

Poetry and Children of Alcoholics: Breaking the Silence

-Martha Dyer ^{1, 2}

This paper addresses the use of poetry as a therapeutic means of breaking silence with survivors of an alcoholic household. The author examines some of her own poetry as descent images and links ancient myth to the journey of contemporary women.

Ereshkigal

Dark sister
chasm of my heart
your eyes have
stripped me
erupted me
bound me in a lonely place
away from love
away from all
that is familiar
deep in seclusion
a snake in hibernation
tight coiled
bleeding heart
strength offered in sacrifice
a molting
a second skin
life offered with passion
a harvest
a great ocean

Dark sister
chasm of my heart
your gifts are
wrapped in shadows
hidden in the black holes
of the sidewalk
more enduring than
any stone.
- M. Dyer 1990

This paper is about growing up female, and growing up in an alcoholic household. Children who grow up in the abusive atmosphere of the alcoholic household are silenced over and over again, and as women, growing up in this patriarchal society, we are silenced yet again. Poetry as a method of giving voice to what has been silenced will be the focus of this paper, and included, are a few of my early poems written while living in an alcoholic household. Since reading Sylvia Brintons Perera's (1981) *Descent to the Goddess*, I recognize these poems as descent images, and will weave support for this throughout the paper. Arguments are offered for the use of poetry in the expressive arts as a method of breaking the stifling silence brought on by any kind of abuse.

The descent of Inanna is one of the oldest goddess descent myths known (Perera, 1981). In this myth, Inanna (queen of heaven and earth) descends into the underworld where she meets her dark sister

¹Department of Art Education, Art Therapy Program, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131

²Correspondence should be directed to Martha Dyer, 224 Edith SE, Albuquerque, NM 87102

Ereshkigal. Ereshkigal kills Inanna and, with this death, Inanna enters into transformation which eventually leads her to a rebirth. Perera (1981) noted that it is this journey into the underworld that is a journey many modern women currently must take towards reaching their dark feminine, a feminine which has been silences for ages.

I began writing many times, and each time I was interrupted by the fear that I was not saying exactly what I wanted, or what I was saying was too personal, or I should be over this childish feeling, and why am I having this much trouble with it anyway? This judgmental inner voice is common for the person who has grown up in an alcoholic abusive atmosphere. In such an atmosphere voicing feelings is taboo...especially feelings which are related to the abuse. There is a message which rings out loud and clear whether it is spoken or unspoken; there is no abuse, and since there is no abuse then there are no feelings related to such abuse. "Don't trust, Don't talk, Don't feel" (Black, 1981, p. 24) are the common messages in the abusive alcoholic household. So we grow up keeping ourselves in check, examining our actions over and over again. We are not sure what is appropriate because we have not appropriate models. We grow up silencing ourselves.

In addition to learning a code of silence within the household, children in alcoholic homes also avoid bringing friends home, and rarely seek advice from someone outside the family. True feelings are hidden, and children continually blame themselves for their parent's alcoholism (Campbell, 1985). All of these feelings and beliefs result in a great lack of support and deep emotional isolation for the child.

I learned the code of silence very well growing up in a home with three alcoholics. Feelings were not talked about at all. Many nights I stayed awake writing my feelings down in poetry. These poems were not shared with anyone, and were kept in a secret place in my room. One poem, written when I was an adolescent, expresses the isolation and emotional entrapment created by such a code of silence.

Facades

There exists a cold
entrapment
after freezing rain bears
hard and long
after saturation subsides
and ice crystals
sing silent songs

A world precious to
naive lookers
frigid yet alive
wrapped in its
polished blanket
withstanding time to
be revived

Breezes break
asphyxiation
twigs crackle in a jest
making dull
sophistication
of worlds glazed
in Sunday best

The characteristic of the inner experience of Ereshkigal and descent include a death-like stagnation (Perera, 1981) and is clearly represented in this poem. Images of entrapment, encasement, lack of air, and lack of warmth all work together to create a profound sense of isolation. This is the kind of isolation Inanna experiences in her descent to the Netherworld where she hangs on a peg for days, dies, and becomes rotting meat. One client of Perera's (1981) describes this experiences "...like cement holding

me...It's been so deep I lose my sense of time...It's coming at everything slow and from below - not human and warm, but detached..." (p. 28)

