of the task force that the specific recommendations we offer will lead to discussions with all those involved in the creation of new schools and will ensure a process that benefits students and teachers in all our city's public schools.

Deeply Personal – The Personal is Political becomes damning. Whose life is this I am living? Often, it is hard to believe it is mine. Write what you know. Jumble of terror and exaltation, freedom and contradiction, the past a rabid dog baiting to bite. I am on a cliff there is an abyss the contrite smites like a vengeful god quandary pride at survival I am not caged munching on tossed protein from a care taker or aid and yet not whole left incomplete as age advances like a warring militia haphazard and undirected.

It is real adventure or misadventure being me these days, late October 1999, the invented me I am trying on, without precedent, without history, without any constructed institution to bolster or provide a framework for my identity. I am living without love without work without any Freudian necessities for a happy life. I am a mother of an 11-year-old and two thirty plus-year-olds. I am trying to be a good mother while remembering the fathers, two of them, whom I hate and who caused me dislocation, humiliation and pain. One father I have nearly daily contact with. Murderous rage is not put to bed easily with such frequent contact. I am virtual moments from having no money and no source of income. I have to remember the choices I made that have put me in this state and condition. I have to remember where I came from and see those choices in that light. And I cannot purge myself of the pain of such a mostly dismal, lonely life at the hands of individuals who used me to dispense of their furies.

My body aches all over from the venom, the brutal exchanges with those to whom I was entrusted or I entrusted myself. And yet, my love for children, the ache I feel for a child not *getting his/her own* is real. In the subway, a girl, black, about 10 was talking to an older girl about the fact that her mother had not bought her any clothes for more than a year and that she had to fend for herself. Her tears were like the dew on morning glories. I recounted the story to my eleven-year-old, who commented, everybody in Harlem is poor. Justice and equity and the rights for children, and my desire to be a good mother are

the only real authentic alive parts of me. I am my own institution, my own friend, and my own lover, on my own. The sorrow is tempered, the searing pain is quieted, because I do love trees, some more than others, and can show you the ones around the Harlem Meer I love most, and I do love ducks and the way they follow each other in concentric circles, over and over and over in search of food and connection. And I do love to hear the people on the park benches having lively discourse. In these ways, I am a participant in the world.

Back packs, shiny faces, crisply pressed school uniforms, well-polished shoes drive me to tears and distraction. Watching the children amble toward the subway with their parents through the park or crowded into the 2 and 3 trains at 110th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard with expectant faces, parents fussing over them making sure every hair and item of clothing are in place fills me with a rage and a poignancy hard to contain. For they will, with few exceptions, be gypped in school today. Their teachers will not be prepared, or have the right supplies or adequate supervision, or will have stopped caring, or will be cynical and burnt-out. I know because I have spent nearly 30 years observing and reacting to the horror of depleted, limited, and often child unfriendly public school classes. If I could only stand at the door of the subway and tell all of the parents, don't go there, keep your child at home, he/she will be better educated and less harmed, unless you can ferret out teachers and a principal in whom you can trust and entrust your child and know that they *will light the slow fuse of possibility* (Emily Dickinson) and then more often or not you will have to lie about your address as a nanny recently shared. No school should have a child enter its doors with or without uniforms unless it is deemed fit and ready to teach and educate to a high, high standard for each of the entering students no matter what. No parent should have to release a child with a low performance grade – ouch, a disgrace!

School reform is rough trade. It is big business very big business. Look at the management companies descending into big cities to buy into a network or franchise of public charter schools, munching off the flesh of poor, their dreams in the dowry trunk, to make a profit. To profit from a despair rooted in democracy's failure, still the promise of educational justice, awakened in each child a sense of promise, the power of a confident, questioning mind unlatched. On the rubble of ineptness going far beyond the shallow if destructive racism and classism of its teaching staff, plastic, inured bureaucrats are frozen in paradigms of shiftless parables like vagrants on a train, curriculums recycled like tree trunks given an irrelevant uncaring boot. The word imagination, imagine has wandered off the lexicography. Slipping

off the ledge of world competitiveness refusing full rights to high standard education for each child no matter the economic or racial or ethnic circumstance. The offspring of the rich the privileged the legacies cannot be depended upon to startle us with their ingenuity their far sighted vision their dreams their entrepreneurial inventiveness and agility that is a *godless* society that holds open doors for only a privileged few with trust funds who knows in which brain in which heart in which soul enlightenment grows? Universal high quality schooling unfurled our flag now decimated and hollow *it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good* as our future as a nation dims.

New Visions Lessons: The school system went lockstep along with thinking that this was just another homily it had to weather, another futile pursuit precious in its idealism never seeing that the dredging was digging deep mining bringing a high beam to scrutinize their minds and the dilly dally daily haplessness of their school day choices and actions. Relentless and unbending, never abrogating a format or an arena, we overwhelmed the intransigent with a level of participation and interest that soon had them scurrying into being at least on the surface believers. Lessons learned: never compromise a person or limit the scope of a person's contribution once an open invitation for ideas and thoughts is given; no idea has a greater value if rendered by a louder voice a notable profile and within ideas and possibilities are also insights into why things are not better, are not working. Tenacity is necessary patience is essential and counter to that wild frenzied bureaucrat pulling attention from the abject academic neglect quiet reflection and penetrating looks to shed light speak of the horror of a children eyes deadened stooped over *Rexographs* being told to be quiet when there is no more quiet to be. The process need reflect the end.

Talmudic renderings
Bending and genuflecting
Davening and wailing
Rap rant cant
Shout out
A yawl a squall
Light possibility
Crushed pebbles under feet
Young voices
Call out
Indignant and suffering
Cut cut cut
Cut it out!

NB

Existential Truths

"It was a state of emergency; how could you not help?" Ms. Zdeb said. "Believe me, the last thing on my mind was violating any zoning ordinance. I had a high calling." (Ms. Zdeb a professional pet sitter took in 100 animals during the floods caused by Tropical Storm Floyd in New Jersey. She is being fined for violating the law; she did not have an animal shelter permit.) N.Y. Times, "Legal Woes for a latter-day Noah" N.Y. Times, 11/21/99

"The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical." The Plague, Albert Camus, p. 133

HARLEM - Pathmark

Yesterday, one of those yesterdays, a bunch of police officers were huddled around an office, a guidance office for special ed. kids, in a public school in Central Harlem. A block from the new Pathmark hailed as precedent setting for just getting built. Remarkable because they hired 60% of they're vegetable sprayers, and shelf fillers, and cashiers, and even a manager from the neighborhood. And even what's more amazing, the people from the neighborhood were even shopping there, yesterday. Flung like ticker tape at

the opening ceremony, the governor, the heads of the four biggest banks, (which are probably two by now), the mayor's deputy, three octogenarians, resurrected from the Harlem renaissance or out of an August Wilson play, from the grassroots organization that provided the impetus for all of this, and the leader of the biggest, most renown black Baptist Church proclaimed this as an event rivaling the end of the Civil War and as complex if anyone would dare to take on deep reflection or attempt to find a justification.

This was the State of New York's Marshall Plan, the reconstruction of the war torn lands, and Harlem was about to be rebuilt right under our feet as we stood their fists waving like Kansas's corn or wheat. Pathmark was its cornerstone. And now, yesterday, sprouting like spring buds and bulbs, a Disney store, Old Navy, the Magic Johnson multiplex, Modell's *Gotta Go to Mo's* sporting store, and a half dozen streetwise Harlem hip hop, in the groove clothing stores, with names like FUBU, and JAGS this is Harlem's answer to Madison Avenue, for whites and others who wanted to look black, not be black, but appear to be black, there were shops galore.

And one block from the rumbling beginning of this transfiguration of a shopping strip, a gaggle of *New York City's Finest* peering over each other's shoulder at a bunch of barely nourished ten and eleven year olds with potato chip stains still on their teeth corroding from the steady drip, drip of Pepsi or Coke these little guys, slouching, shoulders drooping, looking scared but as if they had just been babies in hiding waiting for the inevitable. They had been lulled, fooled into believing they could be safe, hidden away from the troubled streets in school. But school is a far more dangerous place for these war torn babies. At least on the streets they know the rules. And believe me this is war. Public schools in Harlem are filled with pre-emptive attacks and live minefields. While the police peered on silently shuffling their feet as if Gregory Hines got into them or Savon Glover, it happens there, just beneath the sidewalk there is rhythm, just inside their air are the *blues*.

Followed my diagnosed *Crisis of Faith* I moved in and out of a number of jobs needing to generate an income to provide for my still young son and myself the amount of child support so small as to be negligible and embarrassing. Jobs stand out without time frames or dates my work life became part hustle and put trying to put on a brave face and connect still to some meaning. So here is a recounting:

Post New Visions – Employment

TASC – The After School Corporation –funded generously and housed by the Open Society Institute and its founding George Soros. My long-time professional friend, Lucy Friedman, formerly President of the Victims Service Society, hired me to write or create the initial program for the after school programs that would ultimately open in elementary schools around the City. Of note, by now after school activities is a key political issue and a necessary part of a school day particularly in schools within economically challenged neighborhoods or for schools with a large population of Title One or children entitled to free or reduced lunch.

These programs were of course to help working family members and to keep kids out of children those children referred to chillingly as “latch key children”. After school programs promised to reduce delinquency in early teens by keeping them off the streets and busy.

But that was the politics of it, my ideas were to enrich a school day for students and then to importantly to offer them opportunities to participate in a wide range of art –related activities not necessarily available or perhaps even lacking a certain unfamiliarity with the students. Bedrock and to be sure students bring a wide range of cultural experiences to school but my thoughts were to expand on those and to expose students to worlds of art perhaps previously unknown if tangentially.

My plan in the allotted three hours was divided into a homework support and tutoring but not by the very same teachers students had during the day some of whom had terribly failed them – ideal would be a fresh face and new teaching friend and to ensure that this not just become a sinecure for teachers a way to enhance salaries. Social workers and psychologist would be made available should there be a need.

But the heart of the afterschool afternoon was to be spent for students to spend an hour period with a range of artists: dancers and painters and novelists and poets and musicians known to be well-regarded in their fields or if in the early stages of their work to have had an outstanding preparation in their said field. The range of art experiences to be wide-ranging reaching out to the widest world of art and cultural experiences and funds had to be protected from plundering opportunists drawn like magnets to money.

The proposal submitted was brief to the point and clear about avoiding the pitfalls of co-option by the devouring school system. To this day more than a decade later, I am referred to as the “creative mother” the “mother developer” for TASC. Again, a mother figure when as I composed the basic tenets for the after school corporation I did it as a wise and seasoned warrior.

Design by Design – ideas that matter –

A new young –younger by almost twenty-five years – professional friend and colleague asked me to join him as he launched his new not-for-profit, Design by Design. He already had a contract to work two days a week in Bridgeport two days a week, the Superintendent formerly of School District One, had invited him to provide professional support to the City’s principals.

Bridgeport I quickly learned made the Newark of my childhood look savory even if they delivered diluted oil to the schools for heating purposes. A truly criminal element ran the City way out in the open and she was their attempt to look as if they were going to reform their schools which failed students with one or two exceptions miserably.

The schools had a very large population of Portuguese speaking students whether from Brazil or Portugal and all of the students with limited English skill also came from families with enormous economic struggles. Who better than to offer a lazy indifferent day of schooling than to students exactly like these. The Superintendent new to her assignment was familiar with this colleague and brought him in to seem as if she would make some significant change in the quality of educational offerings. Primarily she was living high off a very large salary including housing and interminably deliveries of premier much sought after French wines compliments of the chief custodian of the City schools.

Our first assignment was to conduct a day a week, day long seminars with most of the City’s school building principals and on the subsequent day meet with various of the principals from our workshop in the home school with perhaps a meeting of the teacher leadership team or a grade level training in “backward design” with a grade level teachers. My partner and colleague was expert in this thing gaining popularity known as “backward design” meaning where to you want to get to and plan backward from there. Also offered were

sessions on reviewing student work and finding “authentic” ways of evaluating what the student produced with points along the way giving students an true idea of where they stand and to where they needed to go – this all by creating individual personalized student portfolios – another of the enlightened current education practices being hawked.

