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Her Sweet Faith

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The University of Montana

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HER SWEET FAITH

by

Christian Marie Sarver
B.A. Smith College, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Science
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1994

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It is a basic tenet of ecofeminism that the perception and consequent treatment of women in western civilization is conceptually and philosophically linked to the perception and treatment of that entity we have defined as Nature. Specifically, Karen Warren writes that: "the connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature ultimately are conceptual: they are embedded in a patriarchal conceptual framework and reflect a logic of domination which functions to explain, justify, and maintain the subordination of both women and nature." The following thesis takes those connections as its premise: that a study of nature in the American mind will both resonate off of and elucidate a study of women in the American mind.

Our Lady of the Rockies is a ninety foot statue of the Virgin Mary; it stands on the Continental Divide near Butte, Montana. The Berkeley Pit, also in Butte, was at one time the world's largest open pit copper mine; it now stands, abandoned, as part of the country's largest Superfund Site, the Clark Fork Complex. Geographically, the two entities stand in close proximity to each other. This paper will argue that they are conceptually linked as well, that the statue serves as an example of idealized feminine values, and that those same values have been imposed—in the act of mining—on the ground which was removed to create the Berkeley Pit.

Through a discussion of cultural and environmental history, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that the treatment of women and nature—the treatment, in fact, of anything that 'culture' has come to define as 'other'—is linked, that the agents acting upon each are the same. Vernacular history says that Our Lady is the "mother" of Butte; folklore also reveals that the earth is perceived as a mother (Mother Earth). I am most specifically interested in the consequences—both environmental and social—of being perceived as female, as mother, in a culture which sanctions the oppression of women.
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Would it were yesterday and I i' the grave 
With her sweet faith above for monument

George Eliot, Middlemarch

In Eden, Females sleep the winter 
in soft silken veils 
weaved by their own hands 
to hide them in the darksom grave 
But Males immortal live renewed by female deaths.

William Blake, The Four Zoas

He who digs a Pit will fall into it.

Proverbs 26.27
A Place Prepared by God

and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place
prepared by God.
Revelations 12.6

At night, her connection to the earth—to the physical reality of this world—is unapparent. Bright and luminous through a dark sky, she looms larger than the moon above the craggy peaks of these northern Rocky Mountains. Some radiance floods her: a bright nimbus sweeping the contours of this landscape, blurring granite, fir, spruce, pine siskin, columbine, in a field of grainy light. On the edges of this space, Butte, Montana, holds itself to rock and asphalt.

If she is an apparition by night, by day Our Lady of the Rockies is more easily recognizable as herself: a ninety-foot, metal-covered-by-pearlized-plastic statue of the Virgin Mary. A gravel road cuts switchbacks across the mountains on the west side of the Continental Divide, leading to the bulldozed and blasted site on Saddle Rock which is her home. Below her is the Berkeley Pit, once the country's largest open-pit copper mine, now closed and declared a Superfund site. Butte sits at the base of what was once known as the "richest hill on earth." It is a town whose economic and
social development has been shaped by miners' tools. The enormous, abandoned shafts—marked by rickety wooden structures called gallows frames—sprouting from the midst of city blocks are telling signs of that legacy.

There are facts I could give you, tools which might help explain this woman, this mountain, this place. She was completed in December of 1985, after six years under construction. Her head measures 17' x 10'; the National Guard used an 88' Ch-54 Sikorsky skycrane to lift her; she is modeled after Our Lady of Guadalupe. She is dream made manifest: a man whose wife was dying prayed to the Virgin Mary, promising to erect some tribute if only She would spare his wife. Simply stated, Joyce O'Bill lived, and Bob's faith took form, assumed the weight and texture of fourteen-gauge steel.

The Berkeley Pit is a gaping hole, an absence of earth which does-not-fill a space one mile deep and more than one mile wide. Once a bustle of trucks, pumps, and men, it assumes a macabre serenity in abandonment. When the Pit was operating, huge pumps diverted 2.5 million gallons of groundwater daily. With the closure of Butte open pit operations in 1982, the pumps were turned off and left in place; it is estimated that they now sit under 25.4 million gallons of water.

Currently, the Pit is the lowest geologic point in the region, so all of the surrounding groundwater flows into it.
But the hydrology of the area is not well known, and the water is rising at a rate of 22 meters per year—it may eventually overtop the Pit rim, or it may drain into an adjacent alluvial aquifer, possibly into Silver Bow Creek. The water poses a problem because it is contaminated with tailings and mine waste; the concentration of metals and sulfates are thought to be thousands of times those found in uncontaminated water.

On the southern rim of the Pit is a platform. From this place, the entire Pit is visible in one, slow glance. Visitors move from parking lot to platform through the darkened reconstruction of a mine shaft; the effect is somewhat akin to a Disneyland exhibit. On one end of this tunnel, the fantastical, the unbelievable, the unreal. The object which you have come to see. On the other end of the tunnel is reality, normality, life in its proper scope. Only there is some difficulty, in this case, determining which side is real and which fantastical: a tape-recorded voice on the platform side urges the importance of preserving this place as an historical relic of Butte's "great mining past."

From the Pit, even in the daytime, Our Lady is visible. The image is striking: the outstretched hands of a virgin reaching towards a landscape which has been completely and emphatically de-virginized. The juxtaposition explains something about size, about why she is there: the magnitude of her some apt corollary to the spectacular dimensions of
this space. It is what the mind can understand—this form of restitution, making amends which strive to be somehow commensurate with damage done—and perhaps, on certain sun-turned mornings, her shadow falls just so, casts its body into and fills the hole.

Silver Bow Creek runs into Warm Springs Creek just outside of Butte. These two merged bodies flow west together, becoming the Clark Fork River, picking up smaller tributaries along the way. At the confluence of the Clark Fork and the Blackfoot, several miles east of Missoula, the Milltown Reservoir poses some barrier to this now-burgeoning mass of water, asking favors before the flow passes out of Montana and into the Lake Pend Oreille Basin of Idaho.

The Milltown Dam was built in 1907; it has been operated by Montana Power and Light since 1929 as a source of energy. The reservoir it created was declared part of the larger Clark Fork Superfund Site in 1983. For almost ninety years the dam has acted as a barrier, collecting mine debris washed downstream from mining activities in Butte and Anaconda. These sediments, accumulating in the reservoir basin, contain dangerously high levels of toxic metals, especially lead and arsenic. As long as they remain in their current position, settled in mud—biologically unavailable—the EPA feels they pose no immediate threat to surrounding communities.

Despite the EPA's apparent calm, residents of the
community nearest the dam, Milltown, have already experienced some of the "non-threatening" effects of contamination. In Milltown, in the late seventies, metal concentrations in the groundwater were so high that lawns turned reddish-brown and died when watered. Area residents complained that the aluminum siding on their houses rusted when squirted with hose water. Still, after the drinking water was found to contain one hundred times "allowable" levels of arsenic, and was therefore declared "not potable," federal officials made no connection to mining activities one hundred miles upstream, but instead pointed to some unidentifiable but "naturally-occurring" source.

Only after five years of lost documents and delayed testing—a time during which residents had to import drinking water—did officials admit that the contamination might be linked to the Anaconda Company. The Milltown Reservoir became the first site declared in the larger Clark Fork Superfund Complex.

The EPA's stated concern with the Milltown site has more to do with extremities—say the Hundred Year Flood—than with the quotidian discomforts of poison tapwater. The Hundred Year Flood, according to EPA documents, is a "hypothetical major flood event that has a one percent chance of happening in a given year or on the average occurs only in a 100 year period." Such an event would agitate the metals in the dam, and bring them back into the water column and back into
circulation as lethal agents.

Between the Berkeley Pit and the Milltown Reservoir, the entire Clark Fork River has been named a Superfund site. There are four large rubrics (under which smaller "operable units" have been classified): Silver Bow Creek/Butte Area, the Montana Pole Site, the Anaconda Smelter, and the Milltown Reservoir. In the Silver Bow Creek/Butte Area site alone there are an estimated 9,850,000 cubic yards of contaminated "rock waste," 1,250,000 cubic yards of contaminated material in the Colorado and Clark Tailings piles, and over 3,000 miles of "contaminated connected underground workings." Given this data, the accumulated weight of names is staggering: Mill Creek, Old Works, Arbiter, Smelter Hill, Warm Springs Ponds, Opportunity Ponds, Butte Non-Priority Soils, Butte Active Mine Area. The list goes on. All in need of clean up. All with their own litanies of numbers.

On the Clark Fork Superfund site, the Master Plan Work Group consists of several agencies: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Science (MDHES), representatives of local and affected communities, and the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO). This latter group is identified in EPA documents as the potentially responsible party, or PRP. The phrase 'potentially responsible party' is invariably highlighted and italicized on first mention; afterwards, PRP is just one acronym among many.
At some Superfund sites, no PRP can be identified and responsibility reverts to the federal government. In other cases—as in the early stages of contamination discovery at the Milltown site—if the contamination is thought to be "naturally" occurring, then God, presumably, is the PRP, and no action is taken to counter His divine creation.

ARCO's involvement in the Clark Fork area is relatively recent; the corporation bought the mining works from the Anaconda Company in the 1970s. The Anaconda Company had been the primary shaping force in Butte economics since the 1880s; under its sway, Butte became known as the "richest hill on earth." According to Superfund laws, ARCO—because it owns the properties currently, and because the Anaconda Company no longer exists—is now responsible for financing the clean-up of an area which has been accumulating waste for over a century, under some other company's tutelage. Perhaps the EPA senses some injustice in this fact, and that is why "potentially responsible party" is bolded and italicized. To make the public aware that some distinctions cannot be made cleanly and clearly.

ARCO obviously doesn't see itself as the most guilty entity; a four-page pull-out, Cleaning Up at the Berkeley Pit, distributed in the pages of the Missoulian, stated that "oxygen is the culprit in creating acidic mine drainage." The text goes on to point out that water flowing through ore-bearing rock will remain relatively pure, unless it comes in
contact with oxygen. The pamphlet concedes that the water in the Berkeley Pit is contaminated by the oxygen it encounters in the mine shafts surrounding the Pit, and yet there is no mention of how the shafts got there, how much time and labor must have gone into building them, and how much someone—some entity—has benefitted from their presence.

As you drive into Butte from the north, from Helena, you pass under the statue of Our Lady of the Rockies. She is hard to see from this vantage; ironically, her size becomes an obstruction, and from such proximity she is difficult to identify as anything other than 'big' and 'white,' with protrusions resembling human hands. The City of Butte has set up an interpretive station along the highway here, overlooking the Berkeley Pit, at the base of the mountain that supports the statue. A tourist stopping here would be perched between Our Lady and the Pit, though she might not know that. Even if she did look up, she would perhaps misidentify the imposing white figure towering above her. The wind blows hard through here, the ground is scraped bare everywhere towards the Pit, the mountain is sheer behind. It's not the sort of place you'd expect to find the Mother of Christ.

In her conceptual stages, Bob O'Bill predicted that Our Lady's presence on the ridge would—in addition to compensating the Virgin for her intervention in his wife's
illness—become a "very important and valuable tourist attraction for the area." O'Bill's failure to distinguish between the goals of the state and the goals of his own church raised the hackles of some citizens of Butte, as did his willingness to exploit the economic side of his religious fervor. Kalmer Stevenson, a resident of the area, wrote to the Montana Standard: "Religion is too commercialized and this project is, to me, no different than any other huge commercial installation. A 90' beer bottle would hardly be more an eyesore on the naturalness of the East Ridge."

The display at the interpretive station directs the visitor's eye outward, towards the now-abandoned Pit, where the town of Meaderville used to be. The following description of Butte is offered: "She was a bold, unashamed, rootin', tootin', hell-roarin' camp in days gone by and still drinks her liquor straight." Kalmer Stevenson's sarcasm echoes ironically; reading that sign, the average visitor might in fact be less surprised to turn around and find a 90' beer bottle than she would the Virgin Mary.

Other area residents were less cynical than Stevenson, and accepted O'Bill's faith at face value. Five days after Stevenson's letter, Rose Sullivan sent the following response to the Standard:

It's probably unsettling for Stevenson that a rough old mining town which once touted its ladies of the night as
the 'best in the West' has progressed to the point where it has chosen a virgin to be its symbolic guardian. But what can one expect from a city that has over 40 religious establishments. Sorry, Stevenson, not one is devoted to nature worship. Guess we Buttites figure that went out with the Druids.

It seems only fair to tell you that Bob O'Bill and the others who gave life to Our Lady made no mention of her as a response--antidote or otherwise--to the Pit. Certainly, they would have seen no reason to provide an alternative to an entity that had been the source of their economic viability for most of their lives. And yet, she was being built as the mining industry--the driving force behind Butte's very existence--was coming down. And she sits above an absence which most epitomizes that industry. Her presence, I think, is more than a coincidence of geography. On Christmas Day, 1985--five days after She rose on the mountain--the following letter appeared in the Montana Standard:

What with the Gallows Frames, gaping hole, scarred earth and all, Butte has more than its share of monuments to troubles past. What a refreshing idea to place a statue high above it all as a new symbol of the faith, courage and conviction of the people of Butte to survive no matter what.
A woman I talked to, who lived in Butte but was not from there, said that the people in Butte had their hearts broken when ARCO shut the mines in 1981: "But they don't act like people with broken hearts," she said, "they act like people who are waiting for God to come back and save them." More than anything, she said, the people in Butte wanted The Company—or some company—to re-open the mines; she described this as an attitude of "we'll be good. Like a pleading child." She finished by saying that people are raised not to blame God or their fathers, but in Butte "people might be more inclined to blame God than Dad." By Dad, she meant the Anaconda Company.