As women, such emotional isolation may become even more oppressive given the fact that we have been told over and over again by this patriarchal culture that we do not count. We are to grin and bear our *limitations*. In her work with women, feminist therapist Jan Ellis (1990) stated:

My basic assumption in working with women in therapy is that all of us have been abused. No one escapes the world's prevailing attitude that women and children are less valuable than adult males. Within each of us is a child whose development was short-circuited. I find this to be true for both male and female children. The critical difference is that for males, there is the promise of a time of power. For women, there is no such promise. It is only a matter of time until a woman discovers that the plan for her is to remain limited. The horror of this plan is that she is also to smile and accept this graciously, to join the belief that this is all that she deserves, and that she is to do this in silences (p. 243).

As women, many of us can remember these limitations being placed on us when we were very young. This next poem, written when I was nineteen, is about the realization of these particular limitations.

Lori's Wedding Shower

Tears of joy shown
like the diamond
new to her
left hand
Lori -
you were my childhood playmate
Today women have
gathered together
in honor of
this special occasion

Lori -
do you remember
the red plastic
ironing board?
the easy bake oven?
the miniature china set?

What joy we shared
in imitation of
our mothers
housewives -
now tired

SURPRISE!
Screamed in soprano
(the married women screamed
the loudest)

SURPRISE!

Yes indeed,
surprise my friend
and what wonderful
gifts you have received -
an ironing board

(huge and heavy stainless steel)
pans, cookbooks, can opener
(in just the right color to match your kitchen
wallpaper)

Yes indeed,
surprise my friend
the toys of a
long lost childhood
have turned on you.

My first recollection of being limited as a woman came when I was barely four years old. During an outing, sponsored by my father's employers, I participated in a running race for youngsters - both boys and girls. As the announcer described the prizes my mind began to race. One of the prizes was a bowling set. My older brother was on a bowling team and he had won trophies which decorated the living room shelves. I wanted to bowl too - it was the prize of my dreams.

As the gun went off I remember running with all of my might and seeing the yellow line far ahead. There were no other children even close to me, and I remember looking back several times and seeing the rest of the children behind me, and behind them my family laughing. I wondered what was so funny, but I kept moving with every ounce of strength just in case one of the other children got a burst of energy.

As I crossed the finish line the crowd was screaming and laughing; even the emcee chuckled when he announced my name as the winner. I remember feeling proud and, at the same time, confused about the laughter. It was not until years later I realized the laughter was because I was a girl. They had expected a boy to win.

After the games were finished, all the winners stood in line for their prizes. The anticipation of my very own bowling set was almost unbearable for me. When I finally reached the head of the line I was handed a doll. My heart sank. The man handing out the prizes said, "Little girls get dolls." I began to wail, "I WANTED A BOWLING SET!" My mother took me firmly by the arm and walked me away from the crowd...It is inappropriate for a little girl to express feelings of rage. My mother was unable to mirror and support my rage because she had already been silenced herself. She has already silenced her dark feminine (Ereshkigal).

Mary Lynn Ellis (1989) pointed out some of the many ways in which women have been silenced in this culture. Ellis places particular importance on the reflections we receive from our mothering agents:

She [the mothering agent] will be unable to acknowledge or mirror back those qualities in her daughter that her society deems unfeminine - anger, assertiveness, the need for love (rather than being the provider of love). These rejected qualities in the daughter become split off...The mother she has internalized continues to threaten and constrain her self-expression, and her experiences in the external world reinforce her conviction that any assertion of her authenticity is incompatible with womanhood (p. 264).

As victims of abuse and as adult children of alcoholics, we are silenced over and over again; as women we are silenced yet again.

When Inanna does not return from the Underworld, Enki (God of water, wisdom, and creativity) creates two sexless creatures from the dirt from underneath his fingernails to go fetch Inanna. They are very humble creature who, upon meeting Ereshkigal, mirror her pain and suffering.

