

MOTHERHOOD

by Margaret Randall

Across my childhood America
there were statues of The Pioneer Mother
I think they must have been almost identical
in every town over 30,000
my adolescent 1950s
remembering my Albuquerque New Mexico
and in the cities they were especially hidden
that slight embarrassment
in some small park or nondescript square
well away from the pulsing downtown
the thriving lakeside or stadium
you know, neither shantytown nor business district,
just there

The forward leaning woman with her bonnet
and the young child in her arms
the child was probably a son
long pioneer skirt swirling stone about her ankles
was she 20, 30 or 40?
A stone basket on her arm or a stone bundle
the hands were large
work hands, hands that built a nation
all while keeping in a suitable background
and the grey stone eyes slightly raised
fixed on something way off there
called god or hope or maybe just the next day

I used to want to stand and look at that woman
for hours.

I never did.

My parents dispensed with it as bad sculpture.
In our history books the pioneer mother
the pioneer woman was flat page after flat page
she came to America to the new land
in a sailing vessel salt pork and sloping decks
riding the waves.

If she lived she was already a heroine,
the rest was a collection of phrases repeated

and we repeated them dutifully:
she-working-the-land-with-her-man-
reared-her-children-fought-off-savage-indians-
was-god-fearing-man-fearing-and-good,
and those who weren't
were not in the books.

It was years before I chipped that picture away
cleaned it with the help of sisters
found the Indian women beneath the education
they put on us,
understood the women who came to buy their freedom
and remained enslaved,
understood the women who asked questions
who weren't in the books
the Iroquois council women
or General Harriet Tubman.
Sojourner whose whole arm
not just her hand
but her arm was centuries of work,
and she stood up and said
Look at this arm of mine . . . !

This arm of mine!
It's not only the history they took from us,
women of the mills, great textile strikers
erased with a madison avenue sweep of the IBM,
and presses keep rolling
and out come the raped showgirls the murdered actresses
what sells
always what sells,
and a million red satin hearts
and valentine box the mother's day card
the flowers the pressed flowers the corsages
a million five-pound boxes
\$7.95 or one for every budget
and the mother becomes the \$7.95 mother
or the \$2.29 mother if that's all you have
and if you don't know how to say it pretty
hallmark will say it for you

in a thousand different verses where wife rhymes with life
and Sojourner isn't there
not anywhere
and neither are the million Indian women
the factory girls the machine operators
the cutters the walkers the runners

Deep among the sequins or in the red velvet
the waitress becomes marilyn monroe
and marilyn munroe becomes marilyn monroe to the tenth degree
the peoples of other lands
and our relationship to them,
it's the exact sciences too
the pure ones
they cut and rearrange for us:
math abstracted from living,
the physics of survival, our chemical components,
the geography of our minds.

Studying and imitating those mothers
we worked hard
so our own would be just like the one next door
we rejected even her timid unsure gropings
so we could be fully certainly and definitively
just like the girl across the street
no fatter no thinner
identically dressed and scented
talking about the same things
and with the same expectations
the right kiss a hope chest patterned silver
a single strand of pearls
the set diamond the plain gold band
and the white dress that would cover it all.
I mean all the doubts, anything left unsaid
anything at all that didn't fit in

or grow unwieldy, too large, showed,
came out when it shouldn't. Couldn't.
The right dress the right man the right job (his)
and on to children!
We too
can be, must be
mothers!

Sometimes it didn't work just that way
like for Patricia
whose mother smiled and smiled and went away one day
went to the hospital
and came back in an empty suitcase
carried by her silent father
who wouldn't say
couldn't say till after it happened
YOUR MOTHER DIED OF CANCER
it was too hard
so of course there were exceptions
and Patricia became her own mother
played the role
cared for and closed her lips
opened her eyes
wide
wished alone and made decisions
approved the new mother finally
and went on her own marked way

Cancer, a mother's disease
in highly developed USA
when it didn't kill it carved a future
indivisible middle class ways and means,
like the bourgeois heart attack
or working class TB,
eyes turned away, closed words,
like your mother Robert
who developed bravery as a weapon,
or my own whose womanhood
--not motherhood but womanhood--
grappled around itself that terrible word

smelling of the society it breeds
and bred by it
to be whispered to be feared
to be held as deadweight and evidence
supplying committees foundations and research grants
sporting by first ladies now
charities and a tabulated madness

For even a mother's madness
is electronically counted
registered and shelved
here comes another may tenth and another
the beauty parlors are filled
there are pills now
science keeps moving ahead
development is a wonderful thing
there are pills that all but stop time
push history back on itself
you stay young forever and ever
and youth is everything
everything, do you hear, everything!

