

# Women Without Sleep

**Merlie M. Alunan**

## **LUZVI'S LAMENT**

NINE MONTHS IN my belly six months in my arms and it ends here this stillness this silence this almost weightless form in my hand the perfect shape of the skull fitting the curve of my palm the perfection of every finger the slight protrusion of the nose the closed eyes the cast of gray on the cheeks the lips the skin how cold how fast it happened no more gasping for air no more the thin cry of pain no more the fevers and chills all gone only silence only stillness forever *uy* do not grieve so they told me he's not yours he was never yours they also said this before to me as they watched me feed him from my breast too fair his skin his face too fine the narrow tip of his nose those long fingers the shapely arms and legs look at the gold of his hair like corn silk that's no human infant too handsome openly looking at my coarse black hair my skin the color of mud my monkey face as my mother used to say nodding to one another as if I was not there such good looks it couldn't have come from you Luzvi nor from Esteban that stunted hunchback husband of yours almost a dwarf with his bow legs and splayed feet his thick lips and his nose the shape of *palwa sa lubi* he couldn't have fathered such a fine-looking son oh I know what I know he came out of my body I carried him for nine months he weighed on my bones when I lay on my back he split me apart when he came out just as all my other babies did I felt my flesh ripping open how could he not be mine there was never another man but poor Esteban who is always good to me always kind

they laughed at me then who knows maybe a river spirit a mountain god a cave dweller a tree fairy the ruler of the well where you fetch water and bathe any one of those not-like-us took a fancy to you and entered your body for a joke you can't tell about these things I did not answer them but I want to tell them that the *paltera* laid him on my belly still smeared with my own blood he was crying like a human child I put him to my breast and he suckled like any human child six months he was always ailing cough fever convulsions he threw up every bit of milk he suckled from me always crying as though in pain so my mother-in-law said some spirit is after this child it envies you for this one sell him to the fishmonger sell him for a kilo of *bolinao* so he is no longer yours the others said what good will that do they just want him back he belongs to them watch out they'll get him one day the fishmonger bought him for a kilo of *hasa-hasa* still he vomited yellow we went from one *tambalan* to another even to the hospital when he had colic the doctor said his lungs are weak he has rashes they kept on whispering to me the not-like-us are surely after this one a fairy's child for sure so nights I kept awake watching his breath his cry his every movement all in vain and now this, this cold little bundle for the earth to claim when it rains when it's too hot I want to run to him take him in my arms rock him to sleep sing him the old songs *ayah* I may never sleep again—

—o0o—

The names, just to make them sound more real. Well, of course these stories are real. Could be about any one of the faces we meet in the street, or rub elbows with in a bus or jeepney. Women. They teem. They're everywhere. In hovels, fine houses, churches, schools, offices, the marketplace, the streets, hotels, beer gardens, alleyways reeking of urine and feces, rice fields, sugarcane fields, beaches. Women. There are stories behind any of the faces we meet every day.

I'm around somewhere in these little stories. I could be up-front, nosy little persona prying out details about people and things and events that may have happened in silence, behind our back, behind closed doors, or when we were asleep. The one sifting through the sludge of tales heard and almost forgotten, to find the one story to tell, whatever it is. I'm not indifferent, though I may seem I am. Indifference is a ruse, an act of self-defense. One would not want to wear one's heart in her sleeves. These stories are personal and intimate. Some are too painful, we may wish we never heard them. They're not really astounding stories. They're everyday things, small conversation that covers a lifetime's grief, or triumph, or will to endure.

Being a woman is an insidious destiny. Women are permeable to feelings and sensations of people around them—they seem able to break through the surfaces of

other lives, like seeing through a chrysalis to the imminent butterfly inside. Women sense in their blood the undistinguished cells and tissues inside the pupa before they burst into color and wings, the glory of first flight. That brief tryst is written all along in her own flesh. Like death. Like redemption. Life getting on with itself while death skulked in a corner of the throbbing heart.

