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ZAMI A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME AUDRE LORDE

ZAMI

A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME

A BIOMYTHOGRAPHY BY

AUDRE LORDE

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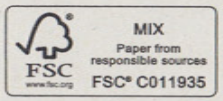

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To Helen, who made up the best adventures

To Blanche, with whom I lived many of them

To the hands of Afrekete

In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair.

that Jim was wanted on a white-slavery charge in Texas, for transporting under-aged girls across state lines for purposes of prostitution.

I was so shaken up by this exchange that I woke Gerry up, and he persuaded me to go with him to an air-conditioned movie.

It was one of The Branded, Lori, who told me about the many jobs to be had in the factories of Stamford, Connecticut. The idea of leaving New York for a while, with its emotional complications, felt good to me, and the idea of plentiful jobs was particularly appealing. I had decided to leave college, since I couldn't learn german.

I put a combination padlock on the door of my apartment, giving the combination to The Branded, who would soon be returning to college. I packed my few clothes, some of my books and records, took my portable typewriter and moved to Stamford.

I had sixty-three dollars in my pocket.

I arrived in Stamford on the New Haven local on Thursday afternoon. I went to the Black Community Center whose address I had gotten from a previous visit the week before. From there, I got the address of someone who had a room to rent. I rented the room, which was a shockingly high eight dollars a week, stored my gear, and said goodbye to Martha, who had come up with me to help carry all my portable possessions. The next morning, I got a job at the ribbon factory where Lori had worked during the summer. I was to begin the following Monday morning.

My room was very tiny, and I shared the bathroom with two other women who also rented rooms in the private house. There were no cooking facilities, so I sneaked in a hotplate to warm up the cans of soup which became my standard evening meal.

That weekend I walked around Stamford, trying to get a feel of the place. I had never lived in a small town before, nor anywhere other than New York. The Liggett's Drugstore on Atlantic Avenue, the main thoroughfare, did not know what an egg cream was. They also called soda, pop. Walking down Atlantic Avenue to the railroad station and back, across the little bridge over the Rippowam River which separated East from West Main Street and the Black from the white communities, I marveled at the different scale life seemed to move on here.

On a Saturday afternoon, the streets seemed strangely uncrowded and unhurried. As I looked into the little dingy stores along the lower end of Atlantic near the station, I wondered why, if they had so much business, they all looked so poor and dull. I didn't realize for a few weeks why Saturday was not the shopping day that it was in New York.

I decided that weekend that I was going to work in Stamford, save money, and go to Mexico.

I could do that, I thought, by conserving on food, which would be no big thing since I couldn't cook in my room, anyway. I found a supermarket and bought five cans of Mooseabec sardines, a loaf of bread, and five cans of Campbell's pepperpot soup, my alltime favorite. I figured I was set for the week, a sandwich for lunch, and a can of soup for dinner. I would treat myself on the weekend, I decided, with franks or chicken-foot stew.

On Monday I started work, at 8:00 in the morning. I could walk to work in a half-hour from where I lived. I sat at a long table with other women, running a hand-cranked hanking machine which made up ribbon into gaily turned hanks and clipped them with a tiny band of metal. The work was unbelievably boring, but the colors of the ribbons were bright and cheerful, and the table by lunchtime looked like a Christmas tree. This was September, but the factory was working on Christmas orders. It took me a while to get the hang of the machine, and how to turn neat hanks that were not returned by the foreman with a sneer. The woman I worked next to consoled me.

"Don't worry, honey. In three weeks he'll let you alone."

Stamford was a closed-shop town, and workers had to join the union within three weeks of beginning work. When I started, I was paid ninety cents an hour, which would increase to $1.15, the standard minimum wage, when I joined the union. My coworker knew something I did not. It was standard procedure in most of the "software" factories to hire Black workers for three weeks, then fire them before they could join the union, and hire new workers. The work was not hard to learn. So three weeks later, I found myself with my first paycheck and no job.

That autumn I began to write poems again, after months of silence. My weekend nights became noisy with the limping clatter of my battered portable typewriter. The woman next door mildly suggested, when we passed on the outside stairs, that silence after midnight was the usual house rule for radios and

typewriters. I folded up my blanket and used it as a pad to deaden the sound, as I worked away at the machine, perched upon my rickety table wedged in between my contraband hotplate and the two neat stacks of Mooseabec sardines and Campbell's soup cans.

In the soft September evenings of this new place, it was as if Gennie had come alive again. I found myself on Saturday nights, walking through unfamiliar streets, explaining to Gennie in an undertone which streets were which, what the plant was like, and discussing with her the strange mannerisms of these non-New Yorkers.

> And you did not come back to April
> though spring was a powerful lure
> but bided your time in silence
> knowing the dead must endure.
>
> And you came not again to summer
> nor till the green oaks were leaving
> traces of blood in the autumn
> and there were hours for grieving.

Gennie was the only companion with whom I shared those first few weeks in Stamford, and sometimes, for days at a time, she was the only person to whom I spoke.

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It was 10:00 A.M. on a crispy Monday morning, and the West Main Community Center was almost empty. I stared straight ahead of me as I sat, waiting for Mrs. Kelly to finish. Starched and cocoa-brown, every iron-grey curl in place, she studied my application through gold-rimmed glasses. Across the lobby a printed white sign hung in front of the bronze name plaque on the wall. CRISPUS ATTUCKS CENTER, the sign read. Some local dignitary, no doubt.

I turned as Mrs. Kelly sighed and looked up. "And what can we do for you today, young lady?" She smiled at me, her voice kindly and mama-soft, but I could tell from her eyes that she was remembering the strange new girl in town from New York who had come looking for a place to stay.

I smoothed the skirt of the shirtwaist dress I had worn to make a good impression. It was the only one I had, and I hunched my shoulders forward slightly, hoping Mrs. Kelly hadn't noticed how, like all cheap dresses, the bodice pulled too tightly across my breasts.

"I'm looking for work, Mrs. Kelly."

"And what kind of job are you looking for, dear?"

I leaned forward. "Well, really, I'd like to work as a medical receptionist."

"As a what, did you say?"

"A medical receptionist, ma'am. I've worked for two doctors before in New York."

Mrs. Kelly's arched eyebrows and averted eyes made me feel like I'd just belched without covering my mouth.

