

Excavation 4: Female Frailty

by Laurie Kruk

Extrait de son travail A Girlhood: Some Excavations, ce texte relate la lutte constante d'une jeune fille contre la maladie, plus précisément comment son combat contre la maladie lui a procuré une évasion hors de la réalité ainsi que l'adoration et l'attention soutenue de sa mère.

Whenever I got sick—minor stuff, colds or flus—it was like a conspiracy opened up between Mom and me, based upon the shared belief that “a woman’s life is hard” (though not as hard as

of pubescent instincts in school yard cruelty, the roughness of house league games. On such hushed afternoons, Mom used to read me poetry—Edna St. Vincent Millay is one I remember, the name itself proof of artistic isolation and distinctiveness.

When I was twenty-four, I spent eight easy months at home with my parents, before-starting my Ph.D. Even so, I was sick three times—with cold, flu and a second flu which turned into tonsillitis which turned into a month’s case of mono. During my final fever, Mom and I were alone in the house, Dad visiting his

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a man’s, she insisted, infuriating my sister and me at my brother’s expense), and the sick were to be catered to, nursed, and sympathized with. At home during one Thanksgiving weekend, traditional weekend to celebrate my birthday (my twenty-ninth), I caught a chest cold. Felt the old self-loathing and secret pleasure.... My sister scorned me as I cancelled plans but choked down birthday cake—becoming doubly special in my mother’s eyes, birthday girl and invalid both. Next day, still sick, but aloofly so, I withdrew quietly to bed, determined not to revert to my role as the family “sickie”—weak and languishing...Proustian, in a house coat, and demanding tea with lemon, soup, and Ritz crackers...sympathy, confidences, stories.

For up until about age twenty-six, I was sick regularly. Born with allergies, asthma, and minor “convulsions” as a child, the merest brush with epileptic dysfunction, I seemed to embrace minor ailments (bronchitis, colds, mono), ailments which provided me with the respite I needed from the real. Serious acne also—a “minor” problem, which gave my girlhood a painful complication, stretching it out, as I had to wait longer than most for the attractive self kotex promised would emerge from this “awkward” stage, lasting well into my twenties. So that making regular retreats during my girlhood, to bed and bathrobe, was all the more understandable. And my mother did not discourage it. In fact, the maternal voice became strongest during those intimate afternoons when I stretched out my weakness, fond of school, but not so fond of its daily routines, such as the eruptions

mother in Windsor. Back powerfully aching with flu, I slept on a hot water bottle. Got up one night, shakily, sweatily, out of my creaky double bed (mine since childhood), and staggered to the bathroom to refill the bottle, childish in flannel pajamas which muffled my full-grown shape. Went faint at the sink and crumpled, the water spilling onto my legs...sucked into a black hole. On her way to bed, Mom found me, roused me from my millisecond dream. She was weeping, with weariness I believe, at my relapse. Her big, scholarly girl had fallen into a helpless heat—one which had steamed away my pimples—returning me to childish weakness. My fall drew her back into the fear and anxiety I caused them, their first child, before I was diagnosed with allergies, when an innocent handful of cashews pumped my baby face up, covered my body with hives and drew me in and out of fever for two weeks. Her guilt at having somehow passed on to me, chromosonally, this blight of allergy, plus the burden of my having to forego the pleasures of peanut butter, unlabelled chocolates, exotic desserts, has been unabated ever since. Nothing can ever make up for my marking by such a quirky fate; nothing can efface her image of me as living under a cloud of allergy.

So my stubborn bout of bronchitis this winter/spring, during my second year of teaching, sparked Mom’s old guilt about my “sickliness.” She called me twice a week to check on my progress (one weekend, she woke me from a nap, to her extreme regret). Said, “I was worried your doctor wasn’t taking good care of you.”

