

ing blank and bemused and used up. Then I drift over to the schoolyard, and there's this mother wondering if I'm doing anything halfway useful yet. Am I working? Have I found a job? No, I tell her.

I'm still just writing.

JOAN DIDION



Why I Write

This essay is adapted from a Regents' Lecture delivered at the University of California at Berkeley.

Of course I stole the title for this talk, from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I

I

I

In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions—with the whole manner of intimating

rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating—but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

I stole the title not only because the words sounded right but because they seemed to sum up, in a no-nonsense way, all I have to tell you. Like many writers I have only this one "subject," this one "area": the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. I may have other interests: I am "interested," for example, in marine biology, but I don't flatter myself that you would come out to hear me talk about it. I am not a scholar. I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word "intellectual" I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts. During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.

In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered, by everyone I knew then and for that matter have known since, the peripheral. I would try to contemplate the Hegelian dialectic and would find myself concentrating instead on a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor. I would try to read linguistic theory and would find myself wondering instead if the lights were on in the bevatron up the hill. When I say that I was wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron you might immediately suspect, if you deal in ideas at all, that I was registering the bevatron as a political symbol, thinking in shorthand about the military-industrial complex and its role in the university community, but you would be wrong. I was

only wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron, and how they looked. A physical fact.

I had trouble graduating from Berkeley, not because of this inability to deal with ideas—I was majoring in English, and I could locate the house-and-garden imagery in *The Portrait of a Lady* as well as the next person, "imagery" being by definition the kind of specific that got my attention—but simply because I had neglected to take a course in Milton. For reasons which now sound baroque I needed a degree by the end of that summer, and the English department finally agreed, if I would come down from Sacramento every Friday and talk about the cosmology of *Paradise Lost*, to certify me proficient in Milton. I did this. Some Fridays I took the Greyhound bus, other Fridays I caught the Southern Pacific's City of San Francisco on the last leg of its transcontinental trip. I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the earth at the center of his universe in *Paradise Lost*, the central question of at least one century and a topic about which I wrote 10,000 words that summer, but I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits into a grayed and obscurely sinister light. In short my attention was always on the periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch, on the butter, and the Greyhound bus. During those years I was traveling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers: I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think. All I knew then was what I couldn't do. All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.

Which was a writer.

By which I mean not a "good" writer or a "bad" writer but

simply a writer, a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper. Had my credentials been in order I would never have become a writer. Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. Why did the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956? Why have the night lights in the beva-tron burned in my mind for twenty years? *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?*

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges. There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions. People on hallucinogens describe the same perception of objects. I'm not a schizophrenic, nor do I take hallucinogens, but certain images do shimmer for me. Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.

Just as I meant "shimmer" literally I mean "grammar" literally. Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the struc-

ture of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. *Nota bene:*

It tells you.

You don't tell it.

Let me show you what I mean by pictures in the mind. I began *Play It as It Lays* just as I have begun each of my novels, with no notion of "character" or "plot" or even "incident." I had only two pictures in my mind, more about which later, and a technical intention, which was to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all. About the pictures: the first was of white space. Empty space. This was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book—a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a "white" book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams—and yet this picture told me no "story," suggested no situation. The second picture did. This second picture was of something actually witnessed. A young woman with long hair and a short white halter dress walks through the casino at the Riviera in Las Vegas at one in the morning. She crosses the casino alone and picks up a house telephone. I watch her because I have heard

her paged, and recognize her name: she is a minor actress I see around Los Angeles from time to time, in places like Jax and once in a gynecologist's office in the Beverly Hills Clinic, but have never met. I know nothing about her. Who is paging her? Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this? It was precisely this moment in Las Vegas that made *Play It as It Lays* begin to tell itself to me, but the moment appears in the novel only obliquely, in a chapter which begins:

"Maria made a list of things she would never do. She would never: walk through the Sands or Caesar's alone after midnight. She would never: ball at a party, do S-M unless she wanted to, borrow furs from Abe Lipsey, deal. She would never: carry a Yorkshire in Beverly Hills."

That is the beginning of the chapter and that is also the end of the chapter, which may suggest what I meant by "white space."

I recall having a number of pictures in my mind when I began the novel I just finished, *A Book of Common Prayer*. As a matter of fact one of these pictures was of that bevatron I mentioned, although I would be hard put to tell you a story in which nuclear energy figures. Another was a newspaper photograph or a hijacked 707 burning on the desert in the Middle East. Another was the night view from a room in which I once spent a week with paratyphoid, a hotel room on the Colombian coast. My husband and I seemed to be on the Colombian coast representing the United States of America at a film festival (I recall invoking the name "Jack Valenti" a lot, as if its reiteration could make me well), and it was a bad place to have fever, not only because my indisposition offended our hosts but because every night in this hotel the generator failed. The lights went out. The elevator stopped. My husband would go to the event of the evening and make excuses for me and I

would stay alone in this hotel room, in the dark. I remember standing at the window trying to call Bogotá (the telephone seemed to work on the same principle as the generator) and watching the night wind come up and wondering what I was doing eleven degrees off the equator with a fever of 103. The view from that window definitely figures in *A Book of Common Prayer*, as does the burning 707, and yet none of these pictures told me the story I needed.

The picture that did, the picture that shimmered and made these other images coalesce, was the Panama airport at 6 A.M. I was in this airport only once, on a plane to Bogotá that stopped for an hour to refuel, but the way it looked that morning remained superimposed on everything I saw until the day I finished *A Book of Common Prayer*. I lived in that airport for several years. I can still feel the hot air when I step off the plane, can see the heat already rising off the tarmac at 6 A.M. I can feel my skirt damp and wrinkled on my legs. I can feel the asphalt stick to my sandals. I remember the big tail of a Pan American plane floating motionless down at the end of the tarmac. I remember the sound of a slot machine in the waiting room. I could tell you that I remember a particular woman in the airport, an American woman, a *norteamericana*, a thin *norteamericana* about forty who wore a big square emerald in lieu of a wedding ring, but there was no such woman there.