"Well, there was an opening for a ward maid up at Newton State Hospital last week, but I think that's already taken. And they usually like older women." She riffled absently through a file box on her desk and then turned back to me, her refined and motherly mouth slightly pursed. "You know, dear, there's not too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people, and especially not for Negro girls. Now if you could type. . ."

"No, ma'am, I can't," I said quickly. She closed her file with a snap.

"I tell you what, dear. Most of our unskilled people find some sort of work in the 'hardware' factories on the other side of town. Why don't you try some of the places over there? They don't register with us, but you can walk right in and ask if they're hiring. I'm sorry I can't help you." Mrs. Kelly pushed her chair back, stood, and gave a little tug to her fawn-grey tailored suit. "As soon as you learn how to type you come back and see us, now, you hear?"

I thanked her and left.

The following week, I got a job running a commercial X-ray machine.

Keystone Electronics was a relatively small factory as factories went in Stamford. It had a government contract to process and deliver quartz crystals used in radio and radar machinery. These small crystals were shipped from Brazil, cut at the plant and then ground, refined, and classified, according to how heavy an electrical charge they carried.

It was dirty work. The two floors of the plant rang with the whine of huge cutting and refining machines. Mud used by the

cutting crew was all over everything, cemented by the heavy oil that the diamond-grit blades were mounted in. Thirty-two mud saws were always running. The air was heavy and acrid with the sickly fumes of carbon tetrachloride used to clean the crystals. Entering the plant after 8:00 A.M. was like entering Dante's Inferno. It was offensive to every sense, too cold and too hot, gritty, noisy, ugly, sticky, stinking, and dangerous.

Men ran the cutting machines. Most local people would not work under such conditions, so the cutting crew was composed of Puerto Ricans who were recruited in New York City and who commuted every morning up to Stamford on company-paid tickets. Women read the crystals on a variety of X-ray machines, or washed the thousands and thousands of crystals processed daily in huge vats of carbon tetrachloride.

All the help in the plant, with the exception of the foreman and forewomen, were Black or Puerto Rican, and all the women were local, from the Stamford area.

Nobody mentioned that carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys. Nobody mentioned that the X-ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe even in those days. Keystone Electronics hired Black women and didn't fire them after three weeks. We even got to join the union.

I was hired to run one of the two X-ray machines that read the first cuttings of raw quartz. This enabled the cutters to align their machines in such a way as to maximize the charge from each rock. Two machines were therefore stationed directly outside of the cutting room, open to the noise and mud and grit flying from the stone-cutters. These were the least desirable jobs for women because of the working conditions, and because there was no overtime or piecework bonuses to be made. The other machine was run by a young woman named Virginia, whom everybody called Ginger. I met her the first morning in the luncheonette across the street from the plant where I stopped to get coffee and a roll to celebrate my first day on the new job.

We worked from 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. with ten-minute coffee breaks at 10:00 A.M. and 2:30 P.M., and a half-hour lunch break at noon.

The cutting "boys" made the first cut through the thick grease and mud of the machines, and then brought rough two-inch slabs to Ginger or me to be read for an electrical charge before they set the axis of their machines. The reading was obtained by a small X-ray beam passed through the crystal. There was

a hood to be flipped to cover your fingers and prevent the X ray from touching you, but the second that it took to flip it down was often the difference between being yelled at for being too slow and a smooth-working relationship with the cutters.

The rock was then sliced along the axis that had been marked with an oil pencil. We read it again, and it was sliced into slabs. Ginger and I read these slabs, tossing them, thick with grime and mud, into the barrels next to our machines. Those slabs were then taken away, washed in huge trays of carbon tetrachloride and cut into squares for the X-ray "reading room." This was a cleaner, quieter place to work, where the crystals were read one last time and stacked according to degree charge.

The women in the X-ray reading room made piecework bonuses over a large base expectation output, and these jobs were considered desirable. By cutting corners, saving time and not flipping the hood, it was possible to make a small weekly bonus.

After the first week, I wondered if I could stick it out. I thought that if I had to work under those conditions for the rest of my life I would slit my throat. Some mornings, I questioned how I could get through eight hours of stink and dirt and din and boredom. At 8:00 A.M. I would set my mind for two hours, saying to myself, you can last two hours, and then there will be a coffee break. I'd read for ten minutes, and then I'd set myself for another two hours, thinking, now all right, you can last two hours until lunch. After lunch, when the machines behind us kicked over, I felt a little refreshed after my sardine sandwich, but those two hours were the hardest of the day. It was a long time until the 2:30 break. But finally, I could tell myself, now you can make it for two more hours and then you'll be free.

Sometimes I stood waiting for the freight elevator in the early morning half-dark with the other workers, anxiously hoping it wouldn't stall and the time clock tick over into red. I tried to propel myself back out of the alley and toward home, because I knew I could not possibly go through another day like the day before. But the elevator came, and I got on with the others.

There were women who had worked at the plant for the entire ten years it had been open.

I would not get paid for three weeks, and my meager hoard of money was running dangerously low. (It was customary in factories in Stamford to hold back your first week's pay until you left your job, as a deposit, so to speak, on your space.) It

did not cover coffee breaks. Sometimes I would stay right at the machines and read the book I brought. Ginger would bop off to the relative cleanliness of the reading room to talk with the other women. One day she clued me in.

"You better get your bottom off that chair in your breaks, girl, before you get stuck to it. You can go crazy like that."

Those were my sentiments, exactly.

With different motivations in mind, my forewoman, Rose, also advised me on my off-work habits. Pulling me aside at lunchtime, and with an archly significant smile, she told me that she thought I was a bright girl and could go places except I went to the bathroom too much.

The cutters made piecework bonuses on their work, but Ginger and I did not. One day the men had hassled me all morning, saying I was not giving them their readings fast enough, and was holding up their cuttings. At 10:00 A.M. they trooped downstairs for coffee, leaving their machines running. Under the cover of the noise, I dropped my head over the nape of the X-ray machine and burst into tears. At that point, Ginger appeared, having forgotten her change purse under the hamper of her machine. She punched me gently on the arm.

"See that? What'd I tell ya? You can go nuts with all that reading. What do ya take in your coffee? I'll buy you a cup."

"No, thank you." I wiped my eyes, ruffled to be caught crying.