I have insisted, to this point, on connection; I have refused to let you consider the statue or the Pit in isolation. But this is a story about separation. Mining, at its most basic level, is an act of separation—of rock from earth, of copper from iron from arsenic, of valuable metal from dross. In metal refining you are, essentially, creating two piles: the stuff you want, and the stuff you don't. Before mining ceased at Butte, the camp had produced enough pure copper to pour a solid block the size of a football field in area and over 750 feet high. Most of this pile ended up in thin wires, stretched from the west coast to the east, tying the country together with light and sound.
The other pile, the one of stuff we didn't want, would be anywhere from 85 to 100 times that size (in the Butte mines, an average of two-and-a-half tons of material was removed for every 10-12 pounds of copper recovered), except that it is spread out along the banks of the Clark Fork and its tributaries. As is, this 'pile'—equally produced, equally refined—covers an area 1/5 the size of Rhode Island and consists of arsenic, cadmium, lead, iron, zinc, occurring at thousands of times their natural levels.

So neither pile exists in any explicitly observable form, which doesn't mean they have disappeared—lead levels in the blood of children in Butte, arsenic levels in the drinking water in Milltown are some evidence of their continued persistence—only that they are harder to discern. The ground beneath Butte is laced with over three thousand miles of mining tunnels; these 'underground workings,' laid end to end, would stretch from Seattle to New York City. The tunnels are held up by many million board feet of timber: former trees that formerly stood on hillsides in the Bitterroot Valley, the Swan Valley, the Anaconda-Pintlar range. Such things would be the most obvious remnants of mining in Butte, but they are tucked away and therefore not easily recognized.

If out of sight—as the expression goes—is truly out of mind, then it would seem that the visual cues to Butte's history are not necessarily commensurate with the weight of
displaced things. Searching for artifacts, objects that reveal some narrative to this story, what I find is that what is most visible is what is missing. The most compelling argument for change wrought in Butte is an enormous space that used to be filled: the Pit that used to be a mountain, and a mother standing alone amidst the stuff of a father's abandonment.

* * * *

On Labor Day of 1906, the miners of Butte erected a statue of Marcus Daly on the Montana Tech campus. A miner who had been given his first job in Butte by Daly remorsed that the statue had been placed such that its backside turned to the copper hill. The man argued that "in life, Marcus Daly never turned his arse on the mines of Butte or the miners who dug them." The statue was turned around.

For Butte resident Nell Jarrard, Our Lady was a perfect complement to Marcus Daly. She wrote to the Anaconda Standard that the statue of Daly stood "as a reminder of old mining days," and of the fact that Butte had always been known as the "richest hill on earth as far as minerals, mining, etc." For over one hundred years Butte was a one parent town: Daly's presence and his company were enough to sustain--his figure on campus some assurance of the viability of the copper industry. Then ARCO shut the mines. Jarrard continues
her letter: "In these world wide troubled times, we need to be showered with blessings from 'Above.'" And in this time of strife, Jarrard was thankful for "a constant reminder that She is overseeing our needs and protection through Her Divine Son."

The statue of Marcus Daly holds itself upright, arms tightly at its sides. Across town and beyond the Pit, facing Marcus, Our Lady holds her arms out--in supplication maybe, or to offer her children comfort from a father who may finally have turned his back.

This story is about separation, and the ways in which the world insists upon connection. The dirt in Butte is not inherently toxic; it was made that way through a process of separation. I want to write about a piece of earth scooped up, broken down, moved elsewhere, and made dangerous. I want to write about a flow of water which carries contaminants from one place and moves them 200 kilometers downstream. Author Wendell Berry says, "Any severance produces two wounds that are, among other things, the record of how the severed parts once fit together."

It is that record I am looking for.
Chapter Two

In the Shape of a Woman

The mouth of a loose woman is
deeep pit.
Proverbs 22.14

The chapel is small and brown, and sits high up on Main Street, edging the Berkeley Pit. Outside is a sign, in a polite and personalized cursive script, noting that the adjacent lot is "Customer Parking" only. There is no explicit statement of potential towing, or any of the usual wrongful-parking threats, but still the lot is empty on a busy street, a busy day, near downtown Butte. People obviously take the message seriously.

Originally called St. Mary's, the church was built to accommodate a parish from the town of Meaderville, Butte's Italian district. In 1952, when the Company began excavating the Pit, Meaderville was sucked into the maw, and the building was left empty, so to speak, though I can't help wondering what spirits inhabit an abandoned house of God. Does He leave when the people do, does He miss rooms where He once lived, a slant of light through a stained-glass window?

In its second life, as the physical structure of the Foundation of Our Lady of the Rockies, St. Mary's has undergone some changes. Its parishioners now arrive in cars
with out-of-state license plates, and the congregation varies every day. The hours are different, reflecting a change in the audience to whom the chapel is now relevant; it's open during the week, and on Saturdays, but closed on Sundays.

Inside, the pews have been largely removed, replaced by a gift shop, an office for making petitions, a wall dedicated to the memory of women and mothers. White, hand-written lettering on a black background, the wall lists the names of deceased women from around the world, women whose families have given to the Foundation in exchange for a place on this dull black surface. The wall's layout simulates a format common to veteran's memorials: commemorating those who have died or disappeared in combat. Author Dashiel Hammett once wrote that Butte was a place whose "most salient characteristic" was its capacity to produce violence; elsewhere the city has been described as "masculine, harsh, and violent." This tribute to motherhood makes me wonder what sense its creators have made of life and birth.

Mary is a volunteer at the Foundation. Her neat, grey curls, the gold chain holding her glasses, make me think she is near sixty. She has lived in Butte all her life. She was born in Meaderville, before it was into the maw, and when I ask her how people felt when they were forced to move she tells me, "Oh, they were upset, of course, most had lived there all their lives. But the Company paid them well."
Behind her, Louise—another volunteer and Butte native—nods assentingly. "Meaderville houses were ugly. Some people were surprised, though, in their new houses down on the Flats because their property taxes were so much higher. They didn't expect that."

Louise has been with the Foundation since its inception. She is taller, more awkward, than Mary and she looks older, though it may only be that the struggles of her life have left their marks in more visible places. I ask her how much time she volunteers at the chapel: "Five days a week." She goes on, "You'd never be able to catch me at home. I'm at a different prayer group three nights of the week."

I ask them about vandalism: a ninety foot monolith of any shape, even one less remarkable than the Mother of God, would seem to invite public comment. Neither Louise nor Mary can think of any incidents, although Mary remembers a young man who visited the chapel once. "He stormed into the building," she says, "we knew right away that something was wrong." I find myself wondering if the chapel does function, for some, as a church—as the place you would go to if something were wrong.

"Louise went downstairs," Mary recalls, "but I talked to him. He wanted to know who had put that pile of trash on the mountain."

There is no priest in the building, no confessionals; solace here, it seems, comes in the form of a fifteen dollar
donation in return for which the Lady will be lit up in honor of a person of your specification. I start to ask about the forms of consolation Our Lady delivers when Louise, leaning across a counter filled with two-inch representations of the Virgin Mary, speaks, "I feel sorry for some people," she says. "If you were a man--and Jesus chose to come into this world as a man--wouldn't you be upset if someone insulted your mother like that?"

Everything in the chapel starts with the Pit. The dome is lined with copper placards--Butte copper, of course--commemorating those who have given to the Foundation. They look like those copper postcards you can buy in tourist shops around the state. Across one wall is a plastic representation of the Pit and the surrounding hillsides. The colors are primary and bright: yellow, red, orange, and purple. Each color is differentiated with a rim of black, no shading or blending, though the piece is actually a seamless sheet of plastic, 8' x 12'. The intent, presumably, is to replicate a stained-glass window, although the effect--so self-consciously a representation--verges on parody. On an orange segment of mountain above the Pit someone has scotch-taped a cut-out--in lined notebook paper--of Our Lady of the Rockies.

I sit down to watch a video on the history of the statue--the only pews remaining in the building are here, turned sideways--and the opening scene is an aerial view of
the Pit looking big and lake-like. As the camera circles, the Pit glows under a sheet of rippled sunlight and a large male voice welcomes me, the audience, to "Butte, America." The nickname is old; Butte's citizens, it seems, have always had a developed sense of civic pride. In 1988, Butte was named, by the National Civic League, one of ten All-American cities. Butte's qualifications were many: motorcycle daredevil Evil Kneivel is a Butte native; Butte was one of the first nine northwestern cities to debut canned soda pop; Butte was home to the nation's first self-service grocery and the first modern cancer center. All of this was possible only because of the mining, because Butte was a place different from elsewhere, and it produced people who were distinct. To tell the story of Our Lady is to tell the story of those who made her, and those who made her were themselves made by Butte.

One of the National Guard officers who supervised Our Lady's flight up to the East Ridge said of the project, "Where else are you going to lift something this big and put it on an 8,000 foot mountain?"

Where else, indeed? The message is clear: She could only have happened in Butte.

I meant it quite literally when I said that everything in the chapel began in the Pit: the building itself was available only because the Pit consumed a people's home in its gaping jaws. The same Anaconda Company that built the Pit
also donated to Our Lady; the heavy equipment that moved some part of 615 metric tons of ore--turning the earth's richest hill into its biggest hole--scraped out a space on the ridge for her to stand. Because there are no windows on that side of the building, you can't see the Pit from inside; it would be easy to shut it out consciously, if you cared, or to ignore it. But this plastic wall brings inside what you might otherwise forget or not know: the water she towers over is not incidental to her existence; it is both necessary and insisted upon.

I live in Missoula, one hundred miles downstream from the Pit. On my wall I have a postcard, a picture of Our Lady, taken from on top of the Divide. The photographer must have been standing behind her; you can see her hands outstretched, the tip of her nose, and the Pit shimmering below. Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*, notes that the association of water with feminine goddesses is nearly ubiquitous in the imagery and art of ancient peoples. The pottery of old Europe, Eisler writes, is often decorated with representations of the Great Goddess towering over a body of water--the water from which She, presumably, fashioned the universe. One thousand years from now, perhaps, some anthropologist will find this postcard preserved amidst *M & M* wrappers and plastic milk jugs. I wonder what interpretation she might come up with, what this image says about our notions of femininity and power?
I am forcing a point, in suggesting that Our Lady of the Rockies is a goddess: there is every indication that most people do not take her seriously as a religious icon. And the body of water she presides over is most easily explained in economic terms. The photographer has captured a geographic irony. Still, what can be commonly assumed--documentable information--is that Butte was facing an uncertain and bleak future as she was conceived and created. And yet, she cost money to set on the mountain. The money came, in part, directly from the pockets of the men who built her. Local rumor has it that Joe Roberts laid down one thousand dollars as the first official contribution to Our Lady's fund. Donations, bake sales, volunteered labor, supplied the rest of the funding. People who had no money to pay mortgages and car insurance somewhere found $600,000 to build her. Why?

In 1895, Marcus Daly, addressing 'his' miners on their threat to strike, reportedly said:

That is your privilege in this country but remember that if you do, it will not be long until there is much suffering among the men who saved no money. When that time arrives don't hesitate to call on me. I will see that none of your wives or children suffer until the men get work again. I have been a working man and know how hard their lot can be sometimes. I cannot grant your demands because it would be an injustice to my company and to the men who
have invested millions of dollars here. Besides, I am boss and do not propose to divide my duties with you. Personally I will do all I can for all those dependent on your work.

Marcus Daly staked his reputation with the mines upon a type of interaction that historian Michael Malone has called "baronial benevolence." He was a good father. In later years, the Anaconda Company was less familial, perhaps, with the miners, but equally parental in its unequal distribution of knowledge and power. Until ARCO pulled out of Butte, there was always 'someone' there—a parent in the house watching out for things. The hole left by ARCO's absence was bigger than the combined space of the Pit and the underground workings. The men who participated in the construction of Our Lady nicknamed themselves "the men of the mountain"; one of these men, Vic Duran, said of her on the day of completion: "I love it because of what it represents. It's Our Lady and she is going to take care of me and take care of Butte."

There is another way of looking at this. Feminist philosopher Catharine MacKinnon writes of patriarchal and capitalist societies: "... exploitation and degradation produce grateful complicity in exchange for survival."

In 1985 the city of Butte worked to pass laws that would grant tax breaks to Montana Resources Incorporated. The company, owned by Missoula entrepreneur Dennis Washington,
had plans to re-open mining operations in part of the Pit. MRI's demands were few: no unions, no taxes. The sale of the mines was held up for several months; MRI refused to buy unless its requests were granted.

On December 19, 1985, two headlines appeared on the front page of the Standard: "Pilots Plan Surprise Finale for 'Lady' Lift"; "It's Official--Butte Mines Sold." The coincidence of events leaves ample room for interpretation, if you are open to miracles. Our Lady gave Butte its second chance, ushering in a new era of Butte mining. She rewarded those who put their faith in her.

Our Lady of the Rockies' faith is a tenuous proposition—her character somewhat malleable. Officially, the 'literature' names her as a "non-denominational lady figure." Mary and Louise assure me that she is not Catholic; she is a "sacred object" for people of all religious persuasions. In 1991, builders laid down the foundation for a chapel at her base—in the shape of the Star of David. Yet, when I ask Louise about the chapel—if there will be services held in it—she scoffs and shakes her head. Mary adds that the chapel will serve primarily "as a bathroom."

Outside of Our Lady's Foundation, many people in Butte will tell you that the statue is mainly a tourist attraction, and therefore non-denominational. Most are skeptical that anyone holds her in authentic religious esteem. The woman who
owns the largest antique store in Butte tells me she doesn't think people pray to the statue. "My cousin disagrees with me," she says, "but I don't know of anyone who makes prayers to her as Jesus' mother." When I ask what she thinks of Our Lady, she smiles, "You know, I never do. It's like those gargoyles on the Ben Franklin building," I nod to encourage her, though I'm not sure what gargoyles she means, "someone stole one—I don't know how you'd do that, but they did—and I hadn't even noticed it until it was gone. Maybe I'll notice her, if someone ever takes her down." She insists, again, that the statue has only secular significance, if any at all, "She's just a thing that men do, you know. She's a hollow lady on a mountain."

