

ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

Selections from the poem sequence, *Wild Garlic*

Incident

Indeed a model women's prison.
Like a college dormitory newly built
by rich alumni in a tree-lined town,
windows you can see out, open this

mild day except: behind a grill,
and departure is discouraged by
iron bars, barbed wire, big dogs.
The country has been liberal.

Here women, even young, are *ladies*. I
am not so young. The others
leave me mostly alone. Until today:
a new girl, fragile-looking, blonde,

still in her blue silk dress,
was dealt the empty bunk in my cell.
What she's in for—prostitution? petty theft?—
is not germane. I don't ask questions.

She asks none. Perhaps that cloak
of numbness: we all cocoon ourselves
into compliance with our fate.
That's how I'd explain her—quietude?—

when two *ladies*—big ones, sure ones—
barged into our cell. One held a knife,
the other what she called a sari.
They announced their purpose: rape.

The usual initiation. Only my age
let me escape—they've other ways
to torment me, and who am I against
the denim mob? I'm no tattler—that

old-fashioned word, like me, antique,
a crackled harpsicord in some rock band.
This time, I tried to talk them out of it.
The new girl, petrified, an easy prey,

just stood, halfway between our visitors
and me. They ignored my arguments.
Then I reached up and took the knife,
pushed it through the window grill.

A distant clink. They were too stunned
to curse me out, or worse. The buzzer shrilled.
"Let's go eat," I said. "Perhaps
it will be chili dogs today."

We filed down the corridor and found
our seats, the two girls with their
curious cliques, I—by myself,
the new girl at another table. That was

this noon. What happens next—tonight,
tomorrow, by next week—I do not know,
and know. At least no matter what they do
to each of us, they no longer have that knife.



Photo: J. Baird

Deidre Scherer, *Sarah's Circle*, 1987. Fabric and thread.
38" x 31"