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Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave"

Women's Writing and Re-visioning Memory

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and know we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh.
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> —Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," (1979: 35)

In my Women's Studies classes, I often frame the objective and methodology of the class in terms of Adrienne Rich's classic statement of feminist "re-visioning." In "When We Dead Awaken," Rich models the personal and political dynamics of feminist literary criticism and calls literary critics to examine assumptions of a patriarchal society, search for new understanding self and society, and build new structures for living and understanding "afresh." I call the students to ask questions that expose male-dominated structures and to give voice to women's strength in their own writing, hoping that their way of living and seeing will be transformed. But there are significant elements in Rich's call that I have overlooked while keeping my eyes only on the texts and my students: *survival, self-knowledge,* and *identity.* These words call me to a more personal form of re-visioning, to consider the effect my reading and

criticism of women's literature has on how *I* live, how *I* understand myself, and how *I* survive as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Feminist reading as survival? Certainly, I must mean writing as survival. The relationship of women's voice and survival have long been a part of feminist literary criticism. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (1929) creates Shakespeare's sister, a fictional female artist who Woolf says could only have met an early and ignominious death. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*—an early feminist literary analysis of nineteenth-century women writers—examines literary representations of female madness as fictional manifestations of the female writer's thwarted voice. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous also articulates importance of women's writing, or what the French feminist theorists call *l'ecriture feminine,* to women's identity:

> I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (1991: 354)

But what will women's writing do for the feminist reader who gathers words and images from *l'ecriture feminine* as a way of understanding her experience as a woman, of putting the text into life in a female body? Can reading offer a strategy for survival?

In September of 2000, I lost a baby 14 weeks into my pregnancy. After having heard the baby's heartbeat at ten weeks, I returned for a monthly exam and the sonogram amplified only an immense silence. The next 24 hours were a physical and emotional hell, but Katherine Anne Porter's short story, "The Grave," one of her many Miranda stories, surfaced in the midst of the very real physical pain of losing a child, and I realized later that women's language helped me find a way of moving back into my body after that devastating loss. I used *l'ecriture feminine* as an act of survival.

Suggesting an association of the female body and reading or writing ventures into the controversial area of essentialism in feminist theory. Do biological arguments risk defining women only by their bodies, a strategy used historically to restrict women's lives? Do constructivist arguments deny meaningful biological realities of being a woman, suppressing women's uniqueness in an intellectual framework? In 1952, Simone de Beauvoir, an influential French philosopher, examined the physical realities of women's experience in *The Second Sex*, even as she described significant cultural forces shaping female experience. Wading through biological detail—ovaries, uterus, glands, lactation—de Beauvoir begins her thorough, albeit now dated, analysis of female biology to answer the question, "What is a woman?"

> These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation.... For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. This accounts for our lengthy study of the biological facts; they are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever. (1974: 36)

It would be too simplistic to suggest that feminist critics, theorists, and writers have only two alternatives for exploring the connection between the female body, experience, knowing, and writing: essentialist or constructivist. Feminist writers and readers have ventured into the vast and shifting realm between the social construction and bodily experience of their lives as women, between the distancing offered through language and the immediacy of physical space.

In her collection of essays titled *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer,* Nancy Mairs examines closely the idea of "writing the body," particularly in her choice to write personal essays rather than literary criticism and in her ongoing physical deterioration due to multiple sclerosis. In giving voice to her own embodied experience, Mairs creates "textual femininity" but questions what *l'ecriture feminine* really means for her as a writer. Could she, for example, write a "textual femininity—of all that can never be said lying between and beneath the words on the page—unattached to some human form whose breasts and belly ... insist upon its femaleness" (1994: 73)? Or can her writing relate to "real women ... warm and wet and fragrant and surprisingly durable, occupying some space, some time, who have (whether reasonably or not) believed themselves not men and have therefore experienced some difference whereby they have been known to represent themselves as women" (73). Whatever "femininity" is, she suggests, "it is *theirs*, it attaches to them as female human beings as it does not to male human beings, because they bear the weight of centuries of living according to certain terms" (74). Mairs refuses to separate mind and body, language and experience. In her writing, Mairs argues, she tries to "sustain a kind of intellectual double vision: to see the feminine *both* as that which language represses and renders unrepresentable by any human being, male or female, *and* as that which in social, political, and economic terms represents experiences peculiar to the female. I want my femininity both ways—indeed, I want it as many ways as I can get it. I am the woman writer" (74).