"No, thank you." Ginger giggled, mimicking my tone. "You sound just like a lady. C'mon, girl, *please* have some coffee. I can't handle these motherfuckers by myself for the rest of the day and they's out for blood this morning. Hurry up, what'll you have?"

"Very light with sugar." I smiled in gratitude.

"Atta girl," she said, with her usual jocular laugh, and rolled on down the narrow aisle separating our machines from the cutting-room din.

That's how Ginger and I became friends. That Thursday, she invited me to drive downtown with her mother and her to cash our checks.

It was my first paycheck from Keystone.

Since Thursday was payday, the shops on Atlantic Avenue were lively and open late. Everybody turned out to market and shop and cash checks and socialize downtown. People parked on the main streets and chatted with the passersby, no matter that tomorrow was a Friday workday to contend with.

Ginger told me she had spotted me in town the first Thursday I was there, before I even came to work at Keystone.

"That's right. Blue jeans and sneakers on Atlantic Avenue on Thursday night! I said to myself, who's this slick kitty from the city?"

I laughed at the idea that anyone could call me *slick*, and held my peace.

Ginger invited me home for dinner that Thursday night, and I realized, as I had a third helping of mashed potatoes, that I had almost forgotten what home-cooked food tasted like. I could see red-headed Cora, Ginger's youngish brash mother, looking at me half in amusement, half in annoyance. Ginger had four younger brothers at home, and Cora had a lot of hungry mouths to feed.

Sometimes Ginger would bring me a roll from home in the mornings; sometimes she would walk over to my house on Mill River Road in the evening after work and invite me out for a hamburger at the White Castle near the bridge, the only place in town open after 6:00, except on Thursdays.

Ginger had a battery-powered portable radio, a gift from her now-divorced husband, and before the weather turned cold, we would go out in the beautiful autumn evenings and sit by the embankment of the Rippowam River that faced my house, and listen to Fats Domino on WJRZ. His "Blueberry Hill" was tops on the hit parade through most of that fall, and Ginger had a special place in her heart for him anyway, since they looked so much alike. She even walked like Fats, with a swing-bopping step.

Ginger talked, and I listened. I soon discovered that if you keep your mouth shut, people are apt to believe you know everything, and they begin to feel freer and freer to tell you anything, anxious to show that they know something, too.

The old Ford swooped elegantly into the curb at the corner of Atlantic and Main, just the other side of the railroad tracks.

"End of the line, girls." CeCe, Ginger's brother, pulled loose the rope that held the front passenger door in place. Ginger and I clambered out into the autumn afternoon sun, bracing but not yet chill. Up and down Atlantic Avenue, schoolchildren were painting garish and ghostly murals in brilliant tempera and soap paint onto the windows and doors of the shops that had agreed to participate in the Halloween pageant and parade. Tomorrow was Halloween. The parade would wind through most of the

downtown area, Ginger explained, and include most of the town's children.

"One big treat. The stores figure it'll save on tricks. They do it like that every year. Keeps the windows from being scratched and marked up. Watercolor's easier to wash off than housepaint. They don't do it in the city, do they?"

We walked into Gerber's Department Store looking for stockings for Ginger, because Cora insisted Ginger wear nylons to church on Sunday.

"I've never seen Halloween celebrated like that before."

"Well," Ginger drawled, fingering the nylons on display. "That's small-town stuff. There's a lot you haven't seen goes on here different from the big city. Like fo'instance, these stockings ain't shit. Let's go see at Grants'." We crossed the avenue and walked back up the other side of Main Street. From the record shop, snatches of Rosemary Clooney's voice singing *"Come on a my house, my house a come on,"* mixed with the Saturday afternoon traffic.

A tow-headed boy on a bike rolled past us, sucking a bright green pickle. The sharp smell of knife-clean dill and garlic pulled a rip-cord in my head, dropping me into the middle of Rivington Street, between Orchard and Delancey.

Bright Sunday morning on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York's eager and determined bargain-hunters searching through the sidewalk bins for good buys and old friends. On the corner of Orchard Street, the Pickle Man presided over wooden vats of assorted sizes and shades of green and succulent submarines, each hue denoting a different stage or flavor of picklement. Half-submerged beneath the floating bits of garlic and peppercorns and twigs of dill, schools of pickles drifted like spiced fish waiting belly up for a bite. Nearby, sawhorse tables extended onto the sidewalk under a striped awning, holding flats of dried apricots, dark orange and mysteriously translucent. Beside them on the tables, long square wooden boxes half-open, waxed paper pulled back over the long slabs of halvah, ground sesame-paste candy. There were boxes of vanilla, smooth chocolate, and the crazy-quilt mixture of the two—my favorite, marble.

Over all, in the sharpening autumn air, the smells from Ratner's Dairy Restaurant drifting around the corner and over the rooftops, cheese blintzes and freshly baked onion rolls. They mingled with the heavier smells of the delicatessen next door, where all-beef garlic sausages and stuffed derma nestled alongside of the kasha knishes in the window-warmer. To the noses on the busy street, religious and dietary separations did not matter, and Sunday morning shopping on Rivington Street was an orchestra of olfactory delights.

I wondered where the boy had gotten a half-dill pickle in Stamford, Connecticut.

"Do they sell pickles in Grants', Ginger?"

"What a great idea!" Ginger grinned as she took my arm. "You like pickles, too? Big sour juicy ones, and the little—hey, watch it!" Ginger yanked back on my arm as I glanced up the avenue absently and stepped down into the street. "Speedy Gonzales, you get tickets for jay-walking around here, and New Yorkers get most of them. You don't have anything better to do with your money?" She grinned again as the light changed. "How'd you hear about the job at Keystone, anyway?"

"At the West Main Community Center."

"Good ole Crispus Attucks."

"What's that?" We turned the corner onto Main Street and headed for Grants'.

"The center, stupid. It was just renamed in honor of a Negro, so we shouldn't mind that they don't want us using the center downtown."

"Who's it named for?"

"You mean you don't know who he is?" Ginger screwed her face up, unbelieving. She cocked her head and wrinkled her brow at me.

"I haven't been around here that long, you know," I countered, defensively.