Sleeplessness is a pervasive state of being, it happens to humans all the time. But the sleeplessness of women is more than insomnia, a clinical condition which has known pharmacopeia. If the causes were discovered, insomnia may be cured, experts would have us believe. Get rid of the cause, or take a pill to blunt its effect. Being a woman does not qualify as removable cause. The only thing to do is to live with it. The condition has sets of inescapable givens. We have not reached that point of biological evolution or technological know-how that would enable a choice, at the point of conception or birth, our preferences--male, female, and, or, all other permutations of sexual orientations that have so recently surfaced, each one asking for space to thrive under the common sun. We shape our identities after the fact of the biological condition we were born into, an accident of chromosomes we can't blame God for. Don't mind this if you think it's wrong or ill-informed. That's just me, and I'm not even trying to be convincing. Male-female is not even the issue here. It's simply about being a woman. Besides, it's just me talking. Resemblances to anyone's thought, if you find any, are purely accidental and random.

Too many things going on inside a woman's body and mind that alienate sleep. And many more things going on outside it, what people say, what people expect, rules to regulate her life, her own actions, that may have nothing to do with how she is constituted as a person. They add up, one way or the other, to sleeplessness. I am among the sleepless, I have first knowledge of that syndrome. Sometimes it's hormones causing it, that time of month. There are other things, but no equivalent in words. Women would recognize these stories. Parallel experiences. As for the men, never mind the men. They live beside women without having an inkling of what's going on in their lives—the women's lives, that is. Men have always felt or done what they like. Whatever they do or say, people nod in tolerance and say, that's what men are, yes, what can we do? Women say the same things about men. But that's talk for other occasions.

The usual disclaimer, expectedly: Names, places and events changed to protect the sensibilities of infants, children and lovers. Whatever we do, save love at any cost. Save infants and children. They are the imminent butterflies. Embroider truth. Tell little lies for love's sake. And save yourself from lawsuits. Or even murder. Reader, you might meet someone you know here, a friend, a neighbor, a sister, your own mother, your wife, even yourself. That's pure coincidence. On the other hand, it's

more than coincidence, simply because our lives are rarely solo portraits. Behind our smiles lurk the tears of generations, and many invisible faces, and other secret lives. And more. Something about women's lives makes you say, Hey, that could be me. There are men here too. Maybe men will read this too and wonder. Or be dismissive. Men feel what they feel, and think what they think. Inevitably lots of questions. Some, impossible to answer. So why even ask? A good cause for sleeplessness.

But for the moment, just the stories. The stories at least.

—o0o—

## REMEDIOS

Baclayon is a ten-minute ride by taxi from the Tagbilaran wharf. Up in Montaña, a gentle rise of land along Layâ Beach, there's an old-fashioned house nestled among avocado trees. Bird-busy and teeming with butterflies on certain seasons. This is the house of her Tia Remedios. Laureen is sitting on the rocking chair in the porch of this house, watching the quick birds zooming past the windows to the trees surrounding the well-tended lawn. The air is still but for the birds. She'd dropped in on the old woman that morning, coming in from Dumaguete. She's is on her way to Cebu where she lives with her own family. Five hours to spend with the old one till the next boat for Cebu comes in. The taxi that brought her up will come back for her at the appointed time.

Tia Remedios never leaves the house now. Not even to visit her garden which is going to seed, Laureen observes. All she does the whole day is listen to news on her radio or watch the birds. A caregiver attends to her needs. All her children live abroad except for the seaman and his family who live in the National Capital Region.

"Those kids downstairs, I worry about them," the old voice pulls Laureen back to her Tia Meding's presence. "They eat nothing but instant noodles."

The kids she's talking about are actually the children of her youngest son, Leo, three full-grown siblings—two young men and a sister who married early and now has two children of her own, a girl of four or five, and an infant. Everyone, including the daughter's husband, is dependent on the OFWs Leo and Flo, their parents, who work as healthcare givers in London. They're her Tia Meding's great grandchildren actually, by her son Leo's daughter.