I put this woman in the airport later. I made this woman up, just as I later made up a country to put the airport in, and a family to run the country. This woman in the airport is neither catching a plane nor meeting one. She is ordering tea in the airport coffee shop. In fact she is not simply "ordering" tea but insisting that the water be boiled, in front of her, for twenty minutes. Why is this woman in this airport? Why is she going nowhere, where has she been? Where did she get

that big emerald? What derangement, or disassociation, makes her believe that her will to see the water boiled can possibly prevail?

"She had been going to one airport or another for four months, one could see it, looking at the visas on her passport. All those airports where Charlotte Douglas's passport had been stamped would have looked alike. Sometimes the sign on the tower would say "Bienvenidos" and sometimes the sign on the tower would say "Bienvenue," some places were wet and hot and others dry and hot, but at each of these airports the pastel concrete walls would rust and stain and the swamp off the runway would be littered with the fuselages of cannibalized Fairchild F-227's and the water would need boiling.

"I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.

"I knew about airports."

These lines appear about halfway through *A Book of Common Prayer*, but I wrote them during the second week I worked on the book, long before I had any idea where Charlotte Douglas had been or why she went to airports. Until I wrote these lines I had no character called Victor" in mind: the necessity for mentioning a name, and the name "Victor," occurred to me as I wrote the sentence. *I knew why Charlotte went to the airport* sounded incomplete. *I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not* carried a little more narrative drive. Most important of all, until I wrote these lines I did not know who "I" was, who was telling the story. I had intended until that that the "I" be no more than the voice of the author, a nineteenth-century omniscient narrator. But there it was:

"I knew why Charlotte went to the airport even if Victor did not.

"I knew about airports."

This "I" was the voice of no author in my house. This "I" was someone who not only knew why Charlotte went to the airport but also knew someone called "Victor." Who was Victor? Who was this narrator? Why was this narrator telling me this story? Let me tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write a novel.

HONOR MOORE



My Grandmother
Who Painted

I can see from where I write, on the back porch of an old house, the dark form of a Japanese beetle burrowing, devouring to the heart of a pink-edged white rose. The urge to rescue the bloom taunts my concentration like radio static. Get up, pursue him with digging fingers to the center where the sweet is, pull him from the flower, plunge him into fatal kerosene. The garden is just two feet outside the porch. The rose is the largest this summer, "Garden Party," a cream-colored mauve-edged dress billowing against green. The beetle will eat all the petals, turn the rose to skeletal lace. If I get up, I will putter in the garden all afternoon, and I must work, burrow toward this piece of writing still to move my hand.

I work sitting on the large, wood-framed loggia couch

which belonged to Margaret, my mother's mother, a woman who stopped painting and sculpting after thirty years because, as she put it, "It got too intense." She said it that way at eighty-two, having survived five strokes, manic-depression, divorce, years in and out of sanitariums. "It got too intense," she answers, gravelly rasp rendered nearly incomprehensible by partial paralysis. "I turned to horticulture."

I am thirty-three. I have been a poet ten years. At twenty-two, I turned to psychoanalysis because, as I wrote in a journal: "I'm always afraid I'll turn into a manic-depressive like my grandmother." Winters I live and write in New York, summers in an eccentric white clapboard house in Connecticut, site of my nine rosebushes and small salad garden. My grandmother Margaret was born in 1892 in Boston. Her father was a Sargent, her mother a Hunnewell, daughter of Hollis Horatio Hunnewell, who made a fortune in railroads and copper. Margaret always had gardeners to keep Japanese beetles from eating her pink-edged roses, to keep the lavender and white blossoms of her tree wisteria elegantly weeping, to plant and tend the copper beeches which still stand on the grounds of what was her estate in Prides Crossing, Massachusetts. The resources that supported her gardeners, maids, cook, and chauffeur have thinned in the intervening generation: I can afford the young man who charges six dollars an hour to mow my small lawn, but I do the gardening. Last winter, after losing all but four of thirty lilies because I didn't take time to mulch them against the heaves of winter frost, I decided to limit my flowers to roses, for which I have a passion, and wild daylilies, which require no maintenance. I would not call myself a horticulturalist.

"It got too intense." This is the first and only time in my relationship with Margaret, a friendship that begins and

grows in the last seven years of her life, long after she has become bedridden, that we speak of her art. "Too intense." The closest we come to speaking of her manic-depression, the madness I interpret as the inevitable result of conflict between art and female obligation in upper-class, "old-family" Boston. Margaret had no role models. John Singer Sargent, the painter, was a fourth cousin, but from a part of the family from which she was separated by the previous generation's feud over abolition. Her parents were not artists, her father perhaps in rebellion against his father Henry Jackson Sargent, who is mythologized as a husband and father negligent because he wrote poetry, its only issue *Feathers from a Moulting Muse*, published in 1854. Serious art goes against the grain of this milieu; horticulture does not. Knowledge of plants, especially trees, runs strong in Margaret's blood on both sides. Charles Sprague Sargent, the painter's brother, made the Arnold Arboretum a force in American horticulture, inspiring Hollis Hunnewell to plant his "pinetum" whose ancient evergreens still tower, with careful Latin labels, near Lake Waban in Wellesley. When his coveted stand of India hardy azaleas bloomed each spring, Hunnewell put up a huge tent to enclose the bushes, so the assembled, sipping tea and eating cakes, could better drink in the glory of the hot pink blooms.