Enki's mourners moan with Ereshkigal. When she says 'Woe! Oh my inside!' they echo her with 'Woe! You who sigh our queen. Oh, your inside!' when she says, 'Woe! Oh my outside!' they echo her with, 'Woe! You who sigh our queen. Oh, your outside!' Their echoing makes a litany, transforms the pain into poetry and prayer. It makes out of life's dark misery a song of the goddess. It establishes art as a reverent and creative and sympathetic response to the passions and pains of life. And it shows the potency of such a litany. For with their mirroring song they ransom a goddess of life. From Ereshkigal pours forth not more destruction but generosity. The goddess of nature is grateful for the humble mirroring, for hearing the song of herself. (Perera, 1981, p. 70)

Image - whether poetry, painting, dance, or music - can transform pain and suffering into creation. It can give the client who suffers from silence a song of herself, an authentic reflection of all

that is inside her. After the song is sung one can find the goddess of life within, and with the goddess of life comes the breaking of silence. Writing poetry, and eventually reading this poetry aloud can offer an excellent method for breaking silence. The poetry can be read aloud to the self, allowing its metaphors to resonate and come alive, and eventually the poetry can be shared with a group. The group may share their thoughts and give the poem even more dimension.

When Inanna ascends, she "...comes up loathsome and claiming her right to survive. She is not a beautiful maid, daughter of the fathers, but ugly, selfish, ruthless, willing to be very negative, willing not to care" (Perera, 1981, p. 78). This next poem, written in my early twenties, shows an ascent. In this poem I am no longer afraid to express my rage, or to tell it like it is.

That's Okay Daddy

Daddy bought a
brown Cadillac Sedan
big enough
to pave the entire driveway
in metallic paint
power seat adjustment
and a clock
that knows the time

sort of like the
black Buick Electra
he totaled just before
I was old enough to drive

Pito and I were
making out in his
rust Chevy Malibu
lips were on my neck
in the summer darkness
Earth, Wind and Fire
coming through
his Jenses
lost with him
arms, hands, sandpaper cheeks
white light breaking
through the rear window
eyes squint
arms release
blood dripping from
his forehead
slumped over the
steering wheel
like a corpse

smoke and steam
rising from an exposed engine
the car was
half gone
ribbons of rubber
trailing behind

I wanted to drive that car

lips on my neck
in the summer darkness
so much room for pleasure

Daddy totaled another car
last night
jerked it forward into a
green Chrysler Newport
backed it into a
blue Dodge Tempest
drove it forward
once more
into the cement wall
of Lamonico's Bar
and BANG
the car blows up

but that's okay Daddy
cause I learned to hate
big cars a long time ago.

She comes up with an authentic reflection of what is inside of her. She comes up wailing, "I WANT A BOWLING SET!", "I FEEL ANGRY!", "I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK. I'M GOING TO BREAK THIS SILENCE!"

Poetry and poetry therapy can offer an excellent method for breaking silence in a creative and less threatening manner, especially for those who have learned not to talk about their feelings. With the breaking of silence comes an authentic reflection of all which is inside, and with this reflection comes an ascent from the dark hole of isolation created by such a code of silence.

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TRUST

TRUST is like

If I trust someone I feel

If another person trusts me I feel

I trust

I build my sense of trust in others by

I can create others trust in me by

If you wish, turn this sheet over and write whatever you choose.

The Nose

(after Gogol)

Ian Crichton Smith

The nose went away by itself
in the early morning
while its owner was asleep
It walked along the road
sniffing at everything.

It thought: I have a personality of my own
Why should I be attached to a body?
I haven't been allowed to flower.
So much of me has been wasted.

And it felt wholly free
It almost began to dance
The world was so full of scents
it had had no time to notice
when it was attached to a face
weeping, being blown,
catching all sorts of germs
and changing colour.

But now it was quite at ease
bowling merrily along
like a hoop or a wheel
a factory packed with scent.

And all would have been well
but that, round about evening
having no eyes for guides,
it staggered into the path
of a mouth, and it was gobbled
rapidly like a sausage
and chewed by a great sour teeth -
and that was how it died.

My Parents Kept Me From Children Who Were Rough

Stephen Spender

My parents kept me from children who were rough
Who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes.
Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street
And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron
Their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.
I feared the salt-course pointing of those boys
Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.