"Even the little one, they feed her instant noodles. Why not eggs, bananas, chicken, *tinolang isda*—"

"Don't worry about them, Tia. They'll find their own way," she raises her voice close to a shout—the old woman is growing deaf. Ninety-eight years old, but her memories are intact, a closely-woven tapestry of hurts. "They'll bungle around for

a while, Tia. But they'll find their way. Look at you, look at your children. It wasn't easy, but you made a good life for yourself."

"Because I got out of there."

*There* it is again, the terrain of her pain, Capiz where Laureen had never been. Tia Remedios and her own mother are siblings, hence they both came from *there*, from Capiz. Laureen has heard this story from Tia Meding once too often: how the old patriarch, Augusto, slapped the young girl Remedios, she, just out of nursing school, and already working. She's the eldest of ten children. Impatient to leave for a job in Iloilo City, she was fretting that her younger siblings, sent on an errand, had not come back with the change that was to be her fare money. This happened before the war, when only two buses plied the dusty stony road between the farm in Lincud and the city.

"Papa heard me complaining about the kids not coming back. He got angry. He slapped me. In the face. Hard. 'A little money,' he said. 'A little money and you are already complaining, you ingrate!' I stared back at him, I said, 'I'm leaving this house soon. And I will never come back. You will never see me again on this earth.' I never came back. He didn't pay for my college education, after all. It was 'Tay Mundo, his older brother, who paid for my nursing course.'"

This part of the story never changes. Same words, same tone. Seventy years had passed, and she has not laid down the hurt and shame of that unjust act. The ultimate insult that compelled her to lifelong exile in Bohol, away from the farm in Capiz where she was born.

"When I was asking to go to college, Mama told me, 'No use asking for the moon when one can't fly.' Mama was illiterate. She was not to blame." She falls silent. "No one told me when Papa and Mama died," she adds after a while. "Maybe they think I'm already dead too."

"They did not tell Mama either, Tia." Tia Meding is Laureen's mother's older sister. "Now they're all dead, Tia. All your brothers and sisters. My Mama's gone too. You're the only one left. I miss my Mama, Tia. That's why I always visit you when I can."

"I'm worried about those children downstairs. They feed the little one only noodles. They have money. Why don't they buy good food? The little one needs eggs, and vegetables, and fruit."

"Don't worry about them, Tia. They'll find their own way." Laureen wants to believe this too. We will surely find our own way, whatever burdens of the past we carry. Her own Mamang never talks about Capiz the way Tia Meding does. Yet, she too, never went back, finding her own way in the world with her family, never looking back as Tia Meding does, often and with much bitterness. Capiz might have been another planet, the way her mother blanked it off her mind. Tia Meding was the one

link she has to the unknown terrain of her mother's past. Lauren feels a twinge in her heart thinking of her mother.

Lauren picks up the hum of a car approaching. It's almost time to go. A heaviness invades her. The old woman will be alone again. She thinks of her mother and swallows back her grief. Tia Meding too would not have long to stay in this world.

"Maybe this is our last meeting," the old woman's grip on her arms tightened. Her fingers are still strong.

"I'll be back, Tia. Before you know it, I'd be here again."

"You're the only one who visits me."

"Texas is too far away, Tia. That's why your girls can't come as often as they want. Cebu is not so far, just an hour and a half away. I'll be back soon."

An unexpected chuckle. "Hah, not me, I never returned. I never saw Papa again. 'Maybe we'll meet in hell,' that's what I said to him when I left. But you, you must come back soon. Make sure you're here when I go. The children downstairs, what's to happen to them?"

"The children will be fine, Tia. They'll grow up and do well. Like you. You left home, and you did very well." From the balcony they watch the car move slowly into view.

"I have to go now, Tia." She bends to kiss the old woman's head.

"Maybe I won't be alive when you come back."

Lauren picks up her luggage. She walks to the door in silence. She does not say goodbye as she slowly goes down the stairs. The caregiver stands beside Tia Meding who's leaning out to wave to her as she gets into the car. She is crying, Lauren knows she is crying again. She turns her face away so she won't have to see the crumpled face. Maybe she cried when she left the old house seventy years ago. Or maybe she did not. Just bit her lips and walked away. Never looking back.

