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Preface

I am sitting at the table of a small block house in the mountains of the Dominican Republic looking over Carmen's shoulder. The one bulb overhead casts a dim light on the paper on which I have written Carmen's name in big block letters.

It is eight-thirty at night. We have finished eating the usual supper at this house, a bowl of boiled roots: batata (sweet potato), rabano (celeriac), yautia (taro root). Because I have been here for the last two weeks, our suppers have been supplemented with salads, fried eggs, or hunks of queso blanco, a farmer's cheese that I always stop and purchase before I turn off the main road and climb up into the mountains. This time I have also brought notebooks and pens. During my last trip I was shocked to discover that few of the women in this moun-

tainside community know how to read or even how to write their names.

I lean over Carmen, and take her hand in mine. I tell her to relax her fingers, and slowly we form the letters of her name.

I am reminded of Carmen on the mountain as I reread the essays in Janet Sternburg's *The Writer on Her Work*. The tension in Carmen's arm, the ferocity of her need, the poignance of her large woman's hand drawing her letters with so much pressure that the paper rips—that image embodies in an elemental, gripping way the hunger that *The Writer on Her Work* addresses through seventeen stories, or testimonials, as they are more likely to be called in my Latin American tradition. It is a hunger for the word and the worlds that become accessible through the word, a hunger for the connection that comes from learning and sharing what we know, and a hunger so particular to us women for news from women who have gone farther down the road than we have gone. We want to know the story of how they did it, for there is an implicit permission and possibility that comes from hearing that story.

You can do it too.

We, women writers of my generation, certainly needed to hear that. History and tradition had told us otherwise. We needed a new set of stories and voices in our heads to replace the shushing ones that had come to us from our culture, our books, our fathers, and, yes, our mothers too. When I set out to be a writer, now over thirty years ago, there were only a few works by women writers in my literature courses that I could use as models. I was canon taught, so when I sat down to write I automatically pitched my voice to “Turning and turning in

the widening gyre,” or “Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree.”

But in addition to having no models for the writing, I had no models for the life. How did a woman become a writer? And a further complication for me, how did a “foreign” woman become a writer in her second language? How did a “minority” woman become a writer in the dominant culture? I didn’t know if it could be done. The lives of the few women artists whose work we read were shrouded in mystery or seen through the lens of a male critic. The options were impossibly dreary: To become a woman writer, you had to be: (a) unstable and end up with your head in the oven like Sylvia Plath, (b) alone and lonely like Emily in Amherst, (c) “lucky” like Mary Ann Evans, mentored by men and dressed in literary drag in the form of a male pen name and persona so that your work might be taken seriously.

At the MFA program where I ended up for one brief, unhappy semester as the only female, I was given a fourth option. At the bottom of one of my poems in a workshop, a fellow writer wrote: “Beware you don’t make it as a poet riding on the coattails of being a woman.” Huh? I read and reread the note, as if it were a sibylline pronouncement. Being a woman would help me make it as a poet? It was only later, after I had dropped out, that I realized what my fellow writer was alluding to: I could make it by sleeping around. Was that truly how women writers became published writers?

I was more than disheartened by these options. None of the above were for me. But I dug my heels in. I kept writing. As an immigrant, I had learned to survive in foreign territories.

By my early thirties, I began to seriously doubt that I could make it as a writer. Back “home” in the Dominican Republic,

my *primas* had married and were raising their children. Here in this country, my friends were settling down to more traditional or more rewarded careers. Perhaps I was fooling myself. Perhaps I had made a mistake in thinking I had enough talent or will to persist in the calling I had chosen. At a writers' conference one summer, I heard a famous poet pronounce that one could only write poetry in the language in which one had first said Mama. A cold terror set in. I had chosen this life, but it seemed that it had not chosen me after all.

What saved me was the sound of a vacuum cleaner outside my studio at Yaddo. I had won a residency at the writers' colony, my first big break as a writer. But as the precious days of that residency wore on, I was getting no writing done.

All around me I could hear the typewriters clicking away (this was before the days of computers). I desperately needed somebody to talk to. Somebody to reassure me that they had suffered similar bouts. But the rule was that there was to be no visiting other studios during the day except by invitation. I thought I would go mad like Sylvia, become reclusive like Emily, change my name like Mary Ann if I didn't find someone to talk to!

And then I heard the vacuum going out in the hall.

Outside my door, an apologetic, middle-aged woman in a T-shirt was winding up the cord to her machine. It turned out that she was part of the crew that cleaned the enormous mansion. Rather than talk in the hall and risk disturbing somebody else, she invited me downstairs to the kitchen. I spent the rest of the morning drinking coffee with the staff, listening to their stories about writers who had come to Yaddo: who was fussy, who needed a special diet, who had once stored each day's draft of a manuscript in a plastic bag in the deep freeze in case there was a fire. It was while sitting in the kitchen at Yaddo, paging

through the cook's large, rubberbanded cookbook, that I came up with the idea of writing a series of housekeeping poems on cooking, ironing, sweeping, dusting. Up to that point, my literary training had discarded such subjects as lightweight and trivial. Sitting in that kitchen, I knew that this was my subject and not the war in Troy or the expulsion from paradise. I went upstairs with that borrowed cookbook and I began to write out phrases from recipes, cooking terms, names of spices, my hand moving freely over the blank sheet of paper.

The year before I went to Yaddo in the summer of 1981, Janet Sternburg published *The Writer on Her Work*. This collection of essays by women writers reflecting on their art and their lives was a liberating text for so many women writers who, like me, felt isolated and afraid. It was a first: seventeen women laying claim to rooms of their own in the mansion of literature with stories about how they had each, individually, particularly, done so. It was the sound of many vacuum cleaners in the halls of the Western canon.

Had I known this book existed, I would have saved myself a lot of heartache at Yaddo and for many years to come. For Yaddo, of course, was not the end of my radical self-doubt; the explicit and implicit rejections from a literary world still primarily male, white, and mainstream (literature by or about Latinos was still considered a branch of sociology); the criticism from my *cultura* and *familia* who disapproved of this "bohemian" career I had chosen.

Instead of this book I did not know existed, I found an improvised version of this book—that is, I began to discover other women who were writing, who shared their stories with me over coffee in English Department lounges where we were adjuncts and over glasses of wine at MLA conferences where

we were being interviewed for the same three tenure-track jobs. Their stories gave me courage, made me feel less alone, provided me with other models and muses than the ones I had been given at school. But these stories were a trickle, one by one, and since they were not written down, I could not refer back to them when the dark nights of self-doubt came.

Then the book I hadn't known existed came into my hands. I want to say that I walked into a bookstore with that hunger writers know welling within me, a hunger for some book that I couldn't yet describe and didn't know if it had been written. But I don't remember exactly how I happened upon Sternburg's *The Writer on Her Work*. It seems now that it was always there, on the bookshelf next to my desk, where I keep the touchstone books. As I read of other women's struggles with their families, their traditions, their fears—all summed up on that blank sheet of paper, I felt like Molly Bloom at the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, turning pages rapidly, saying, *Yes, oh yes, yes indeed, ubhum, ay sí*. These stories, however different from mine, reflected and affirmed so many aspects of my own experience. Reading one after the other, the trickle became a flood, a deep affirming YES!, a chorus/coven of women who practiced the witchcraft of their craft. I felt a loosening of the knot in my gut. I was not alone. I was not locked away in a room of my own.

It was a moment not unlike the moment when my hand fell away and Carmen discovered she could write her name on her own.

Now, twenty years since the publication of *The Writer on Her Work*, at the start of a new millennium, what does this book have to tell us? Is it just a sentimental piece of history, a document of those times when women had to tell their stories in order to affirm that they could do what we now assume they

can and will do? Why do I keep reading this book and why do I keep assigning it to my young writing students, male and female?

Because the condition it addresses is still with us. Disenfranchisement is not a thing of the past. There are many Carmens on many mountains. And though Carmen's illiterate condition is an extreme, a condition that I am afraid to minimize by comparison, it is a condition that still exists in less obvious and in more subtle varieties in our psyches, in this culture, in the backwater villages and border towns of this "first world country": the struggle of women for self-expression, for enfranchisement, whether it is in writing their names or their novels. All one has to do is recall the many millennial lists of the hundred best writers of the century to realize that women are still marginal, recent entrées into the mansions of literature, and women of color are still virtually not there.

We need these stories to remind us of where we have come from and how much work still needs to be done. Indeed, many women writers are no longer willing to reside in the mansion under the old tenure. They are changing what the place looks like, putting color in the great halls. They want to write in the kitchen and to vacuum our own halls. As Sternburg explains in her introduction to the second volume of *The Writer in Her Work* (1991), there has been a subtle but significant change in the recent testimonials given by women writers. More of these women writers are "looking outward, telling more expansive narratives . . . about their engagement with the new territory that is the world." In large part these younger writers are able to do so because there was this first book, this first set of voices saying *You can do it too!*

In fact, that is why I often find myself assigning this book to my young students. The struggle to create, a struggle ex-

acerbated and transformed by the historical moment in which we find ourselves writing—how our gender, race, class play out in that particular place and time—is a struggle that every young writer experiences. Faced with the blank page, every writer feels that zero at the bone, as Emily Dickinson put it. There is no antidote for this but to write and keep writing until the work itself calms the demons inside us. And there is no more soothing balm to the writer at her work than the knowledge that other writers have experienced the same thing. The private struggle expands and becomes a connection to others.

You are not alone. It can be done. You can do it too!

There is an old Native American myth about a family of women who have tried to touch the sky, year after year, century after century, and failed. Finally, one day a young woman reaches up and succeeds. Father Sky is surprised and asks, “How did you get to be so tall?” The young woman replies, “I’m standing on a lot of shoulders.”

It is a fitting story with which to celebrate this new edition of *The Writer on Her Work*, a seminal book that has provided shoulders to many writers as they reached for pen and paper in order to touch and go beyond the borders of their fears and expand the territory of their lives.

The blank page still lies before us and the mountains are full of Carmens.

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