

“Didn’t You Ever Love Me?”

(Seventeen Bitter Fragments and an Afterword)

Judith E. Vida © 2009

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The instability of human knowledge is one of our few certainties. Almost everything we know we know incompletely at best. And almost nothing we are told remains the same when retold.

Janet Malcolm *Two Lives/ / Gertrude and Alice*. 2007.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p.

186.

I.

From an e-mail to my son in Tokyo, 6 AM on September 6, 2009:

...I'm trying to settle myself down to finish what I hope is a last piece of writing about the peculiarity of my relationship with [my mother]. I'm so tired of it. It would be nice to use this impending sale of [her house] as something to lean on [as an exit strategy]. This is all tied up with reading about slaveholding. A short novel called Property by Valerie Martin (that I found out about in a review of her newest book) took hold of me at the end of this week. One of the blurbs describes it as "quietly devastating" which is no exaggeration. [R]ight after I finish this e-mail to you, I'm going to spend an hour or so with my writing.

II.

This is a paper I do not want to write. I do not want to have to write it. Of course I do not “have to” – it only feels as though I do. The “it” that I’m tired of is both the relationship with my mother

and the compulsion to make sense of it. Even now I hear the voice of my dead mother sneering that this is begging for exoneration from the lies and false memories she is certain I have constructed about the perfect landscape of my childhood. *What she knew. What she believed. What she thought. What she felt. Four walls that defined my place in the world. And controlled me.*

III.

It has taken me a very long time to trust where “interest” leads me, usually to something peculiar, but once I take the peculiar seriously, I discover its relevance to making sense of myself in a world I didn’t choose. I do not write about such discoveries so much as I report from within them.

IV.

My mother died in 2008, at the age of nearly 94. Since then, I have a strange taste in my mouth. Some newly released psychic energy expands my internal peripheral vision. I can see how exhausted I am from having had to defend and protect myself from her over my whole lifetime. I observe myself moving about without old reference points. I find that I am often awkward and do not know what to say when asked how I am or what I am doing. Not to have an emotionally defended set-piece response is part of a new freedom, and it is not very comfortable. This is why I have never liked to answer the telephone. On the telephone I tend to feel exposed and on the spot; when a real or imagined demand for compliant response plays as urgent, my failure to comply is a punishable offense. These sentences accumulate, making it hazardous to return calls. Even with my mother dead, this feeling about the telephone persists; it is structural. Though I try to push through it, I wonder if I can let myself stop trying. The truth is: *I do not know what to do with this freedom. I feel that I should be quiet and still. On and off throughout my life I have blustered with a certainty and an air of command that I don’t really feel and do not like; I am making it up. It always seemed to be the way to burst out of the confining strictures of my mother’s world, but it turned out to provide only a short leash.*

V.

I am grateful for this trust in what interests me. It frees me to wonder what to read next, to work curiosity and something like desire as a dowsing rod to direct my hand, and to see what turns up. During the 2008 presidential campaign, reviews of two books aroused my interest in the politics of death and slavery: Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* and Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. After these two I picked up Annette Gordon-Reed's work of a decade earlier, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. Clear, concise, and even-handed, it reads as a legal brief of the evidence for and against there having been a 38-year intimate relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his dead wife's enslaved half-sister Sally Hemings. In the book Annette Gordon-Reed reports that the 1979 novel *Sally Hemings* by Barbara Chase-Riboud set off a firestorm of protest by white heirs and historians desperate to protect Jefferson from the charge of "miscegenation." I looked for *Sally Hemings* on www.amazon.com, and found a new edition with an afterword describing confirmation of the evidence by DNA testing of Jefferson's descendants in the year 2000.

VI.

This is about "reading," isn't it? I am always reading. Reading was the only thing I could do as a child that met with my mother's unquestioning approval. If I was reading, I didn't have to engage, or justify, or defend though I also couldn't go anywhere or do anything. I was quiet and held in place. House arrest.

VII.