She's going home now, back to Cebu. Lauren slams the car door shut. She looks ahead. She knows Tia Meding is waving her goodbye. She swipes a hand across her cheek. But she does not look back.

—o0o—

## GINA

A wild thing, a child with unkempt hair, stained clothes, rough manners—that was Gina when she first came to Tia Ising's house in Cebu. She came from the farmlands of Capiz. Tia Ising washed her up and taught her to comb her hair, dressed her in clean decent clothes, and sent her to school. She got through elementary and high school with no trouble. She was about to start college when she ran away. No one

knew why she did that. She didn't go very far that time. She went to Ormoc and lived with my parents. They also sent her to school. But she was gone in a year and no one heard from her since. They never talked much about her after that, except to wonder, occasionally, where she might have gone. My father was still alive then. He survived my mother by six years. A month ago Gina surfaced in my Facebook account with a personal message: "Come with me to Bohol. I want to visit Mama Ising."

So now, here's this well-dressed woman before me, who speaks straight and carries herself with dignity and self-assurance. We're waiting for the boat to Tagbilaran. We're at Bo's Café along Jones Avenue, a pot of tea between us. We've a couple of hours to kill before our boat leaves for Tagbilaran. I tell her about my failed marriage and years of struggle to send the children through college. Being a university professor helped, I tell her. My kids got to study for free in the university where I teach.

Hearing my story, she tells me her own. "Papang died in Manila. Five years ago. Stroke. But I got to see him before he took sick. I didn't know that was going to be the last time I'd see him alive." She laughs without bitterness. "I wanted him to see me as I am now. He was living with my brother who's a seaman. Mamang's alright. Still in Capiz. I send her money."

"Looks like you've come a long way, Gin. You're looking very well."

"It was not easy, Manang. Remember my Papang in Capiz? Early morning, he was already drinking. By himself, or with 'Tay Simon and 'Tay Rubio. On bad days, he'd call for Berting or Ana, or me, and if he didn't like the way we answered, he'd beat us up. Slap us in the face, real hard. Mamang dared not stop him. Once, he was about to beat up Benito for hiding under the bed when he called. Benito was our youngest, two years old at the time. Papang dragged him out. Ben was shrieking, '*Papang, indi! Indi!*' Mamang grabbed the child from him. 'He's too small, you'll kill him! Kill me instead!' She screamed at him, the only time I remember her standing up to him. He let go of Ben. He turned to her and beat her up. I tried to help Mamang. So he beat me up too. No one came to help us. Then he rushed out of the house. No one knew where he went. He did not come home for three days. When he came back, nothing was said. But the beating did not stop. We lived in terror every day. One day, Mama Ising visited the farm, the first and only time she ever did. She asked, 'Who wants to come with me to Cebu?' I said, 'Me.'"

Gina's father is Tia Ising's and my mother's younger brother. Gina calls her Mama Ising.

"What would have happened had I stayed on in Capiz?" she muses. "Mama Ising taught me everything—taking a bath, brushing my teeth, cooking, cleaning the house. Everything. She was tough on me too, never allowed me to shirk my duties."

It was work, work, work all the time. She must have wanted me to be like her. She herself was always working. I had to carry water for the kitchen from the town's artesian well. Morning and afternoon I did that. But she sent me to school."

"Where did you go when you left home, Gin?" I meant my parents' home where she lived for a year when she ran away from Tia Ising's.

"Samar. I took a bus to Samar. I worked as a house help. Then I got married." She smiled ruefully, "I had to get married to protect myself." She sipped her tea and continued. "Men think you're anyone's game if you're single. Even men in your own family."

This time she laughs harshly. "I started a family. Five children. Life in Samar was rough, not much better than life in the Capiz farm. We relocated to Davao. We have relatives there, Tia Monica, Tio Dando, remember them? They helped me find a job in Davao. But my husband proved a bad partner after a while. Like my father. So I left him. I became an OFW, a domestic worker. I went to Singapore. I worked as a domestic for officers of the British Embassy. Mama Ising's training came in handy in this line of work. I was lucky with my employers. They gave me good referrals, so I was always with kind and generous employers. I travelled the world with them. They took me along wherever they were posted. That's how I took care of my family. I sent money home. All my children went to school. I bought a little property. I'm ready for retirement. I'm okay now, Manang."