Beleaguered and downtrodden spirits and morale almost verging on professional self-hate my contribution to workshop leadership rested in poetry to wrest the damaged and negative attitudes of these school leaders revitalizing a sense of energy or mission. Again thinking about presentation, I found the most professional looking and conservative looking suits I could honestly sport sort of my version of Ann Taylor. The Superintendent was a true Latina dandy sporting the highest most tilting spikes shoes and slinky form fitting cleavage-displaying outfits. She and my youthful and very handsome and grandly dressed colleague shared a Puerto Rican background. My partner in this venture had actually written and acted in and produced an award winning documentary about the life of his Puerto Rican family riddled with drug addiction, prison time, and premature deaths his mother bringing in and raising more and more of the offspring of these unfortunate and doomed souls. The big story at the center of this family saga was my friend and colleague coming out to his mother and siblings as a gay man and how led by his mother embraced him so touchingly. First seeing this film at the Guggenheim at which he responded to questions and answers with his entire family present drew me to him and when asked to work in partnership was delighted and honored.

Planning for these workshops with principals brought me to poetry I got a kind of deep chill knowing that to uproot and inspire I had to begin the training workshops reading aloud poetry and then having them write something anything in response which they would share with the other principals seated at their table, seating was pre-arranged refreshments to commence the day, elegant and catered. What follows are some of the poems read to these at first very sallow and reluctant participants over a six-week period.

Our workshop presentation began with the following:

For me, education takes a generalized sense of outrage I keep experiencing to this day and focuses on the face of a little child. It moves me to lend my life to someone refusing: actively refusing to be an accomplice to a harmony built on a child's suffering. We need to be aroused from a kind of slumber of hopelessness against a background of dread. We need to feel a demand in the face of a child, impelling us to fight rather than lament, to act in a way that affirms a feeling, "I choose to be here for you."

*Maxine Greene, Emeritus
T. C., Columbia University*

*I would feel at times feel that learning to read have been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy.
...The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it. I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.*

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
An American Slave – Written by Himself*

Possibility and Wide-Awakeness

*Where is the place of discontent?
When will we refuse to give up ourselves at a schoolhouse door?
When we will refuse to let the whole of the child stay outside?
When will we refuse to let the whole of the child stay outside?
In discontent we find change
In wide-awakeness we find our way
The answers have always been inside
Possibility is well within our reach
When will I find it within myself to say?
When I walk inside the schoolhouse door
I refuse not to educate and nourish and teach.*

Naomi Barber

For Palestine: Naomi Shihab Nye

The Words Under The Words

*“Answer, if you hear the words under the words –
Otherwise it is just a world
With a lot of rough edges,
Difficult to get through, and our pockets
Full of stones.”*

To Bake the Bread of Yearning: Yehuda Amichai

*My child sees
And the powerful spell See you soon
Which he’s learned to say
Works only among the dead.*

I Belong There: Mahmoud Durwish

*I belong there. When heaven mourns for her I mother,
I return heaven to her mother.
And I cry so that a returning cloud might carry my tears.
To break the rules, I have learned all the words needed for trial by blood.
I have learned and dismantled all the word in order to draw from them a sing word:
Home.*

Looking back I certainly see that we earned our consultant fees – and looking back as well I saw the contorted inward individuals moist eyed and writing from the heart. Whether is reached inside their professional lives or carried over I don’t know for our time was truncated follow-up made impossible the Superintendent fled to Miami to a position offered there just as all of the City fathers were on their way to jail and in one very difficult moment a school building custodian on the take which was part of the mandate committed suicide in his school building office among the cleaning supplies.

This colleague and professional partner of mine went back to school to work toward a Ph.D. his dissertation written about computer game theory and was a major consultant in the creation of a school based on the technology of creating and working with computer games.

THE CHANCELLOR'S DISTRICT

Refusenik Residue –

Reporting on June 15, 2001: This awkward step backward in deep time resulted from being denied the sought after Tier I UFT pension status which kept individuals anchored to teaching jobs until they at least reached twenty years of service. I had been sliced into the New York City pension system with police and sanitation in Tier 3 and a far less generous pension benefit this because I entered the system through a back door, an ad in the Sunday Times, and never played within the designated boxes. Throttled for marching to my own drumbeat the residue of my recalcitrance gave the newly elected Superintendent and his sinister team a last stab at unsettling me after I walked out on my incarceration in a window-less room to work with New Visions. He and his team having taken and mislaid all of my personnel documentation including in the personnel offices of the Central Board, no electronic data banks in those days, found a way to eliminate six months of my tenure at the Board thus showing a short fall of six months, six months less than twenty years of service even in Tier 3.

How lethal retribution, from some back door changes of my years of service I got shut out of gaining full dominion of my pension in pure fact I served as an employee of the Board of Education for twenty years plus six months. About the time of my sixty-second birthday I was encouraged to go to a pension review the consultant querying why I left my position six months short of twenty years, *quite unusual the extra six months would mean a lot financially* she suggested I go back to the Board of Education for six months to make me whole. Thanking her I stumbled back onto the Brooklyn Street near the transit museum and settled on a park bench wondering how I could possibly walk back into hell particularly following New Visions damnation could not be far behind. Humbling myself I decided to call the very Deputy Superintendent who fled poolside to Riverdale guiltless bags of *Gelt* dangling justifying all by her *putting in her time paying her dues* and asked her if she could help. The sinister was nothing new to this hard ball playing pro who took some pleasure in helping me out and to besting the team that had tampered with my pension. She called her colleague newly appointed as Superintendent of the newly created Chancellor's District whom she had suggested for the position who readily agreed to take me on for six months in a consultant capacity in a spirit of sisterhood and *one hand washes the other*.

This woman was in charge of some fifty schools reigned in and set apart in virtual territories although geographically located within each borough. Following a brief interview she assigned me to team up with her newly appointed superintendent for thirteen schools in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx. These schools were choking on money and mostly staffed by the sorry staffs that brought them down although there were newly appointed principals who jumped hoops and above the line of other's busy paying their dues. Returning was some kind of hell but *Calvinism* and my father breathed down my neck and dutifully I was obliged to suck up and do this newly conceived of job offered by my former guilt ridden Deputy Superintendent and now Board member. Brokering *Jew to Jew* for the secular one in the end blood is thicker than water and knew down deep that *Pogrom* found a role is this offing.

There I was back where I had started when I was thirty one this following having spent nearly seven years with New Visions and then becoming the *creative mother* as they referred to me at The After School Corporation (TASC) for developing the program and protocols for their urban landmark afterschool programs generously supported initially by George Soros. And having been to Salvador Bahia Brazil to Projeto Axe where I saw the inviolate respect given *street children* as they were introduced to and invited into a space where the breaking waves on the beachhead were replaced by three nutritious meals, full physical exams and medical follow-ups and the opportunity to learn to read (Paulo Freire their educational architect) and then to join a band or the circus or a dance troupe or design and make high-styled dresses and hats. Swallowing hard I rolled up my sleeves to gather back six months time from the Board of Education to qualify for twenty years of a Tier 3 City Pension and began to see myself more as a survivor not a nurturer not a succulent nursing tit not Joan of Arch but a woman expedient and pragmatic. On the ride to our new office, his first day as well, I felt cropping up the nausea experienced in the early days in School District where I found the hateful to be the norm and where for teachers and administrator survival meant getting to and from the parking lot each school day fleeing children for whom they felt indifference or contempt and from the disorderly feelings this negativity brought up within them.

Keeping Those Crazy School Kids Contained

They are carting them off, like dogs picked off the street by the animal police. Snatched up. Harnessed. Slipped into the back of a van with flashing lights. Whipped through the streets passing through all red lights. Pedestrians wondering who's in there, and *I'm glad it's not me, and oh, god what if it's my child, got hit by a car or something!* Inside a wailing child, locked in restraints, *foaming at the mouth*, as one principal, said. Hard cries lead to spit curdling and looking like sea foam washed up by an angry sea. The child being sped through the streets is angry. The child being sped through the streets is six, or seven, or eight. We're loading them into ambulances, the disruptive ones, and the tantrum throwing ones. Leaders of schools sport bruises to defend their 911 calls. Parents with trembling, weakened dangling hands, sign consents to have their children hauled off.

In the Spring of 2001, in the midst of terrifying rhetoric about testing the kids to death, about a righteous standardization forcing the hand of accountability out of the shadows of torpor, when schools are no longer able to refer or label students as special education, they have turned to the City's psychiatric wards. Always we feed off the heels of our flagrancy, and recoil, bare feet on a blistering sidewalk. First we dumped all the kids whose eyes were a little glazed, whose tempers were short, who stumbled over the word *book* into special education classes that looked a lot like internment camps. They were internment camps. They were also a big business. Claiming scalps, bounty to maintain the quotas for an education sinecure. Special education became a bottomless pit, a hungry mouth, and tentacles reaching into every corner of a school. Colluding teachers in the mainstream could dump their refuse, their recalcitrant, and their resisters. It worked perfectly, fire and ice, lockstep mating. The color of the faces of these relegated, shunted out children was of deepening shades of tan and brown. And poor.

Now in the age of New York City schools cordoned into a virtual space named the *Chancellor's Zone*, meaning they can change the rules and subvert the local school boards. They capture schools the State designates as *Schools Under Review* (*SUR Schools*, the acronym), which means they have an ambiguous number of years to get their act together and raise scores or be closed down. Removing the schools from the official auspice of some local tyranny, they bring them under an unmediated, fully regulated hierarchy akin to a bona fide autocracy. Scripts taken from the annals of dictatorships undergird this tyranny. In the *Chancellor's Zone*, each hour of each day, each minute of each

hour is regulated. One cannot deviate by even a minute without being *written up*. The standardization is so rigid and airtight that the most restrictive prisons could learn a lesson.

The setting summer of 2001: The Chancellor's District, this an encampment of schools loosely tethered across boroughs deemed to have failed on every indicator of educating the students in their charge. Chancellor Levy was in charge *off with their heads* he threatened stalking the halls of a Harlem elementary school as he found anything out of order if indeed he knew what order to look for. Among his great contributions was the absolute declaration that if any child bumped into another at a water fountain, for example, private part to butt as one was sipping the scantily dripping water off a probably contaminated spigot they were to be reported and arrested by the police. He was obsessed with six-year-old sexuality. Six year olds rarely have carefully delineated space demarcations or zones forbidden to cross by others but this bumping into was worthy of a police action.

Present once when the police were called into a Harlem school looking askance and with disbelief when they heard the testimony the report by the principal this being right out of Dickens. The principal not wanting to lose her head or her job spoke in tremolo *Soto voce* filled with remorse and trepidation the implications of her actions crawling her skin like shingles. School was to be that sanctuary that safe place where the only things dangerous were things the imagination could construe. There was a war on children going on. We were presiding over a death camp. Landmines lay just below the floor tiles. We were hunting children for bounty. We were stealing them off to internment centers. Parents waited for that rueful call. Police already had tagged the child and denied him/her their rights. We were arresting children for being children. And strangely, only Catholic schools and assorted other private schools protested before the *City Fathers*, the City Council passed a law saying that anyone who did not call in a crime against a child would be fined and go to jail. What we have here were people stalking, staking out, and entrapping children for the most part for being children. There was always the exception when a much older child perpetrated a crime on a younger child but in this particular school no one was older than ten.

I was witnessing first hand as children were being seized, snapped up, hauled off by police as parents frozen by lives often lived in dualities whimpered not wanting further probing into whatever remains of publicly funded private lives. A Beckett-like absurdity reigns down. A pall. A swift sadness. An

overwhelming grief. To compound matters, not only were we hunting down children who in any way seem sexual in school but the children had to learn to eviscerate the sexual body parts of themselves before entering the lofty portals of a school. Teachers and principals could be fired perhaps go to jail and pay a fine for not reporting to say nothing of a loss of a job and the pension at the end of the twenty year corridor of time. Principals and teachers often tearful would say that they needed to preserve their livelihoods leading to this pointing out having carded and carted out children who had crossed the grisly line. And the line sweated and blurred school becoming a containment center, a holding tank the place in which children waited to be taken away by the police.

Now for the educationally component in these internment camps, to further the exacerbate matters this conundrum, the children had to spend the school year drenched in sweat, ears filled with paramilitary drills, warned and threatened, numbed and programmed to pass tests. Children sat in class only permitted to go to the bathroom at the proscribed times being stuffed with sound bites and slices of knowledge in order to perform at some standard set by the State. In the name of accountability and in the name of teachers and principals keeping their jobs, children were charged with saving jobs and saving teachers and principals from being disgraced and banished by performing at grade level.