Not a line nor a wrinkle
I've never seen my own mother
with one grey hair on her head
till the walls fall around you
and you emerge, parchment,
one terrifying final moment
like Shangri-la,
the face that has always been perfect
lifted and smooth
screaming into a web of lines
a matrix, a map
that says years, a lifetime,
the final admission of having lived.

And I think of that Latin American mother
Carmen of the narrow hills
going up and up
the people in weather patched shacks

Carmen of the soft eyes
her hands have worked as hard as any
her son in prison in exile in distance
and the weight of every day
like finding and making
just what holds them together
just what feeds them
just barely, the family,
and I remember her soft smile breaking
the tears coming just once as she said
No. No, let him stay where he is.
I love him but I don't want him back
for here it's just struggle
the fear all the time
prison again
let him stay where freedom is
where his children too will be free.

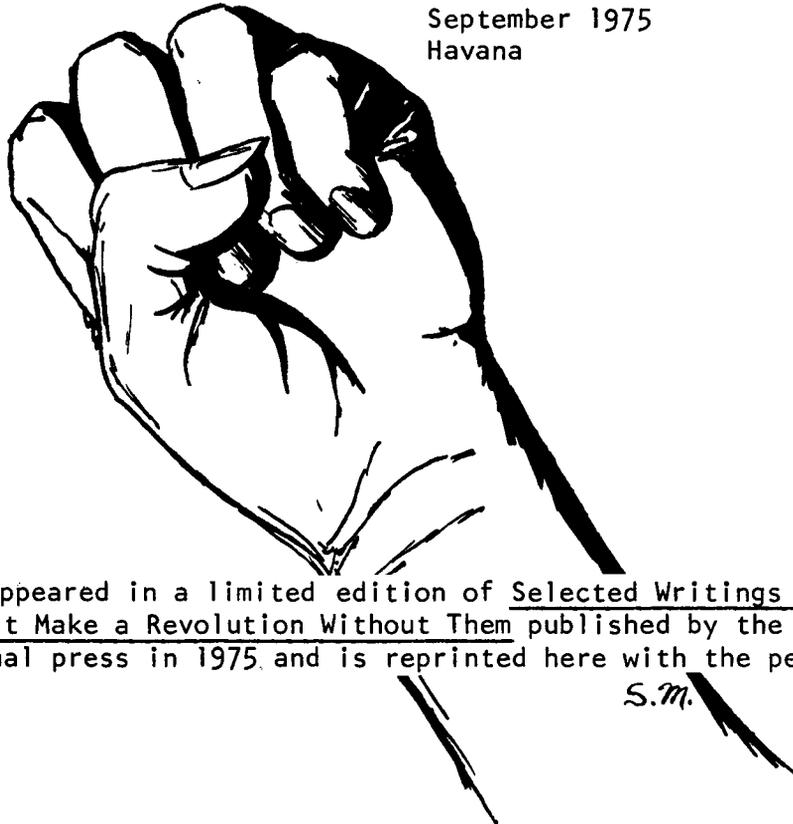
My pelvic bones move apart now
they spread
as I take my own motherhood in my hands
hold it and look at it
talking to this person, this woman,
as if it were me. Yes.
Feel the life creeping back to my flesh
into my bones
my hips widen, acknowledge
Gregory
then Sarah
Ximena of the wise eyes
little Anna

remembering the wet rush of that moment
remembering it in eyes and hands
moving with it, standing up,
this is my own arm,
and then learning slowly
that motherhood is never that moment,
giving birth is only the beautiful explosion,
the beginning,

the giving and taking is every day
as what comes from you
grows and moves away

And you learn to let him go let her go
give and take and give
as the distance widens
and you try to put the real world in that space
the whole struggle
love that's as hard as the stone bonnet
as rough as that heaving sea
as full as the empty suitcase
as common as the red satin heart
as big as the lowell strikers
as strong as her arm
my arm

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Havana



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S.M.