

The Holy Family

Sooner or later
we must admit
that we were sons and
daughters
once.

Blurt out from behind
blaspheming hands that
we were begat in some
womb, which when it blossomed forth,
was called The Family.

And all hailed The Family,
ocular pit
thrice blessed,
into which we were thrown,
so pink and edible
like the Valley of Gehenom

where the child cries,
as her sister must have cried,

knowing certain death
for the first time in her life.

Simmie Moore

ing on an organic level each other's birth, they have a physical and psychic extension of the emotional bond that mothers have with all their children, male and female.

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*).

And so it must be that along with the wrenching process of disengagement daughters must also experience a fundamental and ultimately sexual refocussing of their attention. They must shift the emphasis of their involvement from mother to father, from women to men. An astronomical leap. It is no wonder that female adolescence is notoriously more painful and extensive than male adolescence, and so often incomplete.

The advent of fertility is so much more decisive and evident in daughters than in sons. This fact is comic in the face of how much more shadowed and confused our initiation to all other aspects of sexual activity is. But both struggles represent—to mothers and to daughters—the most tangible evidence that they are separate 'bodies,' in a biological and emotional sense. Because of this it is infinitely threatening to the original dependence, and sex is understandably the most volatile issue in the struggle for mothers and daughters to break from that dependence.

It is here that mother must make her greatest sacrifices and take her greatest risks. It is also where the possibilities for a grounding in friendship between mother and daughter are most wide open. This new ground demands more compassion than mothers and daughters have ever before asked of each other.

And yet this relationship is not to be sentimentalized. The danger and temptation to sanctify mother or to remove her from reality is a very real one—especially within a patriarchal society at the base of which is a fear of women's ability as a 'life-giver.'

There is so much mythology to overcome, literally and figuratively, in order to get to the root of the nature of this relationship. For example, the Persephone myth, to which Rich dedicates a number of pages in her book on motherhood, is a romantic extension of a highly organic consciousness of the connection between mothers and daughters.

It is not that we should be without mythology; rather that we should be sure not to let the mythology stand in the way of or suffice for a true understanding of what it represents. Mythology, though an extension of fact, can easily co-opt it.

And it is important not to confuse the delicate tribal consciousness of one's relation to mother with the fictional and sometimes frightened distortions of woman-kind invented, for the most part, by men within a patriarchal society. The damaging removal which is fantasy makes it impossible for mothers and daughters to perceive clearly and best develop their relationships. If daughters long 'for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back' . . . if mothers long 'for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self' (*Of Woman Born*) . . . then they haven't been creating these things for themselves and each other.

I have a younger brother and sister. My father is dead. The last years of his life were spent in illness, and in estrangement from us. This understandably put a strain on the structure. However—changed, reformed, consolidated—the family is now a mutually supportive and endlessly elastic one. And at the centre of this is my mother.

The guilt and rejection that mars other mother/child relationships I have observed is minimal in my relationship with my mother. Her leniency has allowed her to have much more involvement in my life than mothers of friends have in their children's lives. There were no rules, mysterious in their reasoning, which I was tempted to break. Consequently there was no fear on my part to discuss events in my life with her. This leniency, as well as keeping open a very important dynamic for change in both of us, has allowed for the possibility of disagreement. My mother and I argue as adults based on a lifetime (mine) of trust and all that we have experienced together and through each other. The fact that there have always been gaps, breathing spaces, privacies and disaffections in our relationship allows us to be individuals within it.

It would be impossible to cover all the issues at stake in the relationships between mothers and their female children. But the fact is that my friendship with my mother, and the disengagement that it signifies, co-opts a myth about static roles which is a keystone of possible change. Not only is it personally fulfilling, but this friendship can unify women *because* of their bodies, not in spite of them, and *for* each other, rather than against men. Friendship with mother has to go past the 'I would choose her for a friend even if she were not my mother' stage. She *is* your mother, and is for that reason already your friend in an infinitely complex way. It is impossible and even undesirable to 'forget' that your mother is the woman who gave birth to you. Through that and above that she is your first object of love. The possibilities of this bond, on both personal and social levels, are endless.