"Well I'll be dipped. Slick kitty from the city! What kind of a school was that you-all went to?" Her round, incredulous eyes almost disappearing into the folds of her wrinkled-up face. "I thought everybody knew about *him*. The first cat to die in the Revolutionary War, in Concord, Massachusetts. A Black man, name of Crispus Attucks. The shot heard 'round the world. Everybody knows that. They renamed our center after him." Ginger squeezed my arm again as we entered the store. "And they got you the job at Keystone. I'm glad they did something useful, after all."

Grants' didn't sell pickles except with sandwiches. But there was a sale on nylons, three pair for $1.25, or fifty cents a pair. The Korean War was already pushing prices back up, and this was a good buy. Ginger tried to decide if she wanted to spend that much.

"Come on, girl, get a pair with me," she urged. "They're real cheap, and your legs are going to get cold, even in pants."

"I hate nylons. I can't stand the way they feel on my legs." What I didn't say was that I couldn't stand the bleached-out color that the so-called neutral shade of all cheap nylons gave my legs. Ginger looked at me, pleadingly. And I relented. It wasn't her fault I was feeling so out of sorts all of a sudden, so disjointed. *Crispus Attucks*. Something had slipped out of place.

"Oh, buy them," I said. "You want them and you can always use them. 'Sides, your mother will never let them go to waste." I ran my fingers over the fine mesh of the display stockings hung from a T-rack on the counter. The dry slippery touch of nylon and silk filled me with distrust and suspicion. The effortlessness with which those materials passed through my fingers made me uneasy. They were illusive, confusing, not to be depended upon. The texture of wool and cotton with its resistance and unevenness, allowed, somehow, for more honesty, a more straightforward connection through touch.

Crispus Attucks.

Most of all, I hated the pungent, lifeless, and ungiving smell of nylon, its adamant refusal to become human or evocative in odor. Its harshness was never tampered by the smells of the wearer. No matter how long the clothing was worn, nor in what weather, a person dressed in nylon always approached my nose like a warrior approaching a tourney, clad in chain-mail.

I fingered the nylon, but my mind hammered elsewhere. *Crispus Attucks, Boston*?! Ginger *knew*. I prided myself on my collection of odds and ends of random information, more and less useful, gathered through avid curiosity and endless reading. I stored the garnered tidbits on the back-burner of consciousness, to be pulled forward on any appropriate occasion. I was used to being the one who knew some fact that everybody else in the conversation had not yet learned. It was not that I believed I knew EVERYTHING, just more than most people around me.

Ginger handed three pair of tissue-wrapped stockings to the woman behind the counter, and stood waiting for her change. I wondered where that half-dill pickle had come from.

Crispus Attucks. How was that possible? I had spent four years at Hunter High School, supposedly the best public high school in New York City, with the most academically advanced and intellectually accurate education available, for "preparing young women for college and career." I had been taught by some of the most highly considered historians in the country. Yet, I never once heard the name mentioned of the first man to fall in the american revolution, nor ever been told that he was a Negro. What did that mean about the history I had learned?

Ginger's voice was a cheerful, soothing murmur over my thoughts as she talked me part way up the hill back to my room on Mill River Road.

"What's wrong with you today? Cat got your tongue?"

Before long, I was totally dependent upon Ginger for human contact in Stamford, and her invitations to Sunday dinner represented the only real food I ever ate. She built up an incredible mythology about me and what my life had been in New York, and I did nothing to dissuade her. I told her that I had left home when I was seventeen and gotten my own apartment, and she thought that was very daring. She had gotten married when she was twenty, in order to get out of her mother's house. Now she was back, divorced, but with a certain amount of autonomy, purchased by her weekly contributions to the family income. Her mother worked as a bench-press operator at American Cyanimid, and her father was diabetic and blind. Her mother's lover lived with them, along with her four younger brothers.

For some time, I had known that Ginger was flirting with me, but had ignored it because I was at a loss as to how to handle the situation. As far as I knew, she was sweet and attractive and warm and lovable, and straight as a die.

Ginger, on the other hand, was convinced that I had everything taped. She saw me as a citified little baby butch—bright, knowledgeable, and secure enough to be a good listener *and* to make the first move. She was sure that I was an old and accomplished hand at the seduction of young divorcées. But her inviting glances and throaty chuckles were never enough to tempt me, nor were the delicious tidbits she would sneak out of Cora's kitchen and wrap up in handkerchiefs, persuading Uncle Charlie to drive her over to Mill River Road in the truck on his way to his night job. I remained determinedly oblivious to all this for as long as possible.

Ginger, perfumed and delectable, perched on my desk chair in the tiny second-floor room, watching incredulously as I sat crosslegged on my bed, wolfing down her mother's goodies.

"I don't believe you're only eighteen. Come on, how old are you, really?"

"I told you already." The chicken was crisp and delicious and totally preoccupying.

"When were you born?"

"Nineteen-thirty-four." Ginger calculated for a minute.

"I never met an eighteen-year-old like you before." Ginger spoke with the lofty advantage of her twenty-five years.

One weekend, Ginger stole a lobster claw for me. It was a make-up present that Charlie had bought for Cora's dinner, and when Cora found out she threatened to throw Ginger out of the house. Ginger decided then that this was all getting too costly. Long goodnight kisses on the back porch were definitely not enough; so she finally made her own move.

By the beginning of November, autumn was closing down. The trees were still incandescent colors, but the edge of winter was already in the air. The days were getting shorter and shorter, and this made me unhappy. There was very little time after work before sunset. If I went to the library, it was dark by the time I walked back to Mill River Road. Keystone was a daily trial that did not seem to get better nor easier, despite Ginger's warm-hearted attempts to cheer me up during our frightful days.

One Thursday after work, Ginger borrowed her brother's old beat-up Ford and we went downtown to cash our checks alone, without Cora, or Charlie, or any of the boys. It was still light when we were through, and I could tell Ginger had something on her mind. We drove around town for a while.

"What's up?" I asked.

"C'mon," Ginger said. "Let's go up on the hill."

Ginger was not much of a nature lover, but she had taken me to see her favorite spot, a wooded hill on the west edge of town where, hidden from view by the overgrown bushes and trees, we could sit on two old tree stumps left from long ago, smoking and listening to Fats Domino and watching the sun go down.

> I found ma' thrill-l-l-l-lll
> On Blueberreeeeee Hill—llll.