One can only imagine what Mary must have thought of Gabriel when he first appeared to her. How many women, I wonder, coming home to a stranger in their living room, would be comforted if he told them "not to worry," that he was an "angel" and that she would soon give birth to the Lord's son? If Mary was flustered, though, or questioned Gabriel's authenticity, she shows little sign of that in Luke's account of the exchange. Her willingness to give herself up—"Behold the handmaid of the Lord"—has been interpreted as proof of her worthiness for the task set before her. William Most, author of Mary in Our Life, says of Mary that Eve "ruined us all by disobedience" and so, in the restoration, Mary had to
demonstrate full obedience. Thus, Most notes that the more proper translation of the Greek word for "handmaid" (doule) is "slave girl," and so Mary offers "an obedient humility to balance the proud disobedience of Eve."

What I noticed first in the chapel was her heart—shiny and white and taller than I am. Mary and Louise tell me it's made of scrap metal, left over from the statue, and covered with exactly the same material that Our Lady is dressed in. I wonder what it does here—why they've pulled her heart and set it on a pedestal in the corner of the church. I ask what it's for, and Mary tells me about the slit in the top of it—right in the groove, where the two lobes come together—and that people put petitions inside. The volunteers, she assures me, read and pray for all of the petitions. She won't tell me what they say, what questions she herself has carried to Mary.

This heart makes me think of a ballot box, of Gabriel come down with the Heaven's request, stuffing Mary's heart in favor of Jesus. It makes me think of those Valentines boxes you made in grade school, where everyone had to give everyone else a valentine—every person equal to the next, every love reduced to the lowest common denominator. It makes me wonder about Mary's choices.

I worked in a domestic violence shelter, before I lived in Montana. I remember a Valentine's Day that I spent at the
shelter. In the morning I came to work, and was met at the
door by a woman whose face was so colored by bruises that I
couldn't see what her complexion would have been. I didn't
know you could hit a face like that without breaking it. It's
not typical that the women who come for shelter come with
wounds apparent. They will often wait until some lull in the
storm; they will leave while he is at work, while he is gone,
so he can't pull them back. The woman in the doorway had
obviously had to fight her way out with hands and fists. She
stood in the hallway, her arms full with pink paper hearts
and a roll of tape. "Hi. You must be the morning volunteer,"
she said. "My name is Shauna. Happy Valentine's Day."

My job at the shelter consists mostly of listening:
answering the crisis line, providing peer counseling for
residents. Often what the women tell me is that they are
lonely. 'He' is gone and suddenly they are staring into a
gaping chasm that has no sense of them. Relief at not being
hit can quickly become despair at an absence of interaction
that feels specific. The intimacy they know is violent, but
at least it feels personal. Love becomes as simple as this:
someone who wants to hurt you more than anyone else.

The correlation between love and violence is difficult
to identify. It is depicted everywhere, and articulated
nowhere. Political battles are played out in fields that are
declared to be meaningless or superfluous to a society's real
workings: advertising, pornography, the home. In Backlash,
Susan Faludi writes of contemporary trends in advertising:

The beaten, bound or body-bagged woman became a staple of late '80s fashion ads and editorial photo layouts. In the windows of major department stores, female mannequins were suddenly being displayed as the battered conquests of leather-clad men and as corpses stuffed in trash cans.

. . .Fashion ads in the same vein proliferated: a woman lying on an ironing board while a man applied a hot iron to her crotch (Esprit); a woman in a straightjacket (Seruchi); a woman dangling by her legs, chickenstyle, from a man's fist (Cotler's-- 'For the Right Stance,' the ad read); a woman knocked to the floor, her shirt ripped open (Foxy Lady); and a woman in a coffin (Michael Man).

After Our Lady was built, she sat disassembled in a junkyard for several years, waiting for a ride up the mountain. When she was finally transported, the helicopter made six trips--each time carrying a horizontally-sliced section of the statue. There are pictures of her in these phases of construction: a woman dismembered in a junkyard; a woman's head dangling by thick wire cables from beneath a helicopter. These photographs, distributed in visitor propoganda, are an advertisement as well: "Come to Butte," they say, "the world's greatest mining town. Come see our tribute to women and mothers."
I went to a college of 2,500 women. The biggest weekly mail delivery was clothing catalogs; huge piles of them arrived at each dorm almost daily. I have sat in rooms with women looking at these catalogs; the prevailing commentary is invariably towards the deception inherent in the fashion/advertising industry: "I could buy this dress/coat/skirt/blouse, but I won't look like she does." Such, after all, is the point—to have the lifestyle, the body, the hair, the identity, presented in the pictures. The clothe's allure, the industry's success, hinges on this deception—convincing the consumer that the image projected is not only attainable, but desirable and necessary. The recognition of failure—that you won't look like the model—becomes reason to berate yourself for difference rather than reject the proferred item.

You could say to women, "buy the clothes you like; ignore the ads." You could say, "leave your husband if he hurts you." But everywhere the world prescribes a notion of femininity that is specific and narrow; everywhere the world says you must starve yourself, bind yourself, wear bruises, if you want to belong, if you are truly female. If advertising depicts the apogee of a society's goals and ideals, then the culmination of the well-lived female life is a death violent and black. The violence implicit in the ads Faludi details is reflected in the faces and bodies of the women at the shelter—the images of the world are inscribed
upon real flesh. The woman in the coffin hovers everywhere.

Mary is one of a very few women in the Judeo-Christian tradition exalted to the status of myth. She is rewarded for specific behaviors: for emptying herself of personal gain, so that the Lord could use her body as a vehicle through which to enter this world. Because she is both human and divine—and therefore had experience confronting the perplexities of this world—she is often used as an example of proper human conduct. Harriet Beecher Stowe, in a study of the private lives of women in sacred history, says of Mary's participation in the life and death of Jesus: "this entire absence of self-seeking and self-assertion is the crowning perfection of [her] character."

When Our Lady of the Rockies was built, the Reverend Jim Moe, of Immaculate Conception Church, took her ascension as an opportunity to educate his congregation on the proper ways of persons. Ignoring Joe Roberts's insistence on her secular nature, he wrote to the Standard, just days before she was assembled, that:

The real appropriateness of Mary was in her openness to the Holy Spirit. She was willing to do so much in her and through her. In Mary we have the beloved model of openness to the spirit so complete that she received the fullest revelation of God's love even into her womb and home.
Butte's Catholic community had cause to worry from Reverend Moe and others who insisted that Our Lady's "resemblance" to the Virgin Mary was more than 'skin' deep. As she was under construction, the local diocese stated publicly that it was not associated with the project. The Reverend Edward Hislop expressed concern that so much time and money was being put towards this endeavor, when Butte was suffering with such high unemployment and poverty. He acknowledged the potential that she be interpreted as a Catholic monument, and was concerned that many of the area were not "of the faith the statue represents" and yet it was going to be placed in a "highly public area." Finally, Hislop wondered if the East Ridge hadn't "been dug up enough"?

The road to Our Lady crosses state land. Some faction of Butte's citizens felt, like Hislop, that the area had been torn up enough and that Joe Roberts and his crew should not be allowed to use state land for private interests. But the statue sits upon a site held as a mining claim by a Butte family, and Montana law says a private individual can use state land if such is necessary to develop his claim. Joe Roberts used this argument to defend himself against those who objected to the statue:

Once you have your claim, no one can stop you from building a road to your claim. That's mining law... You
have the right to go over state lands to get to your claim. So don't let anyone tell you that their land is off grounds if can secure a claim up there [on the East Ridge].

His words must have sounded familiar to those families who had lived in Meaderville, who had been told by the Company that their homes would be no impediment to the Company's claim to the richest hill on earth.

The men who made Our Lady are not, among themselves, in agreement as to the true nature of their creation. Joe Roberts said of the completed fact of the statue:

Those of us who have contributed to Our Lady of the Rockies have no illusions about the statue. It is only pieces of sheet metal welded together to symbolize love and motherhood. It is not something to worship. But we hope it becomes an object of respect.

Tom Vega perceived her in more functional terms: "It has been an inspiration for the city and a morale booster for our union." Leroy Lee, the man who wrought her figure from sheets of steel, had difficulty maintaining a professional distance. In his 'biography' of Our Lady he names her first as a "ninety-foot statue resembling the Virgin Mary," though later
and throughout the book he refers to her affectionately as "Mary."

Partially, this hedging has economic roots: Our Lady was transported to her mountain home by a National Guard helicopter staffed by federal employees on taxpayer time. Rumors in Butte have it that the Lady's ride was never paid for. Because the federal government, technically, cannot support any one religious organization, her eligibility for the ride would have been jeopardized by any explicit reference to her as the Virgin Mary. But to name her as a tribute to women and mothers makes her as all-American and secular as the *Pledge of Allegiance*.

Still, it is difficult to ignore Our Lady's Catholic shadings. She is, after all, modeled from Our Lady of Guadalupe. For this reason, perhaps, questions of her appropriateness sometimes take the form of theological debate. One reader of the *Standard* suggested that, to be fair, her builders should also consider putting a statue of Martin Luther on the Continental Divide. Another reader questioned her as a symbol, arguing that it would have been "much more appropriate . . . to have a 'Christ of the Rockies.'" He is referring to a statue of Christ in the Andes mountains of Brazil. The letter goes on to ask, "Surely Montanans could have given as much to honor God's Son as our South American brothers did?"
The Bookley Pit is a "head shop." I'm not sure what that is, exactly, but Molly mumbles "drug paraphernalia" as we walk through the doors. I had thought 'bookstore' by the name, and there are books inside, under the headings: "war," "horror," "thriller," "westerns," and "romance." One wall is 'papered' with backcopies of *Hustler* and *Playboy*--collector's items, judging by the price. In the center of the room is a rack of painted leather jackets; the space is circled by glass cases full of tubular objects with holes in them.

The man behind the counter offers me a book of matches. "We don't advertise on t.v.," he says, and I notice "Bookley Pit" stamped on the matchbook cover. Don't or can't, I am wondering. I didn't know it was legal to sell most of this stuff.

"Well she's the ugliest thing I've ever seen," he says, when I ask if he knows anything about the statue. "Have you ever been up to her?" I shake my head.

"She looks like Bronco Nagurski in drag. If you took pictures of her and sent them all over, this place would be the cross-dressing capital of the world."

I don't know who Bronco Nagurski is, although the name has a rather lovely onomatopoeia to it. Sensing my ignorance, the man tells me that Nagurski was a football player, "the ugliest one you've ever seen."

He believes the statue is a scam, that Joe Roberts took money and equipment and ran. Now, Roberts lives in a huge
mansion. I wonder if anyone in town was suspicious, if Joe Roberts suddenly built himself a mansion in the midst of a depression?

"Oh, he didn't a new house. People like that, they've always got some scam going. He's always lived in a big house."

Oh.

"The worst thing is, she died."

Who died?

"They came up with some scheme about saving some guy's dying wife," he must mean Bob O'Bill, and I don't know if Joyce O'Bill is dead or not. "They took all that money from people, and she died anyway."

I wonder if Joyce's death is necessarily proof that Our Lady was a failure. Joyce's cancer, after all, was diagnosed in 1978. How long would she have had to live to give credence to Our Lady? Moreover, I wonder if the statue's relevance to Butte really has anything to do with Joyce's life?

Sitting behind his counter, he is surrounded by the *Penthouse* wallpaper—women looking out through the pushed-up shelves of their breasts. I remember that I read somewhere that the man who oversaw Our Lady's construction put a thirty-four inch bust on the statue because it was his wife's chest measurement, and so the only breast size he had any experience with. He and the other builders reported getting a lot of laughs over "that part of the statue's anatomy."
The Bookley Pit man tells me his mother loves the statue and goes to see her every year. He, himself, has never been up there. I ask what he personally thinks of her, "They could have made her prettier. She's the ugliest madonna I've ever seen."

But what does he think of the fact of her, does he object to her presence, lit up and floating above Butte at night?

He smiles, "Oh, she's o.k. She's a tribute to women," from beneath his halo of airbrushed female bodies, "and I love women."

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"We penetrate her entrails, and seek for treasures... as though each spot we tread upon were not sufficiently bounteuous and fertile for us," wrote Pliny (A.D. 23--79), protesting mining. His feminization of the earth is typical, of his time and into the present, that we think of the earth as a female body: Mother Earth. In The Death of Nature, Carolyn Merchant argues that the perception of the earth as female--as mother--was, in the time of Pliny, a reason not to mine. Because metals were mostly concealed "in the depths" of the earth's "womb," says Merchant, people believed that "the
living earth in her wisdom . . . ordained against the mining of metals." Thus, the imagery with which a people explained the world to themselves functioned as a moral and ethical guideline for their interaction with that world.

I've been reading mining journals lately, and I've learned about expanding mine shafts: "a winze has been sent 350 feet from the breast of the present tunnel." I know how to refer to a large deposit of metals: "a big body of glittering ore." I know that in the tunnels you may encounter the "face" of a crosscut, the "breast" of a tunnel, the "belly" of a stope. I know what to do if the body resists—"the object of attack is two ore bodies pierced by the tunnel"—and the similarities between mining and suicide: "the crosscut has several veins, but we have only opened one of them." I see some continuity with Pliny's words: that the act of mining is an act of entering someone else's body.

The poet Ovid (A.D. 7) has this description of mining: "The rich earth / Was asked for more; they dug into her vitals, / pried out the wealth." Into this century, writers, miners, and scientists have preserved the gender-typing of Pliny and Ovid's time, though mining's 'characters' have been re-drawn. In a poem called "Mineral Ode," from an 1890 issue of The Engineering and Mining Journal, a miner meets a potential new mine: "Ah she was fair, as she stood there / Gently to me inclined; / Her hanging head, just tinged with red; / Her foot so well defined." Mining historian T.A.
Rickard describes prospecting methods with these words: "Thus in various ways the cover under which Nature hides her metallic treasure is penetrated by the prospector." Wolfgang Paul, in *Mining Lore*, writes: "How many of the old mining men have sunk their shafts single-handed--always in the hope that some day she will open up in depth?"

There is more. A poem from a Butte miner called *The Shaftman*: "Don't you know Jack Onkalo? / He's the man who makes her go / If your shaft be dry or wet / He can sink her, you can bet--." To open up a new tunnel, miners drill holes that are packed with dynamite. When the dynamite explodes, the rock is fractured into pieces that are shoveled away and taken to a smelter for refining. This procedure, setting off the stick of dynamite, is known colloquially as "tapping her light." Miners, when talking of their intent to delve into the earth to retrieve metals use the slang phrase "ya gotta do her."

I had a writing teacher once, who told me that any well-told story is constructed around its nouns and verbs. The adjectives, he insisted, are diversionary: fancy paint on plywood. I want to know the story I am writing, so I make lists of the nouns most repeated in mining lore, journals, and histories: face, chamber, breast, foot, vein, belly, womb, body. The attendant verbs I list as well: sink, drill, penetrate, open, cut, split, strip, bite, blast, laid. In *Nature's Body*, Londa Schiebinger traces the ways in which
Victorian sexual politics influenced scientific discoveries of the age. She writes: "It is possible to distinguish two levels in the sexual politics of early modern botany—the implicit use of gender to structure botanical taxonomy and the explicit use of human sexual metaphors to introduce notions of plant reproduction into botanical literature." In this way, "unarticulated notions of gender structured Linnaean taxonomy," and thus the taxonomy "imported into botany traditional notions about sexual hierarchy."

In December of 1993, the Mattel Corporation celebrated 'Barbie's' thirty-fifth birthday. Corporate spokespeople were thrilled that Barbie had kept her "girlish figure" (and thus her popularity) all these years. Executives also were excited about recent additions to the Barbie clan: for instance, the new native American Barbie, with her slightly off-white complexion, her long dark hair, and her beaded headband. Despite such diversification, however, this party was for the 'real' Barbie, the blond one. In honor of the day, Christian Dior designed a dress, and Mattel hired France's most expensive hair designer to style Barbie's tresses. After the job was done, the hair dresser said, "I loved doing her. She was so easy."

Millie is worried about her nine-year-old daughter, Georgina. It is noon, at the shelter, and several women move in the kitchen, in various stages of lunch-making. Millie
found Georgina the other day, playing with dolls. The female
doll, Barbie, was screaming at the male doll, Ken: "I'm
leaving. I'm going to the shelter, and I'm not coming back."
Millie wants Georgina's life to be easier; she wants Georgina
to play child games, and not worry so much about "adult
things."

Some things I notice about the shelter. The kids watch a
lot of television and movies. The boys like Teenage Mutant
Ninja Turtles. I watched the turtles movie with a young boy,
Daniel, one morning. During the show, he ran upstairs and put
on a soldier's camouflauge outfit and a plastic knife, and
imitated the antics of the 'turtles' as the movie played. The
plot is predictable: a woman is traumatized and saved,
although in a nineties variation she is an 'independent'
career woman. Another film the boys like stars Steven Seagall
as an 'eco-hero.' Through a series of explosions, shoot-outs,
and one-night-stands, Seagall saves the wildlands of Alaska
from a marauding oil corporation run by men. The
environmental twist poses as novelty, but the plot is
relentlessly familiar: the earth replaces the woman as the
object of 'his' salvation. The basic gender dynamic does not
change: men are active, self-determining; women are inert,
mostly, alternatively being captured and rescued--providing
opportunity and justification for male violence.

Millie is native American. Georgina's Barbie, like most
Barbies, is blond and blue-eyed, and an unlikely physical
representation of any real woman. Similarly, the games Millie wanted Georgina to play are unlikely. She wanted Georgina to imagine dates, ice-cream, and movies with 'nice boys.' But Georgina has seen little of that in her life, and imagination is, if anything, a faculty for helping us to survive the world. It does not come of thin air, and its metaphors draw mostly on the empirical facts of life. Perhaps Georgina was wise, in playing games that would prepare her for the life she might have. There are assumptions inherent in the doll Georgina was playing with: you should be white, alluring, plastic. The designer's words echo; Barbie's most salient characteristic is that she is "easy."

That the imagery of mining is highly sexualized and unassumingly violent, then, is hardly surprising: the perplexities of our lives with each other become metaphors for our interactions with the world. The most crucial of human encounters, those between lovers, between parents and children, are re-enacted, symbolically, in mining. The roles prescribed, like those amongst ourselves, are rigid and gendered and dangerous: "Can you drill where the rock is tight? / Where the ore is black and the quartz is white? / Where every inch you drill's a fight? / It's a test of manhood."

The earth, when behaving properly, when giving of her bounty freely, is praised for her compliance. She is a good
woman. If she is less free, if the ores are difficult to extract, she is a wench. Even the best of deposits can be fickle, as demonstrated by Angus Murdoch's description, in *Boom Copper*, of ores on Michigan's Keewenaw Peninsula:

"Nature was unusually generous when she deposited her copper on the Superior shore lines, but, being female, she did change her mind on occasion." And when she was 'bad', she was very, very bad: "The virgin metal, however, proved a deceitful wench, and it was some time before mere males could comprehend her vagaries."

In geology, the surrounding an ore body is called the 'matrix', from the Latin root *mater*, which means womb. Within the matrix, a particularly pure vein of metal is referred to as a 'virgin.' An especially large and generous deposit of minerals is a 'Mother lode.' In the early 1900s a Butte poet and miner penned the poem *Professional Care*, ruminations on a collapsing mine shaft: "So we need a doctor to come up and sew / Ma Nature's womb up, cause we're rarin' to go."

I would go so far as to suggest that there are two Mothers in Butte: both the statue, which is clearly named, and the Pit, which is perhaps best described as an "unarticulated notion." Butte identifies itself as a community especially attentive to women and mothers, which raises some interesting questions. I spoke with a woman who works at a domestic violence shelter in Butte, and she told me that Butte--contrary to public perception--has one of the
lowest overall crime rates in the country. Its rate of violence against women, however, is statistically higher than other cities of comparable size. Also, she said that violence against women increased in the late seventies and eighties—as the mines were closing, as the tribute to women and mothers was going up.

There are similarities between the Lady and the Pit, having to do with expectations. The question is not perhaps what we ask of an icon of the Virgin Mary—I don't want to argue whether or not Our Lady is truly the Virgin—but rather what we think of the female body. When Our Lady was finished, one of the men said, "It's going to come around once in a lifetime and you gotta do 'er." I wouldn't argue that he is being specific; only that he is using what he knows, mining, to explain a new experience to himself. The phrase "do 'er," is a regional colloquialism, used frequently and casually. That it recalls the activity of mining is significant, though, not only because it establishes some, however flip, connection between the Pit and the statue—as female bodies—but because it also establishes some ideal of what is perceived as an appropriate response to the female body: you gotta do 'er.
Chapter Three

The Potter's Field

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners.

Matthew 27.1--7

Driving I-90 along the Clark Fork River, the first time, I was struck by nothing. Between Butte and Deer Lodge, the colors are muted—greys, tans, beiges. Vegetation is sparse; the trees that grow, near Anaconda especially, seem squat and stunted, their limbs held tightly to their bodies. Between mountain ranges—the Flint Creek on the south, the Garnet on the north—the terrain is flat, like a floodplain, although you might forget, as I did, the water. The river sometimes disappears—no splash of green, no swale of cottonwoods calls its presence.

I grew up west of the Rocky Mountains, and so I should have some notion of 'typical' for a western Rockies river
drainage. But I am by nature somewhat tragic, and so when I 
drove this stretch of land, I didn't register an apparent 
emptiness as remarkable. Instead, I saw a dramatically 
impacted place and thought 'desolate.' I thought 'God's 
Country.' It's what you expect of the West after all--dry, 
hard, sparsely vegetated. The sort of place that carves 
lines, deep and indelible, in your face. I have, at times, 
imagined myself the subject of a Dorothea Lange photograph: 
my calico dress, face streaked with dirt, fingers long and 
bony. I have, at times, found such notions comforting.

It's hard to know exactly what changes wrought on this 
landscape can be attributed to mining. After reading 
Superfund documents on the Clark Fork Site, I look at the 
squat trees near Anaconda and think of tombstones. I am more 
inclined to notice mountainous black slag piles, or the 
whitish metal salt coating pastures where cattle graze, or 
the highway sign reading "Warm Springs Settling Ponds." I try 
to reconstruct an image of the Clark Fork Valley 'as it was' 
before mining, although I know that even without the Anaconda 
Company the drainage would not look now as it did in 1840: a 
river is by definition a changing entity. Of its own will--if 
it's allowed--it will turn and bend and swell outside its 
channel banks; the waters will leave and come back, the 
valley will shape and be shaped by the river's flow.

If I had been born years earlier, if I had first come to
Montana with oxen, and children, and a cedar chest of coarse linen, then perhaps the Clark Fork would have appeared to me as it did to a Jesuit priest in the 1840s: "In no part of the world is the water more limpid or pure, for whatever may be the depths of the rivers, the bottom is seen as if there were nothing to intercept the view." Or I would have noted, as one miner did, that "the altitude provides for it [Butte] an atmosphere pure and sweet and beneficial to the last degree."

But if I had come only thirty years later, already I would have seen signs of mining. James A. Garfield, who would one day become president, wrote in 1872: "The beautiful river has been permanently ruined by mines; and has been for three years as muddy as the Missouri. Before the discovery of gold it was as pure as any mountain stream could well be." Butte author Mary MacLane, near the turn of the century, described the landscape around her hometown this way: "the long, sandy wastes, the red, red, line on the sky at the setting of the sun, the cold gloomy mountains under it, the ground without a weed, without a grass-blade even in their season--for they had years ago been killed off by the sulphur smoke from the smelters."

In 1890, the Anaconda Standard ran a story about the disappearance of "nearly all the vegetation in town [Butte] and on the surrounding hillsides." The citizens, the paper reported, were having a "general commiseration" for the four surviving trees in town. In part, the missing trees had been
called upon as cogs in the great mining machine. The miles of tunnels being dug required miles of timber to hold them up. Also, wood was used as fuel for smelting copper and to build miners' homes. In the 1890s, Marcus Daly's Montana Improvement Company was sending 80,000 board feet of timber per day from the Bonner Mill, one hundred miles down the Clark Fork, into Butte.

Trees and vegetation were sacrificed, as well, to air and soil contamination. Along the Clark Fork, where mine wastes were dumped, "vast areas of the floodplain became contaminated wastelands (slickens) where no plants survived and the ground was encrusted with bright blue and green copper sulfates." As early as 1917, citizens noticed dramatic changes in the riverbed near the mine workings:

A trip through the region affected by the tailings presents a very interesting picture. Before their advent the soil supported the characteristic flora of this district which is still seen outside the tailing areas . . . flourishing willows line the little streams while grasses of various kinds, the wild rose, and clover among other things grow abundantly . . . altogether a typical mountain valley. In contrast, among the tailings the willows in places stand back dead for thousands of yards at a stretch while at others they have an unhealthy appearance. . . . Over extensive areas no plant
life at all is to be seen.

Seventy years later, the contamination still affects the area. In a 1990 study, "Hazardous Wastes From Large-scale Metal Extraction: The Clark Fork Waste Complex, MT" geologists Johnnie Moore and Samuel Luoma write that: "Today soil contamination visibly affects vegetation and cropland over an area of at least 300 km² surrounding the Anaconda smelter site."

Some botanists believe that the replacement of evergreens by aspens on the slopes around Butte and Anaconda can be attributed to the fact that aspens, as deciduous trees, shed their leaves annually, thus losing a year's accumulation of pollution. Evergreens, which keep their needles for several years, may be at higher risk in areas of pollution because their bodies accumulate toxins that "may discourage growth."

If I had come to the Clark Fork as early as 1840, with the first white settlers, when the hillsides were still tree-covered, I would have been late to the story of human dwellings in the area. The Salish, the Kutenais, and the Pend Oreille were all living in the Clark Fork and its tributary valleys by the 16th century. Many tribes passed through the main drainage--it served as a major travel route--and Indians visited the upper valley to hunt and gather materials for
tools. Native American place names give some clue to how the valley must have appeared then. Near present-day Deer Lodge, deer collected in large herds, attracted by the minerals of a series of hot springs. A natural monument, a mound resembling a beaver lodge, was located at this spot, and the Snake Indians called the valley "It soo en car ne," or "the lodge of the white-tailed deer."

As the Clark Fork nears present-day Missoula, where the Milltown Dam is, the mountains on either side of I-90 pinch together. For a short stretch, the river is hemmed in closely by steep mountains, which break away past Mount Sentinel and Mount Jumbo into the wide and flat Missoula Valley. The Salish word for this bottle-necked canyon is "Nemisoolatakoo" or "at the water of surprise." Folklore has it that the site, now called Hellgate Canyon, was a favorite ambush spot of the Blackfeet tribe. The Blackfoot River joins the Clark Fork here, at the Milltown Dam; it was once known as the "Cokhlarishkit" River, the "river to the road to the buffalo." In the Missoula Valley, Rattlesnake Creek flows down to the Clark Fork; its Indian name means "place where the bull trout are." Further upstream, Silver Bow Creek was "bull trout village."

Silver Bow Creek was given its current name by a miner who thought its ambulations looked like a "silver bow" shining in the moonlight. The difference in naming reflects a difference in perception, or desire maybe. The Indians
thought fish were the crucial fact of the creek; the miner was there in search of shiny metal. Also, the creek may have had few fish left by the time the miner saw it. Beginning in the 1880s and until the 1970s, untreated mine waste water was dumped directly into Silver Bow Creek. As it runs through Butte, the flow was and is still today called 'Metro Storm Drainage.' A 1970 study of the water determined that Silver Bow's macroinvertebrate population—a factor commonly used as an indicator of stream quality—was virtually absent. Without macroinvertebrates, the fish community has no food.