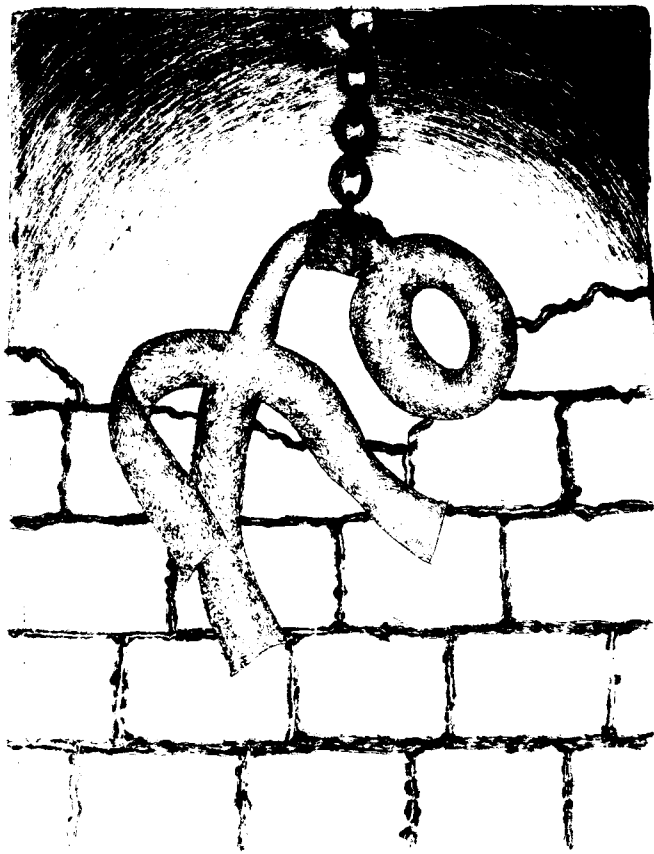
The fact that my doctor is female seemed to reassure her, but I am embarrassed to report on the slowness of my recovery, ashamed to be causing her extra worry. I try to blame my chest infection on the long winter we had, following on the heels of a cool, rainy summer. My mother, however, blamed it on my conscientiousness as a new teacher, my hard-working “good girl” self. Her daughter/herself. “Try not to worry,” she told me. “Your students don’t need so many comments on their essays.” And, more intriguingly, “Don’t try to save the world.”

I hung up the phone feeling mollified, amused, cared for. Loved.

And, come to think of it, if there exists a God—Goddess—Godness, surely that is its purpose: to tell you you are *loved*. Not *saved*, which implies sinful sickening desperation, sinking beneath waves of despair, God-the-lifeguard dragging you up pityingly, knowingly.... *I told you not to go in there*—But loved...cared for...parented... Mothered.

Excerpted from the author's larger work: A Girlhood: Some Excavations.

Laurie Kruk's first book of poetry, Theories of the World, was published by Netherlandic Press in 1992. She is beginning a post-doctoral fellowship at Simon Fraser University in B.C.



Amanda Stephens, Untitled, Print, 1993

Amanda Stephens is majoring in Women's Studies at York University. She enjoys creating artwork whenever she gets the chance.

FRANCESCA SCHEMBRI

Meglio Morta che Disonorata

Mom, whether you do like it or not
 I'm going out tonight
 No figlia—non t'arrischiare,
 Di tuo padre ti vui fa' ammazzare.
 Mom, I'm not a baby anymore
 And he soon have to know
 He ought to let me go.
 Figlia; ti da' volta il cervello?
 Finire voui in un bordello?
 Stai muta!—vai a lavorare,
 Stasera se ne puo' parlare.
 No! Mother, you don't understand,
 We're not in Italy anymore—
 Girls here go out and date
 With their male candidates.
 Zitta, sei ancora una bambina
 E vuoi giocare a signorina.
 Mom, I'm twenty and in love...
 Zitta...zitta si sa poi la voce,
 Sara' poi questo no' spiantato
 Non se' neppure avvicinato!
 Mother you can't communicate
 He's *nglese!* He's not *uno di noi*,
 We don't want to be married.
 Figlia, che disgrazia!
 Ma come fai a guardarmi in faccia?
 Mother, I'm spending out the night.
 Figlia sciagurata!
 Mi vuoi far cadere ammalata?
 Mom, nothing will me stop
 I'm going with him tonight.
 Oh figlia che rovina,
 Meglio tu non torni viva!

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