We left the car and climbed to the top of the hill. The air was chill as we sat on the stumps to catch our breaths.

"Cold?"

"No," I said, pulling my ragged suede jacket, inherited from CeCe, around me.

"You ought to get a warm coat or something, winters around here ain't like in New York."

"I've got a coat, I just don't like to wear it, that's all."

Ginger cut her eyes at me. "Yeah, I know. Who you think you kidding? If it's money, I can lend you some till Christmas." She knew about the two-hundred-dollar phone bill The Branded had run up that summer at Spring Street, which I was now paying off.

"Hey, thanks, but I don't need a coat."

Ginger was walking back and forth now, puffing nervously on her Lucky Strike. I sat looking up at her. What was going on, and what was Ginger wanting me to say? I didn't want a coat, because I didn't mind the cold.

"You really think you're slick, huh?" Ginger turned to face me, regarding me with a slight smile and narrowed eyes, head up and to one side like a pigeon. Her voice was high and nervous.

"You always say that, Ginger, and I keep telling you it's not true. What are you talking about?"

"Slick kitty from the city. Well, kiddo, you don't have to keep your mouth shut around me, because I know all about you and your friends."

What was it that Ginger had discovered or invented in her own mind about me that I would now have to pretend to fulfill? Like the time I promptly downed two straight vodkas to fulfill her image of me as a hard-drinking New York Village girl.

"About me and my friends?" I was starting to get the drift of her conversation, and beginning to get acutely uncomfortable. Ginger butted her cigarette, took a deep breath, and moved a few steps closer.

"Look, it's no big thing." She took a deep breath. "Are you gay or aren't you?" She took another deep breath.

I smiled up at her and said nothing. I certainly couldn't say *I don't know*. Actually, I was at a loss as to what to say. I could not bring myself to deny what I had just this past summer decided to embrace; besides, to say no would be to admit being one of the squares. Yet, to say yes might commit me to proving it, like with the vodka. And Ginger was a woman of the world, not one of my high school girl friends with whom kissing and cuddling and fantasizing sufficed. And I had never made love to a woman before. Ginger, of course, had made up her mind that *I* was a woman of the world and knew "everything," having made love to all the women about whom I talked with such intensity.

I stood up, feeling the need to have our eyes on a level.

"C'mon, now, you can't just not say *anything*, girl. Are you or aren't you?" Ginger's voice was pleading as well as impatient.

She was right. I couldn't just not answer. I opened my mouth, not knowing what was going to come out.

"Yes," I said. Maybe it would all stop there.

Ginger's brown face broke into her wonderful full-cheeked half-smile, half-grin. Instinctively, I grinned back. And joining hands there on the top of the hill, with the sound of the car radio drifting upward through the open door below, we stood grinning at each other while the sun went down.

Ginger.

Snapping little dark eyes, skin the color of well-buttered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf. Ginger was gorgeously fat, with an open knowledge about her body's movement that was delicate and precise. Her breasts were high and ample. She had pads of firm fat upon her thighs, and round dimpled knees. Her swift, tapered hands and little feet were also deeply dimpled. Her high putchy cheeks and great mischievous smile was framed by wide bangs and a short pageboy that was sometimes straightened, sometimes left to wave tightly over her ears.

Whenever Ginger went to the beauty parlor she came back feather-bobbed and adorable, but much less real. Shortly after we met at the plant, she began to resist Cora's nagging, and stopped going to the hairdresser's altogether.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" Ginger turned back to me; our hands, still joined, fell apart.

"It's getting late," I answered. I was hungry.

Ginger's brow puckered and she sucked her teeth into the fading light. "Are you for real? What'd ya mean, it's getting late? Is that all you can think about?"

Oh. Obviously that was not the right thing to say. What am I supposed to do now?

Ginger's round face was a hand's span away from my own. She spoke softly, with her usual cockiness. Her close voice and the smell of her face powder made me at once both uneasy and excited.

"Why don't you kiss me? I don't bite."

Her words were bold, but beneath them I could feel fear belying their self-assurance.

Oh, hell, I thought. What am I doing here, anyway? I should have known it wasn't going to stop there—I knew it, I knew it and suppose she wants me to take her to. . . oh shit! What am I going to do now?

Afraid to lose some face I never had, obediently, I bent forward slightly. I started to kiss Ginger's cupid's-bow mouth, and her soft lips parted. My heart went snatch-grab. Down the hill, the car radio was just finishing the news. I felt Ginger's quick breath upon my face, expectant and slightly tinged with cough drops and cigarettes and coffee. It was warm and exciting in the chilly night air and I kissed her again thinking, this isn't a bad idea at all. . .

When Ginger and I got back to the house, Charlie had left for work with his Railroad Express supply truck. Cora and the boys had already eaten dinner, and the two younger ones were ready for bed. As we came in the front door, Cora was just coming downstairs with her husband's dinner tray. Ginger had explained to me that her father never left his room any more except to go to the bathroom.

Cora and CeCe had just come back from marketing, and Cora was tired. Her henna-red curly hair was caught behind each ear with a baby-blue ribbon, and untidy bangs almost covered her heavily made-up eyes.

"We ate Chinese tonight to give me a break. And we didn't leave any for you girls because I didn't know if you were going to come home. Ginger, don't forget to leave your house-money on the table."

There was only a hint of triumphant reproach in Cora's voice. Chinese food was a rare treat.

I usually spent the night at Ginger's house on the Thursdays we got paid. While Ginger put away the dishes her brothers had washed, and made the boys' lunches for school, I went upstairs to take a quick bath. The morning started early, at 5:00 A.M., when Cora rose to take care of her husband before she went to her job.

"And don't leave that water running in the tub the way you like to, neither!" Cora called out to me from the room she and Charlie shared as I passed by. "You're not in New York now and water costs money!"

Ginger's room was downstairs at the front of the house with its own entrance. It was rather secluded from the rest of the house, once everyone had retired.

By the time Ginger finished taking her shower, I was already in bed. I lay with my eyes closed, wondering if I could pretend to be asleep, and if not, what would be the sophisticated and dykely thing to do.

Ginger took much longer than usual preparing herself for bed. She sat at her little desk-table, creaming her legs with Jer-

gen's lotion and braiding her hair, humming snatches of songs under her breath as she buffed her nails.