We were talking about poor children, children of poverty, children of the disenfranchised. We were talking about children whose families do not know always that their children are in failing schools and they can opt out. We were talking about the children of the marginal people, the people at the hand of sanctimonious self-serving politicians, including President Clinton, recently roiled or with whiteout purged from welfare rolls. We were talking about children who already have been placed in a precarious place just by their position in the society and country. We were talking about children upon whose backs like sacks of fruit, little fruit picking migrants, carrying the weight of a self-righteous society, a sex repressed, sex obsessed society on their frail, often undernourished backs. We were acting as if children who were poor were depraved and sex crazed. We were acting as if, if we drilled them to death they would score well enough for school leaders to receive a merit bonus. In the Chancellor's District, principals and teachers with the highest student scores and improvements got a hefty bonus.

The Chancellors' District –

A first misstep a first iteration as roiling and precipitously kicked up as a tornado and then just snap fingers reversed: They're hollering at the boys like a *Valkyrie*, (valkyrja "chooser of the slain" is one of a host of female figures who decides who falls and dies in battle,) the newly minted Superintendent of the Chancellor's District whom I dubbed beneath my breath the *Wicked Witch of the West*, always looking as if she stepped right out of Nordstrom's her facial expressions prompts from the director of the Wizard of Oz. Her constant obsession losing and gaining weight a charter member of *Weight Watchers* a tailor ready to take clothing in and out. Her *Aide-de-camp* her protégé school building principal, a minted *Stepford*-kin walks by *Tiptoeing Through the Tulips* in her sling back pumps, her stylishly short, above the knees, *Jackie Bouvier* hot pink little A line dress, Saks' costume beads dribbling down her chest, her diamond studs securely in place, and her frosted hair not stirring an inch as she steps jauntily down the hall, I tell you there is rhythm beneath those floors. I look at her as we pass, a weighty entourage examining space utilization, not looking, not even a quick, a sneak peek, a sideways glance, as we /she slouches fashionably by. *It happens*, she says to me, glancing over, when we are safely ensconced back in her office away from the bellowing, yowling tones of the *Valkyrie* what a dangler what a tease, what happens, what just happens just silence on the opposite side of the desk. Stunned by actions and edicts followed slavishly without question without raising an eyebrow the trembling hands and tremulous voice give her away.

*Yesterday and yesterday and yesterday, and tomorrow and all of its tomorrow's**, calling in the police is a way to sanitize the school in this newly rejuvenated neighborhood of the mumbled beneath breaths the unutterable *trash and scum*. Cleanse, wipe the school clean, clear out the underbrush of the transmogrified, get ride of the dangerous element, the pollutants, the contaminants, at the mouth of, in the bed of, on the banks of this new *Love Canal*. Did I mention that President Clinton's Harlem-based office would just be a block or two away? Did I say that this school has been on the abject school failure list by the State Education Department for nearly a decade, a large bunch of years, a lot of tolerance there? Did I say that the school has been asked for another and yet another, *creeping at its petty pace** for a plan, a new plan, yet another plan for its redemption, known in the trade as a Redesign Plan, a petty euphemism for nothing is to change, nothing is to be different, half the faculty will leave, half will stay, if they chose to, and it is only

moments away from Westchester for the commuters, positions based of course on seniority. * *Macbeth* –William Shakespeare

This school's going to get yet another new leader, five in two years, and do project-based experiential learning. They're going to roll the children like dough in flour in a progressive pedagogy that is as far and removed from their value system, their experience, this a cultural imperative, their mandate akin to asking them to lead free love fests at the notorious *Summerhill* (Members of the community are free to do as they please, so long as their actions do not cause any harm to others, "Freedom, not License." This extends to the freedom for pupils to choose which lessons, if any, they attend.) Progressive pedagogy for the current Chancellor who knows not a lick about education with the exception of his own and of the progressive private school his kids attend is churning out edicts espousing progressive pedagogy to a crew of principals who twist and turn *on a dime* and implement anything asked of them just below the surface everything is exactly the same to quote an estimable philosopher UFT executive *we just are constantly rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic* this licking his chops a gadfly Siamese cat. (The rigor of their turnstile mandates harkens as writ large in the *Myth of Sisyphus* if not apparently part of a collective literary consciousness.) Anyway, the Redesign Plan like a prism glinting off the diamond studs is the parting gift of the *Stepford* administrator whose favorite staff member and most trusted administrator is the *Valkyrie*. This just another day in the revolving and most often revolting annals of the NYC public school system Mayor once Prosecutor Giuliani is onto something but sniffing in the wrong places or sniffing wrong to keep his power orbit attached and rule education as if the *Mikado*.

April 3, 2011 – The One Who Got Away

The one who got away...

Mirror, mirror on the wall (nickname for the chief Superintendent of the Chancellor's District of failed schools) was disturbed and distressed by a lanky, *Teach for America* beauty. Barely thirty, the reigning leader of a failed school, which she was turning around blonder and more blue eyed than Iowa, tall as a stalk of corn in August, or a barn draping sunflower there she stood statuesque and regal when she wasn't lying on the reading rug on the floor next to an *emergent reader* reading aloud together as the words struggled off the tongue of this little one, seven or eight. She was the shepherdess of the flock of the poorest of the poor the poorest congressional district in the poorest South Bronx as the politicians would with good effect assert. The abject poverty surrounding the school eye smarting the school a gothic

structure designed to be as if a *Cathedral by CBJ Snyder, the architect at the turn of the century*. In the immediate environ dutiful restoration of apartments mere moments ago aflame from the rampant South Bronx criminal landlord arson stoked fires. The school notorious for its once extreme academic failure now had scores on reading and math tests inching up to the thirties, like the principal. This school leader drove to insane distraction the Nordstrom kempt Chancellor's District Superintendent her immediate and final boss and was disdained, disparaged, caste aside, castigated against, refused, blocked, diminished, declawed, humiliated, squashed, by *Mirror, Mirror* the pet name given this erstwhile leader by me as muttered just beneath my breath in her presence. The wunderkind was the stew in the boiling pot.

So what's the point of this story? The school leader escapes to a houseboat in the docking that abuts New Orleans, lulling about in the Gulf of Mexico, as she writes her novel, has good sex with her new lover, and spends 70% time doing school reform in New Orleans. Where will they find another lambent and brilliant beauty to lie next to the children at reading time, or during their *balanced literacy block*? Where will they find another to court to march in lockstep in the army of *Mirror, Mirror's* toy soldiers? The school building principal broke precedent she was not the great unwashed washed, the first generation of hungry, ambitious school leaders who would stay around to get their pensions who swore to abide the set career ladder by *paying their dues*. This youthful beauty was a vagabond, passing through.

My script wanted her to commit to the kids in that poorest of poor Congressional District. My script, my supposition is in the shredder. *Mirror, mirror* on the wall hated her because she didn't take the *rules of engagement seriously*, she was not trapped and frightened, she did not do obeisance at the clicking pen on clip board she was not symbiotic with the public education S&M ethos. *Mirror, mirror* hated her because she could move on and didn't take the school system pledge to stay the course at all costs she trivialized the premise on which *Mirror, Mirror* based her whole life. As the escaping beauty in a commemorative goodbye said to *Mirror, Mirror* and well documented that unlike this dismissive leader she never took a school down to the bottom, to the dregs, only to dredge it up and look like a miracle worker like someone who nearly drowned a child to revive and resuscitate him or her, an *EMT* of school survival. *Mirror, Mirror* hated her lank her Armani suits worn with esprit and aplomb as she moved in tandem with her students most often kept at arm's distance with breath held to not take in a whiff of their impoverished bodies and souls. Suburban cult suits, appropriate women's business attire,

hair perfectly coifed, nails just so, not a hair out of place, not a misplaced word or step their mantra being at the end of each conference and *if you say something I will not know what you are speaking of.*

And so, bye, bye Ms. Perfect Thirty Something the children who lay down on the rug reading next to you will remember you. The parent association president who smokes crack and has no front teeth but who had entrusted four of her children to you will remember you. She tells everyone *you run a good school* if you to others are imperious and impervious *the kids do good here* she'll vouch for that she knew all along you were just passing through. You stayed four years. *Mirror, Mirror* when you no longer found the celestial, escaped principal at the end of your sneering turned up nose your fixed scowl imagine her that American beauty living on a boat rocking easy in the waters jumping with the sounds of New Orleans jazz, jazz, jazz, and all that Dixieland jazz.

Daily Schedule Chancellor's District – Without Exception or Deviation

At precisely 8:30am, to the tunes of *Fly Me to the Moon* currying a sense of airiness and lightness children march through the entire school building lockstep in rows that would make Bemelmans's *Madeleine's* line look irregular. This heavily scripted containment with its aura of contentment and easily fool the unwitting. The children are lured into small, school-wide, homogenous reading groups to begin at precisely 8:35am their *Success For All (SFA)* lessons this being a highly touted reading program. Forty-three schools all with variations on the theme music for marching through the halls all plunge or rather immerse, kids into this curriculum at exactly the same time. Precisely ninety minutes later *Fly Me to the Moon* comes back on and the children return to their homerooms for a five-minute bathroom break and onto one hour of a preordained math program and so the day goes. The widgets in *Modern Times* did better in the playful hands of Charlie Chaplain. There is no element of humor here. Not a whiff of joke here.

There is no room for fidgeting. Reading is serious business. Scores needed to be spiked up. Every bigwig's job depended on it. Principals and superintendents could get fired. Teachers could get U's for Unsatisfactory. And children sit staring out of windows feet itching under tables to run and skip and play. No time for playing tag when you're dealing with something as serious as accountability. Enlightened educators privileged children learn between frequent breaks to be active and run about tagging each other.

Whirring sirens, ambulances screeching up to the schoolhouse door children being restrained as they kick and scream and try to pull away the fire in their eyes that of a frightened animal already wounded being stalked the spit in their mouths as an insular deep madness forms madness born of betrayal and rage. Retribution for disrupting the SFA class for throwing the children off the clock from clouding the reading chants. Snap them into a straight jacket cart them off parents quivering with contrition and supplication before the ominous righteous school officials. The hands on the other end are not less severe an uninterrupted daisy chain of Foucault power brokering. And as if in collusion, conspiratorial psychiatric teams broker no kindness, no distance, and no counter voice. Shoving the kids into some kind of medicated regimen. Subdued and broken, the kids come back two weeks later drooping lips faltering feet as if with muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy they stumble in the line *Fly Me to the Moon* in subdued dulcet tones plays on. The children are barely recognizable. Except that they have another ditto listed on their schedule the time for the pills. I witness this first hand in my last and most formidable stint as a member of the Board of Education vanguard and State licensed Supervisor Administrator.

September 11, 2001

Early on that beautiful September morning, the Superintendent and I were at one of *our* schools when during our conversation with the principal we were told that a small plane had crashed into the World Trade Towers immediately we turned on the computer to follow the news. The superintendent already had a call into his son who worked in the towers as a trader and I called over to my daughter with a three-month-old baby and alerted her and asked that she turn on the news and head over to Luca's school and bring him to her house feeling that chaos was to follow.

As the news revealed we called our thirteen schools under an order for the Chancellor's District Superintendent and told the principals to keep all of the children in classrooms and to lock down the school. By now my young son was safely at my daughter's who was waiting word from her husband walking back home having witnessed the horror. Suddenly an onslaught of parents and family members were pounding on the doors of all of our school buildings, Spanish language radio and television had advised the parents to bring their children home. Inevitably there were going to be children in our schools who parents or family members worked at the world trade towers and we needed

to keep a sense of order and calm as the pounding outside the door reached hysterical proportions. Teachers were panicked as well having family members working downtown as well. The Superintendent and I had moved to a school at a central location and within moments the Superintendent or *Mirror Mirror* as I referred to her under my breath arrived and in the middle of the school lobby started screaming out unintelligible orders beating up a froth of distemper among staff and students. She stepped outside pressed upon by the unruly and rightfully emotional family members and started shrieking *step back* stamping her feet her hair flying out of order. Finally we decided that our football playing coach the local assigned superintendent would extricate her from the crowd while I tried to keep everyone inside calm and he shoving her aside asked that family members find some identification and stepping in line ask for a particular child and with the aid of a guidance member and office staff would locate the said child affirming a positive identification send the child on his/her way with the family member.