"I turned to horticulture." Turned. And returned, to childhood, to Grandfather Hunnewell's Wellesley estate, the white pillared mansion, his children and grandchildren in their own houses nearby—an enclave, self-sufficient. Margaret and two Hunnewell girl cousins grow up there together, are tutored by a succession of governesses until each Thanksgiving when all move to Boston townhouses, the children to Boston private schools. The house in Wellesley, where Margaret and four brothers and sisters spent springs and falls,

still stands, inhabited by Hunnewells, painted the same soft gray it was eighty years ago, peak-roofed icehouse no longer used but still in good repair. And, down a lane, Hollis Hunnewell's white mansion, inhabited by a cousin in her nineties, still reigns in early Victorian splendor over acres of lawn, rivaled in impressiveness only by a front-yard stand of weeping copper beeches that forms a giant, voluptuous, dark red leafy tent, under which five generations have played hide-and-seek.

But Margaret leaves, leaves in 1910 for Florence, again in 1914 for New York. "She went to Florence an ugly duckling," her lifelong friend declaims seventy-seven years later, passionate octogenarian insistence fleshing out the cliché, "and returned a lovely swan." Not ugly, but certainly plain: posing grinning with the handlebar-moustached captain of the ocean liner. "Sept.—1910—Oct." scribbled below the photo; and with two big-hatted chums on deck chairs, she wears a sailor blouse, hand over giggling mouth—"all busy being silly." Margaret got accepted to the Florentine School by telegraphing, "Please reconsider our marvellous daughter" and signing her parents' names, which surprised no one who knew the girl who at seven threw a ruler at the governess with the harelip and, when asked if she regretted it, replied, "Only that I missed." Two years abroad: photographs of Margaret, awkward, and her schoolmates: Fiesole, Capri, Côte d'Azur, and "London 1911 Coronation Day." And then come the 1914 pictures: a chic young woman, silk draped from handsome delicate shoulders, feathered hat, fur stole. The finishing school has done its work. There is a coming-out party at the Somerset Hotel in Boston, and Margaret is crowded with aspiring partners. A beauty, "lovely swan." And what doesn't show, the young woman artist soon to leave home to study painting, soon to pursue her talent in New York. When manic-depres-

sion and drinking become evident in the early 1930s, Margaret's mother cries, "If only we hadn't sent her to Europe!" Repeats this to many people. In her agony.

I can uncover no evidence of overt resistance to Margaret's journey to Florence or her move to New York, but she is the only girl in her family and group of Boston friends to show such independence. One Farmington schoolmate told me that Margaret came to the finishing school in Connecticut pompadoured as conservatively as any Boston girl, and that a roommate's thirty pairs of slippers opened her fourteen-year-old eyes. Margaret does learn about the Florentine School at Farmington, and a Boston friend's mother introduces her to Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor, in whose studio she works her first years in New York. But there is no particular encouragement from her family or sanction from her milieu to become a serious artist. "I don't understand my daughter at all," her mother exclaims to a friend of Margaret's when Margaret returns from Florence, paints her bedroom walls black, and hangs theater posters.

Margaret was unusual for her time. I am not for mine. I have become a writer in an era of advantage for women and am supported in my vocation by lovers, family, friends, colleagues. A community.

*. . . I am not alone as my grandmother
was who painted, was free and talented and
who for some M A D reason married, had kids, went mad and
stopped finishing her paintings at thirty-five . . .*

Forty-five actually, but ten years don't matter; what matters is she stopped. No one says I must stop writing to pluck a Japa-

nese beetle from a rose or wash the breakfast dishes, and yet there is a force in me that resists my work, and I connect that force to Margaret. I wrote that poem, "Polemic #1," in 1972, groping to name that resistance:

*This male approval desire filter and its
attached hook, abbreviated M-A-D filter and hook,
have driven many women mad . . .*

exhorting women artists, my new community

*M A D is the filter through which we're pressed to see ourselves
if we don't we won't get published, sold, or exhibited—
I blame none of us for not challenging it
except not challenging it may drive us mad . . .*

exhorting them and myself to risk expression, responding with expression to my grandmother's life: What made her stop? There is not a day I do not think of Margaret when I sit down to write, her half-finished canvases as viscerally present as if they are my wound, vibrating like the ghost of an amputated limb a heat-sensitive microscope picks up months after its removal.

When Margaret was nine years old, she wrote on the back page of a half-finished journal:

*When thirty am going to have a house & millions of animals.
Am going to be a nice cantankerous old maid . . .*

When she was nineteen, she broke a four-year engagement and began to study art in earnest. But in 1920, when she was twenty-eight, her father died and her favorite older brother rode his horse into the woods and slit his throat. Shortly after she returned to Boston from New York, she sent a telegram to Shaw McKean, her beau of nine years, which comes down in family lore as "I guess I will marry you."

They stayed married twenty-seven years. "Perhaps the first five," my aunt says in answer to my question, "Were they ever happy?" This aunt is the oldest of Margaret and Shaw's children, born in 1921, her mother's namesake, followed in 1923 by my mother, Jenny, named for Margaret's mother. In 1925, Margaret had twin boys.

"Margaret and Shaw were an incredibly beautiful couple. People would gasp when they walked into a party. Papa played polo. Once in Europe he played polo with the King of Spain!" Every fall they went to Europe, leaving the children with Senny, the governess. There is a 1928 photograph of Margaret, chin resting on her hand, elbow on knee, staring at us, directly but not comfortably. The blue stamp on the back of the photograph reads "Berenice Abbott, Paris, 1928." In Europe, they bought paintings which they hung in the Prides Crossing house. Shaw imported the first Afghan hounds to this country, bred and raised them—they named the estate Prides Hill Kennels. There are scores of photographs, house in the background, Margaret and Shaw, four children at various ages, anywhere from three to a dozen elegantly clipped blond dogs.

"She was not a very cozy mother," my aunt tells me, "We'd visit her at her studio. We wouldn't stay long. She'd be intent on her work." Margaret showed paintings and sculpture in New York every year from 1926 through 1931. It was not just marriage and children that made her stop. There was always the governess, and Shaw was supportive of her art, even began himself to paint. But in the 1930s the balance in her life between marriage, motherhood, career, was thrown. Her mental illness—periods of depression when she drank heavily, followed by manic periods when she did not drink at all—intensified. The marriage grew increasingly unhappy. George Luks, the painter, her mentor and friend, died.