"If I came home tonight, would you still be my. . ."

"Come on a my house, my house a come on, come on. . ."

"I saw the harbor lights, they only told me we were. . ."

In between anxieties about my anticipated performance, I began to feel the rising excitement of the hill return. It challenged the knot of terror I felt at the thought of Ginger's unknown expectations, at the thought of sexual confrontation, at the thought of being tried and found wanting. I smelled the little breezes of Cashmere Bouquet powder and Camay soap as Ginger moved her arm back and forth, buffing away. What was taking her so long?

It didn't occur to me that Ginger, despite her show of coolness and bravado, was as nervous as I. After all, this wasn't just playing around with some hometown kid at the plant. This was actually going to bed with a real live New York City Greenwich Village Bulldagger.

"Aren't you coming to bed," I asked, finally, a little surprised at the urgency of my voice.

"Well, I thought you'd never ask." With a relieved chuckle, Ginger shed her robe, snapped off the dresser lamp, and bounced into bed beside me.

Until the very moment that our naked bodies touched in that old brass bed that creaked in the insulated sunporch on Walker Road, I had no idea what I was doing there, nor what I wanted to do there. I had no idea what making love to another woman meant. I only knew, dimly, it was something I wanted to happen, and something that was different from anything I had ever done before.

I reached out and put an arm around Ginger, and through the scents of powder and soap and hand cream I could smell the rising flush of her own spicy heat. I took her into my arms, and she became precious beyond compare. I kissed her on her mouth, this time with no thought at all. My mouth moved to the little hollow beneath her ear.

Ginger's breath warmed my neck and started to quicken. My hands moved down over her round body, silky and fragrant,

waiting. Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire.

Our bodies found the movements we needed to fit each other. Ginger's flesh was sweet and moist and firm as a winter pear. I felt her and tasted her deeply, my hands and my mouth and my whole body moved against her. Her flesh opened to me like a peony and the unfolding depths of her pleasure brought me back to her body over and over again throughout the night. The tender nook between her legs, moist and veiled with thick crispy dark hair.

I dove beneath her wetness, her fragrance, the silky insistence of her body's rhythms illuminating my own hungers. We rode each other's need. Her body answered the quest of my fingers my tongue my desire to know a woman, again and again, until she arced like a rainbow, and shaken, I slid back through our heat, coming to rest upon her thighs. I surfaced dizzy and blessed with her rich myrrh-taste in my mouth, in my throat, smeared over my face, and the loosening grip of her hands in my hair and the wordless sounds of her satisfaction lulling me like a song.

Once, as she cradled my head between her breasts, Ginger whispered, "I could tell you knew how," and the pleasure and satisfaction in her voice started my tides flowing again and I moved down against her once more, my body upon hers, ringing like a bell.

I never questioned where my knowledge of her body and her need came from. Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I only wondered, silently, how I had not always known that it would be so.

Ginger moved in love like she laughed, openly and easily, and I moved with her, against her, within her, an ocean of brown warmth. Her sounds of delight and the deep shudders of relief that rolled through her body in the wake of my stroking fingers filled me with delight and a hunger for more of her. The sweetness of her body meeting and filling my mouth, my hands, wherever I touched, felt right and completing, as if I had been born to make love to this woman, and was remembering her body rather than learning it deeply for the first time.

In wonder, but without surprise, I lay finally quiet with my arms around Ginger. So this was what I had been so afraid of not doing properly. How ridiculous and far away those fears seemed now, as if loving were some task outside of myself,

rather than simply reaching out and letting my own desire guide me. It was all so simple. I felt so good I smiled into the darkness. Ginger cuddled closer.

"We better get some sleep," she muttered. "Keystone tomorrow." And drifted off into slumber.

There was an hour or so before the alarm went off and I lay awake, trying to fit everything together, trying to reassure myself that I was in control and did not need to be afraid. And what, I wondered, was my relationship now to this delicious woman who lay asleep on my arm? Ginger by night now seemed so different from the Ginger I knew in the day. Had some beautiful and mythic creature created by my own need suddenly taken the place of my jovial and matter-of-fact buddy?

Once earlier, Ginger had reached out to touch the wet warmth of my own body and I had turned her hand aside without thinking, without knowing why. Yet I knew that I was still hungry for her cries of joy and the soaring wonder of her body moving beneath mine, guided by a power that flowed through me from that charged core pressed against her.

Ginger was my friend, the only friend I had made in this strange town, and I loved her, but with caution. We had slept together. Did that mean we were lovers?

A few months after Gennie's death I walked down Broadway late one Saturday afternoon. I had just had another argument with my mother, and I was going to the A&P to get milk. I dawdled along the avenue looking into shop windows, not wanting to return to the tensions and misunderstandings waiting for me at home.

I paused in front of Stolz's Jewelers, admiring their new display. In particular, I marked a pair of hanging earrings of black opals, set into worked silver. "Gennie will love those," I thought, "I must remember to tell her. . ." and then it hit me again that Gennie was dead, and that meant that she would never be there ever again. It meant that I could not ever tell her anything more. It meant that whether I loved her or was angry at her or wanted her to see a new pair of earrings, none of that mattered or would ever matter to her again. I could share nothing at all with her any more because she was gone.

And even after all the past weeks of secret mourning, Gennie's death became real to me in a different way.

I turned away from the jewelry store window. And right then and there in the middle of Broadway and 151st Street on a Saturday afternoon at the beginning of the summer of my sixteenth year, I decided that I would never love anybody else again for the rest of my life. Gennie had been the first person in my life I was conscious of loving. And she had died. Loving hurt too much. My mother had turned into a demon intent on destroying me. You loved people and you came to depend on their being there. But people died or changed or went away and it hurt too much. The only way to avoid that pain was not to love anyone, *and not to let* anyone *get too close or too important. The secret to not being hurt like this again, I decided, was never depending on anyone, never needing, never loving.*

It is the last dream of children, to be forever untouched.

I heard the oil-burner in the basement at Walker Road kick over at 4:30 A.M. and Ginger shifted and sighed softly in her sleep. I started to kiss her awake and stopped, as the smells of our loving and the moist top of her sleepy head engulfed me in a sudden wave of tenderness so strong that I pulled back.