This went on for a couple of hours until the line thinned out and just a few family members remained who were invited inside. Further word from the Chancellor said that we were to keep all unclaimed children perhaps throughout the night until they could be claimed and/or the status of their loved ones attested. Dinners would be served and snacks and cots were delivered. At this point there was a lock down on all bridges and tunnels in and out of the City and in all boroughs. The subways were running and at this point the Superintendent, it was about 7 o'clock suggested I try to catch a subway home. Once back I found a stunned family intact together with my son clamoring to go to the site of the devastation and my daughter's husband unable to get the sight of a plane crashing into a building and its aftermath from his sight. Hard to tally how many of the students in our schools were impacted directly or indirectly but as a universe we were irrevocably changed, as was our world.

September 6th, 2002: Consulting position with Board of Education ends. Twenty years logged in as an employee of the Board of Education.

Ultimately the schools assigned to the Superintendent for whom I was consultant were enormously successful, achieving the highest status of any of the Chancellor's District's schools. We had proportionately, the greatest number of students move out of the lowest testing level and into the highest testing level in reading and math. Additionally, the Superintendent on my watch was out for four months with knee replacement surgery and with daily early morning calls we were still able to achieve so well. And one of our schools in a constant state of bureaucratic siege had the second highest achievement in 4th grade math scores of any school in the City. The superintendent for whom I worked or was appointed as a consultant was an archetype a boozy sports coach with five pat phrases to keep the troops swilling his lines and letting them clip off hours or days as one clips coupons at Wal-Mart.

He was a guy who got to the office early to leave early like a stealth educator who gamed the system until it was a pure reflection of him. He was a first class disappearing act he even had his Board of Education assigned blackberry conspiratorial and fixed to his deceit. He was pleasant amiable a good father who spent most of his day on the phone with his grown children and his second wife commandeering them to his will like *Captain Queeg*. He was their absolute power and his laughter and easy manner belied a killer. He left the school system just before they got a true whiff of him and became a superintendent close to his shore-based homestead with maybe five schools. Reasons for our success with scores were a highly motivated group of *Young Turk* principals all shades of darker skin all hungry with the hot fire of desire to succeed in their bellies. This was a perfect coming together they let him get-over and he let them breathe like a good bottle of deep full-bodied red wine

Back at home having completed my six month plus internment looking back I play *Fly Me to the Moon* Frank Sinatra singing and plan an afternoon walk and think about the book I am reading, reading still mysterious how it happens for most children whatever the methodology just *one fine day*. *Nobody loves a genius child*. *Nobody loves a genius child*. *Kill it and let its spirit go wild* a poem fragment by Langston Hughes, which foretold these caravans of carnage. When next you see an ambulance whiz by in the middle of a school day perhaps in it there is a child frantically trying to break free held together by restraints parents' limply backing away from their child vacant eyed. Another

child abandoned without hope. This to say think clearly of the implications of school accountability and standardized testing rising like spikes on the backs of poor children when you scour the paper for your child's school's reading scores.

Random Radon Thoughts

I watched as fully bonded and certifiable supervisors and administrators concocted ways to subvert I became as unsettled as I had ever been within the confines of the Board of Education twenty years earlier. We are acting crazy, crazy like a fox. Children who are just drilled and hunted and observed under a magnifying glass under the threat of the law, catching and hunted down, appeasing our own need to have STANDARDS. Standards, which are comparatively substandard for the poor. There will be no room at the top. There is no way out. There is no way to climb, or scratch out of poverty. There are no homes, no jobs, no place. So lets shuffle them out, mark them, card them, and tread on them. We are committing genocide. We are doing something as reprehensible and unthinkable, with a tacit consent from the public, and with legislators dashing to create laws to cover, and enshroud the lawlessness of it all.

In this school system *we are not created free and equal*. Merchants of shame and derision are the most recent outcrops of the disadvantaged. There is no justice and equity. And now we are banishing and shackling the children already in lockstep in a chain gang being herded by bullhorns and timers through a very unenlightening school day. Where is the voice of reason, where are the sad eyes, where is the plebiscite to cease and desist?

We are no better than a repressive and potentially totalitarian crazy stalking regime. This stalking is reminiscent of the lynching of blacks not to long ago. But the sought after are children, the tree they hang from is the school, the noose is the capturing hand of an adult who has saved his/her job for another day by virtue of capturing and turning in some predator, sex depraved, some person 6,7, or 8. Who will stop this insanity? We all hang the rope from the tree. Watch the children in shoe sizes 1, 2, and 3 dangling, already *carded*, with a crime card.

Is there pride in purging schools of all evil, raising the flag of standards so high? Is there pride stealing the childhoods from children who already expect next to nothing getting less than nothing?

If this were only an exaggeration, if this were only hyperbole, if this were not the final declamation of an unreflective society building off a heinous and embedded racism and classism. We have become the enemy of ourselves. The protest rises it is rumbling in, it will happen and numbed and benumbed it will overtake us. I felt a foreboding, a sense of doom for those of us who forgot our only job on earth was to love and relish and nurture and delight in each child.

The number of called in sex abuse cases between children thirteen and under has gone up 4800 % in April and May 2001, claimed the head of the police unit assigned to the school system. In other words, for every single call they used to receive they now receive 48. Now who are these perpetrators? For whom are the school officials, under strict orders, calling 911 to make a report of sexual molestation? They are students who are five or six or eight or nine and perhaps 11, 12, or 13. One six year old may have touched another's bottom, or a nine year old chased and touched another during a game of tag, or two 12 year olds brushed against one other in the hallway, and on, and on. We are not talking about adults, 18 or older who violate someone 18 or younger with force. We are not talking about assault or rape. We are talking about playfulness, about being young, if you are young. We are talking about the young and vulnerable.

Public school administrators were told ordered not to use their judgment anymore in cases concerning sexual assault or sex abuse. They were told unequivocally to call 911 if one child touches the other, no matter what the age, in places we refer to euphemistically as *private parts*. Parents are to be notified after the police are called. Students are issued a JD card, which can be expunged or sealed off when they reach eighteen.

*My friend, a college professor told me once, when poor kids do something they call the police, when rich kids do the same thing or worse, they call the psychologist. Heads will roll school officials were told if they didn't adhere strictly to the Chancellor's **no exceptions** edict.*

Do we really believe in New York City that children who come from economically disadvantaged homes and whose skin tones are of deeper eggplant or earth hues are all sexually depraved and deranged? These are the same children who are not given much chance to run around in the playground. These are the children upon whose shoulders the standards' movement rests or fails. These are the children primed all day by test drills, like basting meat before the slow broil. These are the children that are not given a moment to breathe, except to go at scheduled times to the bathroom or to lunch, because they are being instructed in the inviolate tightly scripted curriculum of the day. No art, no music, no laughter, no distraction gets in the way. These children are expected to produce scores that are at grade level or above or else. Or else the principal, the teacher, the superintendent can have his/her job called into question.

Where is the hue and cry for the children? Who is standing up for them? Where is the outrage? The City Council was blocked from voting that if a school official did not report an incident of sex abuse regarding a child, no matter who the perpetrator, that that person would be arrested and lose his/her job. The Catholic Church and other private schools blocked the City Council in case they got lumped into the new law.

How do I call out to parents to tell them to keep their children home? School is a dangerous place. No child is safe inside even one of them. There have and always will be aberrant adults who should be treated swiftly and strongly and criminally. But children...

*How deeply we took in the transfigured expression from the tortured face.
How intensely the tiny cheeks basked in the glow of justice, attained at last
And then already fading.* Franz Kafka

Public schools in June 2001 are not the handmaidens once imagined of democracy. We have flung our poorest children to the barren, far-flung, isolated fields of the cruelest of governments. There the children are dead-eyed, humorless, spitting up formulaic drills, stooped shouldered over tests, and occasionally when one small hand reaches out to another in the need for a human touch, the alarm goes off, the police come and haul off that child. We are as numb and compliant as any citizen in any country in which numbness and compliance is the way of staying alive. To stay alive, stay alive, just dial 911.

MORE REFLECTION

Desire is the sweet commonality, the gnawing voice, the niggling from within that doesn't relent. Scudding aspirations, families' dormant dreams, collide with the intransigent. Politics is the soup stirrer. Public schooling is the messianic message of democracy, its need. Our capacity to catch on will be the reckoning. If we cannot believe and act that each person is singularly the most important person alive. If we cannot perceive that each child is the only one whom we must educate. If we don't gather ourselves to the knowledge that democracy hangs in the balance of our responsiveness to that single random child. Our society will be like curdling milk in the fist of the place where no canary can sing. Freedom, our freedom, rests on the awakening, the sheltering, the harvesting of our capacity for a commitment to randomness and the unhesitating embrace of the face that is not like our own.

I used to believe that bureaucracy in its necessary contriteness was tottering along the fault line. That a society with blood still swilling like raw meat around our collective tongues and teeth, the bitter aftertaste of racism that lived like an aphorism in our food, was the corrosive that stunted our public schools. That public school reflected the world outside, the society at large. But now I see that it is much deeper, more entrenched, and more intransigent. The state of public schooling and its concomitant, democracy, springs from something much deeper, more daunting. Our nature, our limits, our very humanness is at the root. Because our imaginations can shape a thing as lovely as a democratic society and schools that exist to promote full and equal participation of each single individual doesn't mean that we have either the will or the capacity to step outside and realize the ideal. The imagination conjured, the populous stalls.

Anger is a generous fuel to stoke a sense of immutable purpose. But what is it that unnerves, sends into frenzy fills us with an unforgiving pain? What drives us to certain recognition that our survival as a nation and a people depends on taking an eye-smarting hard look into the tenets of religion, the universal golden rule? For some and historic immutable reason, beyond my depth, religion persists in keeping us from and apart but the knowledge that we are no better than, not worthier than, that we need and depend on the ability of each life to fulfill itself. We seem unable to step from the anemic amniotic fluid of self-interest and walk off the depleted and tired turf of our own clawing blinders and probe what the other in truth means to our own snatched off a

planetary deity of life. And every once in a while, a reminder comes, of mythic proportion and we get aroused and become aware but and just at the moment when we would have to act we watch aghast Palestinian children in armored cars on their way to school passing in the single lane the similarly armored car carrying Israeli school children and we watch the maiming and physically scarring girls who trek in airless mountain ranges in Afghanistan to schools built by worthy do-gooders from the West who have yet to confront our own children march in single step arranged by size places into public schools in New York and other

Surprising Truths - confessional as if within virtual box *Orgone Box*

Final tug backward I find that my deepest feelings of satisfaction came from the projects that originated with me while I was in the School District. *Finding a Female Language for Power* happened when morning-like sickness preoccupied and unsettled in those early days and years in School District 10 when the Superintendent fisherman, biblical that, Matthew 4:19 says, *And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men* with bouquet of flowers in hand asked me to *find another way to say the very same thing I had said, you ought to be arrested convicted of murder you are nothing more than fucking murderers pathetic fucking murderers snacking off living off parasitic slaughtering the souls and minds of school kids*. As he walked back into the elevator saying, *see you on Monday* I understood that I had to find the right words if I wanted to have others hear what I was saying.

Peter Pascale met an impetuous eighteen year old who deeply desired to act upon his vision of bringing a better world to the newly arrived immigrants in East Harlem.

Slipping in and out of orbits of power filled my early working life as a mother and *public school reformer*, my own designation, I felt driven into action as if my energy originated with the rays of the sun and then quickly eclipsed as a wife shriveling or folding in, sure as a morning glory at dusk climbing a trellis.

Lifetimes of dreams never remembered and experienced in the trenches as they referred to public schools provided the impetus to create and develop the first iteration of New Visions Schools although I always felt dislocated and a *stranger*.

At The After School Corporation (TASC) I felt appreciated for the initial shaping of the program but right after that when the implementers stepped in no longer welcomed.

Ending Sadness in Spite of Sorrow prescient an unavoidable and formidable driving force moving me through forty years of work no time or desire to authenticate quantify the feelings the sensation was there embodied and emboldening. In non-traditional and perhaps undesirable from a feminine perspective ways I felt powerful in public spaces undeterred a force with velocity and urgency to keep moving forward no matter what. And now I want to entertain with my stories with my tales really not to elevate my personal stature but to share the humor and the pathos the struggle and the valor found when individuals find a desire to connect and move as *Matisse Dancers* in a circle of vivacity and good will.

An anomaly in work settings always a little outside and yet in the moment energy quickened passion heated and I moved undeterred by detractors fearless against opposing forces and although I can capture as moments in the past as they spring through my fingers to a screen I am dispassionate and disconnected. I don't really know who I am or who I was and why I had the disposition or have the right to take forty years of work seriously. What I value is my appreciation for beauty an inquiring mind realizing that I am an autodidact building a vocabulary and a virtual library of knowledge and a grasp of and connection to a deeper more probing self-scrutiny scrubbing fabrication from action and in dimming days a foreshortening of time see that I knew little of friendship less of love but laughter but energy but passion and a desire for just one more movie one more book one more poem one more piece of art one more tree revelatory finally on an odyssey to find what I will think of what I will see and imagine as I fold into my ultimate final journey my *Byzantium*.