I thought about all these books as some kind of subtext for the 2008 election. So it came as a surprise, near the end of the novel *Sally Hemings*, to be ambushed by a few terse paragraphs. In the torturous, knotted, disavowed cords of relationship between slaveowner and enslaved, I met a whole tangle of feelings about my now-dead mother. Fear, hate, and longing were stuffed into the tight

corner where possession overtakes possessiveness. *This is where my compulsion kicked in. There had been something else I thought to write for the IFPE conference, but at the moment of reading those paragraphs, there was a sinking feeling that I would have to write this instead. I submitted an abstract glibly proposing to re-enter those paragraphs as a way to unpack what they stirred. I thought I had a method. I must have thought I could use it. I must have thought I wanted to. But this brings me up short: the word “want” is such empty rhetoric when I’ve never had enough room to know what my wanting is. I can say, “I don’t want to have to write this paper” without knowing what real wanting would be. “Interest” is either as close as I can come to it, or else it is my version of “want.”*

VIII.

In those paragraphs of the novel *Sally Hemings* by Barbara Chase-Riboud, Martha Jefferson Randolph, Thomas Jefferson’s eldest and only surviving child by his long-dead white wife, brandishes an envelope Jefferson gave her the day before, on his deathbed. The envelope contains his written request for manumission for Sally Hemings. Sally Hemings has been Thomas Jefferson’s “concubine” for 38 years who has borne him seven children [four surviving into adulthood]. Sally Hemings is now technically Martha Randolph’s property, as well as Jefferson’s wife’s half-sister, which makes her Martha’s aunt, even though Sally Hemings and Martha Randolph are very close in age. Sally Hemings’ refusal to display gratitude incites Martha Randolph to rage and invective, but holding her ground, Sally Hemings remains unmoved. Her rage spent, Martha pauses, then whispers pathetically, “Didn’t you ever love me?” The internal response of the character Sally Hemings as Barbara Chase-Riboud imagines it crashes onto me like a heavy crossbeam loosened in an earthquake:

[an excerpt from the novel]

“Didn’t you ever love me?” [Martha] whispered.

It was the same thing her father had asked. [“Did you love me?” he asked. After thirty-eight years he still had to ask. (p. 326)] A wild uncontrollable desolation bore down upon me. A howl

like that of a wild animal caught in my throat. When ... when would they understand this farce and this tragedy? I knew that only the one who stopped loving, who stopped needing love, would survive. And hate seemed to drop over me like a veil. Love had left me, and hate had filled that space. The grief and loneliness without him; the empty meaningless days and nights dissolved like dry straw. Hate lifted me up in a kind of exaltation. The white envelope which said I was free but which I knew would never really free me remained in her hand.

I didn't need anything anymore. I didn't need Martha. Martha needed me to free, but I didn't need Martha to free me.

I, like my mother and her mother before her, had survived love. (p. 330)

IX.

What does it mean, “to survive love”? What manner of person is shaped by such survival? *What manner of person am I?* Much of this paper has been written before it dawns on me that Martha Randolph’s invective exactly echoes my mother’s blaming me for my father’s death in 1981 from a heart attack because I didn’t love him. “You don’t love us” was the charge that rang through the corridors of my life. It is lodged in my earliest memories and reverberated through my every milestone and misdeed all the way to my mother’s last weeks as she complained about me to my other son who had offered to take over her affairs (to my immense relief).

X.

Like *Sally Hemings*, Valerie Martin’s 2003 novel *Property* is also unspooled by a first person narration. Manon Gaudet, described on the book cover as “bitterly intelligent and monstrously self-absorbed,” is white Louisiana Creole, a woman, slaveholding, married, childless, then widowed, and in 1828 is powerless to affect anything in her external circumstances except the slaves who are her property, and with whom she is locked in a dance to the death of mutual hatred and fear. Manon is stung to

be characterized by her aunt as having “a cold heart,” but the ongoing narration slices to the bone to reveal Manon’s utter absence of sympathy for any point of view other than her own. When I write it like this, Manon sounds like my mother. When I read it on page 176, the cold heart felt like mine.

Hate has filled the space.

XI.

Is it that I don’t want to write this paper, or is it that I don’t know how to write it? For this to make sense to anyone else, how much old ground do I have to cover? Do I have to repeat what I have already written in different versions, different pieces, over the last twenty years? It is too much, too hard to go over it again. *I don’t want to.* At my 45th college reunion last spring, several of us were invited to take fifteen minutes to say something about our life since graduation. I used some of my Hungarian story to suggest what it meant to me that the mother who had distorted my life was now at last dead. There was a clamorous response: “You’ve got to write this as a book!” For a time afterwards, I was in mild shock from the telling. Later, when I could think about it, my mind went into a kind of de-resolution. Book? What book? I couldn’t quite grasp what this would be. Then, later still: It would be too boring to write. *Besides, I am only making it up. None of it is real. And I want it to be over.*

XII.

Here is the Hungarian story as I condensed it for a previous paper: *Since earliest memory my mother has told me proudly that I am the only member of the immigrant family on both sides who speaks only [American] English, never Hungarian. But when I am 50 and in Budapest (for the first time) for a professional conference, my head explodes with language memory. I hear my grandparents’ voices, I read the billboards. This is a baby-Hungarian language that my mother will insist is false memory syndrome.* There is, of course, much more to it.

XIII.

As I move back and forth among the fragments that I have laid out here, I wake up to something. The word “peculiar” in the e-mail to my son also appears in a sentence in section III that I had lifted from my abstract. Of course the abstract was written months earlier but the repeated word glowers at me. “Peculiar.” Staring at that word “peculiar” draws me toward seeing that I have shied away from exposing the full depth of feeling about my mother out of fear. Fear of the bitterness, I suppose. Am I afraid of how it feels, or of how it looks? My mother was a blamer. Am I really not a blamer or am I just straining again not to resemble her? Who am I when I am not trying not to be her? *Hate has filled the space.* I am worried about the hate.

XIV.

I went to *The Unseen*, a new play by Craig Wright, at the Road Theatre Company in North Hollywood, on August 21, 2009, the next to last night of a run that began June 14. The Road is a favorite theatre company, and this was the third of its three-play season, the first two of which I had really liked. I kept ignoring the reminder-e-mails I had asked to receive, until it was almost too late. Place: a prison. Time: the present. Valdez and Wallace are two men in adjacent cells, who cannot see each other; Smash is the guard who brings them what passes for food, empties their slop buckets, and every day takes each in turn to be tortured without asking any questions. *Godot* meets *The Dumbwaiter*. Optimistic Valdez and pessimistic Wallace lob memory games and conspiracy theories back and forth like the play *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern*, until unanswerable monotony erupts in violence and chaos. Offstage the prison falls. Their cells unlocked, Smash lying dead before them, Valdez and Wallace sit immobilized and staring through their open doors. After a long time, Wallace leaves his cell and goes to Valdez; they are startled to see each other. After still more time, Wallace pulls Valdez forcibly out through the thickening smoke. *The play is over. Applause, bows, house lights up.*

By the time I leave the theatre I am sobbing. Because they were finally released? Because it took them so long to leave? Because it made no sense that they did leave? Or because I know they will never be free.

XV.

Danzy Senna, the middle child of an interracial marriage, in *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* writes:

Years later I tried to leave the country. I lived in London, where my friends were black people from all around the world. I remember noticing that they lacked the black American bitterness – and more importantly, that quintessentially American obsession with race. They told me they didn’t understand why we – black Americans – were so hung up on it, why we saw it everywhere, in everything. They were right: like those religious fanatics who see Jesus’ face in clouds and window fog and rock formations, we did see it everywhere. I remember feeling so lonely in the presence of those seemingly enlightened, unfettered black people, and realizing that at the end of the day I felt at home only in the prison of America. Only there did I make sense. (pp. 55-56)

Reading this brings such a relief to find that I am not the only one who needs a prison to make sense of herself. (Such an odd thing, you would think, for a psychoanalyst to say.)

XVI.

I can admit now that not knowing *how* to write this paper has played a big part in my resistance to it. This has pressed me to be written, but I mean these words to be knife-like, not soft as has been much of my earlier writing. In that writing I had worked hard to open myself up, to open up myself, to risk the softness. I do not feel soft now. I am anxious, tense and fearful. I don’t know how offensive it will be that I find a metaphor of enslavement in my relationship with my mother. Is this “monstrous self-absorption”? Once I began this reading stream, I slipped into a deep well of urgent horror about everything to do with slavery, especially the insidious residual fragments that I stumble upon, fragments deeply embedded in this culture, in everyday mindless discourse, in political

rhetoric, and in me. How I used to feel and think about this seems sentimental, intellectualized, defended, stupid. “Enslavement,” the word that Annette Gordon-Reed uses, is very different for me from the word “slavery.” It stops me in my tracks. Rather than pointing to an institution at a distance, “enslavement” captures a feeling that makes me tremble. Though her editor argued against referring to Sally Hemings every time as “Sally Hemings,” Barbara Chase-Riboud deliberately refused to perpetuate the dehumanization of the enslaved by reducing them to first names. Right up to her end, my mother insisted upon being addressed as “Mrs. Vida,” all the while reducing others to their first names. I am horrified and ashamed of what I have unthinkingly said and casually done up to now that touches on these matters. I have to carry this awareness with me. But can I carry it without collapsing with shame? Can it be allowed that some part of “enslavement” feels (also) like my story?