"You better watch out," I said to myself soundlessly in the darkness. The alarm went off, and Ginger and I, galvanized by the hectic morning routine of the house, grabbed our robes and raced upstairs to the bathroom.

One more minute and we would have to stand in line with the boys. There was just time for a hurried hug and a kiss over the washbowl, as Ginger brushed out the tangles in her hair that had become unbraided during the night.

Charlie dropped us off on the other side of the railroad tracks, a block away from the plant. Ginger stopped in and bought buttered rolls and coffee for us in the luncheonette across the street from Keystone.

"We gonna need something to keep us awake today after last night," she grunted, then grinned, nudging me under the cover of pushing through the mob at the entrance to the plant building. We winked at each other as we waited in the crowd for the freight elevator to take us up into hell.

All day, I watched Ginger carefully for a lead as to how we were going to treat the extraordinary events of the night before. A piece of me was invested in her image of me as the gay young blade, the seasoned and accomplished lover from the big city.

(Later, Ginger told me that it was my questioning why she always had to make school lunch for the boys every morning before her work that made Cora conclude one day, "She's got to be a bulldagger!")

I enjoyed paying court to Ginger, and being treated, in private, like a swain. It gave me a sense of power and privilege that was heady, if illusory, since I knew on another level it was all play-acting. On one level it was play-acting for Ginger, too, because she would not allow herself to regard a relationship between two women as anything other than a lark. She could not consider it important, even as she sought it and cherished it.

At the same time, on a true and deeper level, Ginger and I met as two young Black women in need of each other's warmth and blood-assurance, able to share the passions within our bodies, and no amount of pretending that we were pretending could change that. Yet, we were both very much invested in the denial of our importance to each other. For different reasons, we both needed to pretend we didn't care.

Each of us was very busy being cool, ignoring and misnaming the passionate intensity with which we came together wherever possible, usually on that old brass bed in the insulated sunporch, that drafty haven on Walker Road which we turned tropical with the heat of our young bodies' wildness.

As long as I convinced myself that I wasn't really involved emotionally with Ginger, I could delight in this new experience. Her favorite expression was, "Be cool, girl," and I congratulated myself on how cool I *was*. It didn't bother me, I maintained, that Ginger went out on dates which Cora arranged.

With her typical aplomb, Cora welcomed my increased presence around the house with the rough familiarity and brow-beating humor due another one of her daughters. If she recognized the sounds emanating from the sunporch on the nights I slept over, or our haggard eyes the next day, she ignored them. But she made it very clear that she expected Ginger to get married again.

"Friends are nice, but marriage is marriage," she said to me one night as she helped me make a skirt on her machine, and I wondered why Ginger had asked me over and then gone to the movies with a friend of Cora's from American Cyanimid. "And when she gets home don't be thumping that bed all night, neither, because it's late already and you girls have work tomorrow."

But I thought of little else at work now other than the night pleasures of Ginger's body, and how I could arrange to get her over to Mill River Road for an hour or so after work. It was a little more private than Walker Road, except that my old bed creaked so badly that we always had to put the mattress on the floor.

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The week before Christmas I fell off my stool at work, hitting my head against the brick half-wall that separated us from the cutters, and getting a mild concussion. I was in the hospital when Ginger brought me a telegram from my sister saying that my father had had another severe stroke. It was Christmas Eve. I signed myself out of the hospital and caught a train for New York City.

I had not seen any member of my family for a year and a half.

The next few weeks were a haze of headache, and other people's emotions swirling around me. I went back to work after Christmas, commuting to and from New York City to visit my father in the hospital. Sometimes Ginger came with me after work.

The fog was heavy and chilling over the streets of Stamford the night my father died. No cars moved. I walked two miles to the station to catch the 9:30 train to New York. Ginger walked with me as far as Crispus Attucks. I was terrified I was going to trip on a curbstone, the fog was so thick. The streetlights glowed faintly like distant moons. The streets were empty and eerily quiet, as if the whole world had died, not only my father in that dim oxygenated room on the terminal ward of the Medical Center in New York.

During the week after my father's death, I stayed at my mother's house. Most of the time she was sedated against her frenzied and awful grief, and Helen and I handled the flow of people passing through the house. Phyllis was married and expecting her second child in two weeks, and could only attend the funeral. She lent me a dark grey coat to wear to the church.

During the week, I fought hard to remind myself that I was now a stranger in this house. But it did give me a new perspective on my mother. There had only been one human being whom she had ever entertained upon the earth as her equal; this was my father, and now he was dead. I saw the desolate loneliness that this exclusiveness had won her, and against which she only occasionally closed her hawk-grey eyes. But she looked through me and my sisters as if we were glass.

I saw my mother's pain, and her blindness, and her strength, and for the first time I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her.

My sister Helen withdrew into her flippant shell for protection, and endlessly played a record which she had just gotten on the phonograph in the parlor. Day and night, over and over, for seven days:

I get the blues when we dance
I get the blues in advance
For I know you'll be gone
and I'll be here all alone
So I get the blues in advance.

Some get the blues from a song
Some when love has come and gone
You don't know how I cry
When you tell me goodbye. . .

Returning to Stamford after the funeral, I realized that I needed to be even further away from New York. I decided to make as much money as I could and go to Mexico as soon as possible.

To that end and because Cora invited me, I gave up my room on Mill River Road with its creaky bed, and moved my belongings into the sunporch on Walker Road. The ten dollars a week room and board was less than what I was spending for both before. Cora said the extra cash was a help to her already strained budget, and besides, I was eating her out of house and home anyway.

Ginger told me that a new girl, Ada, had been hired to run my machine at the plant. When I returned, since I was a member of the union, I was given another job. I was moved on to an X-ray machine in the reading room, where the finished electronic crystals were fine-read according to strength of charge, then racked for packing.

Although this job paid the same $1.10 an hour, all the jobs in the RR were preferable and sought after. The room was in the middle of the floor, enclosed by glass panels, and the fierce sensory assaults of the rest of the plant were somewhat muted.

We sat at our machines in a circle, facing outward, our backs to each other to discourage talking. There were six commercial X-ray machines and a desk in the middle for Rose, our forewoman. We were never long away from her watchful eye.

But working in the RR meant there was a chance to make piecework bonus.