FOURTEEN ANGELS

But virtual moments in a lifetime but it was at the moment life changing and as quickly and forcefully as it came upon me it receded and now I am left with little feeling for it all diaphanous as a dream clutched after but fleeting. She called us partners in a not-for-profit enterprise we called **14 Angels**, inspired by Evening Prayer from Hansel and Gretel by Englebert Humperdinck: *Evenings when I drift to sleep, Fourteen angels watch do keep*. Excessively fearful, ground in no particular identifiable reason, of alcoholics, here I was forming a professional partnership with a millionaires' alcoholic with a oversized heart. A dedicated and eerily intuitive art collector of the most confrontational and edgy art some of which most would find scary eye evasive and among her trophy artists just below and before coming across the public radar she claimed me. No one ever had seen me as an artist my work acclaimed for its feistiness and progressive platform known as a public school reformer with great integrity and a great capacity for nurturing work colleagues but never for being edgy and artistic. Invited initially for a glass of wine at her apartment she said she had observed and thus me recognized me as an artist in my work. Taken by the wall-size Shirin Neshat photograph of women with eyes peering from their *Abaya* rifles pointing at us I believed that I had fallen off the face of my world into some place else. For too many years my heart hadn't quickened like that off-balance I felt as if at an uncertain moment in life I had found an unimagined shelter and home.

Through a shifting sand of projects none ever to be enacted we talked through days and trips her intentions pure her desire for friendship a *partner* requiring absolute fealty not to be negotiated or mitigated. She wanted to be entertained she wanted friendship she wanted a court jester/sister I served as all. We were born in the same year, 1940, but I seemed not preoccupied with growing older aging believing it was part of the natural flow of things she to the contrary had as she would say playfully *there is not a stitch of me a part of me that has not been touched by the knife of a plastic surgeon*. Hair extensions woven in and out by the week regular visits *dermaplasty* visits to *Sherm the Derm* usually following fittings at Giorgio Armani outfits bought in multiples from the designer's *Back Room*. Accompanied her often on studio visits to emerging artist giving ample room to almost suckle at her breasts as she drew out their stories leaving discretely behind a check for no less than \$25,000.

And although I held the line *no wine at lunch* usually in a local East Side diner, as the daylight dulled the cork came off fine bottles of French white wine poured into fine Venetian goblets and toasts were made. The seduction almost complete found sixtyish woman wandering in a wonderland never ever of her own imagining. We in the name of developing whatever was our most current intended project travel to Israel to see residential homes and schools for immigrant children and to Brazil multiple times to look closely at a program with which I had a close affiliation for street children rehabilitated and reconstructed as fashion designers, dancers, circus performers and fashion designer. I spent weekends at her home and personal art gallery in Bridgehampton, *Peter Pan's shadow* always gracing my bed. At this very juncture my second marriage a mistake to begin with was eroding and I had just stepped from the New Visions job, where she spotted me as a donor, and so toppling into her reality her space her life was an easy tumble.

My life mounting upheavals brought with them an aura of sadness and it was as if she sensing lurking misery backed away. Our partnership was formed on the ever churning of programmatic possibilities for *14 Angels* along with my almost idolatrous appreciation of the art and artists she kept finding, supporting and buying. Lightness, laughter and late afternoon wine toasts infused our friendship and made it purposeful and as I grew grim no matter how internal no matter how camouflaged she backed away an inevitable erosion of our relationship ensued soon I would be tossed in the junkyard of her past relationships like so many of other castoffs. *You are too sad too disoriented to be around* she informed me. I remained a side kick but at arms distance and on one of our daily check-in calls she chirped, *Really, guess where we are going, Kosovo, with Refugees International, for which she and her husband were big funders and trekkers, we are bringing satellite materials to the refugees in Sarajevo.* The war was at its simmering height but *that's really dangerous* I responded. *Oh well* she quipped tartly back *bye see you!*

Never did. The State Department called me and another assistant to inform us that there had been this accident where a car carrying my *partner* and her husband as well as a famous French refuge expert toppled over a hazardous cliff on the way to Sarajevo but not to say anything until it was verified. Confirmed within hours and soon appearing in the local papers the next day. It became my task a request of her estranged daughter to organize a memorial at the Abyssinian Baptist Church with Dr. Calvin Butts leading the service. Dr. Butts had worked along with us on a particular iteration of one of our *possible programs*, which led to and included a trip to Bahia Brazil. As the service was

planned I could vividly feel her most devious and joyful self-relishing in the proposed service I had gotten back my touch.

Never have so many *authentic and fully bonded Wasps* stepped out of limousines to attend the service in Harlem in this illustrious African American Church. Never has the incongruous stepped so lightly in the moment there a whiff of a performance piece of art. And so I said goodbye to what was a withering but likely salvageable relationship I was just stepping from the darkening cloud. My heart tells me she orchestrated this death she was going to find an out somewhere and drink no longer did it she did not under any circumstances want to age and was losing a taste for *Sherm the Derm* and all that went along with it. Having corn scrapped off the husk fearing losing the caps on her front teeth was enough to send her searching for a way out.

At seventy as I told my children I became a solely a grandma and a writer and I have stayed with that even now with a newly acquired life threatened kidney disease for which I am receiving treatments but ultimately will refuse further medical help. In retrospect I took the little swath of land I stepped into however I got there and came alive to myself emboldened by a desire to be visible somewhere and to do good as my father to foster good deeds and good works with integrity boldness and fearlessness in at least one arena of my life if fearful and half not whole in the personal the public held me in good stead and so anon.

“Many things we need can wait, children cannot: Now is the time when their bones are being formed, their blood is being made, their minds are being developed. To them we cannot say tomorrow. Their name is today.”

*Gabriela Mistral
Chilean Poet*

Deeply Personal

The Personal is Political becomes damning. Whose life is this I am living? Often, it is hard to believe mine. Write what you know. Jumble of terror and exaltation, freedom and contradiction, the past a rabid dog gnarling teeth grit to bite. On an overhang an abyss contorted a knotty twig yet to detach the past mocks feigned being present. The quandary if withering surviving yet condemned to solicitous care giver getting me to *eat drink live* yet age advances a warring militia haphazard and undirected.

It is real adventure or misadventure being me these days. It is late October 1999 the invented me I am trying on minus institutional construct against which to frame an identity. No work no love no Freudian necessities for a meaningful life for any life fit for an ex-Austrian a repatriated *Holocaust* victim three times removed. Mother of two thirty plus-year-olds and an eleven year old, what you say eye brows lift leering don't bother to tamp the salacious yes I was forty-seven and yes he was adopted. Yet to find the right word to express the hatred I feel two ex-husbands meat cleavers-butcherer penis clipping an invasive unruly poison plant dislocation humiliation pain the daily bread rationed by the left wedding band hand. Suicide not yet my heart still holds too much love for my children still curious about what's to come. Riding subways to nowhere in particular overhearing conversations about disquiet random destinies dark hopeless ears perk there again the spark the desire for justice for equity not contrite children mine and not mine seeking even greater viability connection. Recognizing now I am my own institution my own friend and my own lover *out here on my own.* (Irene Cara, Fame)

Back packs shiny faces crisply pressed school uniforms well-polished shoes drive me to tears and distraction. Watching children single skip toward the subway astride parents along the Meer pushing into crowded 2 and 3 trains at 110th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard expectant faces parents fussing over them making sure every hair and item of clothing are in place fills me with *Nausea** knowing with few exceptions they will be gypped in school that and every other day. The teachers will not be prepared or have the right supplies or adequate supervision or will have stopped caring or will be cynical and burnt-out. I know because I have spent nearly thirty years observing and reacting to the horror of depleted limited and often child unfriendly public school classes. If I could only stand at the door of the subway and tell all of the parents *don't go there, keep your child at home, he/she will be better safer unharmed.* No school should allow a child enter its doors with or without

uniforms unless it is deemed fit ready to educate to a high standard each and every student no matter what. No parent should have to release a child to a *School Under Review* (unsatisfactory verging on being closed down) by New York State –Scandalous and disgraceful!

*“Existence is not something which lets itself be thought of from a distance; it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast - or else there is nothing at all.”

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

School reform is rough trade. It is big business very big business. Look at the management companies descending into big cities to buy into a network or franchise of public charter schools living off the backs of poor and their dreams selling them snake oiled hopefulness to make a profit. Profiting despair public education democracy’s greatest failure. Masters of industry clearing the rubble of destructive racism and classism of inured bureaucrats frozen in paradigms curriculums recklessly recycled. Here the tangy taste of bitterness offspring of the privileged startle us with their ingenuity their dreams their entrepreneurial inventiveness and agility. Here a heartless society holding open doors for only a precious privileged few when who knows in which brain in which heart in which soul enlightenment grows? Testimonials of the struggling few *I lit my lamp** agog over stories of *no matter what*, got Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman appear. I lit my lamp with a new-found light, A new-found light, a new-found light, I lit my lamp with a new-found light And I'm a-livin' in the light of the morning. New Found Land, Woody Guthrie

New Visions Lessons: The school system went thinking that New Visions was just another endurance test new vocabulary new points of *yes* another annoying adaptation in the dilly dally daily haplessness of the school day. Unrelenting dogged New Visions overwhelmed the bureaucrats’ crowds milling in thousand of sub-stations planning to create a new public school interlocutors the big boys terrifying and awesome of Wall Street. Holding steady we knew not to compromise a person or limit the scope of a vision; that no idea had greater value tender by virtue of authorship; if mad flapping wings courting ducks by New Visions board members when someone of note of prominence showed interest it became necessary to neutralize maintaining the element of chance the posture of an open process. Necessary if scandal mongering to highlight the abject academic neglect shed light speak of the horror of children eyes deadened stooped over a *rexograph* being told to be quiet when there was no more quiet to be.

Talmudic renderings
Bending and genuflecting
Davening and wailing
Rap rant cant
Shout out
A yawl a squall
Light possibility
Crushed pebbles under feet
Young voices
Call out
Indignant and suffering
Cut cut cut
Cut it out!

NB

Work: The Last Years - 1998-2011

"The end is in the beginning and yet you go on."

– Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*



Nate Zeman

Existential Truths

"It was a state of emergency; how could you not help?" Ms. Zdeb said. "Believe me, the last thing on my mind was violating any zoning ordinance. I had a high calling." (Ms. Zdeb a professional pet sitter took in 100 animals during the floods caused by Tropical Storm Floyd in New Jersey. She is being fined for violating the law; she did not have an animal shelter permit.) N.Y. Times, "Legal Woes for a latter-day Noah" N.Y. Times, 11/21/99

"The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical." The Plague, Albert Camus, p. 133

Following my preacher diagnosed *crisis of faith* I moved in and out of a number of jobs needing to generate an income to provide for my still young son and myself.

Jobs stand out without time frames or dates my work life became part hustle trying to put on a brave face and connect still to some meaning. So here is a recounting introduced by a perfect embodiment of all I had hoped to become depicted in *Gray Line with Black, Blue, and Yellow* by Georgia O'Keefe.





Shirin Neshat

Fourteen Angels

She was a drunk. She was a genuine *WASP* from Greenwich. Flowing spring mountain thaws of white wine never an empty hand-blown Venetian wine glass went dry. Omnipresent in households and offices scotch tape and post-its invented by and manufactured by her grandfather so ubiquitous so uncanny to know the inventors granddaughter drawing without a thought on endless streams of money. In one afternoon at a favorite antique and plant shop in the Hamptons she purchased a dozen Venetian masks costing into the thousands to wear sipping after dinner brandy. *Mine is the one with gems feathers and deep purples* she asserted dancing among her wine and liquor soused dinner guests scaring them as she alighted a honey-soused humming bird flushed breath hot with escaping multi-liquored vapors.

I am a Jew from the Weequahic section of Newark New Jersey home to Philip Roth and where Allen Ginsberg's aunt taught us English. Ours a strange coupling birthdays within months of each other one year apart. Motherhood an anathema for her one daughter a dark obsession months of monastic silence pierced by lavish gifts ephemera artists washing down walls slow arduous drawings pastel scenes *Trompe l'oeil* the art to create illusion. Gouache illusory our relationship indistinguishable from those mellifluous art forms. For her I was a door to a larger an unfamiliar world beyond a rubbing a palimpsest washed over and over. Ultimately *reeking of sadness brought me down* no longer jester partner friend she obliterating me even whiffs of sadness of defeat of victimization left her cold and forbidding.

Lost among the Kosovo cliffs delivering satellite material with a favorite philanthropy Refugees International. This a jaunt to escape another awakening with repulsion in a new penthouse a mistake fortunes spent along dreading getting to be 60 then 62 when her inheritance would arrive in full. Her sense of irony and the absurd channeled the way for a memorial service at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem the service conducted by the black preacher of note, the Right Reverend Calvin Butts. Never had so many *WASPS* stepped into the sanctuary from waiting cars. Her unforgettable laugh penetrating the church felt her omniscience flickering in the whispers of the mourners settling into pews so ill at ease. *Not a part of me untouched by a surgery or dermatology* she would frequently say breaking the covenant of silence about body and face work bursting out with hilarity.

Enamored intrigued drawn unabashed infatuation with a woman who granted a single wish I had to be thought of as an artist finding identifying emerging artists was her gift. She was a seminal investor for daring artists most of whom yet to be recognized. Funding Marina Abramovic's exhibit for *the 1997 Venice Biennial*, bringing to the New Museum from Colombia Doris Salcedo's farm table woven with thousands of strands of rural women's hair, giving a grant for Nari Ward to dig into Harlem trash to create sculpture with the found objects relics of archival sites from Harlem's tossed and overlook lives ultimately exhibited in a Whitney Biennial. Black artists and women and gay and straight just on the edge the brink Kiki Smith's *Body as Subject* affixed to her wall poignant and eerie early on. Shirin Neshat photo woman in *Abaya* pointing rifle straightforward seemingly at you as you entered her home through swinging saloon thick erotic wood hand carved doors Freud inside out.

I became her personal artist and partner as she would say in a venture we started for which we received *not-for-profit* and *tax exempt* status in a virtual flick of a wrist money and power bringing us through in record time. It was to be called *14 Angels* inspired by Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* prayer *Evenings when I drift to sleep, fourteen angels watch do keep*. The name had resonance drew curiosity if the goal or mission changed quickly and abruptly summer storms kicking up in ardent NYC heat. Humbled being considered an artist willingly letting concept papers build up little discarded balls of paper in a filigree antique wastebasket. She just liked having me around and I with an enduring work ethic embedded in *Calvinistic Good Works* put together proposal upon proposal, which she read and disregarded as quickly and frequently as she cancelled appointments and dates. *Cancel, cancel, cancel* she would raucous with laughter tell her secretary who worked along with us in her apartment located in the heart of millionaire old money zip code 10028. We were simply embeds considered part of the exhibits in her astounding ever-rotating art collection amassing week by week. \$60,000 here \$60,000 there and when she walked into a gallery in Soho or Chelsea suddenly someone impeccably and fashionably dressed appearing as solicitous as they were cool or remote to other people who drifted in and out of the gallery.

We went to artist's studios where she listened as if yoga master each artist pouring out testimony of suffering passion and desire to her. She could sniff out the inauthentic or sycophantic and if visiting artist-in-heat currying favor soured she summarily would end visit disappearing dramatically into her waiting limo. Interest perked connecting with particular artists she sat enrapt giving the individual the rare opportunity to show his or her work and to talk about where it was going as the visit came to an end she would give a hug and a check for \$25,000 in the clasped hand leaving as if off a stage set. I was shadow partner court jester lady in waiting supplicant.

Her alcoholism worrisome subliminal requests made that I make sure she not get drunk during the day. Afternoons when she had her fill of wine the desire overtaking her breaking through her resistance she asked to be put to bed arms reaching out once with an invitation to join stiffening backing away never a further invitation. We travelled together multiple times in pursuit of the next idea for *14 Angels*. If heiress she would open her heart connecting with others with the deepest humility that is until the sun began to fall and an exquisite bottle or two of white wine always stowed in her luggage would come out door shut and her evening of sipping and stupor ensue.

We travelled to Israel to learn about residences for teenagers for our proposed plan for *Neighborhood Residences* the idea abandoned immediately following the trip worthiness viability never the reason just a restless whim to move on.

We travelled to Brazil, once with the Reverend Calvin Butts to study the fashion program at *Projeto Axe* in Salvador Bahia Brazil. Fashion one of many activities offered street children whose real affliction was grating poverty. *Projeto Axe* staff living with and among these children inviting them with gentle prodding and encouragement to leave a life of ocean bathed vagrancy for a supportive and nurturing environment. Once the choice was made the young people would be offered baths and beds with clean sheets, nutritious meals, full health exams, and formal schooling. The young people never ever needing to break bonds with home families also had the opportunity to chose from an array of introductory showcases to join in one of many activities ranging from circus performance, dance, music, recycling, and designing high-end fashion. Established leaders in each of these activities served as guides and facilitators encouraging the youthful participants to perform at the highest professional levels. Culminating events scheduled annually to which politicians and other City and National leaders were invited. Imperative for *Projeto Axe* to demonstrate the possible even for the most forlorn and discarded youth in a society who had as many as fifteen years earlier been harassed or even disposed of at the end of a gun a phenomenon publicized throughout the world. *Projeto Axe* created by a group of dissidents during the dictatorship many of whom had served time in jail now determined to fight for the rights of all Brazilian children providing this opportunity for the street children *to come inside* a virtual proposition in return from forgoing their lives by ocean bed restaurant trash bins and their infamous nuisance panhandling.

Reverend Butts was totally taken by *Projeto Axe* forming a partnership with the New Vision School connected to the church's development fund, The Thuirgood Marshall Academy. We stayed in a house owned by the musician Gilberto Gil overlooking the bay. During the five-day visit we shared meals even taking in Salvador nightlife filled with dancing and caipirinha. Accompanied by *Axe* staff Reverend Butts attended two Candomblé*services conducted by female priests.

Amazing confluence of the divine the justly anointed religious leaders
crosscurrents of respect reverential.

*(Candomble is an African-Brazilian religion has around two million followers. It is a syncretic religion, meaning that it is a combination of various beliefs.),

My friend and partner a constant aficionada of fashion comfortable in the select rooms of Armani etc. and sat touched and in awe at the exacting rendering of a fashion show in which former street children stepping high strutted down a cat walk in exquisitely designed and tailored outfits at the annual fashion show with the President of Brazil and other notables in attendance. Accompanying the prancing fashionistas an aria *Va Pensiero* from the Opera *Nabucca* pealing out over a corner of the impeccably restored town of Salavador vociferous cheers rose from an inspired audience. Astounding political statement redounded a startling perspective garnered as individuals watched these young people once asleep on the street perform at such an exacting level. Not to be easily dismissed that these young people of extreme overwhelming poverty once set to the streets to beg once shot like gnats, rats running rampant around government buildings because they made people of means and stature uncomfortable. Now majestic demonstrating in full flex in various venues in the vernacular of the powerful and well esteemed.

Getting into the limo on the way to Bridgehampton to spend a long weekend in her new home designed to her exact specifications by a noted Hampton architect her husband playfully relieved to have some time away from her although madly in love bid us goodbye as the *Bickersons* we indeed often playfully bickered. I was both in and out of my element. In Bridgehampton where Bloody Mary's before noon turned into wine and wine and more wine I would disappear into her art collection. She had built an art gallery as part of the house with ever changing exhibits throughout the summer showing artists just emerging or having just appeared in the Whitney or Venice Biennials. She was an early patron of the *New Museum* to which she donated a child's antique muslin dressed delicately smocked with male public hair along with the old rustic farm table upon which Colombian artist Doris Salcedo finely wove a million strands of rural women's hair.

Guess where we are going? *To Kosovo with Refugees International to bring satellite materials to the people in refuge camps!* She said with that unmistakable *Wasp* clip and her terrifying laugh rising like the unfathomable implausible artistry in her collection with that she hung up abruptly.

Soon after The State Department called late one Sunday night and said *a couple with whom we believe you are acquainted toppled over a cliff in the van in which they were riding near Kosovo as part of the Refugee International*

entourage to deliver satellite material to a refuge camp. This was not to announce yet. Stunned saddened but not surprised that her end would come in this way aging scaring her almost as much as the huge infusion of cash she was about to receive anticipating the complications coming along with it. Tumbling down a precipitous cliff in a war ravaged part of the world within the whirligig of great philanthropy a perfectly choreographed death for a women always verging.

In my own postmortem prayer streaming my sleepless night the words the song of Englebert Humperdinck, *Evenings when I drift to sleep, fourteen angels watch do keep.* Lifelong excessive fearfulness based in no particular identifiable reason of alcoholics and then forming a transformational professional partnership with an alcoholic million heiress with an oversize heart. A dedicated and eerily intuitive collector of the most confrontational and edgy art often exhibited only in discrete and off-putting venues and among her trophy artists and with her intuitive radar she claimed me. No one ever had seen me as an artist my work acclaimed within closed subterranean circles for its feistiness and progressive platform known as a public school reformer with integrity and a great capacity for nurturing but never for being edgy and artistic. **From a decade distant** I see I really did love her and relish our relationship and about all things of the heart of the intuition that speak through and with art she was right. By dear partner and pal ascending an angel of your own image of your own making. What was written was a paean a last somber *Hosanna* and *Amen*.



My benefactor and angel ascending...



Ana Szapocznikow

The Ana Szapocznikow a perfect representation of my friend.

An Afternoon of Truth Telling

A rich woman fell in love with me
A very rich woman
Not in love as with a man but maybe
It is too close to her death to fathom
When we met
She asked me to lunch a philanthropist
Who had observed me at New Visions
You are an artist
Come work with me
After lunch
We went to her apartment
Filled with art
The edgiest craziest
Sound barrier shattering art
I was stunned
Women in Burqas pointing rifles
A Shirin Neshat she informed me
Feeling an affinity
She opened a bottle of chilled white wine
She told me
Now I collect art
Artists new coming into their own
Now let us do something together
She suggested as we drank through the bottle
I told her I would be leaving my job very soon
Good she said we will become business partners
A little tipsy or light headed
I got on the express bus
Back to Riverdale where I lived
A place exponentially deadening my soul

I left my job and showed up at her door
With a big embrace we moved beyond
The heavy wood sculpted swinging doors
They were *The Garden of Earthly Delights, Hieronymus Bosch*
They were the *Karma Sutra and Freud*
Every position and disposition of debauchery and lust
She gave me a quick tour of her latest acquisitions

We left for a lunch at a local but very elegant restaurant
My life in a one hundred eighty degree tilt
I in gauzy disbelief
In record time her family lawyer
Established a not-for-profit tax exempt not-for-profit
We decided to call it *Fourteen Angels*
Inspired by *Evening Prayer, Hansel and Gretel*

When at night I go to sleep,
Fourteen angels watch do keep:
Two my head are guarding,
Two my feet are guiding,
Two are on my right hand,
Two are on my left hand,
Two who warmly cover,
Two who o'er me hover,
Two to whom 'tis given
To guide my steps to heaven.