"The aunties felt bad when you left them just like that," I tell her gently.

"Yes, I know. I don't blame the aunties. It's not their fault."

She is quiet and thoughtful for a while. I feel that she has something more to say but has decided against letting it out.

"Tia Ising's children all live abroad now. Except for the seaman."

"I know. They're all doing well. The grandchildren all grown up now too. We keep in touch."

"One of Tia Ising's children died five years ago. Ramon, the eldest son. Drink, and diabetes. Did you hear about that?"

She looks at me for a long time, not speaking. No expression on her face. Then she takes a deep breath and turns away. She looks out to the traffic along Jones, not meeting my eyes.

"Yes, I heard about it." She takes a deep breath. "That's why I can go home now and see Mama Ising."

She picks up her teacup and sips the tepid tea. She looks me squarely in the eyes, "Now you know."

She puts the teacup down gently. "Let's go. We've an hour to make it to the pier."

—o0o—

**NENA**

Nena was in college when the war broke out. The war forced her to go back home to Tagbilaran. She was enrolled in the UP College of Fine Arts, the only girl in an all-male cohort.

“At that time, 1941, the talent to draw was considered a special ability of men, never of women. I was the rare one who dared to claim I can draw as well as any man.”

She told me this in the early years of our friendship. I was twenty-seven, a jobless, first-time mother, and she was pushing sixty, nine children behind her. The youngest at the time was eight years old.

She went back to school when peacetime came. In two years she finished BA Fine Arts. She graduated top of her class. She came home with her trophy, planning to go back to Manila and build a career in art. Her parents would not allow her to go back. For good reason. From the *probinsyano* point of view, postwar Manila was a wild and wicked place for an unmarried woman. As a good daughter Nena obeyed her parents. She stayed home, married her high school sweetheart, and started a family—all as expected. Marriage was a “safe place” for their daughters, so parents thought at the time. *May estado na*, “has achieved stability,” the saying goes, having gained a husband to take care of her. An unmarried daughter made them uneasy. Who will provide for her? What will she do with herself? Who will take care of her in her old age?

Nena’s husband’s job took him all over the Visayas and Mindanao. She went wherever he went, the dutiful wife. She dropped babies at every place they stayed, until she had nine, each one born in a different city in the south. That kept her too busy to do anything more than keep house for her large family. One of her daughters, Celia, became my student.

Celia was a frail-looking girl with fire in her spirit. An angry child. Her mother, she said, wouldn’t hear of a daughter becoming an artist. This was how I got to know Nena’s story. Before I even met Nena, I had a sense of her bitterness in the hurt eyes of her daughter.

As a first-time mother, I felt I had become a milk machine. My nipples hurt from the constant suckling. My engorged breasts were unbearably painful. I felt I was at the mercy of the infant who knew me only as the provider of its comfort and nourishment. Putting the fretful infant to sleep, I would think of Celia, this baby would grow up and become like that resentful young girl with the petulant mouth and the hurt eyes. Chafing at the leash her mother kept her on. Insisting on her own way. Nothing a mother can do about it.

“Do what they say now,” I would tell Celia as gently as I could. “Finish college. Then do your own thing.”

“But I hate what I’m doing now. Why is she cruel to me?”

“What else can you do? Just obey them now. Then live your own life. Art is patient. It can wait. It gets better as you grow older.” I had nothing else to say. I didn’t know Nena at that time.

I did get to meet Nena eventually. In a small city like Tagbilaran no one remained a stranger for long. You didn’t have to try too hard, people and things had a way of coming around. Cruel, Celia had said of her mother. I was to find out from Nena herself that she was cruel, not just to Celia, but to most of her children. Several of them had wanted to go to art school. A question of money? Some of her friends from college, now famous artists, had offered to help. But she vigorously opposed anyone’s wish to go to art school. The boys dropped out of school in frustration. She stood her ground and refused permission. Celia said she wouldn’t even give them art lessons.

