Photos by Margaret Perkin

My Mother & Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party

A. N. Barnett

Dans le Dinner Party *de Judy Chicago, il aurait dû y avoir, dit l'auteur, un couvert pour "la femme inconnue, pour ma mère et la mère de chacun et chacune". Sa mère vécut une vie de recluse, ayant eu cinq enfants en six ans. Elle fut au service des autres, elle survécut à la Dépression, elle vieillit et elle mourut. Elle était comme toutes ces femmes sans nom qui n'ont pas laissé d'adresse et qui n'ont rien fait d'assez extraordinaire pour être commémoré.*

Peut-être n'est-ce pas un couvert qu'il aurait fallu, mais au moins une plaque sans nom qui aurait salué leurs vies.

This is no criticism of *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, shown recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. I have got to think more about it. It certainly is not a non-event. But it is not too early to say that something was missing. Something *was missing* at *The Dinner Party*. My mother was not invited, and I think she should have been. She should have had a setting, a place.

I admit that everything about my mother's life was obscure — her birth, her life, her death, even though it took place at the New York Hospital. Her husband, my father, was obscure, although for years he had convinced us he was something special. And I must say that my mother took part in making us believe this was so. There was a time during the Depression, she told us, when he made $125 a week. Her children were obscure and it does not hurt, almost, to say that they remain obscure.

Thinking about the matter, I must add that my mother resisted her obscurity somewhat. She recalled for us a thousand times that on her father's side, somewhere between the Polish border on the west and Tomsk on the east, there existed an Alexandra Berliner, an aunt who was a doctor. She would also find a furtive assimilative delight in describing her sons'

heads as West Point heads.

But the fact is that my mother lived an obscure life. She was born in London just after her father and mother had arrived there from Poland — or was it Russia? She went to the Baron de Hirsch — or was it the Rothchild? — School. Her father, as everyone on Riverdale Avenue knew, had married beneath his class, so to speak, as a tailor, and was happy in London. But her mother, his wife, drove her husband and family to the

farther shore of America. She drove her husband even more in the new world, and when he could not take any more he went into cardiac arrest, our mother said.

Nothing terribly special happened to my mother in her childhood. She did, I remember now, believe she had a humped back. Her father had told her that when she asked him to make her a dress. What's the point of making such a garment for a humpback, he answered. What does it matter whether a little girl who wanted a party dress had a humped back or not, she thought. In any case, she now knew she had a humped back and began to live as a humpbacked

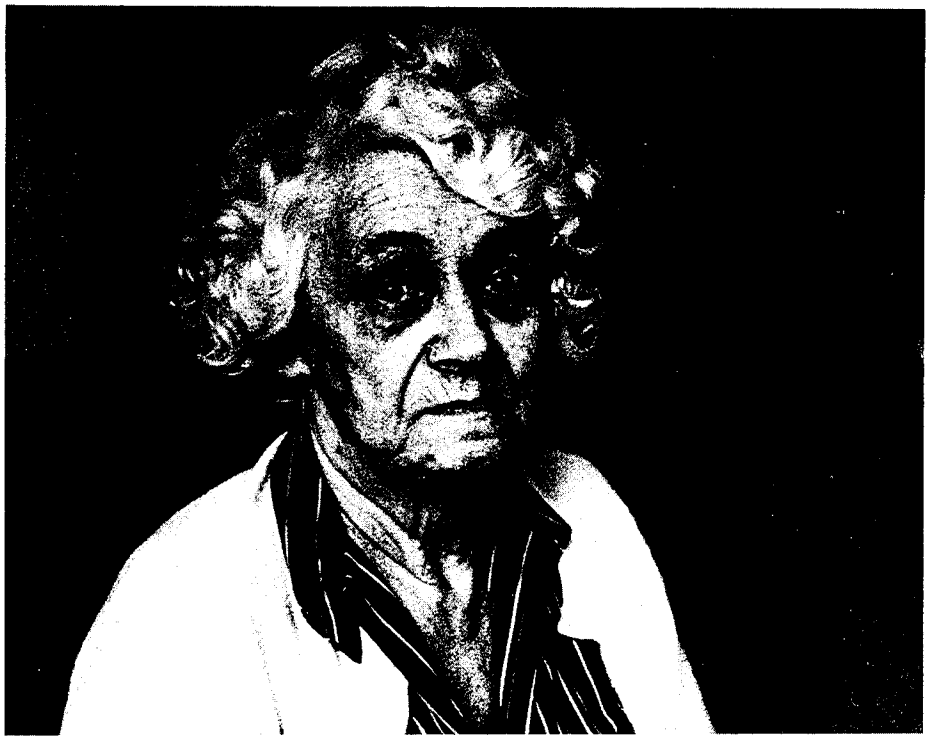
little girl in Brownsville and avoided the boys and spent her time in the dark room between the tailor shop and the air shaft practising sitting straight and altogether reforming her posture. Then one day, she told us, when she had drunk her fill at the water fountain in Betsy Head Park and had lifted her head, her eyes met those of a boy who had been watching her as he waited his turn to drink. He stared at her face and then told her she had the most beautiful brown eyes he had ever seen and could they not walk together for a while and the humped back that never was disappeared forever, my mother said.