Mairs suggests that women's writing, creative or personal or analytical, inherently engages gender constructions with lived physical experience in a

woman's body. She cannot help but write what she knows in her mind and has experienced in her body as a white, middle class, educated, heterosexual, crippled woman. She states boldly, "This is the body who works here." Within Mairs' framework of female voice and body, I could identify another type of "textual femininity" and assert that, for me, *this is the body who reads here.* In this essay, I want to describe the powerful effect of reading women's writing, *l'ecriture feminine*, on my experience as a woman, particularly the painful, unscripted moments in life. Like Cixous, I will consider "women's writing: about what it will do" for a female reader, for me. A feminist critic may re-vision a literary text, but the feminist reader may put the text "into [her] world and into [her] history—by her own movement" (1991: 354).

In *The Resisting Reader*, an early feminist analysis of American literature using reader-response theory, Judith Fetterley describes vividly the subtle undermining of a woman reading only from the masculine point of view:

> In such fictions the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself. (1978: xiii)

I first experienced Porter's writing as a junior in college in the early 1980s, after completing an introductory literature course centered on the theme "Fathers and Sons"; an American novel class that covered 150 years and ten novels, all written by men; a British Literature survey spanning 1800 years that included no female authors. Strangely enough, I did not miss the female voice at that point in my reading and critical experience. Reading solely from the male perspective had connected me to many truths, but, as Fetterley points out, at a great cost to my female mind and spirit. Fetterley argues that my lack of reading from the female perspective was more than just intellectual neglect:

> To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal, to be American—is to be *not female.* (1978: xiii)

Having been trained to look at female characters from a male's perspective, I was shocked by a sense of familiarity when I first read "The Grave." I experienced empowering recognition of myself in Miranda's perspective, responses, and truths. According to Fetterley's theory, I was tapping into a powerful force in Porter's story because

> Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. ... Feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness. (1978: xix-xx)

That semester I treasured Porter's "The Grave," along with the other women's writing included in the American literary canon of the past 150 years. And twenty years later, when my memory of Porter's "The Grave" leaped from its "burial place" into my "mind's eye," I received the power I needed to deal with the unfamiliar ground of seeing my own unborn child. As a feminist reader, I have experienced a new understanding of my life *in* a female body not only through my own experience, but also the feminine consciousness and power portrayed in Porter's story.

All of Porter's Miranda stories offer a wonderful example of text as "re-visioning" in character (*Miranda* suggests *to see*), content, theme, and style. In "The Grave," Porter focuses on Miranda's navigation of external gender expectations, concrete physical embodiments of female sexuality, and internal discoveries. Porter creates a textual femininity, or as Mairs says, "all that can never be said lying between and beneath the words on the page," but she also shows how feminine consciousness surfaces in a space where the physical and intellectual experience of a female converge, if only for fleeting moments. From the opening with nine-year-old Miranda and her twelve-year-old brother Paul clamoring into the fenced family cemetery to peer into its empty graves to Miranda's concluding vision, twenty years later, of a buried memory, "The Grave" traces Miranda's negotiation of the inner and outer forces of female experience and extends the same possibility to its readers. In my reading of "The Grave," I do not want to examine the text at arm's length or scrutinize it under a microscope. I want to re-vision this story, to draw it close to my own body and miscarriage experience. In the following pages, I weave between text and life, analysis and memory, in order to map the space between language and experience where I have gained understanding, some healing, and, most important, some trust in my body, a body I have sometimes cursed for what feels like its betrayal of me and my dreams for motherhood.

By titling this story "The Grave," Porter leads us directly to the physical reality of death and decay. Miranda's grandmother, the family matriarch, has twice transported her husband's bones to new graves, the last in a rural Texan farm that prospered under her control. Miranda and her older brother Paul, aged nine and twelve, venture out on an ordinary hunting excursion and come upon the empty graves left gapping open following the third and final transplant of family coffins in a public cemetery. Nature dominates this place with "tangled rose bushes and ragged cedar trees and cypress, the simple flat stones rising out of uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass" (1974: 1546).