Because it flows into the Clark Fork, Silver Bow Creek contamination becomes the larger river. Montana rivers of similar size and habitat type to the Clark Fork typically support 3,000 to 5,000 trout per kilometer. Biologists estimate that trout densities in the Clark Fork rarely exceed one-tenth of that number, and that in some stretches the figure drops below 80 trout per kilometer. During torrential rainstorms, the force of water on slickens lining the river leaches out metals onto the Clark Fork. The river has run red, at times, with the weight of these metals. Massive fish kills have been recorded as a result of such rainstorm episodes; they were happening as early as 1890.

The Indians of the Clark Fork held fish in high regard. Among some of the tribes it was customary to eat a fish without breaking any of its bones. After consumption, the fish's skeleton would be laid, intact, back into the river.
This practice, the tribespeople believed, was a means of insuring more fish in the future. This makes me think I may have misunderstood the slag piles, black and bare, piled along the edge of the Clark Fork. Maybe they, too, are an offering: a body consumed, the skeleton laid out as a ritualized form of gratitude.

He said that he didn't have a problem with abuse, because men who abuse their wives hit them for no reason, and he had a reason. I don't know if she believed him; in the short time I knew her, her response to most stress was to repeat the phrase "the Lord works in mysterious ways." He had put her in the hospital numerous times in the ten years they had been together. They had four children, all daughters. She left because the two oldest girls had told a daycare worker that "Daddy" hits "Mommy," and "sometimes he kicks us." She was afraid Child Protective Services would take the children; she was going to stay away until he was "better."

He was, not uncommon among men who hit their wives, solicitous after she left. He wanted her back; he loved her; he was only trying to help her be a better person. Shelter residents cannot have contact with their abuser during their stay, cannot give out the shelter's resident phone number. The crisis line--because the number is public--and the volunteers staffing it, sometimes become the conduit for the relationship. He called the crisis line several times, to
reach her. I never spoke with him myself, but other volunteers told me the messages he left: that he needed to see her, that he knew what was best for her, would she please call. He was polite, always.

I can't imagine, I am afraid to imagine, what it would feel like to sleep next to a body that you had made bleed, that you had used as a repository for all of your fury. In the times that his touch put her in the hospital, it was he who delivered her bruised and bleeding self to the emergency ward, who explained her clumsiness to the hospital staff, who took her home and put her bandaged body under white sheets. I wonder if her caressed her, then, and if touch exists on a continuum—if the difference between love and hatred is only the amount of pressure applied by a lover's hand?

If the land around Butte is altered by mining activities, Butte is the locus of the contamination. The following description was written in 1912:

To one approaching the city the general appearance is most desolate. Bare, brown slopes, burnt and forbidding, from which all vegetation was long ago driven by the fumes from the smelters, rise from an almost equally barren valley. The city lies at the base of the slopes. Within it and dotting all the hills about rise red mine buildings, which with the great heaps of gray waste rock
from the mines form the most conspicuous feature of the landscape . . . heaps of waste are everywhere present.

Copper King William Clark noticed the smoke that his industry produced, but he seemed relatively untroubled by it. His complacency may have had something to do with the fact that he spent most of his time in a penthouse in New York City, and didn't have to breathe the air he generated, or maybe he really believed the words he spoke publicly: "I must say that the ladies are very fond of this smoky city . . . because there is just enough arsenic there to give them a beautiful complexion, and that is the reason the ladies of Butte are renowned wherever they go for their beautiful complexions."

Perhaps Mr. Clark was reflecting his times in thinking a small amount of arsenic, even if dangerous, was merely the price one paid for beauty. Beauty, of course, is hardly a benign concept, and in some way Clark's words are an ironic and incisive comment on prevailing cultural attitudes. In Backlash, Susan Faludi documents the price women have paid, physically, to conform to societal notions of physical attractiveness:

Antiwrinkle treatments exposed them to carcinogens. Acid face peels burned their skin. Silicone injections left painful deformities. 'Cosmetic' liposuction caused
severe complications, infections, even death.
Internalized, the decade's beauty dictates played a role in exacerbating an epidemic of eating disorders.

Perhaps Clark underestimated the amount of arsenic hovering in Butte. The richest ore deposits in the Clark Fork area contained up to 80% copper, the lowest as little as .2%. Arsenic occurred at levels ranging between four and 18%, which means that some Butte ores contained as much arsenic as copper. As the copper is smelted, the arsenic is refined as well, and goes up as smoke into the air, or runs into tailings ponds, or sits in slag piles on the riverbanks.

Responses to the arsenic were mixed; a not uncommon one was death. In the early 1900s, Anaconda Company smelting operations were transferred from Butte to a larger facility in the nearby town of Anaconda. Butte's air began to clear, but within months of the inception of smelting operations in Anaconda in 1902, outbreaks of arsenic poisoning occurred in livestock over an area of 260 km. Moore's study documents one ranch, 20 km downwind from the smelter, that lost 100 cattle, 800 sheep, and 20 horses during the first year of smelter operation.

Smelter smoke was linked as well to failures in human health. Madeline, a prostitute living in Butte near the turn of the century, wrote in her autobiography: "the sulphurous atmosphere of Butte precluded the enjoyment of open-air
exercises." Between July and October of 1890, there were 192 deaths in Butte; 36 of these were ascribed to "breathing related diseases." A physician was quoted in the Anaconda Standard saying:

... it is impossible to cure either pneumonia or typhoid fever without pure air. For recovery the lungs must have pure air, and the smoke is of course suffocating. It is the opinion of good physicians that but for the smoke several, if not most of those sick with pneumonia would have recovered.

Between 1898 and 1902, with technological advances, the Butte mines were doubling and tripling copper production. In those same years, the number of respiratory fatalities increased by 100 percent.

William Clark may not have believed his declarations about the salutary effects of arsenic. I think it more likely that he was being sincere in the following 1907 address to the U.S. Senate: "In rearing the great structure of empire on this western hemisphere, we are obliged to avail ourselves of all the resources at our command. The requirements of this great utilitarian age require it. Those who succeed us can well take care of themselves."
I wonder if William Clark anticipated the degree to which future generations would be "taking care of themselves" in the wake of his empire-building. In reading about clean-up efforts on the Clark Fork Superfund Site, I notice that all of the figures enumerated are multiples of millions: $32.33 million to clean up with one plan; $52.77 million with another; 2.2 million cubic yards of tailings at the Butte Reduction Works; 2.49 million gallons per day flow of contaminated bedrock groundwater to be contained. Mr Clark would have been impressed with the size of it all, perhaps, and with the degree to which his legacy has become physical and tangible and not easily forgotten.

Around the Anaconda Smelter, the earth still grapples with the residues of mining. As late as 1978, the smelter was emitting, daily, 700 tons of sulfur dioxide and 30 tons of metal-laden particulate matter. As noted earlier, these emissions had at various points been acutely toxic—leaving cattle and people dead, and slopes barren of trees. But the effects of contamination are not always so conveniently discrete. A 1975 study of the area noted that "trace metals may not only affect organisms directly (i.e. via toxicity) but they also seriously impair or interfere with ecologically
important processes."

And so, because trace metals inhibit seed germination and root and shoot growth, contaminated areas display a lack of vegetative cover that leads to soil erosion and dessication. Thus, the smelter is surrounded by "severely denuded areas [that] may remain barren for years, if not for centuries." Local plant communities die and are replaced, if at all, with species resistant to high metal concentrations; community structure is altered.

The organisms that facilitate biological degradation are known as "decomposer communities." Because they function to release and produce nutrients, they are essential to an ecosystem's persistence. In forests near Anaconda, decomposition rates seem to be remarkably slow, indicating some problem with the decomposers. Scientists have noted places where:

... litter layers were discontinuous and restricted to the immediate area just below the crown; they were also often very deep (7--20 cm). In addition, no decomposing layer was distinguishable, nor were visible fungal mycelia common.

Elsewhere, Natalie Walsh noted that communities whose plants showed high concentrations of copper and sulfur were also those communities that were "most recently established,
least well-stocked and least developed"; these sites had as much as 70% ground without vegetative cover, while sites of similar habitat type outside the range of contamination had only 14% open ground. On exposed ridgetops in the near-by Anaconda-Pintlar range, Walsh found that plants were "susceptible to effects of phytotoxic fumigation even though the vegetation has evolved mechanisms for surviving in naturally severe environments."

Of her study in the Anaconda-Pintlars, Gael Bissel concludes that:

Smelter pollution has long been recognized as a major source of serious declines in surrounding vegetative communities. High sulfur emissions generally destroy much of the local overstory vegetation, particularly conifers, and often many understory species. Gradual accumulation of trace metal pollutants in soils further inhibits the revegetation of many plant species. The persistent toxicity of trace metals, combined with the forementioned loss of sensitive overstory and understory species, eventually, leads to severe soil erosion, particularly on steeper slopes. Consequently, there is little normal vegetative cover around most large or older smelting facilities, even after pollution reduction or cutbacks.
This last sentence is perhaps the most troubling: at some point, the composition of a thing is so altered by contact with another that it cannot return to itself, even if the source of contamination is removed.

Geologist Johnnie Moore believes that most studies of the Clark Fork area have failed to comprehend the extent of contamination, especially with respect to secondary effects of pollution. He attributes this tendency to the longevity and omnipotence of the Anaconda Company in Montana: "Perhaps because many of the secondary problems are historic, the present generation may view them as part of the 'normal' terrain, failing to recognize their origin in activities as much as hundreds of kilometers away."

I met Casey the first morning I worked at the shelter. We watched Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles together. Casey's mom Julie was twenty-one—four years younger than I was. When she left Casey's father, he called the nursing home where she worked and threatened to kill everyone inside if she didn't come back to him. The home's administrators asked that she take time off, until the matter was "settled." She had to come to the shelter because her friends were afraid he would turn his fury towards their homes, children, lives, if they offered her haven. I am learning how commonplace such economic and social isolation is for many women, and the ways in which his power pins her life like a moth to a felt board.
When I met Julie, she was planning to be married within the month; she was agitated and wanting to be away from the shelter. The pervasive discourse of abuse—which feels supportive when the women first arrive—can become oppressive, especially if there is light visible in the crack under the door. The confidentiality, the strict rules, the stories and tears shared, become a stigma, and the women are often determined to define themselves against their shelter experience. In training, the coordinators warned us that we may see former residents in the grocery store, or walking in our neighborhoods, and we should expect that they won't want to talk to us.

Casey and I spent a large part of that first morning staring out the window. For safety reasons, the children are not allowed to play outside, although the shelter has a large, fenced-in yard. Casey told me how much he loved walking in the woods with his father, especially when they saw birds. We watched robins, chickadees, finches, and he described the sound each would make if we could have heard them through the glass.

Casey was five years old when I met him. In his short life, he had already accrued a file thick with multi-colored documents. He had been abused, physically and sexually, by his father when he was three. His mother also suspected that his uncle—his father's brother—had molested him. I know that because I read the file; now, anyway, Casey doesn't bear
any external emblems of his strife. But I fear for his life, and the choices he has been given. I've read the statistics— I know that almost 90% of abusers were themselves abused as children. The connection is not so direct—many people who were abused do not grow up to abuse others—but I can't help but think that Casey's perceptions of "normal terrain" must affect his ability to identify terrain that is not normal.

When I came home, after that first day, after birdwatching, I walked into my bathroom and vomited in the toilet. I took off my clothes and stood naked beneath the shower while the water was hot, then tepid, then icy and sharp. In my head, one phrase, simple and unremarkable, hummed like a prayer: he's only a little boy.

You may think there is no connection between smelter waste and a woman beaten. You may think cosmetic surgery is nothing to do with pulling metals from the earth, that I am trivializing the horror of a small boy's life by comparing it to a forest that can't grow back. But I can't ignore an element common to each: that what holds these lives together is a gaze that seeks to take each of them apart.

Desire, I think, can be a force most pure and real; Susan Griffin writes that the true meaning of desire is that "wanting leads us to the sacred." And yet, the "breast-rounded hill" of Butte was desired, and now it is gone; a woman is so much wanted by her husband that he kills her so
that no one else may have her; a town that loves women and mothers has unusually high rates of domestic violence. Our wanting goes awry; we use the same word—desire—to express both love and hatred. Judas betrayed his Lord with the most intimate of gestures—a kiss.

If we look at a mountain and see only copper, then eliminating the mountain doesn't create an absence we would notice; if we look at a woman and see someone who 'could be' beautiful—if we think the most important thing about her is the silhouette of her body—then removing her face to give her a new one seems a justifiable means to the only true end. If a man looks at his wife, or his son, and sees only himself and his needs, then the bruises he leaves on their bodies do not seem at odds with the love he professes to feel for them. The wanting is partial—the copper but not the earth, the body without the soul, a child's innocence but not his life pure and sweet and whole.

I don't know which way the trajectory works: if we are willing to abuse our own bodies, our children's bodies, because we are innured to the disruption of the earth's, or if the earth's dismemberment comes after we have acclimated ourselves to human suffering. If we think the two are distinct, are little to do with each other, the world shows us otherwise: a study on mice in the Anaconda area determined that resident mice are accumulating cadmium and arsenic in their bodies. As a result, the mice are exhibiting "sub-
lethal" effects of cadmium poisoning: liver disorders, kidney failures, hypertension caused from thickening of the small- and medium- sized renal arteries, gross cellular and tissue lesions. In areas of contamination, mammals are often studied as an indicator of possible deleterious effects of pollution on humans.