Engelbert Humperdinck

Somehow this struck us as just right
We were still to define a task or project
When introducing me to friends
She would say *this is my business partner*
No one probed
If the ecstatic occurs I was walking in it
Bleak breaking upon me
My husband enshrouding closing in
Decisions encroach already moved beyond
My imagination awakened

Well into our partnership
On a drawing board three or four projects
Always and only in planning evolving
Three days a week I worked in her apartment
She nearby on the phone
Making and cancelling appointments
Midmornings set off to be rejuvenated
Or to shop haute couture designers fawning
I stayed back to more fully develop projects
Afternoons visits to artists studios
Most had been in a Biennial somewhere
She listened a suckling mother

As the artists described their work
Leaving behind a check in the many thousands
Then off to galleries where owners suddenly materialized
The car and driver waiting
Predisposed to particular artists
Purchases just short of hundred thousand
Her walls holding images verging
On the edges of the unconscious
New an antique muslin white communion dress
Delicately smocked with male pubic hair
Acquisitions arrived daily exhibits changed
Doris Alcedo's farm table woven with rural women's hair
Send *this to the New Museum* she told her secretary
Who often shared the office the spare bedroom

The world whirred spun around me
The more daring the art the more I gravitated
She a soul mate an inconceivable friendship forming
Nothing id driven scared her I opened up
Unable to resist the art her seductiveness
On a day after a simple lunch at a local Greek diner
We returned she opening a bottle of fine French wine
Usually waited until I left and her husband arrived home
She started moving primitively orbiting
Combustion building within me
Music voluminous *Tropicalia*
The art pushing her from behind
She chanting over and over
You will have to leave him you will leave him

A whirling dervish wine dripping off her lips
Her nostrils flaring bursting with edginess
A super sonic deafening sound
The omniscience the foredooming of her words
She was crafting my life with brew and witchery
Her prophecy wine drenched no tealeaves
The Brazilian music deafening
She became a blur
Babbling dulcet sweet
Then hilarious then raucous

She was taking me on
I sat motionless struck dumb
You will leave him my dear in the very, very near future
And I will leave my husband never
He does not love you enough
Finally saying *next time go top shelf*
The dancing grew wilder
The bottles clanked together
Dropped on the floor one two three
The afternoon reached its peak
My heart lurching speeding
This was not a dream
This was a fortune telling
I was drenched and bloody
Come let's go to bed
She was staggering sputtering, falling
Her eyes closed as if stuck shut
She fell onto her white hand embroidered duvet
Newly purchased Kikki Smith *Reindeer Series*
Propped against the wall staring
She fell into a deep grandly soporific sleep
I knee-deep near paralysis stood by her bed
I listened to her heavy breathing
She was alive just sleeping deeply
The six life size pencil drawings
Of steadily gazing deer facing her
Soon her husband would arrive
Twice in my life women asked me
To lie down with them
Twice I couldn't
When I was twenty and now fifty-seven
Two women who in truth
Stole my heart blurred my vision
Mining my unconscious of its desires
Relieving me of self-deceit and self-doubt

I walked through the thick hand-carved saloon doors
Babies sucking breasts, babies sucking penises
Babies somersaulting over and around
Mothers and fathers upside down, inside out

Bosch and Freud linked gone contemporary
Her art now riveted in my consciousness
The day was still bright a spring chill
Knowing believing that
I will not be married next time it is spring
A prophecy a fortune foretold
Her obsessive oracle within
Before the buds broke into spring
Before the crocus blossomed
I will not be wearing wedding band

She never asked me to lie down again
She never left her husband
She died mangled steadfastly at his side
What was in her mind?
As the car hurled through the air
Off the Albanian mountain cliff
No chance to survive the ravine below
The fall more than five thousand feet
She and her husband embarking on a mission
To bring satellite materials to the refugees
In Sarajevo with *Refugees International*
Beneficiaries of their great largesse

Just before her death
Although in daily communication
She creating greater distance between us
Warning me as she pulled away
You reek of sadness
The stench repulsive
Your heaviness weightiness
Lightness gone
Not good for me
To be around you anymore
You stayed with him too long
His lying cheating ways seeped in

Now I am happy unbearably light
I left him as the spring flowered

Fragrant with freedom sweet as wisteria
She died before I could tell her
Yes oh yes and thank you
Our trip to Israel and trips to Brazil
And our pressing into and against
The birthing of art artists still nubile
It is more than a decade since she died
Watching Marina Abramovic staring people down
At the Museum of Modern Art multiple times
Remembering that my friend
Had paid for her installation to the Biennale in Venice
How we looked at her art books together
Reading responsively her writings
Dear friend you would no longer be repulsed by me
And if asked again I would lie down next to you
Stroking your hair as you slept
Looking over at Kikki Smith's deer
Smiling to myself in my reincarnation
The swagger and tumble
Of the images on the swinging doors
Never stop longing to walk through once more
Feeling the surprise and wonder
Of the art and your delighted and impish smile

Naomi Barber

Last Job – 2005 -2011

Lehman College Bronx Institute City University of New York served as Deputy Director the Institute focused primarily on academic enrichment programs for Bronx middle and high school students most of whom were Latino as was most of the Institute's staff. The Executive Director Professor Herminio Martinez brought to the United States when he was twelve or thirteen as part of the airlift from Cuba known as *Peter Pan* – students primarily of means fleeing the Castro regime in Cuba under the dotting and face

Central responsibility was to create an initiative in which we prepared the largely district Latino population of middle through high school students for entrance to competitive colleges achieving in timely fashion a college degree the initiative funded largely by the Kellogg Foundation and called *ENLACE*. Developing the program reflected the steps private and competitive public middle and high schools prepare students as successful applicants at top tier colleges. Tracing the elaborate footwork the steps taken preparing the most privileged students became our totem and our challenge. Forty, seventh grade students comprised our first cohort most of whom were Hispanic, children of very recent immigrants primarily for Central and Latin America, all of scarce financial means. Students participated in the intense admission process including essays, interviews and had to be in the upper testing levels in read and math. Most important was their interest and determination with a promise of a full commitment to all aspects of the program. Classes and workshops offered for a full day on Saturday and for six weeks in the summer and would extend through the 12th grade. Ultimately it was hoped that all forty students would find admission to sought after colleges and graduate successfully at the end of four years. Inviolable preserving an abiding connection to each student's home culture as they continually experienced a broader world. This came with the knowledge that students when enjoined to deny their home background suffered disruption leading too often to family upheaval and heartbreak.

We were steeped in the practices of the privileged contracting with Princeton Review for SAT test prep offering summers at the Ivy's and with of the *Experiment in International Living* sending high school students from China to Guatemala to live with local families engaging in a variety of work projects. Students prepared college applications writing essays drawing on extensive conversation with assigned mentor with only grammar edited. The essays were compelling if unsettling most of which focused on the travails of acculturation *becoming American*. From stacks of applications on desks of admissions officers it was obvious that ours stood apart not one letter of rejection sent a student. Our students were deemed worthy not just to fill the need a quota for diversity (poor kids of color from poverty stricken congressional district) but by the virtue of the attested to arduous and diligent preparation. Families were engaged from the start of the program and at graduation time celebrated their children's success if leery or scared about their eminent departure to college. Gradually over time with summers on college campuses or travelling parents had been building up to this big moment. Most of the families spoke primarily Spanish and were inordinately filled with homesickness with frequent trips back *home*. Family incomes ranged from \$20,000 annually as a home care aid to \$60,000 in construction in good years. Families celebrated their daughters with *Quinceanera* a traditional Hispanic celebration held when a girl reached fifteen. No matter the family financial circumstances this was a defining event no expense held back the celebrant in a white wedding-like dress male escorts in tuxedos this party central to the parent's stature among and with family members.

I had come full circle back in the public sector if on an elevated college level in what was designated a Hispanic Serving Institution more than 60% of the student population Hispanic. Once again bombarded with old guard Jewish faculty so reminiscent of the *Pogrom asserting Jews* from the school district and they feeling equally threatened and entitled. Most of the students first generation to college and had no way to gauge how much of the college offerings were mediocre but for one or two rare and thankfully rare exceptions. Unfortunately the Bronx Institute was under the umbrella of the School of Education with shifting deans and self-preservationists in control sinister and bankrolling rich pensions.

My boss was best friends with the old boss from the school district the, *who the fuck is fondly Naomi* superintendent. Republican fiscally conservative socially enlightened his children attended the Ethical Culture Fieldstone School from the time of kindergarten. Both of these men considered me a *wunderkind* if now in my sixties both with short fuses although the Cuban was far more temperate and able to have conversation without great upheaval or

emotion and encouraged my serving as a sounding board. He shared his interest in establishing educational enrichment programs for Bronx middle and high school students putting them at advantage in the *real world*. We had an easy affinity and a natural confluence of professional goals he offering me full reign to work without constraint if touching base frequently more as an intellectual exchange. Conversant particularly after New Visions with erstwhile power brokers as they arranged schooling for their children I knew, as the Navajos would say *The Way* and the wiles of what competition we were up against. The boss was clear that aspiration of our young students be held inviolate a holy grail leading to success in the world of the *Barbarians at the Gate* without compromise.

Diligent and thoughtful in each aspect of the enrichment program most essential were the deep and enduring relationships with the students. Staff mentors were assigned two or three students and extended support in any foreseeable way to ensure students steadiness and success. Trust relationships built over time and students had *hotline* access to mentors during the critical first year of college and beyond. The professor did not want an abrogation of commitment on our part, as students grew more confident in their pursuit of quality higher education. What follows are stories of three of our students. ENLACE was the name given the program by its primary funding source The Kellogg Foundation.

The three young women now successful college graduates all participated in *ENLACE*. Each receiving a full scholarship to a first rate four-year college.

Four years at Brandeis on a Posse Foundation scholarship (groups of ten students awarded full scholarships to the same college as a way of providing support for students from economically challenging backgrounds). This truly exceptional young woman and Latina arrived on campus dressing as she had at home in the Bronx. She at eighteen was an accomplished poet dancer and disciplined student. Early walks across campus carried snicker and catcalls *Hey hot Latin mama* loud and hurtful. **Verging on quitting** unnerved and even scared her one excursion into the world of college was the summer before when she attended Harvard where she and a cohort of students were guided carefully through course work and campus life college staff identifying possible future candidates. Other than that her life centered on school neighborhood ultimately with weekly trips *downtown* studying dance and writing. On a particular phone conversation when she sounded less plaintive and discouraged sharing she had an epiphany during one of those unnerving cross campus journeys. She began offering a *Thursday Night Rice and Beans Canteen* invitation only male and female students sought a place at the table it

becoming a major weekday food event. Then she offered dance lessons at what she called *Salsa Saturday Nights* again drawing a huge loyal group of followers. Having frequented in New York City the *Nuyorican Poets Café* she opened a bi-monthly *Open Mike for Poetry Slams* appearing suddenly a bevy of ethnically and culturally ripe poets. She graduated in three years with honors a multiplicity of faculty supporting and engaging her.

This accomplished now college graduate grew up with a single mother working as a home health aid never earning more than \$20,000 a year. Her mother expressing often-complicated feelings about her daughter's intimidating ever increasing transformations throughout childhood. Wondering what inner strength what level of persistence and perseverance is necessary for this young woman to transverse a continent of the unfamiliar how did she a keep a heart and mind open when intruded upon with ongoing intense feelings of betrayal and loneliness? This wonderfully talented and successful graduate shared her experiences at college in the following poem.

Mind of a Dreamer

*Rice and beans will never be served in this house
She would not sully the off white, semi glass kitchen paint
The ingredients required are too strong
Too pungent
Too foreign
They would stick to the walls
Offending company
Leave spic lingering in the back of their throats,
Burn mojillo into their nostrils
The spice laden walls would sing
"arriba arriba we arrrrre latinos
We are latinos living here"
To the melody of "La Cucaracha"
Singing at everyone who entered
Or so she thought
She never really understood the American dream
If beauty is in the eye of the beholder*

*Then a dream should be in the mind of the dreamer
This dream mandated that she trade in her Goya and Aji
For Rice a Roni and Stove Top Stuffing
There would be no meals that took hours to make
Years to perfect
No intricacy
No delicacy
All recipes would take ten minutes or less
All seasonings would come in neat, factory sealed, little pre-packaged packets
The titles read:
Two second meatloaf
On the go casserole
Out the door shake and bake
No time to breathe brisket
She lived a microwave safe, Handy travel size, Disposable
Just add water existence
She never really understood the American dream
If beauty is in the eye of the beholder
Then a dream should be in the mind of the dreamer
She no long spoke Sppanish
Forbade us from it also
She put a channel block on Vnivision, and Tele-Mundo
We could still watch the Nudie channel
It was in English
She said if no one heard us speak Spanish
If no one smelled it one us
If we stayed out of the sun
Maybe they would assume we were something else
Something different, something better
Italians, Arabs, it didn't matter
We weren't even allowed to eat Taco Bell
Because it might arouse suspicion*

*She informally changed our name from Garcia to Gark
My name was now
Eduardo Juan Del Rosario Alto Garcia En La Montana San Pedro De Los Pesces GARK
She had crippled us
No roots to stand upon
She tore out our living Papaya tree
Replaced it with a store bought plastic apple tree
She never really understood the American dream
If beauty is in the eye of the beholder
Then a dream should be in the mind of the dreamer
Never told her how I launched my fists
At the faces of those who shouted names I did not identify with
Never told her how I put hot sauce on everything
In a vain attempt
To keep the Latin inside me burning
Never told her that my dream of America
Embraces all the things I am
It builds upon my past
Instead of trying to pave over it
What good is beholding beauty
If you see yourself as ugly
What good is a dream
If you're not even in it.*

Z. C.

A second worthy narrative involves the student who in the ninth grade could not speak a word of English and during her entire high school career *double translated* her homework assignments becoming in remarkable time fluent in English and able to succeed at school at the highest levels. Neither of her parents spoke English. She was a devoted and steadfast member of ENLACE taking advantage of everything offered including a summer at Yale. Receiving full scholarships to multiple colleges, which she visited at their cost

selecting a school in which she felt most comfortable. She was a very self-possessed and confident young woman. In the first months of school living in a suite with three other female students she tried each night to study with the same diligence to which she was accustomed the noise and distractions around her unsettling. Her request to suitemates to please quiet down was mocked met with muffled laughter when she went to the RA (*Resident Advisor*) for help she was told *to learn to live with it this is college life!*

When she tried to get into the first year course of economics was summarily turned away reasons never fully articulated persistent and gaining confidence as a student ultimately becoming an economics major graduating with honors. Through a network of professional Hispanic women, she secured a summer internship with the Inter-American Bank in Washington and subsequently is followed closely by a group of Hispanic prominent women.