Porter's description stresses the relationship between Miranda's instinct and behavior, as she "leaped into the pit that had held her grandfather's bones. Scratching around aimlessly and pleasurably as any young animal, she scooped up a lump of earth and weighed it in her palm. It had a pleasantly sweet, corrupt smell" (1546). Miranda contemplates the "lump of earth" as a god might consider creation, the shaping of humanity from the earth, or death, "from dust to dust."

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After conceiving our two children with medical assistance, my husband and I were surprised when I got pregnant the "natural" way. Anticipation and dread battled within me. I had already lost two pregnancies at six and nine weeks, so I woke each day feeling hesitant, uncertain that we had actually created a life that would last, another little person to join our family. After hearing the heart beat at ten weeks, I relaxed. We shared the news, fairly certain that this pregnancy, after nearly a decade of trying to have children, would be my last. Madeline was four and Hugh two—"a girl and a boy," as people were fond of commenting, as if I would not have been as pleased with two sons or two daughters—and I was already 39, with many scars from infertility work, two miscarriages, and two caesarian-sections.

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In her grave digging, Miranda discovers a small object, a "silver dove no larger than a hazel nut, with spread wings and a neat fan-shaped tail. The breast had a deep round hollow in it" (Porter, 1974: 1546). As discoverer, Miranda examines the figure very closely, looking inside to find little whorls, a very feminine detail that suggests a woman's labial and vaginal opening, its roundness and layers burrowing deeper to an unseen core. Her call to Paul "that she had found something, he must guess what..." is stopped mid-sentence by Paul's shouting, "I've got something too!" Paul has found a gold ring, perhaps a wedding band carved with flowers and leaves, symbolic of the social covenant, the "natural" binding of male to female by convention. Miranda's wonder at the dove turns to desire for the ring. Even after a swap and Paul's taunting that the dove is the screw head for a coffin, Miranda is content with the perfect-fitting gold ring.

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Ultrasounds combine the internal and external in a very odd, somewhat disconcerting way.

The technician punched numbers into formulas, hit return, covered my abdomen with a jelly-like substance, and ran the cold, crescent-shaped wand over my belly. In the darkened room, we looked intently at the black, fan-shaped area on the computer screen where the landscape of my uterus would be mapped. This ultrasound was similar to previous ones where a doctor or technician interpreted gray shadows, sketchy white lines as the dark circles of mature egg follicles, as the pulsing light of Madeline's heartbeat, as a lima-bean sized Hugh, or as the empty amniotic sacs of two aborted pregnancies. It is almost unfathomable that I could lie prone on a table,

bladder full to contrast with the uterus, and glimpse such miraculous, secret information. But with all the medical technology we had used in the past six years, I embraced technology's truths. I wanted to know more about the innermost secrets of a body that withheld so much from me. This ultrasound was tense; we wanted confirmation of the life we had heard a month earlier. The technician identified parts of a perfect little baby—outlining the skull, spine, arms, legs, feet, hands on the screen. A doctor entered to offer an official reading and examined the screen as the technician's wand probed deeply under my ribs and low towards my pelvis. She simply nodded to the technician and left the room without a word. I feebly asked, "Is there a heart beat?" The technician shook her head, eyes focused on the keyboard. "No," she said. "I'm sorry." I had known the answer all along, but the definitive truth pierced my stomach and I drew in my breath, warding off tears. Avoiding Dave's eyes or touch, I went to the bathroom. Sitting on the stool, I pummeled my stomach with clenched fists and began to cry.