They were lithe, they sprang out behind hedges
Like dogs to bark at my world. They threw mud

While I looked the other way, pretending to smile.
I longed to forgive them, but they never smiled.

Unknown

Oh we've got to trust
one another
in some essentials.

Not the narrow little
bargaining trust
that says: I'm for you
if you'll be for me.

But a bigger trust,
a trust of the sun
that does not bother
about moth and rust,
and we see it shining
in one another...

Final Curve

When you turn the corner
And you run into yourself
Then you know that you have turned
All the corners that are left.

MY PAPA'S WALTZ

Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

RECOVERY

Bob Mullin

I was sailing the endless seas,
secure in the calm of the day,
when fierce winds kicked up from
nowhere,
catching the openness of my sail
and tipping my craft
violently
to its side.
As my world suddenly
tilted,
disorienting
me in a
swirl of
sensations,
I felt myself lose
control,
and I screamed out my helplessness.

In that instant the winds
as though frightened by the very sound of my voice,
vanished.
My craft righted itself,
and yet nothing was the same.
The seas had been transformed by the storm,
as had I,
and my anxieties,
though muffled now in the appearances of quiet,
intensified.

ANGER LAY BY ME ALL NIGHT LONG

Elizabeth Daryush

Anger lay by me all night long,
His breath was hot upon my brow,
He told me of my burning wrong
All night he talked and would not go.

He stood by me all through the day,
Struck from my hand the book, the pen;
He said: 'Hear first what I've to say,
And sing, if you've the heart to, then.'

And can I cast him from my couch?
And can I lock him from my room?
Ah no, his honest words are such
That he's my true-lord, and my doom.

I lost my breath
and felt
something
close
within me.

What kept me afloat then
I do not know.
Somewhere
deep
inside
my faith held.
Slowly a spark of warmth
spread to my frozen limbs.
I calmed.
And I could answer
the memory of the winds
with a song.

ALMOST

Bob Mullin

It almost snowed last night.
The shimmering beauty of those white flakes,
one

 piled

 upon

 another,

almost
became a reality.

 I could

almost hear

 the soft, noiseless crunch of my boots;

almost feel

 the aching tingle in my fingertips

 as they sweep up a handful

 of the feathery frost;

almost taste

 the chilled powder melt into an icy slush
 in my mouth.

Almost.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT CHAPTERS

Portia Nelson

I

I walked, down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in
I am lost...I am helpless
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place,
but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit
my eyes are open
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

ALICE IN WONDERLAND - CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CAT

Would you tell me please
Which way I ought to go from here.
That depends a good deal
On where you want to go to, said the Cat.
I don't care much where - said Alice.
Then it doesn't matter which
way you go, said the Cat
So long as I get somewhere,

Alice added with explanation.
Oh you're sure to do that,
said the Cat, if only
You walk long enough.

THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE.

Thomas Merton

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following you will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

STONE

Charles Simic

Go inside a stone
That would be my way.
Let somebody else become a dove
Or gnash with a tiger's tooth.
I am happy to be a stone.

From the outside the stone is a riddle:
No one knows how to answer it.
Yet within, it must be cool and quiet
Even though a cow steps on it full weight,
Even though a child throws it in a river;
The stone sinks, slow, unperturbed
To the river bottom
Where the fishes come to knock on it
And listen.

I have seen sparks fly out
When two stones are rubbed,
So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;
Perhaps there is a moon shining
From somewhere, as though behind a hill-
Just enough light to make out
The strange writings, the star-charts
On the inner walls.

NEW VIEW

E.B. DeVito

By any reckoning
That you can name
The way back is longer
Than the way I came.

Sometimes we play
Disorienting games
And spin in a world
Where nothing is the same,
Where all the landmarks
Overnight are changed
Like children in a game
Of blind man's bluff.

By any compass point
That you can set
The road back is long
And difficult -- and yet
I too when the spinning
Whirling game is through,
May wake to a direction
And a view
That is, by any reckoning,
wholly new.

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Alice in Wonderland by Louis Carroll

Thomas Merton - Thoughts in Solitude

Repeat After Me by Claudia Black

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