Nothing terribly special happened to my mother when she was a young woman, though it is true that she fell in love with a West Point officer. He loved her too, my mother said. But he was not Jewish and so nothing came of it, except that her hair fell out that summer. She went back to the room behind the store next to the air shaft and waited. But her mother was mortified and impatient and fooled the forces of evil by switching the names of her daughters so that Irene my mother became Anne and Anne my aunt became Irene and my mother's hair grew back — but never as beautiful as it had been, my mother said.

Kid Gloves also wanted to marry her. He was mad about her and followed her everywhere — that is, when he wasn't beating up people or shaking down the storekeepers. He reminded her that she was in her middle twenties and not married. I think she was tempted a little, but she condemned him for the way he made a living. So she married my father, who was illiterate and very clean and a lot of fun and a sewing-machine operator at Rosenwasser's shoe factory, where she also worked. Dinners out, dances, Coney Island, vaudeville shows, but, as she confided in her eighty-third year, he was the wrong man. The most exciting time they had together, almost together, happened very soon after they married in 1917. My father caught Spanish influenza and nearly died of it. He nearly died of it because, my mother told us, he was the first case identified in New York City and the doctors did not know for weeks what was wrong with him. He had been drafted, but by the time he was well enough to go to camp the war was just about over.

Nothing much happened to my mother when she got married, except she had five children in about six years or so and had a couple of nervous breakdowns. She never spoke to us of sex or making babies or making so many babies or going crazy or running away or killing my father or for that matter killing anybody. Doctor Brown came to the house frequently and gave my mother some powders mixed with water. Doctor Brown always prescribed powders for our illnesses, and most of the time they made us sweat, a state we learned to interpret as getting better. My mother got better and then got sick and got better and sick again, all her life.

In the middle thirties — when we would tell each other that the Depression was over, the Panic is here — my mother did nothing notable. It is true that when my father decided to go into business he nagged her until she borrowed some money from her mother. But I should also say that my father acknowledged my mother's independence as a woman. He attend-



ed to a business that began to go bankrupt the day it was incorporated and left to her the problems of finding enough money to feed us and pay the rent and electricity and gas and the Hebrew Free Loan Society and the Provident Loan Society, which held the little diamond ring she had bought on time and had hocked immediately to pay for the appendectomy of my oldest sister. We moved to Jersey City and then to Hoboken and back to Brooklyn and then to Worcester and then back to Brooklyn again, following my father as he went from job to job. The actual moving must have appeared as a magical act to my father. He would leave some weeks before for the new job. On the appointed day, he would appear at the new address, where he found furniture and family unpacked and supper ready. I do not think I have made clear what I want to say. It was my mother who packed and unpacked and found the money for the movers.

One can see, then, that my mother did nothing worth recording, like millions of women throughout history and the world. Serving her parents and then her husband, raising children, the death of a child, coping with the Depression, sending sons off to war, watching her own decay, wondering what it all meant, my mother was like most women who ever lived — their lives were not genuinely recordable happenings. Then, in medicated semi-coma, guarded by the Jamaican nurse, she watched her children come from afar to see her die, she watched her husband weep, saw them peer at her again and again, wondering whether she was alive. Was it worth all the trouble? She stared at the family and drew deeper and deeper into herself for herself and waited without joy and without hysteria, without rage and without fear, and with some regret, for her life to end.

This is no criticism of *The Dinner Party*, I want to say again. But one is allowed to ask, should there not have been a setting — indeed, a central setting — for the Unknown Woman, for my mother and everyone's mother? And if this is too much to ask for, then at least a tile without a name for all the unnamed women who have left no addresses?

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., A.N. Barnett came to Canada in 1969; he teaches sociology and criminology at Laurentian University.

MIRROR IMAGE

Needing Lot's wife.
Craving Circe.
A mingling and a blend
become your expectations.

Your anger grows.
You aim words
that run in packs;
barking commands,
trying to control me.

Your words land
upon my doorstep,
but I've left you
nipping at my heels.
You cannot touch me now.
I am beyond you.

No longer
a pillar of salt
or temptress.
The mirror
broke in two
trying
to reflect your images.

Jennie Fowler Wendland
Surrey, British Columbia

TRANSLATIONS

and him saying
the man's the boss
because
that's the way it is
and her
mute before such invocations
crying in her weary kitchen

the memory
rising around my tongue
like an old idiom
and I fluent too late
and in a new language

Leona Gom
Surrey, British Columbia