At a conference of women artists and writers late in 1978, fifty years after the Paris photograph, I meet Berenice Abbott, the photographer. I bring a small print, Margaret's staring face. "Do you remember her?" Immediate recognition. "Of course I do! How is she?" "She died last January. Did you know her well?" "I knew her in Paris. Then I lost her. Where did I lose her? Something about a play. She sent me to a play in New York and I didn't like it. I lost her in New York." She asks me what happened to her. "Well," I say, "she stopped painting. She was a manic-depressive. I don't know whether she stopped because she got sick or got sick because she stopped." Immediate response. "She got sick because she stopped. They all did and they didn't know it."

I write about Margaret to find out, concretely, for myself. That silence, that unused canvas, thwarted passion and talent passed down a matrilineage to me. My mother has nine children, survives a near-fatal automobile accident, a nervous breakdown to put herself first, to commit herself to writing. She publishes one book, but in two more years, at fifty, she dies of cancer. Talent. And failure. Failure to hold, failure to focus, failure to hold the focus to the hot place so the transformation can occur, carry you out of self, so what you create may support, steady, nurture, and protect you.

I write to understand this moment: my relief when sitting in my aunt's living room after Margaret has left her eightieth birthday party, my relief that when I defend her evening-long silence—there were toasts to her wit, the beauty of her house, the dynamism of her personality, none to her art, and she did not speak all evening: "She is not selfish, she was driven crazy, . . ." I hesitate, ". . . by the conflict between being an artist and being a wife and mother"—my relief that when I in my late twenties say this, my mother, newly committed to her au-

tonomy, her writing, sitting under one of Margaret's paintings, everyone silent waiting for her to speak, my relief that with fear in her voice, a tremor, she agrees with me, and I see, for the first time, love of her mother in her eyes.

Margaret's art begins eight years before her marriage. When she returns to Boston from Florence in 1912, she starts to study at the Museum of Fine Arts. Summers until the war she goes up to Ogunquit, Maine, to study painting with Charles Woodbury, there meets Gutzon Borglum who was becoming famous for his presidential faces on Mount Rushmore. She moves first to Stamford, Connecticut, then to New York to work with Borglum. Her early work is sculpture. In New York she lives and works in a studio on Fifth Avenue across from the Plaza Hotel. Fanny Brice lives downstairs. She and Margaret are friends, and Fanny spends one night, having argued with Nicky Arnstein, sleeping on the floor of Margaret's apartment. Once Arnstein gives Margaret a shirt, silk with his initials on the pocket, because he feels it's an improvement over her smock. I know more about this shirt (and the day Margaret at Fanny's request spends a morning in Central Park returning to find Nicky gone, arrested—they had not wanted her implicated) than I do about her growth as an artist, or her first one-woman show in New York six years after her marriage.

The first show got very good reviews. "Sculpture and water colors by Margaret Sargent are on view at the Kraushaar Galleries. It is refreshing to find work that is so personal in its expression as this is" (*New York Evening Post*, March 6, 1926). "Margaret Sargent is that rare apparition in the local art world, a stranger coming here wholly unheralded and yet with

an astonishing number of things to say for herself in her watercolors and sculptures. Her pictures have the delicacy of Marie Laurencin in color, yet in the case of this Boston artist, it is used for exquisite and unconventional expression. . . . Her head of George Luks is a veritable tour de force in its effect" (*New York City American*, March 14, 1926). George Luks's "open enthusiasm for the work of the gifted Bostonian Margaret Sargent—now known to New Yorkers—is quite disinterested because she is not a follower in any sense . . ." (*New York Telegram*).

Reviews of the Kraushaar shows build in enthusiasm each year until 1931, and late that year the headline of a Boston paper proclaims, "Margaret Sargent Exhibition Popular: Pictures Attract Hundreds at Gloucester." I find no reviews after 1932. I remember her drawing, and my aunt tells me she does not stop until her first stroke in 1965, but she stops exhibiting, and her painting tapers off during the late thirties and early forties. "I think she hated herself for not continuing."

And here the stories of the madness begin. Shaw's brother and his wife arrive for Christmas Eve with their children. Margaret is drunk. "We all went home." This at five in the afternoon. Margaret driving down to Wareham with her brother Harry. At first she is her bright, charming, intelligent self, and then, in a flashing moment, she seems drunk. They arrive at their mother's seashore house. Margaret rushes to the long wood pier, Harry follows. The tide is out. She walks to the end of the pier. "All I want to do is dive in," she says to Harry, who is horrified. Dive in. The tide is out. The rocks glisten, wet. But there is no water. Harry takes her into the house. The rest of the family hears of it from their mother. "If only we hadn't sent her to Europe."

After the five strokes she has in the last thirteen years of

her life, Margaret is moved to a high-rise apartment in Boston so she'll be closer to doctors and twenty-four-hour nurses. The apartment has a view of the whole Boston Common, but the curtains are always kept pulled. I arrive one evening for a visit. Wearing a fuchsia satin jacket and makeup as porcelain as I imagine Empress Josephine's to have been, Margaret is sitting up in bed, scrapbooks crammed with yellowed reviews overflowing onto sheets the color of daffodils, a salmon satin blanket cover. She looks up. "Why I'd forgotten these!" she exclaims, shocked, genuine. I stand there mute in the face of a degree of pain no one, much less a healthy granddaughter fifty-three years younger, can console. I am afraid of physical incapacity and I know it. Since she can hardly make her speech comprehensible, would she understand the questions I might ask? Grandma, why did you stop? When she answers, "It got too intense," why don't I say, "But why else? Was it because of the children? Was it because your marriage was unhappy? Something in your childhood? Grandma, what did it feel like when you began to go crazy? Did you go crazy? Was it craziness or just something in you that needed to be understood and wasn't?"