XVII.

It is hard to locate my voice without my mother to angle against. I cannot foresee how this will be heard or read, but it no longer matters. Making sense to anyone else means less than that I make sense to myself. *I am sorry but this is true.* At the end of my mother’s nearly 94 years I was so tired of surviving love. Freed from the pull to answer to her for what I did and did not feel during her lifetime, I must answer to myself. *What was so bad about my life? On the surface, seemingly nothing. So why has it always felt so bad?* This is what I have had to make sense of. Stumbling upon the Hungarian story while my mother was alive told me I wasn’t only who she told me I was. Stumbling upon the Hungarian story while my mother was alive proved that some part of myself had once belonged to me. The compulsion to write this now arises from a wish to be credible enough at last to stop working it over. *Hate has filled the space. Writing this paper gives that hate a voice. This is why I don’t want to write it. I didn’t love my mother. It is hard to say it. There was no room left in me for love. Is it a vain hope to think that if I write this, some of the hate will drain out and leave some open space?*

Afterword.

Later, I said I should have known. *I don't think I believed that she would ever actually die; I don't think she did, either.* On a Super Bowl Sunday, I had sat at my mother's bedside in a convalescent hospital. Since her collapse at home two months earlier, there were a few letters from friends whom we didn't know to call; and my husband's brother had died in Ireland four days before. I read her the letters, and because she could no longer hold a steady pen, I took down what she said in response on some nice stationery that I had brought. I was touched by her simple clarity and by the fluent sympathy that rang deeply true in a note to my newly widowed sister-in-law. It was probably the calmest two hours I had ever spent with her. She spoke only kindly and appreciatively about people, with none of her typical ranting complaints. She said she knew how hard I had always worked and thanked me for taking the time to be with her. Finally, there was a long letter that had been forwarded from a niece of whom she had always been intensely critical. As I read aloud her detailed efforts to turn her life around, my mother murmured "Oh good," and "good for her!" and "I hope it works this time." By the end of the letter, my mother was too tired to go on, so we agreed to write a response later. The next day she was restless and uncomfortable with visitors, though she let me feed her three spoonfuls of chicken soup; shortly after, she couldn't be aroused and was transferred to the hospital where she died, a week to the day after my husband's brother. *As I write this, I think, so why couldn't I have asked her what she thought she had really been angry about? But I knew the answer – that she had been cheated by life of being who she wished she was, that I had been her last best hope and I had failed her – and I couldn't bear to hear it again. It is all the more remarkable that at the very end, she did stand up in her life with something like acceptance.*

Acknowledgments.

I have written this in what feels like the monstrous self-absorption as "I", "me" and "my," but in my adult life I have not in actuality been as alone as I felt, and as I was, as a child. Without the generous

love and support of my husband and children, some incredible dear friends, and my analyst, I could not have found the room to begin to reach myself. I am grateful for not having been chucked out as they must have longed to, more than once. Those who come to work with me nourish me with the gift of themselves as we try to make sense of the many layers and contradictions of being. And I am grateful too to the grandparents who loved me in the first years of my life, before my parents, reunited after the war, took me away – but that is another part of the story.

Written works in the background:

Chase-Riboud, Barbara (1979/2009). *Sally Hemings (a novel, with a new afterword by the author)*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc.

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Martin, Valerie (2004). *Property*. New York: Vintage Books.

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Press, pp. 29-35.

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Related background materials:

Wright, Craig (2009). *The Unseen*. A Play. Performed at The Road Theatre, North Hollywood, California, Craig Wright, Director.

Jefferson in Paris. Film, 1994, 139 minutes.

John Adams. Television mini-series, 2008, seven episodes.

Sally Hemings: An American Scandal. Television mini-series, 2000, 173 minutes.

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