Incidence of human mortality from "serious disease" has been unusually high in the Clark Fork Complex. Between 1959 and 1972, Silver Bow County was among 100 counties in the nation with the highest disease mortality rates for people aged 35--74. Between 1949 and 1971 the death rate in Butte from non-cancerous disease was the highest or among the highest per capita of any city in the nation. Average adjusted mortality rate due to trachea, bronchus and lung cancer among white males in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and North Dakota between 1950 and 1969 was 25 deaths per 100,000; deaths from these diseases occurred at almost twice that rate in Clark Fork sites of primary contamination.

It is a long standing tradition in mining that women are taboo underground— the female body of the earth, like other female bodies, has been defined as a specifically masculine realm. For this reason, one may expect mortality rates in mining towns—even for disease—to be higher for men, because males would have more direct and longer exposure to the debris of mining. But studies reveal that the risk of exposure in the Clark Fork Complex is not purely.
occupational. Between 1970 and 1979 cancer mortality rates in women were statistically greater than the norm in the nation for women. Overall cancer rates in Butte women were in the highest four percent in the nation in this period.

One thing seems clear: the body we are altering, the body whose death we mark daily, is our own.
Chapter Four

**Giving Water**

one who gives water will get water

*Proverbs 11.25*

Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the processes of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them.

*Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1*

"They can't get inside you," she had said. But they could get inside you. "What happens to you here is forever," O'Brien had said. That was a true word. There were things, your own acts, from which you could not recover. Something was killed in your breast; burnt out, cauterized out.

*George Orwell, 1984*

Jim Scott, of the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Science, is a large man. He's from Texas, which is obvious from his belt buckle, boot-cut dress pants resting on a shiny pair of cowboy boots, and his accent. I am sitting next to Mary Kay Craig, of the Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Coalition, and she tells me that Jim really plays up the "Texas stuff" at these public meetings. "He's trying to be casual," she says, "in an intimidating sort of way."

Mary Kay wears hats. Tonight is the first time I've met her, though we've spoken on the phone, and she tells me she
identified me, in this room full of men, by my hat, which is brown wool with a dark velvet trim. "My friends and I have a group," she puts her hand on my arm, "and we wear hats, because no one does any more, and they're lovely."

I would guess that Mary Kay is in her early sixties. She has dark, spirally curls that she lets fall around her wide and pretty face. She is wearing a tan skirt, pleated and made of raw silk, a blouse bright with wildflowers, and white 'walking' shoes. She seems an unlikely candidate as a "raging environmentalist," though I have heard much about her unwavering, sometimes fierce, commitment to "clean-up-not-cover-up."

Mary Kay and I are here, at Montana Tech, for a public meeting on the proposed plan to clean up the Mine Flooding Operable Unit of the larger Silver Bow Creek/Butte Area Site of the larger Clark Fork Superfund Site, which includes the Berkeley Pit. The meeting is sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency, Montana Department of Health and Environmental Science, and the "potentially responsible party," the Atlantic Richfield Corporation. Together, the agencies have come up with a series of "possible solutions" to clean up the Berkeley Pit. This meeting is intended as informational—to help the public understand varieties of solutions, as well as the reasoning behind the "preferred alternative." Of thirty people in the room, there are no more than five women.
To allow underground—and later open-pit—mining in the Butte area, groundwater was lowered by a pump located in the Kelley Mine Shaft, west of the Pit. When mining operations ceased, in 1982, pumping was discontinued. The Pit, now rife with the debris of mining, began to fill. Scientists estimate the water now swirling inside has a pH of 2.5, a level comparable to that of the fluid found in the human stomach. Aluminum, arsenic, cadmium, copper, iron, lead, sulfate, and zinc, have been found "in elevated levels" in the Pit's water. These particular contaminants are troubling because they exhibit both "carcinogenic and toxic characteristics"; the "potential receptors" of this carcinogenic and toxic material are "humans, aquatic life and waterfowl."

Russ Forba, of the EPA, is the first speaker tonight, after Jim Scott gets everyone to "settle down." Forba is a tall man, but slight, and his voice is quiet. His job this evening is to deliver a site overview, so that the 'audience'—the public—has some common idea of which problems the Butte Mine Flooding Operable Unit Proposed Plan intends to address, and which it considers not relevant. "It is not our objective to drain the Pit," he says immediately, in case anyone here is expecting miracles.

Despite its alarming size and toxicity, the Pit is in some ways one of the simpler problems to be dealt with in the larger Clark Fork Superfund Site: it has a rim, and seems
therefore containable. The Pit's borders make it a relatively comforting proposition—the water inside has the appearance of a thing imprisoned. For the EPA, the Pit is problematic not so much because it is toxic, but because it may not be static. The Pit is estimated to be filling at a rate of five million gallons per day, and while it is remarkably large it is not infinitely deep. Long before the Anaconda Company began its monumental shoveling endeavor, water moved through this valley towards the Clark Fork basin. The cessation of mining, and consequent shutting off of the pumps, though, does not mean that the water will return to its previous flow patterns. Some crucial balance has been thrown off, and the systems which transport water effectively, safely, have been disrupted; the flow has become unpredictable and therefore, with regards to recognizable forms of life, dangerous.

The concern with the Pit is that the water will reach what the EPA calls the "critical water level," which is the point where water that now flows into the Pit begins to flow back out. Set loose across the landscape, this fluid—called "pregnant solution" once it mixes with water in the Pit—will presumably 'impregnate' clean waters with its toxic flow. For the Pit, the critical water level is 5,410 feet. At current in-flow rates, if no action is taken, the water would reach this level by the year 2015. The EPA, MDHES, and ARCO—for the purposes of devising a clean-up plan—envison two "hypothetical discharge scenarios" whereby water would leave
the Pit: that contaminated water will discharge into the alluvial aquifer; or that water will overflow the rim of the Pit, and run into the surface water flow. Neither scenario is "ever expected to occur."

Water enters the Pit in three ways: bedrock aquifer flow, alluvial aquifer flow, and surface water flow. Because part of the Pit is currently being mined, the surface flow—which comes mostly from an area called Horseshoe Bend—is presently being pumped and partially diverted. Horseshoe Bend right now puts 1.5 million gallons a day into the Pit; after mining operations cease it would contribute 2.4 million gallons per day. The surface water flow is the only inflow that human endeavors expect to control.

In the Butte area there are two groundwater sources—a bedrock and an alluvial aquifer—and the Berkeley Pit intersects both. The bedrock aquifer, made up of older and denser material, has a flow approximating .07 million gallons per day. This figure is enhanced by the underground workings, because the tunnels act as drain galleries, collecting and transmitting water. During the time when the Kelley Shaft was operational, the bedrock aquifer yielded as much as 5.7 to 7.2 million gallons per day. The bedrock aquifer is higher in elevation than the Pit, and its gradient increases concentrically away from the Pit—which means that the Pit acts as a sink for that aquifer's water. Currently, the bedrock aquifer contributes 2.49 million gallons per day to
the Pit, or 49% of the inflow.

The bedrock aquifer is problematic because of the nature of the rock; the same forces which made mining profitable—high metal concentrations—make living dangerous. A Risk Assessment done on the area says that:

the bedrock . . . is a metal-rich ore body. Under oxidizing conditions (i.e. when oxygen-enriched water comes in contact with sulfide minerals in the underground workings) an acidic solution is formed. The acidic solution contains elevated concentrations of dissolved metals. The mine workings excavated in the bedrock provide large conduits for the flow of acidic solution towards the Berkeley Pit.

Russ Forba, addressing this flow, acknowledges that, again, his agency is stumped. "The contaminated bedrock aquifer is being written off," he says. Pushed to define his terms, "I take this to mean the mined areas." I remember that there are three thousand miles of underground tunnels, in addition to the Pit, that make up the "mined areas." Most of the city of Butte sits atop of and next to these tunnels.

Although federal and state regulations require that water in the aquifer be brought within specific levels of contamination, Forba notes that these requirements will be "waived" with respect to the bedrock aquifer, because "we are
not able to meet them technically."

The EPA's position on water purity resembles army triage—some entities will be allowed to perish in order that resources will be channelled towards those entities that can "reasonably" be expected to survive. In the Butte Mine Flooding Operable Unit, the agency is focussing its concern on keeping the contaminated bedrock aquifer from spreading to the alluvial aquifer. The alluvial aquifer is made up of sedimentary deposits sitting on top of the bedrock material; it is younger, more porous, rock than the bedrock aquifer. Hydrologically—originally—the aquifers are unconnected, though they may be linked, now, through the Pit and the underground workings. The alluvial aquifer is of concern because it directly supplies Silver Bow Creek, and the drinking water of downstream residents.

The proposed plan is vague in its insistence that the two aquifers are separate. The argument hinges on the shape of the "inward gradient": that as long as the bedrock flow is towards the Pit, the contaminated mine water is "being contained." To keep this gradient directed inward—to keep the Pit below critical water level—surface water, the Horseshoe Bend flow would be diverted through Yankee Doodle Tailings Pond. Because of "uncontrolled" groundwater flows, the Pit itself would be pumped as well, when its water level exceeded 5,410 feet. This water pulled from the Pit would be
treated and discharged into Silver Bow Creek.

This type of management is know as "in situ," meaning that the contamination is left on site (in its current situation), to be managed—pumped, drained, decontaminated—in perpetuity. It reminds me of cleaning my room, when I was a child, throwing a tangled ball of toys, clothes and books under my bed, and pulling the bedspread low on one side to cover the mess. The assumption is that we understand all of the connections, that we can keep the aquifers separate, and that water will enter and exit the Pit only through prescribed routes.

Kyle Scott, a hydrology student at Montana Tech, tells me that, in actuality, the geology of the mined areas is not very well known, and what information we do have is complicated by the extensive tunnels. He thinks that it is "unscientific" to assume that the water in the Pit is sealed off. Even more troubling, he says, the plan makes no provisions for deep monitoring wells—which means that the monitoring system would not necessarily detect seepage below certain depths.

The Clark Fork watershed drains a basin of about 22,000 square miles; this basin receives approximately 33 million acre-feet of water per year from rain and snow. 33 million acre-feet is enough water to cover one-third of the state of Montana under one foot of water. Of this water, 16 million
acre-feet—roughly half—eventually gets to the Clark Fork river; the rest evaporates or is used by plants.

Groundwater moves through the Clark Fork aquifers at an exceptionally fast rate—ranging from three to sixty feet per day. Because of this, the water is especially clean. The same factor which contributes, normally, to the health of the system means that, in the event of contamination, toxins would have an especially fast and direct transportation route. 83% of the water in the Missoula Valley comes from the Clark Fork. If the proposed plan is wrong—if the bedrock and alluvial aquifers aren't now or don't in the future remain separate—then the flood released will be large and heavy and fast.

By law, the parties responsible for clean-up of a Superfund Site must do a "baseline risk assessment" to determine the "potential future human health and environmental risks associated" if no remedial action is taken at an area. This "no-action" alternative is not an option for the Pit, involved agencies are clear; as soon as a viable plan is selected, it will be put into action in the "negligible amount of time" of two years. The delay in action is not a health hazard, however, because all of the discussion of risk is, at this point, hypothetical: "The future ingestion of potentially contaminated groundwater or surface water is the route of exposure considered for
humans."

The plan, which is so vague in its discussion of potential and future threats, has, buried within it, threats which are real and measurable. EPA's cancer risk range for Superfund Sites is from one in 10,000 to one in 1,000,000 additional chance that an individual may develop cancer over a 70-year lifetime. The "target risk range" is one in 10,000—one person out of 10,000 could develop cancer as a result of a lifetime of exposure to the site contaminants. The cancer risk figures in Butte don't meet the target risk criteria; they currently range from two people in 1,000 to six in 10,000 developing cancer over a lifetime of exposure.

To measure "non-cancerous effects," of pollution, the EPA has devised a "hazard index," which reflects the degree that chemical contaminants might cause "poisoning, burns, irritations and/or other health problems." A hazard index higher than one is considered, by the EPA, to be potentially dangerous. For all "receptors and exposure pathways" evaluated in the Butte area, and especially for arsenic and cadmium, the hazard index exceeded one, which the agency interpreted as a sign that there is some indication of "potential future and adverse effects."

Lead exposure is another concern in Butte. For lead contamination in Superfund areas, the EPA has deemed that it is acceptable to have 95% of the "exposed population" with a blood-level below ten micrograms per deciliter. The risk
assessment showed that if the alluvial aquifer (elsewhere called uncontaminated) were used as a drinking water source, 51.7% of the children would have a blood-lead level greater than ten micrograms per deciliter.

If water in the Berkeley Pit reached and ran over the Pit's rim, the resulting solution--streaming through backyards and basements--would exceed chronic water quality control levels by 59,000% for zinc and 173,000% for copper. And yet, the plan says that hypothetical discharge scenarios are "never expected to occur," that threat is "potential," and danger is "considered," but not real. Russ Forba says that clean up requirements at the Pit and in the bedrock aquifer are being waived as technical impossibilities.

This last statement seems highly ironic in light of what technology has already done in Butte, and the lengths to which human endeavor has been, in the past, willing to go. C.F. Kelley, former president of the Anaconda Company, said in a 1955 speech that the Company would, in the future, continue to follow its policy "of never standing still--of never running out of ore--of never ending our search for new resources and efficient methods." In the pursuit of money, technical difficulties were set aside. Later, as the mines closed, the people of Butte found somewhere the money and the willpower sheer and pure to move trees and rocks and slabs of steel, and put a statue in a place most people would consider impossible to walk to. What treasure, I wonder, came down the
mountain with them, what hunger is assuaged by her pearly visage?

And when the carrot before our nose is life itself--when the glowing treasure is the dark red humming in our veins--we are hesitant and unsure; we pull back from a fervor we call excessive. We speak, or let others tell us, of technical impossibilities. Our Lady of the Rockies was built because Bob O'Bill feared for the life of his wife who was dying of pancreatic cancer.

Jim Scott is concerned with appeasement. As a representative of MDHES, he is at the meeting to explain why the agency responsible for human and environmental health has ok'ed the current plan, which entails leaving water in the Pit, and assumes that no water will leave through the bottom or the "connected contaminated underground workings." His strategy for mollifying a belligerent crowd is to preface all his comments with the statement, "I hear your question." He appears, in fact, to hear very little.

A man in the front row asks of Jim: "You always tell us you're concerned with our safety but now you're telling us it's not safe but you're not going to do anything about it."

Jim is cool in his response, "I understand your question," but he has to be careful. His answer must account for exorbitant expenditures--must admit a degree of contamination that justifies such large amounts of money--
without jeopardizing his support of a clean-up plan many consider ineffectual. Jim stands back to explain why action is essentially, but not immediately, necessary. "We are not now in a threatened position," he pauses, looking around the room, "but that's going to change."

One aspect of controlling the Horseshoe Bend flow is diverting the water the Yankee Doodle Tailings Ponds to decontaminate it before sending the flow through Silver Bow Creek. Such action leaves behind a poolful of highly concentrated and contaminated sludge that, should it ever relocate, would be highly toxic. The man in the front row is concerned about keeping this 'parturient' matter contained. Jim Scott is confident in his answer: "In the event of a reasonable maximum earthquake event," by which he means an earthquake of 6.5 to 7.0 on the Richter Scale, Jim assures us that the dam that holds the sludge back "simply won't collapse."

I can't help wondering about Jim's plans for those seismic events which fall outside his parameters—the ones he would perhaps define as unreasonable, irrational, hysterical.

Jim is unwilling, however, to consider the possibility that his plan fails to insure the safety of area ecosystems and humans. His reasoning is two-fold. First, the dam is almost big enough to play a football game on top of, and Jim "can't imagine" something that big breaking. Also, the dam was surveyed and designed by the "goddamn safety officers"
and, Jim repeats himself, "they're the goddamn safety officers so I have to believe them."

To Mary Kay, the only woman who asks questions, Jim is excruciatingly polite. She asks about water leaving the Pit through the bottom, which the plan does not account for. She points out that the Pit increases in width at the earth's surface, which means that an added 100 feet in depth of water will in fact double the volume of water in the cavern. Mary Kay wonders if the added weight of so much additional water will force water back out of the Pit—despite the Plan's careful documentation of the laws of gravity—where it may eventually mix with the alluvial aquifer?

Kyle Scott leans over and tells me such phenomenon has been extensively documented in deep lakes.

Jim says to Mary Kay, "Actually, I think you've confused two issues," and I can almost hear "little lady" in his voice. I concentrate, and watch his lips as he talks, but I don't understand what he says. The words, individually, I can pile in my mind, but woven together the fabric is invisible. When he is finished, all I can remember is the brusqueness of his voice, and his upright posture that says clearly: "you don't understand this enough to challenge me."

Under the auspices of the Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Coalition, Mary Kay is having a meeting to help area residents generate comments to the Plan. After the public
meeting—which has been attended by an alarmingly small number of the public—she asks Jim for some MDHES maps. Despite the fact that the public comment period closes in 45 days, Jim urges her to delay the meeting. He thinks she may be "pushing things," trying to explain the proposal to others before "she really understands herself." He offers to come help her, if she wants. Mary Kay is clear that she will be fine.

Mary Kay grew up in Butte, but she hasn’t lived there for forty years. She worked for a $40 million-dollar-a-year cosmetic company. I can’t resist asking her which one--she can’t be the Mary Kay--but she names one that I don’t know. When she and her husband first moved back to Butte, her husband--not a Butte native--commented on how bleak the landscape was. “No plants, no trees, and a lot of three-legged dogs,” he said.

Now Mary Kay lives with two Catholic nuns--Sister Kathleen and Sister Patsy. I don’t ask where the husband went. As I walk her to her car, which is not a pink Cadillac, Mary Kay invites me to stay with her if I come back to Butte. She thinks the sisters would love to take me to a bar and show me how to play darts.

Mary Kay thinks the Pit should be drained, and the contamination moved off site. She calls the current plan “cat-box technology.” She has other euphemisms as well, for plans that disguise but don’t remove pollution: “cover-up-
not-clean-up" and "pretty versus permanent."

"Management of wastes in situ is not good public policy and it is very arrogant," Mary Kay tells me. I find scientists who agree with her. Johnnie Moore and Samuel Luoma discuss the peculiar nature of heavy metal pollution: "Metal contaminants cannot be dissociated into other elemental components, as organic contaminants can: they will change form but they will not degrade through time."

Because of this fact, Moore concludes that "unless excess metals are permanently removed from large-scale metal extraction sites, most remedies will be temporary."

Mary Kay says that to the EPA, permanence means "our last word on the subject is."

Butte residents are not in agreement about the clean-up. Many are apathetic—as attested by the few present at the meeting. The first time I visited Butte I was looking for the Pit. When I got lost, I asked a woman walking on the street for directions; she paused for several seconds before telling me: "You know, I’ve lived here all my life, and I don’t know how to get there." She gestured towards the left with her hand, "It’s somewhere that way, I think."

Some want mining to resume. I have seen little in the way of righteous indignation, and certainly the fervor that raised Our Lady of the Rockies has not transferred itself to the Superfund clean-up. Mary Kay explains this, that no one
has ever told these people that life can be any different, or that they have a right to clean water or air. "They are burying their heads like ostriches," she says, "but what else have they known?"

Mary Kay thinks it is her job to make people care, to show them the world is nothing if not possible.

* * * *

We are accustomed to thinking of violence in terms of blood and bones. While I would be clear not to diminish the very specific experience of a body entered against its will, I know women who think they are hit because they have failed—failed to make 'his' home pleasant, to clean up the house properly, to make a ham sandwich the way he likes it—and that they somehow deserve the blows dealt them. In *Women and Male Violence*, Susan Schecter says of violence against women that "brutality is not necessarily confined to hitting, pushing, and pulling out hair." I wonder how many years an individual hears that she is stupid, ugly, fat, clumsy, unfit as a mother, before the voice yelling at her becomes her own?

I have thought of love as a physical place, a place where the self you become is that person most cherished, most real and true. And I have wondered what it must be to look at
the person you have let into that singularly private and intimate circle of yourself, and have him tell you that the place he found inside you was not worthy of reverence. For how long does the human spirit persist, before it comes to forget the sweet smell of clean water, the delicate pink of mountain heath; how long until it believes that a landscape diminished is the only one that ever existed, the only one that is possible?

Webster's Dictionary gives, as one definition of violence: "an act of desecration or irreverence." Our culture everywhere says that body and spirit are entities separate and distinct, and yet we reveal truths to ourselves unwittingly. In this word, as elsewhere, flesh and spirit are pulled together: violence of the body is not separate from violence against the soul. Perhaps the definition is better turned back on itself: an act of violence is violent primarily because it strives to break both body and soul.

The word desecrate comes from the Latin root sacer, which is holy. Holy, halig, literally means whole or entire. Violence is an act that renders an entity partial, makes it not whole. There is no separation; you cannot intentionally destroy the body and leave the soul intact, and so one word expresses both actions, which are the same action. To violate is to make not holy, not whole; it is to change both form and substance, so that a woman doesn't mean herself anymore. She becomes a hole in the shape of a woman.
The Berkeley Pit is not the first, or the largest, depression carved into the Clark Fork Valley. Fifteen thousand years ago, Glacial Lake Missoula filled a cavern stretching from Canada south through the Bitterroot Valley. A plug of ice, broken off from northern glaciers, lodged itself into a narrow space of rocks where Lake Pend Oreille now sits. The ice acted as a dam, closing off the flow like a bathtub plug. Because ice floats, however, the dam periodically lifted, releasing as much water as now sits in Lake Ontario. The torrent was so fast and so big it scoured downstream landscapes, leaving the Columbia River Gorge, the channeled scablands of eastern Washington. The results of this movement can be traced still on the step-like striations on mountains in the Clark Fork drainage, the Bitterroot Valley.

The Berkeley Pit is of a depth similar to Glacial Lake Missoula, though much smaller in area. That the Pit took a fraction of the time that the Lake took to form is relevant, I think, but it isn't the entire point. The difference between geologic upheavals—grand or disruptive or large as they may be—and the workings of humankind may have something to do with violence, something to do with taking apart that which belongs together. The world is not static; I know change is constant. Yet, if I believe at all in some larger force holding life together, then I have to think that
geology, climate, gravity, are working somehow in unison. That the shape of the landscape may alter--often drastically--but some essential integrity is preserved, that meaning is the same.

Of the forces that created the Pit, I have no such sense of integrity. In 1955, then-president of the Anaconda Company, C.F. Kelley, delivered a speech to Company stockholders about the future of Anaconda. Speaking of the Company's intent to expand production into "new frontiers" of atomic energy, he was optimistic about the ways that this "specter of death and total devastation" was both a source of economic revenue and peace. Kelley--forgetting, maybe, or not caring, of Hiroshima, of Nagasaki--argued that the bomb was protection against war because humans feared it too much to use it: "In this already demonstrated natural fear of mankind of destroying itself lies our hope for the future."

The Company, of course, failed before it made good on its peace-making efforts. Still, I can't separate that intent, that faith in death, from William Clark's belief that future generations were on their own in the wake of his empire-building. If mining is an act of separation, the atomic bomb is a final version of that. Kelley's words seem the logical extension, the only possible culmination, of a culture that has as its central metaphor a man dying on a cross. The atomic bomb, perhaps, is a secularized version of the Crucifixion: in the guise of science, of the not-
religious, we re-inscribe our belief that salvation comes through death. Our stories, our gestures, reach towards death and some irony we call this hope, we call this life.

The filaments of the world are not broken merely because we have taken them apart. Shattered, the world functions as a parody of wholeness. The paths that once carried water clean and pure now carry arsenic. The conduits through which love moves—streams, rivers, air, touch—become deadly.

And for the hole, the world will tolerate no vacuums; a space created will eventually be filled. We know this from experience, from our own lives—and it makes sense that humans, who are of the earth, would mimic that primordial stuff in their lives. The Pit will not remain empty. So, we take hostages, and we build statues, and we hope that somehow the gaps will be filled, that the water will stay contained. We write off the bedrock aquifer, and want so much to believe that the alluvial aquifer will stay pure that we do believe.
Chapter Five

Salt and Fire: a Mothers’ Story

Because kinship and marriage are closely tied to gender systems, these social structures are implicated in the subordination of women.

Evelyn Blackwood

We cannot criticize the hierarchy of male over female without criticizing and overcoming the hierarchy of human over nature.

Rosemary Radford, Sexism and God-talk

The story of Lot’s wife is a parable of faithlessness. She lived in Sodom, a town renowned for the debauchery of its citizens. The Lord made His mind up to destroy Sodom, and nearby Gomorrah, and all of the people living there. But Lot was favored of his God. Angels came to him and said: “anyone you have in this city--bring them out of this place. For we are about to destroy this place.” The one condition of Lot’s pardon—that the family must not, as they left, look back at their homeland burning. But Lot’s wife, fleeing, looked back at the city, and for her disobedience she was turned into a pillar of salt.

Lot’s favor came from the fact that the Lord knew him to be righteous and faithful. The Lord knew this because he tested Lot. The day before Sodom and Gomorrah burned, two angels, dressed as men, came to Lot’s house and Lot gave them food and shelter. That night, the men of Sodom gathered
outside the house, calling: "Who are the men who came to you tonight, bring them out to us, that we may know them." The New Oxford Annotated Bible notes that "know," in this context, is biblical: "‘know’ refers to sexual relations."

Lot was faithful, though, and so he knew what he should do. He went to the men clambering on his steps, and he said: "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men for they have come for shelter under my roof."

For obeying his "first" obligation—which was to his guests rather than his children—Lot was rewarded. He was warned that the Lord would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and that he should leave. The angels were clear: that as he left, he must not look behind or he would be consumed.

The terms and consequences of Lot's faith may have something to do with his wife's lack of belief. When she heard that she must leave, she must have packed up her family's things—the little that would have been transportable. She may have thought, if she had time, that she would miss her house, a meadow next to her yard, a place where she had brushed a daughter's hair. As she walked up a hill and away from her home, she walked with a man who had offered his children's lives for a god's favor. What god, she may have wondered, would require this? What husband, she may have wondered, would do this?
It seems unsurprising that she looked back, that she could not easily leave her home, that she doubted her husband and the sacrifices his Lord required. If her husband's eyes turned upward—away from a daughter's life or a small, shingled house—and to his god, her eyes looked earthward. What is important, her gesture said, is here: this life, this body. And for her doubt—which may really be a different kind of faith—she was turned to a pillar of salt, towering over a home she could not leave.

Lot's wife has been held up as an example of the consequences of disobedience. What she may have cared about were not the things, according to Christian myth, most worthy of devotion: the quotidian, the earthly. She made a bad choice. And yet, in some ways, she chose what everything in her culture said she—because she is female—should: this life.

It makes some sense that the Virgin Mary has such a large cult, despite that her veneration, by Christian standards, verges on idolatry. She is, after all, female, and we expect from her what we have come to expect of all women: that she will care for the home, the child. There is some logic here: the one who does laundry and makes food and gives birth—the one whose primary responsibility is for the body—is more likely to care for a damaged body. This fact may explain the forms of worship of the Virgin. Mary, after all,
was Jesus's mother; she gave him life, blood, matter. To her, then, we turn, when our own matter is ailing.

Marina Warner, in *Alone of All Her Sex*, writes of icons of the Virgin Mary that have appeared worldwide: "Prayer formed the figure of the Virgin Mary, and it is the chief function of her myth to answer it." She is the most practical of the saints, in a sense, because she is the one who can redress questions of a less than cosmological nature. Though she is chiefly significant as a mediator between Heaven and earth, Warner points out that Mary is also petitioned for "more mundane favors and terrestrial benefits." God, it is said, works in mysterious ways. Mary, one presumes, is more direct.

A close friend taught English in Spain for several years. She would visit churches, during her vacations, and though she wasn't Catholic, or perhaps because she wasn't Catholic, she was fascinated by the country's worship of the Virgin Mary. She sent me a letter from Coimbra, Portugal, describing an altar for the Virgin:

> Some people left flowers but most put their hope in wax carvings of body parts. The carving represented the part of a loved one or oneself that the supplicant hoped could be healed. Arms, legs, heads, even breasts piled under a rack of lit candles. It looked like a massacre of, miniature wax people. I wish I had such faith.

Our Lady of the Rockies is typical of statues of the Virgin Mary: she stands above a body part carved. The
difference, maybe, that the carving is so big that the statue had to be brought to it. Mary supplied the physical fact of Jesus's life: she is the body, the earth, the matter. In this fact, Our Lady's presence over the Pit is bizarrely appropriate and touching. She is as if to say: "Mother, mater, heal matter." She is as if to say: "We have suffered the same fate." And yet, the mountain was torn up again to place her.

Marina Warner offers some explanation for this, and for the engorged masculinity of a town that claims itself devoted to mothers and motherhood: "There is no logical equivalence in any society between exalted female objects and a high position for women." Warner continues:

This veneration of women provokes no corresponding rise in the status of women. On the contrary, the fertility ascribed to her reinforces the mythology that motherhood is the central point of a woman's life, where all the streams of her nature converge and prosper. For it is Catholic countries, above all, from Italy to Latin America, that women are subjugated to the ideal of maternity. . . . Her cult does not transform her into a divinity who restores the equilibrium between the sexes, or looses women from the bonds of tedious biological teleology. The ideals . . . epitomized by the Virgin, do on the other contrary bind the bonds tighter.
The properties we turn to—compassion, caring, attachment—in times of stress are not the ones we purport to cherish. In our cultural consciousness we value Lot, whose conscience is towards abstractions: his duty, his honor, his Lord. Mary, the values she epitomizes, we turn to in moments that we call weakness. Warner writes: "The bond of motherhood that attached her [Mary] to the whole human race through him presupposed a natural law of inalienable, indestructible, love." What we cherish in her, in our mothers, is this: we think she can't say no.

Our Lady of the Rockies' ideology is not subtle; it is written on the landscape around her. It is written as well on the minds of the people who live in her shadow.

There is a common perception, in the world, that abused women do not know what is happening to them; this is, to some extent, true. Often, their isolation is severe—they are economically dependent, a fact exacerbated by the presence of children, and they have been told all their lives that the most important thing they can do is form some indissoluble connection to a man. I talked to one woman who told me that her husband had given custody of their children to his mother, and so she was essentially a babysitter, with no voice in her children's lives. He had kept her so outside the
pale of human interaction that she believed he could do that—give her children away—though he had no papers to prove his case, and there had been no court proceedings.

I sat one morning with Debbie, a twenty-four year old woman who had been raped by her housemate. As is often the case, Debbie’s abuser, Steve, isolated her emotionally before resorting to more physical forms of control. "He hurt my feelings," she told me. "I like to go out, but he said he wouldn’t be seen with me." Steve yelled at her frequently, although Debbie insisted that she could yell back. But she worried about her seven-month-old daughter, Rachel: "In the beginning, she cried when we fought. Then she got used to it; she’d sleep right through the screaming." One day, Steve punched a hole in the wall because he didn’t like the way Debbie had laid a slice of ham on his sandwich.

The day she left home, Debbie cut her finger on a plate she broke fighting with Steve. "I left my blood all over the apartment. I didn’t even clean it up. And I didn’t leave a note. I’m through with him." Debbie’s mother lives only a couple of blocks from the shelter. She helps some, watching Rachel, but she has her boyfriend and his kids living with her, so there is no place there for Debbie and Rachel to live. And she thinks Debbie should go back to Steve, because it’s "unrealistic" for a woman to think her man won’t “hit her just a little bit.” After several weeks at the shelter, Debbie feels increasingly restless. "The only person I’ve
seen get out of here went back," she tells me.

I sometimes think it's not ignorance, but an extreme fatalism that keeps these women bound to men who yell at them, hit them, hit their children: they look out and see no evidence to suggest that life might assume a gentler shape. In some crucial way, Debbie knew exactly what was happening to her, and she worried about Rachel growing up: "You really can't get away. They cut forests, dump oil in the oceans, kill baby seals. Hitting your girlfriend is no big deal I guess."

* * * *

My mother's garden is small but bountiful. We have a riding arena in our backyard, a relic from a childhood--mine--spent on horseback. My mother is afraid of horses, and since they, and I, have left, she's let the arena go to wildflowers and planted a garden. She loves the color of it, I think: eggplant, carrots, beets, spinach. In the winter she gives me presents: jars of rosemary, dill, mint, tarragon, that she has grown; a cruet filled with balsamic vinegar, lemons and figs floating inside. When I call her, she tells me what she has for dinner: baby red potatoes rubbed with sage and olive oil; eggplant roasted with red peppers and garlic. If I am home visiting, we make cranberry scones and eat them with
strong tea and cream on the back porch.

My mother grew up in a very German, very Lutheran community in northern Indiana. She went to parochial school, though I think her sense of God is very different from what her teachers and family intended. She remembers, in the third grade, asking her teacher why she was blamed for her 'bad' behavior, but God got the credit when she was good. At the look on her teacher's face, she realized such questions were not the way to get the Citizenship Award. As a child, these things seemed important to her, and so she let similar statements hang silent in her head.

On her eighteenth birthday, which was also the day of her high school graduation, my mother's father died. The Sunday before, in church, the pastor had been discussing the story of John the Baptist, who lost his head to the whims of a capricious dancer. Early in the first morning of her nineteenth year, as she was going to commencement and trying to put off thoughts of a father who would never see any of the direction her life might take, someone asked her what she wanted for her birthday. To the horror of her classmates, she shrugged, echoing Salome, "Bring me the head of John the Baptist."

My mother is unusual in her family. She left Indiana, when she was young, and moved to North Carolina with a boy whom she was not married to. She did, eventually, marry this man who would become my father, but her family was confused.
They approved of him—he was handsome, charming, he was going to be a doctor—but the brashness of eloping shocked them. Her family was more careful, more sedentary, less inclined to sudden motion. They didn’t understand why she hadn’t waited, in Indiana, for him to come back.

She never went back. She moved to Utah; she raised three children; she quit nursing, which she hated, and got a degree in archaeology. For six years now she has lived next door to the boy with whom she escaped Indiana. Their marriage has been long—almost thirty years—and turbulent. The faith she gave him when she was young has twisted and grown hard—the inexorable glaciation of infidelity. The commonplaces of it embarrasses her sometimes, I think. She had read the Brontes, Emily Dickinson; she had envisioned that her life would assume more tragic proportions. Instead, her husband betrayed her in predictable ways, and she looked aside, as she was supposed to, while he courted other women. A sacrifice meant to ennoble them both only wore her out, and he never noticed.

I was in high school when I watched the bird die. Walking into the living room one night I could see, through the glass door of the woodstove, flame quivering and breathing, throwing liquid shadows on my father’s face where he sat reading. I remember the orange seemed unnaturally bright, the billow of flame unusually wide. I recognized the
shape of flight, the shape of a bird inside, even as I moved
towards the door to open it, to let the bird out. I wasn’t
thinking, of course. She was one fire. She was dying. Set
free, she would have danced her macabre steps, and set the
house to flame. Fortunately, my father, looking up from his
book, intercepted me.

Holding me back from the stove door, he told me that it
was necessary, sometimes, to let some things die to protect
others. He said the bird must have set up a nest inside the
chimney stack, and fallen down into the stove with the
suffocating smoke of a wet-wood fire. Putting an arm around
my shoulder, he squeezed lightly; he understood, too, that
"for the best" could be "hard to watch."

My mother set herself a pyre one night—took twenty-one
years of journals and put them in that same wood stove and
watched the flame grow bright with her life. She told me
about it years later; she said she had been afraid one of us
would read them after she was dead, and we would see how
unhappy she had been. Perhaps she hadn’t wanted children;
perhaps she had imagined herself a life of poetry and
solitude. I asked if she had read the pages, before they lit,
and she said no, and I wondered then whom she was protecting
and whom she was killing.

I believed my father, when I was younger, about fire and
sacrifice. He was right about the bird: if we’d let her out
she would have fluttered into the eaves, bringing our house
to a swirling crescendo of flame. But I'm twenty-seven now, two years older than my mother was when she had me. I've learned that fire isn't the only way to burn a house down. And I can't help wondering what fury might have been set loose from the stove, what phoenix may have risen from the ashes. I can't help wanting that part of her, that I never knew, back. I want to read the journals.

When I was young, I knew my mother didn't believe in God. We went to church, whenever we were in Indiana, because it was easier than standing against the flood of familial expectation. I remember liking church, because I got to dress up, and because I liked the seriousness of the service, and communion. I played Mary, once, in the Sunday School Easter play. Still, I thought of church as 'playing house': pretending a life that other people had. My brother and I were baptized Lutheran; by the time my sister, the youngest, was born, my mother had given up even the pretense of belief. I asked her once what she and Dad thought of God. She told me, "Your dad doesn't believe in God. He thinks of himself as the center of the universe."

I knew, too, that she wasn't happy. My parents never fought in front of my brother or sister or I, but I remember Sunday mornings when she would wake up screaming. She would go through the house and throw everything--clothes, shoes, camping equipment--off the back deck. Sundays were one of the
few times my father was home—the only time she seemed so frantic. While she stormed, he would sit us children and talk to us about picking up our toys so Mother wouldn’t have to work so hard. She told me, years later, that it was terrifying to have lived with someone for most of your adult life and realize, finally, that he didn’t know you at all.

She is more peaceful now. They live on a four-acre piece of land—next door to each other, and in separate houses. They are still married. She doesn’t feel compelled to explain that part of herself. She has placed him where she can live with him, where she can be happy. There are things she has lost, I am sure, in this composition of herself. She does not tell me when she cries. She doesn’t believe in God, but she has enormous faith in ritual, and she knows the importance of mornings spent watching sunlight gather in the corners of her room. She tends her garden; she sends me a sweater that she thinks looks as if it were knit of my hair.

I told her once that I had learned from her a cynicism that was its own form of religion. I am an observer, by nature, more than a participant. I will stand on the edge of life and watch others respond. But I will not play the fool myself. I learned young that salvation—whether it come from gods or mortals—is short-lived and messy at best. The capacity for faith is inherent, I think; I know that there is some force, grand and unifying, which holds me to the world.
But faith is a skill as well—one I haven’t yet acquired. I would give myself to God, I would revel in that messiness, because I think there is something appallingly small in a life held tight to one’s chest, only as I fling myself into the abyss I already know how far I have fall before the ropes will catch me. It’s a belief, lukewarm and controlled, that would never see me tied to a stake, wailing as the flames licked me ankles.

Together, my mother and I go on pilgrimages. We have walked for miles the banks of the Escalante River, in southern Utah. The country is slightly foreign to me; I’ve grown more accustomed to the Ponderosa Pines, the craggy granite peaks, of the northern Rockies. She talks about getting lost, if you move away from the river, and how she’s imagined herself disappearing into the unbroken sheaf of sage. She prefers to let me set up the tent or start the campstove, but she knows more than I do about flash-floods. She hears birds and speaks to them by name, and shows me petroglyphs where I would not have guessed them. Her presence here has no agenda; mine seems edgier, in comparison, and I am restless to travel specific distances, to take photographs. Hers is a familiarity come of time spent, of an eye attentive to detail.

We sleep in the afternoons, when it’s hot, in the shade of thrushy willows. We wear wide-brimmed straw hats, and wish
that we had cotton sundresses so we could feel the breeze--cooled as it crosses the water--wrap around our legs.

My mother thinks Our Lady of the Rockies looks like "the thing on top of a wedding cake." The first time I saw the statue I stood with her on the edge of the Berkeley Pit; she hummed "The Wedding March" as we walked through the mine shaft to the Pit platform. We had driven two hours, away from a conference on "Women in the American West" that bored us. We thought a woman imprisoned--alone, in the wind--at 8,000 feet might be more illustrative of women's place in western American history than any of the dry, academic lectures we had been hearing. While we were eating in Butte, our waitress told my mother that you could, for a small fee, light up Our Lady of the Rockies in specific colors on "special days." My mother wanted to give me the statue, ablaze in pink, for my twenty-fifth birthday.

We couldn't go into Our Lady's house while we were there--it was Sunday, and the chapel is closed. My mother wasn't disappointed, really, she got as much satisfaction from the irony. She asked me to send her a rosary from Our Lady, but only after she found out they were pink, and plastic.

I was born, nearly, on Christmas Day. In North Carolina, "Christmas babies" are sent home swathed in a red stocking.
People have though this might have something to do with my name—Christian Marie. My mother’s explanation is different: she saw a Steve McQueen movie, “The Cincinnati Kid,” the night before I was born, and in it Tuesday Weld played a woman named Christian. “Your father liked Tuesday Weld,” she shrugs, “he had wanted to name you Sheilah. What a terrible name for a child.” My siblings’ names are equally Catholic—Francis Edward, Mary Heath. I would make this fact significant, if I could, but she won’t let me. Though her gestures sometimes recall the religion she was handed as a child, she doesn’t think “Heaven” is a useful concept. When I ask her why she wants to visit Our Lady of the Rockies, she says it’s because she “likes to think about lies.”

She sent me a postcard one spring. On the front was a stylized photograph of a woman in ‘harem’ attire. She is playing the lute, one breast is nearly exposed beneath her robes. The caption reads: “The convent was not totally as Beatrice had envisioned it.” On the other side, my mother had written:

I hate to feed your cynicism, but it’s my duty. You’ll have to find your faith somewhere else. My peas have sprouted. Take heart.

end.