Margaret's sister-in-law sits, eighty-eight years old, on the window seat overlooking the ocean in the house built by her grandfather, her return to this family place an affirmation of her ease in the life to which she was born, an ease Margaret never had. "She was so clever, one of the funniest people alive! Once at Christmas Eve dinner at my house—I knew but no one else did—Margaret, dressed as a maid, wore a red wig, blacked out three of her teeth, put the most hideous slippers on her feet." She spoke "with a ghastly Irish accent" and kept passing hors d'oeuvres "within an inch of my mother's nose." Mrs. Lee was polite for a while, but Margaret the maid kept

jeering, "Have ye had too much to drink, m'um?" Finally Mrs. Lee's indignation overcame her. "If you don't behave, I'm going to tell Mrs. McKean to throw you out!"

And the other outrageous stories.

Once at a party she hired wrestlers for after-dinner entertainment.

Once she greeted two gentlemen guests in the bathroom. She was in the tub, nude, bath water thick with floating gardenias. Someone passed champagne.

For another party she hired special waiters. Someone would ask, "May I have a bit of ice for my drink, please?" and the waiter would go off to return from the pantry struggling with a chunk of uncut ice "practically the size of a boulder!" His companion, an acrobat disguised as a waiter, did pratfalls while passing champagne, not spilling a drop.

Once Margaret ran off to Europe with another man. No one knew of her departure until the children appeared at breakfast. Pinned to each pair of pajamas was a luggage tag scrawled with the name of the person to whom each child should be sent in her absence.

In answer to my question, "Were you and Margaret close?" her sister-in-law shakes her head. "Margaret was too bright for me, just too bright. A terrible waste. She could have been an actor. A writer! A painter!"

An eight-by-ten photograph mounted on an eleven-by-fourteen board. Margaret stands painting. 1931. Large wooden easel. Intent on the canvas. Face blurred, for her whole body moves as she paints, and the photographer from Bachrach has asked her actually to paint. Brush in right hand, palette nearly hidden in the left. Hair pulled back at her neck, sleeves of the knee-length, high-necked smock rolled to the elbow.

A November morning forty-seven years later. I am back at work after weeks of interruption: *Mourning Pictures*, my play about my mother's death, performed in Minneapolis. I am called overprotective because I am offended at the addition of someone else's lyrics, the cutting of the play without my permission. Two days ago there was a reading of my new play: two women in their twenties, their friendship, their search, each for her creative impulse, how that search is deflected again and again before a commitment is made. Forty-seven years later, to keep Margaret at her easel, I write about the woman at her art.

This photograph of Margaret is one of a series of her by Bachrach. The newspaper article that accompanies it: "Society woman turned artist." Headline: "Applies her artistic skill to make her home beautiful. Mrs. McKean's hobbies, modern paintings and old doors." She painted as Margaret Sargent. "Mrs. McKean in private life. . . ." How is the family more private than the woman intent on her canvas? "Mrs. McKean herself—black-haired, blue-eyed, lovely, gentle and questioning—but forceful and courageous on the subject of her work." The woman artist whom no interruption deflects. "Despite her big family and her large household, Mrs. McKean is always worrying about her work. She is unaggressive and gentle in her worry, but she is always thinking about her next painting, about the next thing to be done. And about her house, nothing escapes her notice, so sensitive is she to the beautiful that a drooping flower registers immediately."

In these past months I've moved after separation from a long relationship. Half my belongings are in packing boxes. I learn to let things escape my notice, but it is not easy. If it were not for two deadlines, I would not work. "The urge to rescue the bloom taunts. . . . The garden is just two feet outside. . . ."

In another photo in the Bachrach series, the finished painting sits on the easel. A self-portrait. Yearning, not eagerness in the wide-open, light-blue eyes. And sadness. Nothing gentle unless you can call pain gentle. Margaret's face in the photograph not girl-beautiful as in this self-portrait. Thickening neck. Thickening cheeks. A puffiness, probably from drinking. "As children we didn't really know about the sickness," my aunt tells me. "All we knew was that some mornings we were told we could tiptoe in and kiss our mother, but that she was sleeping late because she was tired. And we would go in, and the shades would be drawn."

I imagine two women in 1931, who, reading the morning *Globe*, might have seen Margaret's photograph and read the article. One has children and no one to care for them, should she want or need just to go to bed and draw the shades. This is a woman whose dreams—to be a painter, a writer, an actress—were put aside when she married at sixteen, had her first baby at seventeen. In the photograph, Margaret stands, uninterrupted, brush raised. A quilt slung over a screen encloses the space where she works in her studio. The other woman I imagine is an artist Margaret's age, single, who works unphotographed, without money, no high-necked smock, no studio. When these women read the article, do they become angry with this woman who is an artist with children, with the money to work as she pleases? Would they realize that Margaret Sargent resents this description of her house at the expense of her work, that this "socialite" is also a serious artist? Would they have sympathy with the difficulty I share with Margaret, learning to work if you don't have to work to earn a living? There is no way either of my imagined women will learn that Margaret Sargent stops painting. But she does stop. Would either of these women, each in her own difficult cir-

cumstance, have imagined that something in Margaret's situation would stop her art?

"We would go up and visit her in her studio. She would say hello, but she would be intent on her work." "It got too intense." Too intense. That feeling in me. At the moment of perfection in the work, life is balanced. Then some event, some moment, throws the balance, and I do not work for days, feel what Margaret felt standing at the end of the pier. "She got sick because she stopped. They all did, and they didn't know it." The urge to stop: to call someone, or to eat, or to weep. These interruptions are more staunchly supported inside me than perseverance. The battle is to hold to the vision I know I must express, but the confidence to do it, where does that come from?

"You will have a bosom like your grandmother's," my mother says. I am eleven, standing with her near the brass-fixtured highboy on the second-floor landing of our house in Indianapolis. My mother, black-haired, olive-skinned. My brother teases me for being too pale, too round—"white and gooshy, white and gooshy"—and I reassure myself: I am like my grandmother. She had black hair and very white skin. Like mine. She is not called pale. She is called wonderfully fair.

"I was flat-chested until I had children," my mother says, pulling my first bra from the underwear drawer. "I envy you your bosom." Thirteen. Ever since the blue-plaid straight skirt would not pass my hips that day we shopped in Indianapolis, I call myself fat. Alone in the mirrored dressing room I share with two sisters, I cup new breasts with small, wide hands. Bosom like my grandmother's. The bosom grows. And the buttocks. "What's that behind you?" my mother jokes as we

walk together down a midwestern street. Fat. Fat as Margaret's face in the picture she sent from Brittany in 1952. The only picture of her in our house. Framed. A fat face. Too fat for the Breton headdress. Too sad to look at for long. I finger the red felt jacket she sent from Saint-Malo. It lasts. Grandma sent it from France! The fat face. Whimsy of the red jacket. She taught me to draw. To want to write letters in strange colored inks on unusual paper.

It could have been any day in the years before the truce my mother and I reached when I left home. It happened a lot in the years my bosom was becoming like my grandmother's. Standing in the twenties vintage maroon bathroom so the other children wouldn't hear, my mother and I scream at each other for "reasons" having to do with hair—"Sweetie, keep it away from your face!" And she pushes it from my face. And I yank her hand away. And there is silence, then, "There, that's lovely," the side of my face revealed when the hair goes behind the ear. Bitch. Under my breath. Messy room. A slap. My face. Not often. Punctuation to the fights with my mother. Not fights. One long fight. She is cool. I am not. Margaret's fat face. Too sad to look at for long. My mother dead now. I am left with reports of witnesses, war correspondents. "All the time," my brother says. "Screaming at you. Screaming." And my sister. "Once I asked Mom, why are you so mean to Honor?" "What did she say?" "Nothing." And my father. "My psychiatrist told me to stay out of it: mothers and daughters. . . ." My brother twenty years later: "She was fighting something back in you. Definitely. Tamping it down. It was her mother in you. She saw Margaret growing in you."

"Grandma was selfish," my mother says. "She and Papa fought. Terrible being at home. Away as much as I could be." And my aunt: "Jenny and I tried to talk Papa into leaving her

sooner, getting a divorce. But he said he couldn't leave us with her. Nearly impossible in those days for fathers to get custody." So he waited to divorce her until the children grew up, we grandchildren were told. As if it was a civilized agreement. "Your grandparents don't get along, so . . ." Nothing about pain, her shock at his announcement. "I don't think she ever thought he would leave her," his brother's wife tells me. There are those who say she didn't love him. There are those who say she never loved anyone else.

My mother on the telephone when telephones were black. She hangs up: "Grandma's in the hospital again." "What's wrong with her?" "Mentally ill." My mother standing there touching her head. "It means her mind is sick." Her brain? The feeling inside my own head. Nothing in my mother's voice telling me her fear. Fifteen years later. A white telephone. My mother telling me she herself is going into a sanitarium, "depressed," Margaret's sad face. Oh, yes, her brain. Fat. Her mind. Oh, yes, kernel of pain in my own head. Yes, I understand. That feeling starting to hurt. No words for it.

My mother is giving a dinner party. I help. From the high cupboard we bring down white china cupids holding luscious fake grapes, gift from Margaret, to decorate the long dining room table, Margaret's wedding present. "You know the story of this," my mother says as we place the silver and the red goblets. "She promised it as a wedding present, then she had more shock treatments, and when we went to claim it, she wouldn't give it to us! Shock treatments made her forget even our wedding!" My mother talks in a perfectly normal voice. "Finally we got it, but the whole thing was *just* awful."

My mother wants to keep me from going to Radcliffe. "I

don't want you to have to cope with Mama." Cambridge is just an hour from Prides Crossing. Of course I want to go nowhere but Radcliffe. The time comes, Margaret is in a sanitarium, I go there. Brick Cambridge. Old trees. At Radcliffe I am a midwestern immigrant even though all the men in my mother's family have gone to Harvard for generations, even though Radcliffe was founded in 1879 by my mother's great-grandmother. I cry from fear the night before my first exam. *King Lear* seems written in an alien language. I am too ashamed ever to speak the wish: I want to write. My cover is the theater. I audition, voice failing when I must speak. Work backstage. Skate a surface, the dark water of possible creativity well below, frozen from me. Unspoken, even unthought is the fear: If I thaw, plunge will I go mad? You look just like Margaret! Crazy like my grandmother?

Crazy is not romantic for me in spite of the romance of tortured female madness as creativity, Sylvia Plath et al. Crazy fighting with my mother. Crazy after crying—the feeling no one can comfort. Crazy Margaret, the woman always described as startlingly beautiful, bestially fat, stuffed into high heels, still attempting chic. Crazy. Scent of her perfume cut with heavy, nausea smell. Image of my mother on the phone, the news again and again of Margaret drunk, manic, sent, for a few weeks, to this or that sanitarium. I see her once with my parents in the room she has taken at the Gladstone Hotel during a New York visit. She doesn't talk much, look at us much, fiddles with gladioli in a vase, and afterward, my mother on the phone, "Mama was in terrible shape—" something about drinking, but I don't remember Margaret's drinking, just her very long, very dark red, very shiny fingernails.

At seventeen I do not want to be fat, but I want to love to drink the way she does, to laugh the way she does. I do not

want to be crazy, and yet I love this grandmother. Everything she does, she does with taste so original its sensuality is palpable: letters written in brown ink on butcher's paper; a green satin purse with cream satin lining, a Christmas present for the granddaughter she barely knows; the feathery sketches she does of children; the extravagant love she expresses in the arched, rising vowels of a North Shore accent—"Dahling, I *adore* you."

That week at Grandma's wrecked my life," I say. My father laughs. "We were all so worried, but you had a great time." Wrecked my life. What mystery, what example, what illusion, what ultimate would have formed the yearning of my imagination had I not, at the age of four, visited that grandmother in that house?

That house. A dark saltbox bought by my grandfather while he was still at Harvard. Built in 1630. Lived in first by the king's tax collector for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, then during the Revolution by General Burgoyne. Added onto by Margaret and Shaw after their marriage. Old part left intact, restored, then whole wings built so that it becomes, to a small girl's eye, a castle. Entrance hall first Margaret's studio, then, with later additions, a mammoth living room. Tower room off one corner, octagonal, walled with mirrors Margaret left outdoors for a winter to weather their silver to an appropriate cloudiness. Furniture that looks exotic, extreme versions of many styles. Spanish. Louis XIV. Arcane Americana. Copies so skillfully made it doesn't matter that they're copies. Dark clapboard. Pool surrounded by trimmed boxtree. Entrance hidden so the hedge seems a maze. Apple trees like candelabra, espaliered against the house. Windows crisscross leaded, tiny handblown panes.

I remember the dress with the lace collar. The photographs are black and white, but my dress was purple, the collar wide like a clown's. I am small, my hair pulled back from my face with barrettes. I sit below George Luks's portrait of my mother at four dressed as a Spanish infanta. My grandmother directs as the photographer, a small, wiry man who says little, positions me. I stand below the portrait. My child face. My child mother's painted grin. Flash. The photographer changes the plate in the old-fashioned camera. I turn and look up at my mother. In the photograph my small body twisting, the back of my head. My mother, tiny in a brocade gown, mischievous. Not the serious mother I know who always carried a baby—my brother, my sister—on her hip.

We move down the long tile corridor to Grandma's Spanish bedroom. I sit pasting paper, intent. Grandma looks on. Flash. I ride a tiny antique rocking horse. On the wall above the mantle behind me, the di Chirico, two stallions rampant, creamy manes lifted by desert wind, creamy tails streaming to the ground. Nearby sits Grandma, pen in hand, sketchpad on knee. Flash. Outdoors, arm around the neck of one of the Labradors she sculpted early at Stamford with Borglum. My little gray hat makes my head round as the stone dog's. I become part of the landscape of that house.

That house. I remember running down the long hall. Pink. Windows onto the garden, the pool. I remember sleeping in a pink room. I remember hurrying down narrow, winding back stairs to a kitchen. I remember a kind cook with a long gray braid. I remember a man, plaster on his trousers, stumbling through a door onto the loggia from I didn't know where and I knew not to ask. "There was always some parasite artist or other staying with Margaret after the divorce. Some were nice. Some were simply *awful*." Grandma sitting near my

bed. Navy blue suit. Tight black pumps. Sketching me as I fall asleep. When I wake from the nap, she is gone. I remember Jack, the green macaw, screaming "Margarett!!!" over and over. "Maaaggrrett. Marrggrrett!" And the darkened bedroom. "Shhhh. Quiet," the cook says. "Your grandmother up late, sleeping." I remember shafts of sun coming through skylights breaking the gloom of the living room. The quiet. But I don't remember my grandmother's voice. Or what she sketched. I don't think I ever saw the drawing.

To write Margaret "I want one you painted" takes until I have my first apartment. My letter to her says something about lots of blank white walls. Tentative because I have seen only one drawing of hers, never a painting. Tentative because I know she stopped and don't know how many paintings there are, if any. *The Blue Girl*, its arrival announced weeks before by a note scrawled in pink on hot turquoise stationery, comes crated. I unwind thirty gleaming screws. "It has a wonderful Spanish frame," she writes. Unwind, place the screws, one by one, in an ashtray, lift the lid, whiff of wood, fresh, peel back the cardboard: yes, the old frame and dazed black eyes staring as if interrupted. A stranger, huge black hat's shadows smudge the white forehead, lips set, red, disturbed. Color. Color. Light blue collars a pale neck, behind writhe thick green vines, exploding ultramarine blooms. Brown hair to the shoulder she sits, volcanic, holds the graceful white arm of an orange chair with both hands, as if to hold her to the canvas. I am twenty-one. This is my first adult intimacy with a woman who has given up.

"Who is she?" I ask Margaret later. Her voice is already muffled by the first paralytic stroke. "A model." Of despair.

Hands badly articulated. After the stroke, Margaret's hands shake too much to draw, *The Blue Girl's* hands, painted in 1929, splay like fans, prophetic.

Intense color. By "too intense," Margaret, what do you mean? Too hot? The hot color blooming, blooming across canvas after canvas, gets hotter, hotter, then too hot for any brush and explodes, burns out, leaving just a tiny pile of ash? "Who did that frightening painting?" A visitor asks. I am twenty-one. "My crazy grandmother," I laugh, knowing that at night when I sit down at my blue typewriter I won't be able to dismiss her piercing disturbance as I type, fingers splaying across the keyboard, drumming, drumming to tame, to come to know that countenance, the steady acidic gaze that follows me everywhere in the room watching, communicating some warning I cannot yet hear.

But those drummings begin my writing. First inchoate raving and need, then, finally, poems, prose. The earliest readable piece begins: "In the pouring rain one day I drive my friend Jonathan out to see Grandma at her house. She has not lived there for years, but she has recovered enough from three strokes to go 'out to the country' several mornings a week. We drive through torrents to the house. Grandma has not yet arrived. I push open the huge door. The long entrance hall, living room bereft of paintings and furniture except for a few huge hard-to-move pieces. A rose brocade, outsized altar piece which Grandma bought once at an auction in Spain, still hangs at the end of the room, maintaining its handsome shape but well past beginning to crumble. Jack, her green macaw, is long dead, but because of the storm, I think I hear him screaming "MMmmaaaaagrrrett" from somewhere upstairs."