When on the brink of quitting college she found a women's affinity group devoted to exploring and advocating for breast cancer victims and further research. Each member was given a turn to present research and an initiative. Unbeknownst to me her mother had recently been treated for breast cancer thus her connection to the issue was deep and personal. On a holiday visit to the Bronx Institute she shared that she had given an original paper on the advent of breast cancer in woman from the Dominican Republic. Following the presentation she set out a table of information sheets buffeted with trays of home baked breast cookies raising funds for cancer research in the Dominican Republic. The friendship with the women in this group kept her buoyant and desirous of venturing out further into the greater world of college life when in her junior year she fell in love. Offers abounded from banks and other financial institutions upon graduation. She plans to begin graduate work in economics in the near future.

You have to vote for Barak Obama she emailed she was in her freshman year at Wesleyan College in Connecticut and he had just spoken on campus. Immediately I signed up and gave \$50.00 on both of behalves we indeed were early almost charter members in support of his campaign. During a time we were discussing colleges I suggested she apply to Wesleyan quipping *I always wanted my son to apply and attend he never did probably too much pressure from me. Okay* she said and did and got accepted with the proviso she attend a prestigious boarding school in Massachusetts for an additional year of high school to fully prepare her for the rigors of Wesleyan without guarantees but with full scholarships for each institution. Her mother came in to discuss this odd turn of events their daughter being the Valedictorian of her graduating class. Lengthy conversation with translation ensued and after consulting with

her daughter and her husband supported the plan to take on a fifth year of high school. Sad and stunning the huge gaps in her coursework in a small New York high school thought well of. After studying upper high school level math science working on writing she gained entrance to Wesleyan College where she majored in political science ultimately serving as a leader in the student council summertime interning in the Obama campaign.

The Bronx Institute ENLACE program received strong acclaim given the success for its first cohort of forty-one Hispanic students each attending a first tier college and without exception finishing in four years with B or better averages. To scientifically parse the reasons for such overwhelming success is impossible but worth noting the program at the Bronx Institute offered multi-level academically demanding and exciting workshops provided when necessary concrete assistance with basic skills. Detailed assistance given making college decisions with ongoing support filling out applications and financial aid forms. Mentors followed students up through the first and second year of college were readily accessible throughout the program if for simple chats sitting tight through stormy times without exception. Ultimately staff served as facilitators and cheerleaders never doubting the possible.

The Bronx Institute created a documentary having the students share their experiences in high school and college. The video distributed by the Kellogg Foundation to universities and campuses particularly those with a high preponderance of Hispanic students received high acclaim and interest in developing similar programs.

Having been involved at New Visions in creating small schools found that students in the Bronx were inadequately informed during the high school application process of the new small schools and the possibility they offered for academic success. In response we put together the **ENLACE Guide to Small Schools** in Spanish and English distributing thousands of copies throughout the middle schools in the Bronx.



ENLACE Family-to-Family Guide: Schools of Hope in The Bronx

Above is the cover of the guide designed for families to explore educational options available for their middle school children as they applied to high school. Parents were recruited to research the small schools and contributed to the ultimate format and design of the guide to ensure its usability. It was important for the Guide to be worthy of display on a coffee table and for family browsing at leisure. Applications to the small high schools in the Bronx increased guidance counselors invited to luncheons introducing them to the Guide encouraged students for the most part to apply.

Poetry chap books produced in a series of workshops offered by local poets, they included:

**Summer Muse – A Poetry Anthology by the Students of the ENLACE Summer Program 2004*

**Bronx Breathing – A poetry Anthology by Students in the ENLACE Program 2004*

**ENLACE Program – Songs from Home 2004*

The following is a stirring really incredible poem by one of the ENLACE students.

Animal Love

*Night and day. Two horses were put together in the same paddock.
They slept standing, their throats curved against each other
They slept that way, knowing each other always*

*The dignity of being together.
The volume of the, each other's weight.
The proud rise of their tail, head swinging and the taste of
Bay in the morning air
In night and day, wet from heat and the call of the wind on it*

*Their privacy had a river in it
There are things that they did that I don't wanna know
Fences were nothing compared to their love*

*Finally, this was their freedom,
Their share of passion*

Sorangie S. Age 17

Beyond the school day the Bronx Institute offered programs that were exciting and welcoming from physics to advanced math to readings in world literature. Most significant the Bronx Institute provided an unstinting level of support for students offering incrementally more challenging courses and workshops requiring ever-higher standards for success. Breakthrough summer internships with The Bronx Botanical Garden, The Bronx Zoo and Wave Hill along with first tier colleges and the Experiment in International expanded the lives of students too often confined to dangerous and oppressive Bronx streets and neighborhood life. At the Bronx Institute as the boss would reiterate *the sky is the limit* and in essence it was.

The last and culminating job at The Bronx Institute was gratifying but at a particular point I sort of slipped off the face of work some chronic ailments and the encroaching decade of my eighties had me leave via the back door certain the time had come.

REFLECTION:

*How deeply we took in the transfigured expression from the tortured face.
How intensely the tiny cheeks basked in the glow of justice, attained at last
And then already fading. Franz Kafka*

Back at home looking back at forty years of work playing *Fly Me to the Moon*, a touch of reminiscence here for the daily processional from homeroom to SFA group in the Chancellor's District also the song it is said that Neil Armstrong played when on the moon. Planning an afternoon walk thinking about the book I am reading *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss. Reading still mysterious how it just happens for most children whatever the methodology just *one fine day. Nobody loves a genius child. Nobody loves a genius child. Kill it and let its spirit go wild* a poem fragment by Langston Hughes, which speaks of too often witnessing public schools as *caravans of carnage*. It is necessary to think clearly of the implications of school accountability and standardized testing rising like spikes on the backs of poor children when scouring the paper for a particular school's reading scores.

Fist Yet Raised Ask Forbearance: Desire is the sweet commonality the gnawing voice the niggling from within that doesn't relent. Scudding aspirations families' dormant dreams heartbreak splat futures dim. Public schooling is the messianic message of democracy its need. Our capacity to catch on will be the reckoning. If we cannot believe and act that each person is singularly the most important person alive. If we cannot perceive that each child is the only one whom we must educate. If we don't gather ourselves to the knowledge that democracy hangs in the balance of our responsiveness to that single random child. Our society will be like curdling milk in the fist of the place where no canary can sing. Freedom, our freedom, rests on the awakening, the sheltering, the harvesting of our capacity for a commitment to randomness and the unhesitating embrace of the face that is not like our own.

It continues: Painful to think that society blood still swilling raw meat on collective tongue and teeth it the bitter aftertaste of racism lives an aphorism abates a corrosive that stunts our public schools. That public school reflected the world outside the society at large. Hard to know that racism with its additive classism is much deeper more entrenched and more intransigent. The notion of public schooling and its concomitant democracy springs from something much deeper more daunting. Our nature our limits our very humanness is at the root. Because our imaginations can shape a thing as lovely as a democratic society and schools that exist to promote full and equal participation of each single individual doesn't mean that we have either the will or the capacity to step outside and realize the ideal. The imagination conjured the populous stalls.

Anger is a generous fuel to stoke a sense of immutable purpose. But what is it that unnerves sends us into frenzy fills us with an unforgiving pain? What drives us to certain recognition that our survival as a nation and a people depends on taking an eye-smarting hard look into the tenets of the universal golden rule? We seem unable to step from the anemic amniotic fluid of self-interest and replenish depleted and tired turf and probe what the other in truth means to our own snatched off a planetary deity of life. And every once in a while, a reminder comes of mythic proportion and we get aroused and become aware but and just at the moment when we would have to act we watch aghast Palestinian children in armored cars on their way to school passing in the single lane the similarly armored car carrying Israeli school children and we watch the maiming and physically scarring girls who trek in airless mountain ranges in Afghanistan. The soul of our country of our lives

rests in how we school our children and how we acknowledge that same desire universally the implications of not doing so are too frightening to even consider.

Final tug backward I find that my deepest feelings of satisfaction came from the projects that originated with me while I was in the School District. *Finding a Female Language for Power* happened when morning-like sickness preoccupied and unsettled in those early days and years in School District 10 when the Superintendent biblical fisherman that Matthew 4:19 says, *And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*

Pivotal moment when he arrived with bouquet of flowers in hand at my door asking me *to find another way to say the very same thing I had said to the Assistant Principals during a workshop you ought to be arrested convicted of murder you are nothing more than fucking murderers pathetic fucking murderers snacking off living off parasitic slaughtering the souls and minds of school kids.* As he walked back into the elevator saying, *see you on Monday* I understood that I had to find the right words if I wanted to have others hear what I was saying.

Peter Pascale met an impetuous eighteen-year-old girl who deeply desired to act upon his vision of bringing a better world to the newly arrived immigrants in East Harlem.

Slipping in and out of orbits of power filled my early working life as a mother and *public school reformer* my own designation I felt driven into action as if my energy originated with the dawning rays of the sun and then quickly eclipsed as a wife shriveling or folding in sure as a morning glory at dusk limply clinging to a trellis.

Lifetimes of dreams never remembered and experienced in the trenches as they refer to work in the public schools provided the impetus to create and develop the first iteration of New Visions Schools although I always felt dislocated and a *stranger*. **At The After School Corporation (TASC)** I felt appreciated for the initial shaping of the program but right after that when the implementers stepped in no longer welcomed.

Ending Sadness in Spite of Sorrow prescient an unavoidable and formidable driving force moving me through forty years of work no time or desire to authenticate quantify the feelings the sensations were there embodied and emboldening.

Now I want to engage with stories with my tales really to share the humor and the pathos the struggle and the valor found when individuals find a desire to connect and move as *Matisse Dancers* in a circle of beauty vivacity and good will.

An anomaly in work settings always a little outside and yet in the moment energy quickened passion heated and I moved undeterred by detractors fearless against opposing forces and although I can capture as moments in the past as they spring through my fingers to a screen I am dispassionate and disconnected. I don't really know who I am or who I was and why I had the disposition or have the right to take a body of forty years of work seriously.

What I hold is an appreciation for what I know to be beautiful and am still star struck by an ever-inquiring mind. I am finally an **autodidact** building a vocabulary and a virtual library of knowledge and a grasp of and connection to a deeper more probing self-scrutiny scrubbing fabrication from action. I am grateful for the agility nimbleness moving me into the Internet never less awed retrieving so many lost and unknowable worlds.

In dimming days within foreshortened time see that I knew little of friendship less of love but laughter but energy but passion and a desire for just one more movie one more book one more poem one more piece of art one more tree gathers me awake if for one more day. This odyssey locating what I will think of what I will see and imagine as I settle into my ultimate final journey my *Byzantium*.

At seventy I told my children I am now only a grandma and a writer. This time buffeted by the waves of arbitrariness my children discarding or moving away shedding me anticipation if grief forestalled. Mothers train children to move on go away be on their own time reversals subtexts actions suggest I am being moved to the final goodbye not be crippling but freeing up. The space grows death encroaches so be it in the order of all things.

And on the anniversary of Martin Luther King's birth, I received the following:

January 15, 2002

*Ms. Naomi Barber
1270 5th Avenue
#11
New York, NY 10029*

Dear Naomi:

*God loves you and so do I. I hope to see you soon. Keep the Faith!
Sincerely,*

*Calvin O. Butts, III
Pastor,
Abyssinian Baptist Church*

Leaving forty years working to *End Sadness In Spite of Sorrow* on this affirming note.



My benefactor and angel ascending...



Ana Szapocznikow



The End
Naomi Barber