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In Miranda's graveyard exploration, feminine instinct is modeled in Miranda's comfort with the soil and her curiosity about the dove; feminine and masculine constructions are opposed through the dove and the ring; feminine interpretation is framed by masculine definition as Paul claims and names the silver dove. Miranda's instincts differ from Paul's, but her discovery is repeatedly negotiated through masculine structures, as the remainder of the story bears out. Even their hunting trip is fueled by Paul's authority:

> On these expeditions Miranda always followed at Paul's heels along the path, obeying instructions about handling her gun when going through fences; learning how to stand up properly so it would not slip and fire unexpectedly; how to wait her time for a shot and not just bang away in the air without looking, spoiling shots for Paul, who really could hit things if given a chance. (Porter, 1974: 1546)

While having her own urges to shoot, with "no proper sense of hunting at all," Miranda prefers walking over shooting, even though it means enduring her brother's commands, frustration, and disgust. Porter establishes clear gender differences in the children's attitudes and actions but stresses the artificiality of external gender differences by dressing both Miranda and Paul in overalls, shirt, straw hat, and sandals that differ only in color. Miranda's clothing symbolizes her unusual relationship to patriarchal structures. Having lost her mother when she was two, Miranda and her siblings lived under her father's lack of concern for social custom and endured the community's criticism of "the motherless family. . . running down, with the Grandmother no longer there to hold it together" (Porter, 1974: 1547). Even at age nine, Porter points out, Miranda's intuition, "her powerful social sense, which was like a fine set of antennae radiating from every pore of her skin," made her keenly aware that "the year was 1903, and in the back country the law of female decorum had teeth in it" (1547).

Porter stresses that external social structures frame Miranda's responses, as when community women "slanted their gummy old eyes side-ways at the granddaughter and said, 'Ain't you ashamed of yoself, Missy? It's aginst the Scriptures to dress like that," and when "the ring, shining with the serene purity of fine gold on her rather grubby thumb turned her feelings against her overalls and sockless feet" (1547). When Miranda longs for a cold bath, fresh talcum powder, and a dress, Porter distances us from those desires, commenting that those desires related to a "family legend of past wealth and leisure" (1547). Miranda wasn't, Porter suggests, feeling inner stirrings of a desire for external femininity, simply a desire for comfort.

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After talking with my gynecologist, we decided to go through with a delivery of the dead fetus, rather than wait for a spontaneous abortion that could occur in hours or weeks. We started treatment that afternoon. Back home, I left Dave to the telephone calls and childcare arrangements while I gathered things I might need at the hospital. Reaching into the closet for my robe, I saw the maternity clothes I had just unpacked the weekend before. Methodically, I removed the multi-colored challis top I bought in Chicago when I was pregnant with Madeline, the vest my mom had made, the black slacks with their stretchy stomach panel. I folded them in a stack on the floor. Dave was startled to find me surrounded by clothes but quietly accepted my explanation, "I don't need these anymore." Together we boxed up the clothes and put them in the next room to be taken to Goodwill.

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Miranda's internal feminine desire surfaces less unfettered by external expectations when her brother Paul prepares to skin a newly shot rabbit, slits open its stomach, and encounters a uterine sack of unborn baby rabbits. While Paul reacts first with silent amazement and then with a fearful threat not to tell their father, Miranda's response is more complex. Porter leads the reader inward once again, first to the baby rabbits themselves, with a detailed description of the female rabbit's "long fine muscles with the silvery flat strips binding them to the joints," the "scarlet bag" that contains a "bundle of tiny rabbits, each wrapped in a thin scarlet veil." As Paul pulls and exposes each tiny rabbit, like an anatomist delving into secrets of the body, Miranda touches them, their "dark gray, their sleek wet down lying in minute even ripples, like a baby's head just washed, their unbelievably small delicate ears folded close, their little blind faces almost featureless" (Porter, 1974: 1548). Pulling us toward life—rabbits burrowed within the mother's womb—and death—their grandfather's bones, Porter lets the two co-exist as Paul "buried the young rabbits again in their mother's body ... and hid her away" (1548).

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Under the influence of a drug to induce labor, my body went through the painful process of delivery, and I found myself vacillating between physical immediacy and intellectual distancing. Of course, pain seared through much of my experience:

stomach straining with each wretch, legs with a bone-deep ache shifting against coarse cotton sheets, the burning twists of my uterus expelling the small, lifeless fetus that was no longer connected to my body. I hardly had room for any consciousness other than an effort to regulate my breathing, control my sobs, muffle involuntary groans. My mind raced for refuge in some idea, some memory that could order the onslaught of pain. It wasn't possible. Only after I had slipped into a morphine-induced sleep and woke covered with sweat, freed from immediate pain, did my thoughts surface. As I regained some mental and emotional reigns, I found myself detaching from my body. The early morning darkness crept in through the windows, warded off only by a small light over the sink where the nurse scribbled notes, creating an account of my body before calling the doctor for a check. I was conscious of the stillness, expectant but full of dread. I stifled the urge to scream "Stop," wanting this moment to cease, a final blip on a dark computer screen. My doctor, who had kept an all-night vigil with us even though he wasn't on call, entered the room and washed his hands quietly, funneling his usually booming bass into a gentle murmur of directions to the nurse. He patted my leg and offered a warm smile, his sad eyes betraying the truth of what he would find. He reached into my vagina, plastic-covered fingers pursing for entry, thrusting inward, expanding to glide around the slippery perimeter and to gently push the small fetus, no bigger than a small bird, out into the world.

As in any pelvic exam, I felt like a spectator, gazing through the frame of my pale, shaking thighs, knees pointing upward like sentinels securing a sacred space for the doctor to enter, push, explore, and retreat. I restrained my urge to resist the doctor's probing, but I could not obey his reminder to relax and breath. I was unable to connect what ran through my mind with the physical sensations of metal against flesh, hand into opening, pressure against a pinching cervix. So when the doctor and nurse bent more closely over the end of the bed and shifted their focus away from my body to that of the fetus, I felt confused and abandoned. Certainly they could not be looking at something unrelated to my flesh, blood, and cramping. All I had felt was a brief gushing of warm fluid that lingered coldly now on my labia and thighs. "What are they looking at?" I thought. My consciousness of the fetus was not fully developed as it would have been in the latter months of gestation when kicks and thrusts negotiated the boundaries between body and baby. So when the doctor asked if I wanted to see, I really didn't know how to answer. Standing at my left shoulder, Dave clenched my hand tightly in response, as if he could hold me back from knowledge, could ward off the pain of what we had been experiencing for the past eighteen hours. I pulled myself forward and looked past the sentry knees at what was supposed to be our third child. We gazed down at a very real body, only about 4 inches long, pinkish gray ligaments that formed a torso, arms and legs; that connected delicate feet and hands to limbs; that curved into a head that held eyes, nose, mouth, ears. And there were the budding ridges of her tiny labia. The fetus was a little girl, a little girl that had been, as the Psalmist said, knit together in my womb. I reached back for Dave's hand again as the doctor's gloved fingers prodded gently at her arms and legs, observing quietly that the spongy tissue indicated she had died several days earlier. "You can touch her, if you like," he offered. I felt Dave take a step back, but I slipped my hands under her tissue bed and

lifted her closer. She was practically weightless. With her limbs reaching out and chin tucked, she looked as if she had been dancing. I couldn't actually touch her, feeling torn between wanting to examine her carefully, like a precious unearthed treasure, and wanting to close my eyes and imagine her as my little girl. I couldn't help thinking that I had glimpsed some mystery of life that I did not have had the right to see. I did not know what to do with the image of that tiny little girl, so perfect yet incomplete, so real yet so ephemeral. I wouldn't call my feeling horror, really, more like hesitation, caution, a sense of the aweful wonder and sadness that this moment was even made possible.

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As Miranda observes the unborn rabbits revealed from within the mother's body, she encounters the tangible embodiment of the physical bonds of human existence and connects the sight with emotion and emotion with knowledge that is both intellectual and intuitive:

> Miranda said, "Oh, I want to *see*," under her breath. She looked and looked—excited but not frightened, for she was accustomed to the sight of animals killed in hunting—filled with pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes, they were so pretty. She touched one of them ever so carefully, "Ah, there's blood running over them." (Porter, 1974: 1548)

The desire to know the truth of her own body leads Miranda to act without thinking and to experience —to look, to touch. Miranda's action leads to a formless, yet very physical, knowledge, and "she began to tremble without knowing why. Yet she wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along. The very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always known just this" (1548). Miranda's trembling suggests that the body knows even before the mind comprehends. Although "no one had ever told her anything outright," Miranda assumes that Paul must already have this knowledge, and "she knew now a part at least of what he knew." Although Miranda measures her new knowledge against patriarchal wisdom, the reader sees that her knowledge is very different from Paul's, because "she understood a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form, so gradually and so steadily she had not realized that she was learning what she had to know" (1548). The relationship of the female body to creation and the fragile balance between life and death is an emotional and physical truth; what Miranda "had to know" was already in "her own mind *and* body" [emphasis mine] (1548). A female does not consciously move from body to mind or mind to body; the two form a wisdom buried deep within the layers of her body and spirit.