That visit to her house is my first since childhood. Margaret comes, escorted by her lawyer. By this time this

lawyer and my aunt are her legal guardians. The windows of the long black limousine are fogged. "Hello, dahling, you've arrived," she says, ignoring her weight, crippled body, the grossness of her face. She is dressed in hot pink jersey, perfectly made up. Lawyer and chauffeur begin to lift her into the wheelchair, she grasps for her cane, diamonds glinting in the car's overhead light, perfume wafting the air. "Be careful!" she yelps, snaps, continuing to smile at Jonathan and me. "Your aunt called and begged me not to go out in the storm, but I told her you were coming and that I wouldn't miss it for the world." We wheel her into the house, and when we are settled in the cold, dark living room, Jonathan says, "This house is beautiful. It's the most beautiful house I've ever seen." And she answers, "This house is me. I devoted my life to it, and now I come out here and keep up the work on the grounds, the planting, the trees." The copper beech, gigantic, swaying in the storm. The wisteria unrecognizable without blooms.

It is on this visit that I see the paintings, by some fluke brought in from the studio on the hill before the fire. The paintings saved, and all her sculpture burned. The pile of ash. In the dark room the paintings. I have seen only *The Blue Girl*, don't know how many she did before she stopped, have no conception. Paintings in a room off the living room. Canvas after canvas after canvas stacked against the walls. Too many to look at. Eyes. Wide open eyes. Color. Two little girls in red woolen caps. Margie. Jenny. One of her twins, my Uncle Harry, a little boy, recognizable around the eyes. A child on her side stretched out on a pink chaise longue, green plaid dress, reading. Still life with cyclamen and clock. A cloche-hatted woman winking, the word "whoopie" dashed across the canvas. Women with tortured eyes, half-finished hands. Women with finished hands. Three children on a green ground, backs

to us, wandering in some dream game of hide-and-seek. A man in a tux. The intense dark boy in the golden chair. Too many to see. Hundreds. Stacked in layers against the wall. A body of work. And for the first time Margaret is more than an inspiration. For the first time she is an example. "Why did I ever stop?" The asking voice. "For years I worked. Hard. And then it got too intense. I turned to horticulture."

"Still a worthy cage, ladies and gentlemen. Let's start this fine antique cage at twenty-five, ladies and gentlemen." The bullet rhythm of the auctioneer's voice. Festive green and white tent set up on the lawn near where the stone Labradors, long gone to my aunt's house, once stood. The box hedge overgrown, the pool drained. Tent crowded with people on folding chairs, standing, craning, peering at each piece that comes up. "Refreshments for sale, ladies and gentlemen. Luncheon." A table near the wisteria. Cars surround the copper beech. "And who will start this important, no this magnificent Shaker table at \$800, ladies and gentlemen?" And Margaret no longer visits. She has been in a nursing home twenty miles from here for six months. "I hope she doesn't know about this. It's tragic," a woman in a flowered dress says to her companion. And she doesn't know that the house has been sold to a developer who has promised to preserve at least the original saltbox, or that the furniture, dishes, rugs, mirrored fixtures from the art deco bathroom, and everything her children didn't take, that didn't rot, is being auctioned off this sunny summer day, two weeks before her eighty-fifth birthday. I see Margaret's sister-in-law across the crowd, and one of Shaw's sons from his second marriage buys a silver tray. A small Queen Anne wing chair is hoisted to the front and quickly sold. "Aren't they divine!" the

lady in the flowered dress says about the Spanish beds from the di Chirico bedroom. "Everything she had was good! Margaret had a great eye."

Her blue eyes, still like lakes. Skinny, shriveled back to her bones, hair no longer dyed, no makeup. Vulnerable as a child, she lies on her side on a hospital bed. "Hello, Grandma," I say, hating that I speak as if to a child to this woman who has lived eighty-five years. "Oh, hello, dahling," her voice is very low. "Hello. Hello." She's been repeating things since she came here. A new drug? Oakwood, mansion turned nursing home, on a bluff overlooking the ocean. "How are you?" "Not very well. Not very well." It is August. There are five photographs of my mother in the bare but spacious room, one of me. Beside her bed is a copy of the anthology I've edited, my first book, new plays by women. I'd sent a first copy to her four months ago. A week later had come her call: "I read your book, read your book, read your book. I've read it twice. Twice. Wonderful. Wonderful." The nurse, worrying I haven't understood, says before hanging up, "When she finishes reading it, she begins all over again." The book of plays about women, each play about a woman struggling to be autonomous. Margaret's greatest compliment to me is the book lying there, the only book beside her in this barren room with a view of the ocean, blue on this sparkling day. "I love you," I say, "love you, love you, love you," repeating like her, biting my tongue not to thank her for the things of hers I've bought at the auction. I am not speaking the truth and it is the last time I see her. New Year's Day I telephone. "I love you so much. So much. So much," she repeats, voice barely audible. "How are you?" I ask. "The same. The same. The same. The

same," voice fading with each repetition. She dies three weeks later. Months afterward I ask for her copy of my book, and it arrives, dog-eared, tattered, fattened by repeated readings, in a legal envelope. My inscription reads, "For Grandma, with intense love and great thanks for her example."

MICHELE MURRAY



Creating Oneself from Scratch

These selections have been culled from Michele Murray's personal journals which cover the period from 1950 to her death in 1974, at the age of forty-one.

December 31, 1954

There is so much I want to say to round the year off while I sit in a train next to Jim riding up to Schenectady for New Year's Eve, but so little of anything I write would even touch things as they are that I hesitate to say a word. For, first of all, I do not even recognize myself, the person I've been all my life, the person I was last New Year's Eve, and different parts of me have been chopped off into different relations. I am a teacher, a fiancée, in addition to being a daughter, a granddaughter, cousin, and friend. And perhaps by next December 31 I'll be a mother, a published writer. But all of these views of me are only partial.