Each reader obtained her crystals from the washing cage in boxes of two hundred. Taking them back to our machines, we inserted the tiny, ¾-inch squares of wafer-thin rock one by one into the throat of the X-ray machine, twirled the dial until the needle jumped to its highest point, powered by the tiny X-ray

beam flashed across the crystal, snatched it off the mount, racked it in the proper slot, and then shot another crystal into the machine. With concentration and dexterity, the average amount one could read in a day was one thousand crystals.

By not taking the time to flip down the protective shield that kept the X ray from hitting our fingers, we could increase that number to about eleven hundred. Any crystals over twelve hundred read in one day were paid for as piecework, at the rate of $2.50 a hundred. Some of the women who had been at Keystone for years had perfected the motions and moved so swiftly that they were able to make from five to ten dollars some weeks in bonus. For most of them, the tips of their fingers were permanently darkened from exposure to X ray. Before I finally left Keystone Electronics, there were dark marks on my fingers also, that only gradually faded.

After each crystal was read, it was flipped out of the machine and rapidly slipped into one of five slots in a rack that sat to the side of each of our machines. From these racks, periodically, a runner from the packing department would collect the crystals of whatever category was needed for the packers. Since it was not possible to keep track of the crystals after they were read, a tally was kept at the washing cage of how many boxes of crystals were taken daily by each reader. It was upon this count that our bonuses were based.

Throughout the day, Rose came by each machine regularly and spot-checked crystals from each of our racks, checking to make sure that no one racked unread crystals, or rushed through crystals with incorrect readings in order to raise our counts and make bonus.

The first two weeks I worked in the RR I talked to no one, raced my readings every day, never flipped the shield, and made three dollars in bonus. I decided I would have to reassess the situation. Ginger and I talked about it one night.

"You'd better slow down a little at work. The word's going out you're an eager beaver, brown-nosing Rose."

I was offended. "I'm not ass-kissing, I'm trying to make some money. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Don't you know those rates are set high like that so nobody can beat them? If you break your ass to read so many, you're going to show up the other girls, and before you know it they're going to raise the day rate again, figuring if you can do it so can everybody. And that just makes everybody look bad. They're

never going to let you make any money in that place. All the books you read and you don't know that yet?" Ginger rolled over and tapped the book I was reading on my pillow.

But I was determined. I knew I could not take Keystone Electronics for much longer, and I knew I needed some money put aside before I left. Where would I go when I got back to New York? Where would I live until I got a job? And how long would I have to look for work? And on the horizon like a dim star, was my hope of going to Mexico. I had to make some money.

Ginger and Ada, her new workmate, went to the movies more and more often now that I was living at the Thurmans', and I was determined not to care. But my sixth sense told me I had to get away, and soon.

My daily rate of crystals began to increase steadily. Rose came by more and more often to my machine, but could find nothing wrong with my crystals, nor their slotting. She even went so far as to ask me to turn out my jeans pockets one evening. I was outraged, but complied. By the next payday, I had made an additional thirty dollars in bonus money for two weeks. That was almost as much as my weekly wages. It became the talk of the RR women.

"How does she manage to do all those?"

"Just wait and see. She's going to burn her fingers off before she's through." The women lowered their voices as I came back from the cage with a fresh box of crystals. But Ada, who had stopped by for a brief chat, did not care whether or not I heard her parting words.

"I don't know what she's doing with them crystals, but I bet she's not reading them!"

She was right. I could not even tell Ginger how I was managing to pull down such high bonuses, although she often asked. The truth was, I would slip crystals into my socks every time I went to the bathroom. Once inside the toilet stall, I chewed them up with my strong teeth and flushed the little shards of rock down the commode. I could take care of between fifty and a hundred crystals a day in that manner, taking a handful from each box I signed out.

I knew Ginger was hurt by my silence, and by what she saw as my disloyalty to the other RR women. I was angered by the feeling of persistent guilt that her words aroused in me, but I could say nothing. I could also say nothing about the increasing time she and Ada spent together.

I longed for a chance to be alone, to enjoy the privacy that was not possible once I started to share the sunporch on Walker Road. I hated the amount of time I spent thinking about Ginger and Ada. I began to feel more and more desperate to get out of Stamford, and my bonuses went up.

One day in the beginning of March, I saw Rose talking to Bernie, the plant's efficiency expert, and looking after me speculatively as I came out of the john. I knew my days at Keystone were numbered. That week I made forty dollars in bonuses.

On Friday, Rose told me that the plant was cutting back readers and they were going to have to let me go. Since I was a member of the union, they gave me two weeks severance pay, so I would leave immediately and not make a fuss. Even though it was what I wanted to happen, I still cried a little on the way home. "Nobody likes to be fired," Ginger said and held my hand.

Cora was sorry to lose the extra income. Ginger said she'd miss me, but I could tell she was also secretly relieved, as she confided to me months later. I made plans to return to New York City.

20

I don't know why I was seized with such a desire to go to Mexico. Ever since I could remember Mexico had been the accessible land of color and fantasy and delight, full of sun, music and song. And from civics and geography in grade school, I knew it was attached to where I lived, and that intrigued me. That meant, if need be, I could always walk there.

I was happy to learn that Jean's boyfriend, Alf, who was in Mexico painting, would soon be coming home.

When I returned to New York after my father's death, going to Mexico became my chief goal. I saw very little of my mother. Where I would have expected grief for my father, there was only numbness. I stayed with Jean and her friends in a West Side apartment while I hunted for work. I eventually went to work as a clinic clerk in a Health Center, and moved in to share an apartment with Rhea Held, a progressive white woman who was a friend of Jean and Alf's.

Epilogue

Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting.

A year later, I finished library school. The first summer of a new decade was waning as I walked away from Seventh Street for the last time, leaving that door unlocked for whatever person came after me who needed shelter. There were four half-finished poems scribbled on the bathroom wall between the toilet and the bathtub, others in the window jambs and the floorboards under the flowered linoleum, mixed up with the ghosts of rich food smells.

The casing of this place had been my home for seven years, the amount of time it takes for the human body to completely renew itself, cell by living cell. And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women. *Zami.*

Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.

We carry our traditions with us. Buying boxes of Red Cross Salt and a fresh corn straw broom for my new apartment in Westchester: new job, new house, new living the old in a new way. Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance.

Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.

Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.

Once *home* was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home.

There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood.