

Lecture I. Mean Stories and Stubborn Girls

Lecture II. What It Means to Be Free

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THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

Stanford University
May 14 and 15, 2001

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I. MEAN STORIES AND STUBBORN GIRLS

She said to me, “The stuff you write—such mean stories.”

It was 1989. The woman was a college professor at Columbia University, and what I remember most clearly was the gorgeous mohair suit she was wearing as she spoke. I had been admiring that suit, watching the way the nap of the fabric caught the light. It was not something I would have worn, but I appreciated it. It was evidence that the professor knew exactly who she was and what she had to be confident about. I had no such certainty. I had just finished my stint as a guest in her class, and though I had enjoyed myself, it had been hard work. Few of her students seemed to have read my stories, but those who had were passionate, and the discussion had gone deeper than I had expected. There had been a few awkward moments when one or another stumbled over the word “lesbian,” but on the whole the students had been sharp and revealing about their family lives, the stories they wanted to write.

I had known, though, that there was something more the professor wanted, some reason she had walked out with me. I listened as she said it again, said “such mean stories.” I stared at her face—the eyes glinting bright as she looked slightly past me. I stepped forward but could not get her to look me in the eye. When she spoke the word “mean” she emphasized it, the intonation precise at the edge of her chin. Did she mean the phrase the way I had meant it? I could not be sure. I knew little about her family background, nothing about how she saw her own life in relation to the stories she chose to discuss in her classes.

Meaner than what, I wanted to ask her. Meaner than who?

“My sister,” she said suddenly. “You remind me of my sister. She always wanted to write.” I wanted her to say more, but she only reached up to finger the lapel of her suit.

“Your sister?” I prompted.

“Yeah, my sister.” And that was all she gave me.

My life would be so much easier if everyone I met had published a memoir. It would explain all the things that get left unspoken. Best of all would be if people wore those patches Samuel Delaney invented for one of his novels—little panels that bluntly detailed genetic and social background in easily readable lines of code. Instead, I have to figure people

out by close observation and dogged patience. All too often I get it wrong. It took me years to get the mean story behind that college professor's suit, to learn just how much like me she was, and how it was she had lost her younger sister.

When I was growing up, people would start to tell a story. They'd begin by saying something like, "She was so funny. And after she had that third child, she would tell you things would just make you sick laughing." But then they would stop. Their faces would go blank. They would change the subject and never go back to that funny, passionate cousin. What happened to her, I wondered. What happened to the child? When I asked, no one would answer. It was something I had to figure out for myself. I puzzled it out piece by piece, one story building on another, until I gradually realized that cousin was one of those that went off the bridge.

I heard the bridge story hundreds of times when I was a girl—in fragments, in short one-note references, or sometimes in lists that did not get finished, and, most often, in sudden awful curses. My aunt would say, "Before the bridge." It was plain I was supposed to know what she meant. Before the car went over the side rail, before the family was lost in the flood, before the baby drowned under her mother's body, and before the cousins washed up downriver—before all that. All time was before the bridge or after. Many of us grow up with such mysteries. It was the stories my mother and aunts would not tell that were the defining events of my family.

What car? Which child? Which cousin? Did it really happen? I could not know for certain. The stories changed over time and were never fully revealed. I knew there had to be a larger story behind the ones that were told.

When I sat down to write my memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, I went looking for newspaper clippings—something to prove or disprove the legends. No one in my family could be trusted. They loved good stories too much, and they liked to make them better. I told myself that fragments that had been repeated so often had to have a core of truth. Some fraction of the real could be traced, I was sure, if I could find the evidence that predated what the family made of it.

It took a friendly newspaperman in Columbia, South Carolina, to track down the bridge story. There was a car wreck. It did go off the side of a bridge. There were three children who died, and one was a newborn

baby. The woman driving was one of my cousins, but no, she was not running from her husband. The car had been headed toward Augusta, and a cousin there on leave from the army. There was no runaway flight from a violent man. There was only a senseless accident.

No one was left alive to question, so I had to rethink everything for myself. All the drama that I had pieced out over time from hints and fractions of story had to be examined again. *He beat her up and she run with them babies.* The legend had shaped what I thought I knew. *She always swore she'd steal those children and leave his ass.* The woman I had imagined looked back at me from the stories I had written, another creature in new skin. *She was a piece of work, that girl, nothing stopped her once she made up her mind.* The heroine I had imagined grinned back at me and shrugged.

She had been trying to get discount cigarettes bought cheap at a PX. No drama in that. She had just had the bad luck to try to cross that bridge the one day in South Carolina history when it froze. The drama that had her steering over the edge blinded by tears and rage was only that—a drama, not fact. Oh, yes, there had been times she had run. There had been half a dozen times my cousin had stormed out, had raged and cried and packed up the children. She had moved back in with her mother once, gone to stay with a sister another time, slept in her car at least twice, and had her and the baby's picture made over at Sears Roebuck, with her uncombed hair still sticking straight up in back. "Oh, she was something," my aunt Grace had said about her.

Do you understand what I am saying? I am like everyone else in my family. I want a good story, I want it to mean something. I want the bridge to be the climax, not another moment of despair. I want to make sense of loss. I want glory. Oh, I want my cousin to go off the side in a flash of wild glory, not drop into the dark like a stone.

I keep boxes of clippings. I don't know many writers who don't—newspaper articles, magazine scraps, copies of letters, and even Associated Press stories I download off the net. They are my compost, my research bins. I have whole drawers devoted to men who kill their entire families. I have them sorted by the number of children. I have other drawers for women who kill. I have sorted those by whether they tried to kill their children, with subsets of those who did or did not kill themselves.

All those clippings strike me as deeply familiar. I measure my fiction

against them, always wondering if my stories are as mean as the world that shaped them. Maybe my fictions are not mean enough. Is my purpose equal to the people I portray? Do I steal the heat out of my aunt in the moment when the car headed for the side of the bridge? Does it all assume a different dimension when I make it over and tell you she had not fled her husband? There is a problem in drawing lessons of life from fiction, just as there is a problem in drawing fiction from the events of our lives. There is always a disjunction, and what I mean by my stories may not be what you take from them.

What I try to make is what I think my cousin deserved. What I try to bring to the lives I steal is significance and respect. What I demand is for attention to be paid to those who are mostly not seen, not acknowledged. In this, I am no different than any other American writer. I speak for my own. I try to be something of a voice for those I treasure. In doing that I make a connection to others who would speak for their own. The more specific and revealing we become, the greater chance we have for impact and connection. That is the great power of literature. Some days I fear that my stories are not up to the demands of the people who made me a storyteller. Other days, I simply make what I can.

Can you think about your life as a story? Think for a moment about your life as if it were a story that someone else was writing, someone like me. Do you believe you are safe? Do you believe that your life will vindicate your education, that your successes will validate the times you acted out of fear rather than reason, that your best impulses will offset your worst? I call that a sense of entitlement. It is characterized most often by a feeling that you belong wherever you are, or that you will with a little effort. I used to believe this was a sense that characterized only the rich and upper middle classes, that it was never found among my kind—the poor or the marginal or the queer. I have learned the hard way that I was wrong, that a sense of entitlement sometimes appears among those for whom there is no reason to expect it. But as a measure for the embattled, I still find it useful. I watch for it, and its absence.

I went to a very small private college on full scholarship, a national merit scholarship. I remember my terror at the freshman introductory symposium. It did not matter if we were going to study French, or math, or anthropology. For a moment we were to think about what a liberal education could mean. I remember sliding down in my seat and looking around me uncertainly. The people who looked back at me

might have been as uncertain as I, but I did not believe that. I believed they all knew what was coming, what they were doing. I thought they were nothing like me.

“You are special people,” the president of the college began. “You are the cream of your generation.” In our seats we all shifted and looked around, pleased and fearful, wanting to believe him. “You can do anything,” he said. “There are no barriers that will stop you if you only hold to your purpose. The world is wide open.”

Does that sound familiar? Are you one of those who have heard such a speech? I wonder if you heard it the way I heard it. That man said wonderful, proud things to us. He was followed by professors who smiled and nodded and greeted us by name. Their words filled me up, lifted my head, and made me think beyond what seemed my heretofore-small ambitions. The president talked about God. The professors talked about social responsibility. In our folding chairs we sat up straighter and looked around.

It was 1968, an interesting time in American history for the discussion of ethics. It was the time of the antiwar movement, the still vibrant civil rights movement, the early stages of the women’s movement. The headline on the magazines asked: Was God dead? Troops were moving into South Vietnam in record numbers. The world outside was full of upheaval, but we were safe on our little campus.

Behind everything we were to argue and discuss was that first sentence they spoke to us. “You are special people. Special.”

I did not believe them for a minute.

Oh, I did believe that I was extraordinary. But what I meant by that phrase was not what the president of the college meant. It seemed to me that my success in getting into college was tempered by my shame at how much of a struggle the attempt had been. All around me the other members of my generation were questioning what education meant, whether they should be there at all. For me there was no such question. I had seen only one chance to get out of our mildew-stained tract house and to get free of my stepfather’s storming rages and knotted fists. My roommate told me she feared she would become just like her mother, driving the station wagon to the mall and cooking the same meals over and over, going on the same vacations and laughing at the same tired old jokes at the dinner table. What I feared most was my mother’s pushed-in features and loose mouth, the gray exhausted face I would

wear soon enough if I found no way to escape it. I had worked three summers as a waitress. I had taken a second job pulling greasy mop-heads off cold steel frames to pay my way onto that campus, and I was terrified that I might not be allowed to stay. I feared being revealed as an impostor, no scholar, just another desperate waitress's daughter. I feared being sent back to my stepfather's house, and I had a very real sense of the people who would do that—the gatekeepers who would turn out over-ambitious girls like me.

I sat in those early lectures with my mouth shut tight, and my hands in fists, never realizing I was exactly the person for whom scholarships are designed—smart, determined, hard working, and ready to change my life. I believed that I was passing, and I was ashamed of myself for doing so.

Who could have interrupted that process? Who could have rewritten my story and saved me two decades of self-hatred? What would have made me know myself just like those with whom I found myself studying? Is it not exactly what a democracy wants—the lifting up of the children of the working class? Is that not the goal of a just society—welcoming to full participation those who have always felt themselves marginal and denied?

I had told the scholarship people that my mama was a waitress and my daddy a truck driver, but it was the *way* I portrayed them that was a fiction—too noble to be genuinely related to me, too fantastic to be believable. I kept my mama a waitress, but such a waitress! I made her the kind of woman who, if you left a dime more than what she expected by the plate, would run after you to make sure you meant to give it to her. The myth is ragged but clean. I made my mama so clean, she became a mirror to my own despair.

And my stepfather? That violent, contemptuous monster who had darkened my nights from the day my mama married him? I erased my stepfather, replacing him with a good father who worked two jobs to pay the bills cancer had run up on my mama's accounts. I erased the fact that he beat my sisters and raped me, that he humiliated and cursed us until we thought we deserved the names he called us. I left out the stories of all the times he stopped working and sat on the couch in his underwear, staring into space and muttering how he was going to kill us. I left out the fact that I was completely terrified of him, that it was, in fact, terror that dominated my teenage years, not the dream of an education.

I left out, edited, and rewrote our lives. Most of all I edited out the fact that when I met my fellow scholars—all those other freshman students—I hated them. I hated each and every one of them. They made me ashamed of myself—or rather I made myself ashamed just by looking at them.

What does it feel like to hate people for no real reason that you can justify, simply because their lives are not yours? I felt as if they made me hate my own life. But did they? Was it their joy that made my misery, their happiness that compounded my grief and shame? Was it their security that triggered my terror? They were not criminals, those boys and girls I so feared. They were simply living their own lives, going about what their mothers and fathers wanted for them.

For the past few years I have been living inside the story of a young woman who is about to graduate from a small, exclusive private college when she is the victim of a terrible accident that robs her of everything—language, history, talent, and skill. To write out of her, I have had to live inside her, and I have had to find ways to love her. I wonder some days at my own impulses, why I chose this story. I know that I based her on students I have had, but I know also that much of her I took from the girls I met my freshman year in college.

The year I started college was a different time, and the world was smaller than it is now for girls. But I think of the girls of my freshman class with great admiration. Those girls are the ones who went off and joined the Peace Corps or became missionaries, got married and made babies while trying to rewrite what it meant to be a wife and a mother. They did in fact become friends of mine. They were generous and kind—and it seems to me that I have spent much of my adult life trying to understand and not hate them. My ethical challenge has been not to dismiss them or sin against them as I felt I had been sinned against.

To write a good story you have to completely inhabit the people of your story. You cannot fake it. You have to climb inside and fully be someone else, all of them, even those parts you have despised or feared. You have to dream what they dream. It has been easier for me to imagine a child full of rage, a stubborn girl who fights not to be poor and held in contempt. But now I place myself in a young woman whose shames would strike my stubborn girls as minor, whose sins would not even measure on her scale. The girl I am imagining is the kind of young woman I see whenever I go to small colleges to speak or read.

Let me stop and explain something to you.

From my earliest youth, I believed two things that could not mesh. I believed my family were exactly what we were said to be—criminal, lazy, damned, and horrid. At the same time I believed us beyond any such labels. I believed us favored, blessed, strong, stubborn, and courageous. I believed we were beloved of god for what we suffered and endured—which curiously enough is a message I picked up from literature, song, and sermon. I watched the aunt for whom I was named give birth to eleven children with little help from a husband who drank too much and lost job after job, living up to the worst of the stories told about people like us. I was contemptuous of my uncle, and my aunt, but in awe of them at the same time. I believed we—my aunt, my uncle, and all of us—were stronger and better people than those who did not drink or have more than one or two children, children they pampered and adored. Somehow I believed us stronger than those for whom the way was smoothed and clear.

Is this an idea you have entertained? Is this a myth you too have believed? It is the split in convictions that runs like a seam right down the center of all my hopes and aspirations. I always felt that we were better than those who had more than us. I always believed that though we might be treated with contempt, we were tougher and stronger and more worthy than those who named us less. Most importantly, I always believed that if there were a genuinely just scale on which the human heart could be weighed, then my people would weigh out greater than those blessed with money and power and position. Has this life not given us greater, meaner challenges? Who told me this was better? Who turned these curses to blessings? Was it in my mother's words that I began to believe that we had something the rich didn't have? Or was it in the novels of John Steinbeck, the stories of Flannery O'Connor, the essays of James Baldwin, and the poems of Walt Whitman? American working-class art sustains and nourishes the children of the poor by holding up a mirror that enlarges us even as it shows us our misery.

To this day, these two ideas haunt me. I know the awful impact of poverty, the damage of despair and the self-fulfilling nature of stunted aspirations. But knowing all that, I developed the conviction that those of us born poor, or queer, or people of color, or simply different in any of the many ways this culture holds the different in contempt—that we were intrinsically better than those who had never been tested by adversity. It is no advantage to realize that as a culture we have this same

schizophrenic notion—that Americans fear and hate the poor even as we drape over them an idealized veil of awe and sentimental fantasy.

Perhaps I could ignore this conflict if I had not chosen to become a mother, but raising what I acknowledge is a frankly middle-class child, I can not afford the gloss that much of our culture puts over these issues. I want to give my boy exactly what every other mother wants to give her son—love and security and every advantage. I read him books and teach him the names of all the dinosaurs. I am buying him music lessons and showing him where on the map of the world his ancestors originated. I have given him photos of my mother and all the family to whom he is related—his dad and his other mother's family. I never lie, but there is much I do not tell him. I have not told him the bridge story, though I came close a time or two. I feel the familial urge, the interrupted story I could so easily take up and pass on.

What stops me is this: I fear to raise a child of despair. I dread to raise a boy who will hate and fear the world into which he was born.

Let me be unsparing about what I believe.

In a meritocracy, people would actually get what they earn. In a just society there would be no tricks, no lies, no compromises that favor the few over the many, no misrepresentation, no theft of the soul. In a just society, we would trust each other instead of battling always for the little chance of doing better than the one next to us.

We do not live in a just society. There are tricks and lies and misrepresentations and compromises. Sometimes the guilty go free. Sometimes the innocent are convicted. Prejudice is more common than compassion. Fear and hatred still dominate who and what people will accept as part of their lives. Not all children get the opportunity for education, or even for basic medical care. For all his innocence and talent and passion, my son may be hated by people who will never know his true worth.

How do I arm my son against that hatred, against injustice and shame and despair? How do I raise a strong, principled man in a society with so much confusion about just what that would mean? I want for my son the life lived by the young people I met in my freshman class in college—those children of the middle class who I was sure had grown up with no omnipresent sense of fear, with no secret suspicion of their own worthlessness. What I have always called a sense of entitlement is what I want for my boy.

But I wonder, I can not help but wonder, if that sense of entitlement is an advantage or a secret flaw in the psyche. I was raised on reassuring promises that as a working-class girl I had strengths and powers denied to the gently born and carefully raised. Looking at my own child, I find myself faced with new and terrible fears. What do I risk in trying to make my son more like the children with whom I went to college? What do I risk in the same efforts I am directing at my nieces and nephews and cousins, my constant encouragement that they go to college or try for better jobs? Will I steal the strength out of their stubborn pride if I keep insisting they adopt the behavior of those they have always held in contempt?

I give my son what I give you, I give him stories—large complicated stories, multilayered and sometimes difficult to understand. Sometimes I give him pieces of the story, the way my aunts gave me the story of the bridge. I know it may take a long time for him to be mature enough for the full story. No matter, I lay the groundwork for the full story.

Sometimes it seems my family has lived on resentment, survived on a diet of liquid bile and outrage. We have turned it to milk. Mostly we have done that through humor, a self-depreciating, bitter recitation of our own worst impulses. We have practiced a deliberate distillation that turns misery to vindication. We have made our worst experiences over into art.

Let me tell you the story of how I got through my last year of college, that year when the scholarships had been cut back so far I did not know how I would manage. That summer before, I worked every hour I could and tried not to spend a dime of what I earned. It was a time when you could, if you were desperate, buy frozen pot pies six for a dollar. I bought them—turkey, chicken, spaghetti pot pies. I got through workdays on three or four such little pies, spending less than a dollar on nutrition. I went off to my last year of college with watery eyes and a greenish tinge to my skin. I stepped into my first class and promptly passed out on the floor. Diagnosed with a severe vitamin deficiency, I boasted I was that rarity, a twentieth-century American walking around with an eighteenth-century syndrome—scurvy.

Who gets such diseases? A twenty-one-year-old college student can—a girl who knew even then how to tell a good story. This is how you learn to look at your own life from the outside, making misery over into story, wedding stubbornness to need. I lived off the story of my

bout with scurvy for years. I told it over and over until I had refined it to parable.

“Did you ever hear what happened to all those sailors who crossed the oceans in the eighteenth century, those who went months without fresh fruit or vegetables? They got scurvy, beriberi, or pellagra.” I would grin and nod and watch my audience. I knew how to do this, turn round the story in my own mouth. I would deliver the punch line with awful intent, say, “I replicated the experience on a college campus in 1972, went into full scale vitamin deficiency and fell over in statistics class! Oh! Talk about special! I am proof we are special.”

It is 2001. What is the lesson I want you to take from a story I have been telling for thirty years? I want you to think again about that word “special.” I want you to join me in the task I have set myself for my son and my nieces and nephews and for all the children I claim as my own.

We are special, yes, all of us. When I sit down to write out of my fictional middle-class girl, I ask myself all over again what makes a human being special. I ask what is worthy of being loved. I ask what is worthy of being admired. I ask what it is we should honor and what it is we should discard. I do so in the full knowledge of how I used my own experiences against those who were not responsible for them. I remember telling my scurvy story over and over. I acknowledge that I deliberately set out to horrify those who cared about me, that I told that story so that it would haunt them and make them uncomfortable—all the more so because I made them laugh at it.

This is one of the things a storyteller does, one of the responsibilities of story-telling, and it is not simple in any sense. The impulses that guide story-telling and the uses to which stories are put are infinitely complex—some of them not at all benign. Some of the impulses of story-telling are defensive or even destructive. I want to make it plain that I have never been comfortable with the emphasis on moral constructs in the art of fiction. I stand more with Oscar Wilde than with John Gardner. I know that is complicated by the fact that I am completely forthright about my own feminist convictions and my understanding of how my life has been shaped by growing up poor in a society that fears and hates the poor even as it mythologizes them.

I believe in moral responsibility. I believe in holding people to account for what they do. I believe that a man who beats a child is a criminal. I believe a man who breaks his marriage and terrifies his wife is

responsible for everything that comes back on him because of those acts. I believe that a woman who fails to protect her children will be haunted by her own failures. I believe that a lesbian who lies to her lover about her family because she is ashamed of them will most likely lose that lover. I have in mind a moral and ethical code, which I do not always manage to uphold in my own life, but in my writing I hold the world to the standard of that code. I put my characters to measure against it. Still, it is always my desire that it be impossible to reduce any of my work to political slogan or easy categories. And I have never found a standard—political, moral, or religious—by which I would easily condemn any single individual.

As the daughter of a family in which many of the men went to jail and most of the women were pregnant before they married, I know what it feels like to be treated with contempt for those facts. I knew what it felt like to know myself a lesbian and that I was hated for that—while feeling myself in no way hateful. Always it has seemed I have lived in communities in which we shared an ethical system by which we were able to honor and trust each other—outside the ethical system of the larger society, the one that held people like me, my family, and my lovers in contempt.

As a junior in college I read *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I don't know if that book is still read, but it resonated powerfully with the novels I was finding, the ones that seemed to offer hope to people like me. It was the discovery of the notion that the privileged might have a responsibility to the poor that began to ease my fear and shame. Was it the novels of John O'Hara that told me that or the social studies of C. Wright Mills? Where did I develop my notions of a just society? Was it my anthropology classes or the novels of John Steinbeck? Where in fact did I begin to construct a notion of justice? Was it in reading the Bible or the essays of James Baldwin?

What does it mean if our youth embrace the small in fear of what they might have to pay for wanting large? Is a nation damned when it keeps shaping its children to the small and the fearful? What is loss if our children believe the best they can hope for is the life of the walking wounded?

Can we truly imagine a world in which the children of the upper classes are raised to acknowledge their responsibilities to those less fortunate? Is that not how a democracy should work? If a country were just, and if merit were genuinely the way in which people's worth was

measured, then would it not be reasonable that the rich would give back to those who have not had their advantages? If justice were the rule, would we not treasure our most despised, nurture our less fortunate, and honor our stubborn, hard-working poor?

I do not believe this is a just society. I do believe that we are a people who yearn for justice. I believe that our institutions and laws and systems at their best move us toward greater justice. I believe in this country, in its best impulses, its most fervent reach toward justice and equality. I keep in mind all the ways our nation fails its own, but I remain hopeful. It is too tempting to dismiss those that are different from us, for me just as for those I have imagined my adversaries—the rich and privileged who always seemed to be looking down on my family from a great cruel distance. It is tempting to reduce the complicated nature of our culture to a simple system of good guys and bad guys. It is far more difficult to inhabit the shadowy territory in which nothing is so simple or so certain, and where mostly people act out of fear or misunderstanding rather than prejudice or hatred.

The things I have learned as a writer are exactly what has most changed what I believe as a citizen. The complexity that I know makes a good story is what has broadened my political convictions and opened my imagination to people who, as a girl, I feared with my whole soul. But how is a writer shaped to that complexity? How do you learn to tell those kinds of stories?

Maybe you need a bridge story, or its equivalent.

After I graduated from college, I worked for two years for the Social Security Administration—a Kafkaesque position in which my primary responsibility was to administer SSI funds, a job that required me to deny assistance to women who would sit across from my desk shadowed by that yellow-tinged terror I knew too well. Watery eyes and knotted fists defined my days. I had become a gatekeeper. Denying aid, refusing food stamps, signing women and children off of assistance—that was my respectable, middle-class job. My moral and ethical convictions derive in part from the experience of being employed as one of the people this society uses to tell other people they are not deserving of the most basic needs.

Is this what happens to us then—scholarship children invited into the world of the more privileged? Are we always going to come up against such awful moral quandaries? What is there to reassure us of our worth, to save us from hating ourselves? If all your education will mean

is that you will find yourself in such a job, hating the work and yourself, how do you survive?

This is what happens all too often to our best and brightest. We are invited into the sanctuary of education, to the citadel of the mind, and the resting place of the human soul. But once there we know no rest, no sense of safety. Having fought so hard to stand against the persistent wind of contempt, we stagger when the wind becomes despair.

These days I go on a regular basis to small colleges and large universities. I go to speak or read my stories, but I go also to look for my kind. I watch for the hesitant girls at the back of the room, the shadow-faced boys at the ends of the rows. I watch for those who flinch when I make my hard-edged jokes about poverty and despair. I watch for the grief and the anger. I look for the expression I saw on my own face that last year I was in college, and I find it. I find it all the time.

These days, I watch for it in my own family—in my cousins, nephews, and nieces, the ones I have tried so desperately to welcome into the middle class, to persuade to try for scholarships. Few of them have been willing to try. Junior college, beauty college, technical school, secretarial school, and mechanics training courses—that is where my family looks for a way out of poverty. But these last few years, I have had a few take me up on my challenges. Now my youngest sister's oldest girl has gone off to a small private college in central Florida.

My niece is gifted, stubborn, and strong. Born with birth defects that could have been a ticket to life-long idleness, she has stubbornly succeeded where others have failed. She has astonished her mother and delighted me. These days she is working her way toward a future almost unimaginable when her mother made the decision *not* to give her up to an institution that would have warehoused her for the length of her life. But she is a junior now, at that place I know so well. She has fought and endured and made funny stories and jokes out of her pain for far too long. Her voice on the phone has flattened. Her signature on her letters has grown wobbly and weak.

This is the moment when we lose them. It is the moment when I almost lost myself. I know how it works. I know the wave and how it sweeps over you, the self-hatred and contempt that almost eat your soul, the moments when you begin to believe the world is right about people like us—that we are not worth the trouble, that we are better off ignorant. I know how being told you are special can turn on you, how it can

go sour in your mouth and make you want most of all to just lie down and die.

Who genuinely believes in education?

Those of us whose lives have been remade by it believe in it, even as we know the risks.

Who is most at risk in these wonderful institutions that educate and validate our children?

Those of us who cannot say the word “special” without feeling the need to spit, to curse, or to laugh—we are at terrible risk. What can we offer our young to get them through intact? How do we nurture them, give them what will feed the soul as well as the mind?

I send my niece stories, just like the ones I offer the shadow-eyed young people who always sit in the back rows when I go to read or talk. I glorify my own, without sentiment or feeble fantasy; I try to document the worth of our lives. I send those messages out.

I tell stories about my aunts. I sing the song of our Aunt Grace, meanest woman in the family and longest lived. I tease the jokes out of our Aunt Dot with her thirteen children and one well-trained husband, who mostly did not speak for the last twenty years of his life. I tell again how the twins, Bobbie and Grace, moved through Greenville High School braced by the shoulders of their brothers, boys so dangerous no one ever dared disrespect those girls, how the boys went off to the county farm for crimes that would never have condemned boys from better families. I tell how they stood up under contempt, better than some boys stand up under honors. I remake, retell, lie a little, and try to vindicate. I am shoring up what I know is in danger. I am cadging a little space for my own in terms that will not shame anyone but those who hate us, and I do it deliberately, with full knowledge of how little it might mean in the long run.

In a world that disdains you the only reasonable response is stubborn disregard of contempt.

In a world that does not nurture you, the only sane response is to value your own—even if some of the stories you tell yourself are not as true as you might like them to be. In a world where you are always at risk, it is only reasonable to try to make within yourself some safe haven, some little space where you are valued for what you know are your strengths—the very stubbornness and bitter humor that a safer world does not value as you do.

I want to believe that there is wisdom, grace, and goodness available to all of us. I am dragging as much of my family as I can into the middle class. I am buying my son music lessons, sending subscriptions to my nieces and nephews, and giving books to second and third cousins who rarely acknowledge the gifts. My intentions are complicated, dangerous, and not certain of success. I want our lives to be easier, more valued and honored, and I do not want to lose any of what I know to be our strengths.

I love this country because of the books that fed me as a girl, the impulse toward justice that sang through them. I love this country because of John Steinbeck and Audre Lord, and Sandra Cisneros and Adrienne Rich, because of a literature that swore in a just society there was no barrier to hope, no obstruction to those willing to struggle, no wall that would block off desire or freedom or love.

In the novels of John Steinbeck mean stories happen. A man starving to death is saved only because a woman is willing to bare her breasts and feed him her milk—his daughter and the milk that will not feed the child she has lost become the promise of life and hope and compassion. What an astonishing tale, what a glorious moment of vindication!

In the poems of Muriel Rukeyser, politics is wedded to poetry and passion is made over into righteousness. In her work it is all right to love the page itself, to love writing, to love the girl, to honor all impulses. My favorite poem of hers is the simplest and in one sense the least political.

“Poem, white space, white space, poem.”

I know what I took from those opaque words—the simple insistence that I not fear the unwritten story, the unspoken tale. I know what I felt facing a white sheet of paper in the middle of trying to write the hardest scenes of my first novel, to write out of the mouth of a despairing eleven-year-old girl, raped and abandoned and full of guilt for what she saw as her own responsibility for what had been done to her. I know what that poem told me in my fear and confusion, the comfort and the promise of the words. I know the invitation it offered. I know justice is possible on a blank sheet of paper.

You can make your dreams happen. You do not have to hate yourself—not for your family of origin, nor your sins of omission. You *are* special as we are all special. More still is possible if we open the gates to even more of our brothers and sisters. Greater justice is possible if we acknowledge our common citizenship, tear down the bitter barriers be-

tween the few born with a sense of safety and entitlement and all the rest of us.

Join me in that struggle. To remake our society, we must affirm our common condition, our mutual and deeply feared connections. We must honor our most stubborn angry children. We must put our hands out to each other in the conviction that we all share the same hopes, fears, and desires—that we are all special.

II. WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FREE

When Evann Boland called and asked if I would be willing to discuss ethics and ethical questions I responded first with a joke and then with a laugh. I do not think of myself as the kind of person who is commonly asked to speak on such subjects. I had difficulty thinking I can be trusted with the territory, and that is only partly the product of growing up in a family whose members went to jail the way middle-class boys go off to college. Growing up poor in the American south in the 1950s, I had every reason to develop a conviction that nothing I did would ever be admirable or even acceptable. Growing up knowing myself an unnatural girl, not only a lesbian but rebellious, opinionated, argumentative, and ambitious, I also had a powerful conviction that I was in the deepest, most essential core of myself a dangerous person.

There is a glory in believing yourself dangerous, but it does not derive from the same qualities of character that tend to produce a strong sense of ethics or even an ability to make judgments about what is good and honorable. Growing up with a sense of being an outlaw, a member of a despised and violent class, tended to push me in the direction of greater violence, sharper resentments, and angrier expressions of outrage. How did I not become the thief I expected myself to become, or the liar, the criminal, the woman without family, community, or friends?

I wish I could give a simple straightforward cause and effect explanation, but I was raised a Baptist. I fall back on miracles more often than not. I believe there is much in the world that cannot be explained or justified, and the justifications I construct are centered more around story than around cause and effect. Story is more about mystery and people than about explanations or justifications. I believe that more can

be learned from a good story than from a structured essay or a monumental piece of theory. I am a storyteller, not a social scientist.

So let me begin by trying to puzzle out how a working-class, stubborn girl grows up to be asked to speak on ethical issues.

I am suspicious of talent and sanguine on the nature of genius. I have never been comfortable with compliments, even well-meant ones. When people come to me and tell me they loved my books or were awed by a reading I gave, my response is most often a blush and a disclaimer. "You are so wonderful," a woman said to me in Chicago a few weeks ago, "so articulate." "You should have met my mama," I responded. Then a young man asked me to read his stories, telling me he trusted my ear for the false and the self-serving. "Oh, you should have known my Aunt Dot," I told him.

Among the people who shaped me, it was bad manners to preen while being complimented—and that is a difficult ethical posture for an American writer in a time when self-promotion is seen as key to the writer's success. Humility, genuine or feigned, is rare, and everyone seems to long to be named a genius, even without a money prize to accompany the title.

This is the difficulty. I do believe in genius, in the idea that there are people who are special and different from the rest of us. I grew up reading science fiction stories about magical children who could do anything, survive anything. I took such figures as my models, as the standard by which I would judge everything I could accomplish. Magical children can do anything, learn anything, acquire any skill, or simply display talent without benefit of effort. That is the nature of magic and of genius. Genius is dangerous to those raised in a culture that inculcates a sense of inadequacy.

What is the essential difference between the middle class and the working class? Part of it, I am sure, is that those of us born poor and ashamed cannot believe that we are good enough, no matter what evidence of worth we manage. At the same time, we fear and resent those who treat us as if we are not good enough—not valuable in and of ourselves. How do you convince anyone that they are worthwhile? How do you persuade someone that they do not have to constantly manufacture evidence of their worth? How do you convince people that they are free when they have never been made to believe themselves entitled to the full rights of citizenship?

To believe in freedom, in the responsibilities and rights of citizen-

ship, you have to trust that you will not be disenfranchised without cause. For a meritocracy to function, it has to be just—the rewards have to actually come when one puts in the time and effort and hard work. When things are handed over to those who have not genuinely earned them, then the system fails. Why work hard if someone who did not work hard gets put ahead of you?

As a scholarship student at a small, prestigious college, I felt as if I had suddenly become one of the elect. There I was, invited into the preserve of the rich and the entitled. It was also painfully obvious to me, however, that my invitation was conditional. It could be withdrawn at any time. It had riders and limitations. I was a girl, a lesbian, and very nearly an atheist at a small Presbyterian college. There was another thing I realized very quickly. The more I distanced myself from my family, the further inside the preserve I would be invited. If I could, as many before me seemed to have done, erase any echo of my origins, then I might be safer—though never fully without risk. If that was genius territory, it was lined with barbs and stony paths.

Do you know the lifeboat story? I've told it before. I will tell it again. It was one of the essential experiences of my education. It was raised in our freshman orientation class, a seminar in ethical values.

"There are twenty of you in a lifeboat," the lecturer began. Then he gave the list of the twenty—women and children and grown men and almost-grown adolescents, a preacher, a doctor, a nursing mother, an elderly woman, an elderly man. The list quickly became complicated and long. The essential fact was that there were too many for the boat to remain afloat. Worse, a storm was coming. If the load were lightened, then some might survive. If it were not lightened, all would die. This was the dilemma that we were given, an exercise we were to work out together.

As you do the exercise the task set begins to seem rational. But is it? Think about this problem as if it were true and real, as if these were events that you actually must endure or survive. You in your own body must decide if other living beings live or die. You must make moral choices. If you refuse to do anything, then everyone dies. If you select some to live and some to die, then you undertake to say who is worth saving and who is not—and you will have to carry the weight of those decisions.

Of course I understand what they thought the purpose of this exercise to be. In one sense it asks people to think seriously about their role in society, about who makes such judgments and who never gets to

decide these things. If we are generous, we can say that such thinking tends toward the moral and the ethical. You define the good society by how you approach this dilemma. Choose or do not choose. Are you capable of deciding who is worth trying to save and who is not?

I understand what might have been meant by the original exercise. It was after all a small liberal arts college with a decidedly religious bent, a Presbyterian college. Back then the dominant liberal theory was situation ethics. This is the situation. Make your decisions. Accept your social responsibility. Making such brutal decisions requires thinking about the implications. Shouldn't we all be thinking about what standards are applied to who survives and who does not? In an ethical society are we not responsible for each other? The lifeboat brings this down to the most immediate and terrifying moment. Look to your left and your right—look at these people you know and those strangers. Some must be tossed over the side to save the rest. Who would you toss over and who would you save?

Is this not how the world works? Is this not, truly, how our lives are constructed? Who gets to go to school and who stays home? Who watches the babies while mama cleans houses and brings home leftover food to supplement the groceries she can buy? Who gets a scholarship? Who does not? Who gets into the drug trial for the new wonder drug that will stop the virus, shrink the tumor, keep that heart beating, those lungs pumping, make conception possible, or relieve the chronic pain? Who can hire a lawyer? Who can not? Who is pretty? Who is ugly? What is pretty? What is ugly? Who got through college on his daddy's money and his mama's ruthless campaign to get that arrest record erased? Who goes to rehab? Who dies of an overdose? Who decides? Who is responsible? Who is inherently valuable? Who can go over the side? Who will chose? I never forget the lifeboat.

These are mean questions, large questions. How we approach them reveals even more about us than how we answer them. But I am a storyteller, not a social scientist. I approach the lifeboat from my own angle.

At the National Book awards in 1992, I got to shake the hand of Ralph Ellison and be introduced to Toni Cade Bambara. They were sitting at the same table. The man nodded at me and the woman took my hand. I can still feel my giddy sense of unreality, my awe and fear.

"That quote from James Baldwin," Toni Cade Bambara said. "I had forgotten it until I saw it in the front of your book. It sent me back to the essays."

I stammered something, hesitant to speak at all. I had read *The Invisible Man* in college, but I had reread *The Salt Eaters* only a few months before. I could not quite get it in my head that I was standing there with people who had done work so wonderful. All I wanted was not to embarrass myself, but how could I say “I love your work” and not sound like a fool? I said it anyway. Ralph Ellison nodded mildly. Toni Cade Bambara smiled a small smile. All I could think was that I should have thought of something else to say.

Later as I was headed out a doorway, Toni Cade Bambara came up to me again and put her hand on my sleeve. “We should talk sometime,” she said.

“I would like that,” I replied.

The nod she gave me then was welcoming, the smile open and trustworthy. Still, it was two and a half years before we saw each other again—at a small college in New Hampshire for a gathering of women writers that Grace Paley had assembled. We wound up on two panels and did a reading together. She read from a story about some of the characters who had been in *The Salt Eaters*. I read a story pulled out of the first draft of *Cavedweller*, a prose poem about a mother’s enormous sense of guilt and shame. After the reading when the conference was winding down, I met up with Toni Cade Bambara walking toward the Dartmouth Inn, and we finally had a minute to talk.

We started out on the subject of faith and the church, an embattled sense of faith on both our parts, a difficult relationship with any church. But we had both grown up to it, and she teased me about my preacher’s cadences. I quoted back to her a few lines from the piece she had read earlier. The rhythms of the language were the same.

“We know who we are,” she said with a laugh.

We did, I thought. But I can not say now how we got onto the subject of political activism, other than it was so much a part of both our lives. It had been what we had all been talking about over the two days of that gathering. Was there any way to be a woman writer in 1995 and not be an activist? Well, of course, there was. But was there any way we ourselves could write and not be activists? Of course, there was not. It was a select group, one constructed by the very astute Grace Paley. All of us believed that what we wrote challenged every notion this culture had of who and what we were supposed to be. That was inherently political even if we did not use the usual language of rhetoric. Black feminist, lesbian feminist, community activist, cultural warrior—sometimes the

language for these categories seems grandiose, but not as large as what is meant by these labels.

Toni Cade Bambara told me she had been editing a videotape, and she didn't know when she was going to finish the book she had been writing for at least a decade. She hadn't been well this winter, she said. I nodded. I knew how that felt. I had been traveling from little college to little college, trying to write on airplanes and in hotels, always exhausted and guilty about not being home with my partner and son. Worse, I was pretty sure that the book I had started out to write was gone, and a completely different one was coming onto the page. I wasn't sure how I felt about that fact, could barely articulate it to myself, much less my editor or agent. I was able to say it to Toni Cade Bambara. We were talking as writers together, and my uncertainties were not so exceptional in that context.

It was storytelling we got onto—the drive toward storytelling, the feeling that there was no one else who would tell the particular stories we had to tell if we didn't. "There isn't," she said at one point. "Not like we do it," I agreed. "Not at all," she said. She did not smile when she said that.

For me the moment was wonderful—coda and completion to all the discussions of the weekend. The women who had read and argued and explained their own work had been passionately engaged in a way I believed writers should be engaged. It had seemed we were united in purpose and conviction, with work to do that pulled us toward the future. There was permission in that context to make mistakes, to be wrong and to go on anyway. I thought about the fragment that Toni Cade Bambara had read earlier that evening, the draft of a story she said she had not yet gotten quite right, the way she said she would get it right. She knew she would. That was a luxurious concept for me, the sense that the work was ongoing and would find its own rhythm. I wanted to believe that more strongly for myself. But it was late, and we were both tired. We would talk again, I said. Toni nodded and went on up the steps. This time I believed it. I looked forward to it.

Months later someone called and told me the news. Toni Cade Bambara was dead, of cancer, in Philadelphia. Most people hadn't even known she had cancer. I had not.

I was, of course, packing to leave for yet another small college. I sat down with the phone in my hand, stunned and grief-stricken. Had she known it was cancer that May evening in New Hampshire? Had she

even imagined she might die so soon? I could not believe that was so. She had spoken so passionately about that video, the unfinished book. I looked for my copy of *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* but could not find it. A few hours later I was on a plane and then, somewhere over Chicago, I started to cry. I had wanted to talk to her again. I had hoped someday to sit down with her for a full afternoon. There was a story I wanted to read to her, some notes I had made on her stories that I had planned to send her. There was a poem I had written when I read that story she called "Ice." There were questions I had not had a chance to ask.

Grief is a comfort when the loss is so great.

That next January I went back to Dartmouth. I wound up sleeping in my friend's basement office on a fold-out couch beneath ten feet of bookshelves. When I could not sleep, I read the titles on the shelves up one side and down the other. One-third down on the right was the spine of a well-worn copy of *This Bridge Called My Back*. I stood up with the quilt still wrapped around me and pulled it down. It had been years since I had last opened that book. This copy fell open to exactly the right page: Toni Cade Bambara's sharp and pointed comments on racism in the women's movement.

"When you leave, take your pictures with you."

I had forgotten that she had written for the anthology, forgotten how short and strong her piece was—as an introduction to the other essays and an invitation to work that needed to be done. What I remembered was the way she had looked when we read together, glowing with eagerness and passion, the way she had looked when we spoke after—exhausted but smiling. I remember the laugh with which she said, "We know who we are."

Grief is not enough when the loss is so great.

I read her short essay again, hearing in it her voice. There was that call to action, those words **YOU WORK WITH WHAT YOU HAVE**. It was something I might say. It is the legacy of girls raised to make do and make over.

There was the flat statement: "Guilt is not a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling." I curled up on the futon and nodded. Guilt gets in the way and stops us from acting when we most need to do something. I have a long list of times when guilt has gotten in my way. I read the closing paragraphs.

"Fear is a feeling—fear of losing one's power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. Fear is real. Possibly this is

the emotional, non-theoretical place from which serious anti-racist work among white feminists can begin.”

Then there was the demand to “use this knowledge” and the closing two lines.

“For we are all in the same boat. And it is sinking fast.”

The lifeboat.

Jump back.

Wrapped in that quilt in that basement room, I went right back to being seventeen years old, right back to sitting in a small chapel on the campus of that lovely little college all those years ago. The professor was at the front of the room weaving his body from side to side, laughing, saying, “The wind is rising and the water is coming over the sides. What will you do? What will you do?”

I had been overwhelmingly self-conscious and terrified at seventeen. Fear was not a theoretical concept. It was the sour bile in the back of my throat, the cramping misery in my belly. What was the right choice? Was I supposed to be pragmatic? Should I look those people full in the face? Should I admit what I was really thinking?

I was thinking, “You go over the side, I am staying.”

I was thinking, “This is my first damn time in the boat.”

I was thinking, “If they knew who I really am, they would toss me right over the side.”

There was the lifeboat—Toni Cade Bambara’s lifeboat and my own. It was a cauldron of fear and guilt and shame and hope. We don’t really have much choice about what we can write, I had said on one of those panels at the women writers’ conference. There is always desperation in our lives, more to do than we can manage. There is always more to fight than we have any hope of changing, more contradictions and complications. We are always being asked to choose between one part of our lives and another, our families and our loves, our own lives and our hopes for our lives. It is always urgent, and the water is always pouring in on us.

I had not been thinking then back to when I had first gone off to college, to that place I had won by sheer persistence, luck, and a national merit scholarship. Now I did. I felt myself back in that place, sitting surrounded by the children of the middle and upper classes, girls who had never worked waitress, boys who had never been in a fight. I had hated being asked those questions in that company, hated being asked to pretend this was an exercise. It did not matter that I knew the reason for the exercise, what we were intellectually supposed to understand. I

had stumbled into this territory. If I belonged there, then I had to think like a citizen.

Around me, the other students started making lists, determining value, choosing who would go over and who survive. I sat there with the blood pounding in my ears and thought about my mama with her cheap makeup and stubborn features, my sisters already mothers themselves and full of shadowy resentment and fear. It was plain to me how the world worked. There was no imaginary lifeboat. We were already drowning and had been doing so for generations.

I looked up at the professor. He was beaming with enthusiasm and excitement. Surely his enjoyment could not all be intellectual. Surely something else was going on. It had to be a trick question. Maybe we were supposed to refuse to do this. Maybe we were supposed to revolt. A truly moral ethical decision would be to refuse the parameters of the exercise. Maybe we were supposed to refuse to sacrifice some that others might live. I looked around at the other students, white cotton blouses and paisley skirts, blue jeans and plaid shirts—a genuine mix that I could not have predicted if my life depended on it. Who in that room would have spoken on my behalf? Even thirty years after the fact, that is a question I can not answer.

I told myself again that it had to be a trick, but I could not say that out loud. To the left and the right of me, the calculations were going on. Was a pregnant woman one life or two? Was the minister necessary? If he had been a doctor, maybe. An island, someone said. The lifeboat might make it to an island. There might need to be a new society and what would they need there? Women of childbearing age, someone answered.

What if they are lesbians, I wondered. What if the only way you will get children off those women is to rape them? I listened as those students measured out fate, hating them more with every moment. In my head the cadences of a gospel preacher began to boom, all hellfire and high righteousness. Would a just society demand that some die that others might live? Did it?

Curled up on the futon in that New Hampshire basement, I began to chew my nail. I had done the same thing in that chapel all those years ago, chewed my fingernails and refused to look up to meet anyone's eyes. In my head a train was pounding, a roar was booming, a loud angry voice was shouting.

Our fate was our fate. I knew that. No matter that there was a scale

that would measure my sisters as more important than the girls sitting all around me. No matter that there had to be some system that would value my boy cousins over those boys—boys who had never been sick with fear or made to hate themselves for the family of their birth. I bit down to the quick, to the welcome taste of blood and outrage.

That is how it works, assigning value and measuring human worth. You choose your lifeboat and you defend your right to your own life. They had given us IQ tests in eighth grade and then had made me do mine again because, as I understood all too well, they did not believe my first score. I lifted my head and fought the urge to scream. If I had let that cry out, what would it have been? Would it have been the voice of a girl in terror or a woman who did not want to die?

Put me on the lifeboat lists. I am smarter than most of the children already in the boat. I am strong and stubborn and used to sacrifice. I am motivated, do not doubt it. Do you need my test scores? Do you need proof I am worthy? What list values my qualities? I had no rich mama or handsome daddy. What list condemns me? Will I be damned for my genetic tendencies toward alcoholism and substance abuse? Let us measure what we mean by worth. Is there such a thing? Do you believe in it? How then do you justify your life? Is that reason enough to barter my salvation? Growing up knowing myself held in contempt and refusing that contempt, does that prove my worth? Does my work buy me space in the boat, passage to the country of the safe? How is it I am to begin to believe that? Why is it only some of us feel driven to justify our lives? Why is it every day of my life I have felt myself back in that chapel with the water rising around me?

I hear the question that remains. What did you do, Dorothy, in answer to the lifeboat quiz? How did you answer the question when it was put to you? Oh, I would love to pretend I was brave and outraged. I would love to tell you how I stopped the exercise, how I rebelled and stormed and cursed people who could make such measurements, professors who could so completely disregard the horror of the dilemma. But that would be a lie, and all I have, as a storyteller, is my sense of truth. So no, I will not lie about this one. I said nothing. I did nothing. When I could, I went and hid in the bathroom. I think I threw up my lunch.

The lifeboat exercise required that I throw my mother and sisters over, and I could not do that—though I believed what was implicit in the lesson, that my own survival would depend on the destruction of others. If I had been strong, I should have stood up and screamed. Throw

yourself over, I should have screamed. We will not be thrown over so easily. We will fight you and hate you and haunt your dreams forever. Measure us like stones, and we will fall on your head. Dismiss us like arithmetic, and we will count your days.

There is no lifeboat, and of course there is. The world is the lifeboat and some of us are already in the water. And yet we are in this thing together. Our world is not so small or embattled that we must become monsters just to keep a few afloat. This is what I should have said. Throw no one over. Leave no one behind. Earn your humanity. Behave as if each of us mattered—until you understand how true that is.

If I were free, if I believed myself fully a citizen of this country, perhaps I might have spoken those words. But at seventeen, I believed none of that. I was sure I was not free. I knew I was not welcome in the boat. That seemed to me to excuse me from thinking like everyone else in that room. I had the luxury of not feeling myself part of the decisions. I could hate those who would decide, and pretend that I was nothing like them, that I had no responsibility in the brutal equations going on all around me.

Freedom is the right and the responsibility to change the rules. Believing yourself a full partner in the society gives you the right to stand up and argue how that society will function. You might suggest we all take turns in the water, that we build bigger lifeboats or put more on board, or that we simply behave as if all of us must be saved or none. We could see how that changes the equations. We are free to make our world reflect our best convictions, not our most base pragmatism.

In the world as I choose to speak of it now, none of us is going down alone. We will all hold fast to each other—as I wish now I had held fast to Toni Cade Bambara that night in New Hampshire, followed her up the steps and said to her all the things I thought I would say some other time.