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It was over. The doctor and nurse gone, the fetus gone, our little girl gone. Dave

left to check on the kids. I slept fitfully, moments surfacing in my mind: that split second between the hopeful anticipation of the heartbeat and the painful knowledge of death; my maternity clothes buried in boxes; the baby's tiny arms spread outward. None of my thoughts fit in any framework I had received as a woman and mother. What do I do with what just happened, with what I had just seen? As they wheeled me toward the operating room to remove any stray uterine tissue with a D&C (dilatation and curettage), my mind was pulled into Porter's story, "The Grave." I retraced Miranda's steps through the cemetery, through the woods, two steps behind her older brother. Remembering the scene with the baby rabbits, I saw Miranda bend over the slit amniotic sac and run her fingers along their slick, silken heads, their closed eyes, their curled legs. I suddenly recognized that this had happened before; other women have seen the miraculous shape of life in the shadow of a small, unmoving fetus. Although I cannot escape the image in my mind of those fragile dancing limbs, I have found a place to lay this experience, to return to it, to remember and know. Closing my eyes, awaiting the veil of the anesthetic to fall, I decided to name the baby Miranda.

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When Porter's story ends 20 years later in a marketplace in India, nature again saturates the scene: the heat, the market smell of "raw flesh and wilting flowers, was like the mingled sweetness and corruption she had smelled that other day in the empty cemetery at home" (1974: 1548). Porter again focuses on Miranda's internal discoveries, and this time her memory serves as the burial place. At age nine, Miranda's discovery of what "she had known all along" had not led to any miraculous external change. She had told no one and the memory "sank quietly into her mind and was heaped over by accumulated thousands of impressions" (1548). At age twenty-nine, when "the memory leaped from its burial place before her mind's eye," Miranda encounters a vendor who holds up "dyed sugar sweets, in the shapes of all kinds of small creatures: birds, baby chicks, baby rabbits, lambs, baby pigs," their bright colors and sweet smell merging with the "crushed refuse of a market" (1548). As she stops, "the scene before her eyes dimmed by the vision back of them," Miranda's inner vision takes over once again, suggesting that the buried wisdom of twenty years ago, the intuition of body and mind that she had experienced that childhood summer day, could still provide an avenue to understanding (1548). But the story does not end with Miranda rediscovering a body truth. Instead, the closing image is of "her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands" (1548). She sees her brother's control over that experience, over the graveyard treasures, and over the knowledge revealed through the unborn rabbits. Her internal truth, the knowledge in her mind and body, had been suppressed, layered over by her brother's command not "to tell," the silencing that kept her from describing and sharing her own truth.

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I recovered quickly from the physical experience of my miscarriage, and my body truth was buried beneath layers of narratives I was handed for naming my grief, even though none fit what I had been experiencing. Shortly after the baby was delivered, the nurse brought me and Dave a small green fabric memento box, the hospital's gift to grieving parents. A booklet inside contained prompts for recording my experience: How had I found out I was pregnant? What had been my hopes for the baby? The nurse explained that they had photographed the baby before sending the body to the lab and would keep the picture on file. Even though I may not want the photo now, she confided, I could call anytime and ask for a copy. When the lab report indicated only that the fetus was completely normal, doctors offered us different explanations, or lack of explanations, for why a baby would die so unexpectedly. "Each day in the life of a fetus brings change and offers some new test for survival. Sometimes things just do not develop as they should." Friends bought us a tree and asked to help plan a small memorial service and tree planting in our yard. I did appreciate the hugs, flowers, and meals we received, especially the simple statements, "I'm so very sorry." But I could not go forward with a memorial service. I wanted to tell them that I didn't give a damn about symbols: names, trees, flowers, ceremonies. All of that has nothing to do with what has happened and is still happening within me, in my body. That small bundle of tissue was never a baby, only a fetus, only the beginning of a life, a cumulative bundle of cells lost from my body. How do you memorialize that?