We became friends. Bonded by our mutual “weirdness,” which was what our friends would say about us. She agreed to give me art lessons. But a few sessions in her home told me I have no talent.

Nena’s last watercolor, done when she was graduating from her Fine Arts degree, hung in her cluttered living room with the battered furniture. She never painted after that, she told me. Why is that? I asked her. She gave me a vague smile, as if to say: It’s too complicated, let’s not talk about it. We did not really ask questions of each other. We kept each other company, that’s all, sharing recipes, sewing tips. We were at loose ends and did not know what to do with ourselves. Most of her children were grown up except for the eight-year old. She had time on her hands now. But the long years of staying away from her pigment and brushes had set an inertia that kept her from breaking out of her hiatus. She had indeed become by this time the painter who did not paint.

Sometime in our topsy-turvy lives, we had both decided to turn away from our fatal—and selfish, so we thought—attraction to art. But maybe I should only speak for myself. From the start I was resolved to focus on my family. Family above any other consideration. Nothing should ever divert me from the sanctity of that resolve, I vowed to myself. That sanctimonious vow had translated into the squalling infant in its crib and the seldom-home husband working hard, I supposed, to support us. Endless meals to prepare, laundry that’s never done, cleaning that’s never finished according to one’s satisfaction. Nevertheless, small sacrifices for so great a cause—the family.

All the while in my mind, the words crawled about in nonstop riffs, rhythms, tones, accents, contrapuntal with the smell of infant pee, milk, and sweat from my own body, the constant tiredness, the lack of sleep. And a strange displaced anger, an

unfocused dissatisfaction, a constant miasma hanging over the days. And also guilt, for the simple fact of feeling unhappy and dissatisfied without a reason.

I kept all these carefully in check. Women do this very well. My mother humming a song under her breath as she washed and cooked and folded laundry, or swept the house, or sewed on buttons and mended hems and torn garments. Her sigh when she finally sat at the edge of her bed at night, the tasks of the day done, and everyone safely home. No one had ever thought to ask her what she felt, what else she had wanted to do besides being our mother, a living fixture in our lives, the one we were eager to leave behind in the morning and happy to come home to at night. Dependable as sunrise or moonrise. I've heard it said once too often that this was everything to a woman, if she had this in her life, she was made, she was constituted mainly for this purpose, it was her reason for being. My mother believed implicitly in this. She never told anyone of us about her dreams for herself. Did she ever have any? If she was sleepless for ruing what she had missed, or what she could have been, she never let on. Her dreams were for us, so she always said. It seemed right enough.

We were sitting in the porch of Nena's house one afternoon, looking out across the narrow strait to the nearby island of Panglao. Across the street, a flowering *malunggay* branch rose high above the fence.

"Look at those white flowers against the gray sky. So beautiful." So much longing in her voice.

That's how I learned where all the bitterness came from, the cause of Celia's anger, the hurt in her eyes. I knew at that very moment that Nena had never stopped painting in her mind. I knew too, that someday, she would paint again.

And she did. Years later, after an illness that nearly killed her. She was seventy-three years old when she started all over again. She painted canvases full of life and history, full of the joy and gladness of land and sea and mountains, full of the eagerness of life. Each canvass characterized by her amazing sense of color and symmetry. Each one an act of forgiveness of everything that needed redemption, herself included.

So I knew, too, that Celia would find her own way in life and in art.

And thus, I too, knew that someday, I would write. And so I did.

—o0o—

## THE POET

The poet lost her house to pay off a loan. A business venture gone bad. She lost her house to the bank and she and her husband, the fictionist, had to stay with relatives. In her old house she had a study which contained her collection of books,

two huge desks with their respective well-padded swivel chairs, one for her and one for the fictionist. She was in the habit of writing at night, getting up from bed in the adjoining room and working in her study until sleep overtook her again.

They're lucky to have this little room in a cousin's house. At least they don't have to rent. The room is just big enough for their huge bed from the old house and a desk. No room for more furniture. The fictionist claims the desk as his writing space, no argument. That's just as it should be, she tells herself. Poor dear, he'll never know how to manage without a desk. He needs it more than I do.

She gets a milk carton and puts her writing things on it, her ballpoint pens, the pad of ruled yellow paper, the folders containing the files she's working on, and the books she's currently reading. Also a huge unabridged edition of the *Merriam-Webster English Dictionary* which she puts on her lap to serve as support for her writing pad. When she wants to write, all she needs to do then is to slide her feet to the floor and sit at the edge of her bed, and arrange the thick volume and the writing pad on her lap. She still writes everything by hand. She would then give the document to Aniceto, her nephew, to encode in his office computer. She is always careful not to disturb the snoring fictionist beside her when she sits up to work. She is grateful for the working space each of them has in this very small room. At least they don't get on each other's nerves, fighting for work space despite their straitened circumstances.

She never thinks of sitting on the desk even when the fictionist is not using it. She sits at her place on the edge of her bed, and writes, as she has always done most of her life. She keeps the milk carton which contains her files under the bed. She writes, dressed in an old faded duster, hair uncombed. But she sits at her writing space with the rightful certainty of a queen on her throne, or a CEO commanding an office-full of minions. It's a scruffy little room, on the walls are clothes hanging on nails, window curtains strung askew on a tie wire, a big calendar from Maruyama Enterprises on the cabinet shutter, and on the floor, a crumpled blanket warming her feet.

Try sitting this way sometime to discover how her old body sank into the mattress, how the unnatural position strained her spine, her shoulders and hips, balancing on her lap the heavy tome with her writing pad on it. She couldn't rest her back and stretch her legs without dislodging her writing stuff. She does this balancing act for an hour or two at least. She sits there uncomplaining, engrossed in the moment's task. She never blames anyone for the wrong decisions that had cost them their old age security, their house, their position in the community.

This is what I remember. I was sitting at her feet at the time, learning from her all I could of the pride of the craft that held up her spirit and gave it strength against her tribulations. Tribulations, I had a lot of my own. I marked the humility and patience

and grace that sustained her and made her rise at a fixed hour of the night, and sit at her writer's "throne" on the side of her bed, pen between her fingers, glad for the words she could still summon to paper, and grateful for this little space on earth in which she could sit and write. Inside the gray head bowed over the paper, her mind was young and restless, roaming the jungles of her imagination, while the world slept.

—o0o—

### **JOEY'S SECRET**

i'm five years old i've five brothers edwardjeremyjohnjoseph bigger than I joshua smaller they call me joey that's a boy's name but it's okay when i grow up i'll be a boy then i can go to school then no one will laugh at my clothes then i can climb trees and play all day like edwardjeremyjohnjoseph and joshua i'll catch spiders too and make them fight mama will not mind me doing it 'cause i'm a boy my spider will be the biggest and bravest then no one will grab my food from me and make me cry 'cause then i can run fast after my brothers and get my food back i'm always hungry the boys are hungrier always grabbing my food so when I cry our neighbor the long-hair man tells me don't cry little joey i'll take care of you your papa told me to take care of you the long-hair man is kind he's always giving me food chippies and fudge bars saying i'll take care of you little joey your papa said I must take care of you you must obey me they put papa in a box a long time ago they took him away he never came back i don't know where they took him i was still a baby that time my papa taught me to walk my mama always busy washing the neighbors' clothes she tells me play with your brothers edwardjeremyjohnjoseph always leave me behind 'cause i'm slow also joshua even if he's little they are always in the streets chasing each other flying kites fighting with the other kids the long-hair man tells me little joey i can be your papa just do what i tell you he told jeremy once don't take away joey's food he says to john don't tease joey here joey here's some candy all yours a lot of candy he took my hand he was kind let's hide your candy so the boys won't find it let's hide it in your house some place the boys will never find he led me home nobody there but the dog the long-hair man is our neighbor the dog did not bark oh i can't say what happened i can't say i can't i can't i can't . . . i am joey I am five years old I don't want candies anymore who will tell the long-hair man to please stay away please stop giving candies to me and to my always-hungry brothers, so i can sleep....