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Porter ends "The Grave" with Paul's "pleased sober smile" as he holds the silver dove. She does not offer us an account of what Miranda will do with her vision. If the silver dove represents a feminine construction, then the story suggests that artificial constructions of feminine meaning cannot escape masculine control. Male exchanges, male exploration, male slicing open and burying the female physical experience, all are layered over her own knowledge of life's secrets and her life as a woman. Perhaps, as on that day twenty years earlier, Miranda's memory will allow her again to feel that "the very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always known just this" (1974: 1547). Or perhaps, the unarticulated truths of female experience may surface into knowledge and language. Perhaps Miranda will react to her brother's smile, representing all the smugness of patriarchal authority, as her Grandmother had, by wresting power from patriarchal hands and creating her own story. But then again, Porter's title "The Grave," might suggest that Miranda's discovery will sink again to a burial place deep within her mind and body. As a writer, Porter unearths the graves that hold her past, testifies to her own understanding and truth, abandon the gold ring and creates her own precious silver dove to turn over and over in her hands.

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When I returned to my Women in Literature class after the miscarriage, I was able to share my experience, titling my reflections "Why I do feminist criticism." I

didn't break down. I calmly read my script with descriptive details and a comparison to Porter's short story. I asserted for them my belief that I am a different person because of the women's literature and feminist criticism I study and teach. And I do feminist theory because I believe that reading and teaching from a feminist perspective can change my life and others' lives. I want to read, critique, and teach, I told them, with the knowledge that each person's experience, varied and complex as it may be, is a powerful component in the making of meaning in and from a text. Combining the personal and the textual isn't the only way to learn or to make meaning, but it can be a very powerful means of survival. By the baby's due date in March, I was ready for the tree planting ceremony beautifully and intimately led by some close friends and our parents. I put away a small pitcher dotted with delicate blue flowers that I had been filling with a miniature rose each week since the miscarriage, a small ritual that kept my healing process part of each day's consciousness.

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As open-ended as this story is, Porter's careful crafting of the story through language, metaphor, and action is similar to the beautiful silver dove, crafted as a coffin's screw head, bearing testimony to other layers of unperceived meaning. Just as Miranda held the small dove to the blazing sunlight and examined the hole bored into its center, Porter asks the reader to hold this scene to the light, to trace the layers of meaning. The burial places in this story—the grave, the rabbit's body, Miranda's intuition and memory—contrast with Paul's hunting, killing, and hiding. The artificial constructions—the gold ring, the silver dove, overalls and thin dresses, sugar sweet animal candies—contrast with natural constructions of grass, flowers, soil, rabbits, flesh. The sights and smells contain paradoxes and evoke paradoxical truths: sweet but corrupt, delightful and awful. Porter is not offering us a specific truth, except that we each contain "secret, formless intuitions in [our] own mind[s] and bod[ies]" (1974: 1548). The surfacing and sinking of inner truth offers a fleeting glimpse of one form of knowledge, the knowledge in body *and* mind. In the story's action, the two are inseparable. The fingers caked with dirt don a gold ring; fingers slip along the blood-covered body of the baby rabbit and a young girl senses the physical embodiment of desire within herself. Feet "picking [their] way among the puddles and crushed refuse" lead to a woman's memory of the limiting of her knowledge and voice. The grave as "just a hole in the ground" (1546) and Grave as symbol for the mystery of physical and spiritual truths. Body and mind, action and reflection, practice and theory are not dialectically opposed but intimately connected, thought infusing experience in unexpected and inspired ways.

With that ambiguity and process of remembering and understanding and acting in mind, I turn to my own experience. Over the past 20 years, while not lying exactly dormant like Miranda's memory of the baby rabbits, this story has been part of my understanding of the way my work as a mother is balanced with teaching and writing, of the way my body can be the source of the awesome

power of pregnancy and childbirth or the fearful powerlessness of infertility and miscarriage, of the way my desire for understanding is buried in physical and emotional experience and always, without ceasing, of the way my reading women's literature can frame the unexpected and incomprehensible moments of my life.

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