

Foreword from *Dropped Threads*

The focus for this anthology floated out one day amid soup and salad at one of those gatherings where Carol and I take the emotional pulse of our worlds – or The World, it seems to us.

“The woman’s network let me down. Nothing I’ve ever heard or read prepared me for this!” This particular yelp resulted from the plummet of energy and purpose I experienced with menopause and quickly led us to wider, more lively musings on what else had caught us unprepared, where else we had experienced gaps between female experience and expression. We were surprised by the number of topics and by the ease with which they came to mind. The image of dropped threads from the fabric of women’s talk occurred to us and the familiar, satisfying assumption that women could talk about anything unravelled as we spoke.

We included other women in our speculations: friends, colleagues and family members took up the conversation with enthusiasm and immediate revelations as though, for some, the topic was one they had wanted to discuss for years. They identified gaps in their communal talk and named life-altering surprises in their individual lives. Most spoke of serious issues, of surprise bruising or blessings, private moments of intense connection or bewilderment. Other women reported insights that bordered on the hilarious: one friend mentioned that her greatest surprise was “sagging earlobes” and another claimed it was “a husband who flosses his teeth in front of you and then expects passion in bed.” The idea for an anthology of writings on the topic blossomed naturally. We had obviously tapped into a rich vein of stories that touched on defining moments in women’s lives. We invited a number of acquaintances and friends to write these stories, the ones they wanted and needed to tell, recognizing, of course, there would be private spaces that everyone needs to keep beyond the claim of words. We thought women writers would have interesting observations: what subjects hadn’t they written about that needed communal airing? We also asked women of other backgrounds, academics, ranchers, politicians, homemakers, journalists, lawyers, to identify the areas of surprise and silence in their lives.

The responses were immediate and the topics wide-ranging: everything from the joys of belly dancing to the shock of gender inequities in politics. There seemed to be a general embracing of the license implicit in our invitation, but also some reticence: more than one respondent commented on the courage it would take to write on personal issues that had long been beyond the limits of acceptable expression. A few women identified experiences which they could not write on because the pain was too new or the fear of judgment still too strong. What was particularly satisfying to us was that we were contacted by women who had heard of our venture and wanted their stories included. One of these surprise offerings is among the most powerful of the anthology.

The collection of thirty-four reflective pieces is the end result of those conversations and connections started back in the spring of 1999. Many of the voices will be familiar to readers; others will be new. Some are forthright and take the reader to the heart of intense experience. Others approach distinctly personal moments with caution and then veer away, as though the walls around the silences they’ve been keeping are impenetrable. What unites all these writings is the uncommon honesty, courage and acuity of emotion these women bring to their topics – and to us.

They tell us that once life slows down enough for reflection, women uncover truths several beats away from the expected and the promised: female friendships are often more central in our lives than those we have with men and children; what we are told can be as limiting as what is never spoken; and vanity, dominance and blasts of lust that break through marriage and age barriers can be good things. From those who document the private contours of grief and shame, we learn about survival instincts and minute-by-minute coping strategies that rise up and guide people to new spaces of accommodation. Other women point to the individual colourings of common human happenings: spiritual stirrings, aging and the discovery of fundamental gender inequities continue to catch women unprepared because these experiences can never be the same for any two people.

What the stories and the essays indicate about the variety and uniqueness in women’s lives is

visually reinforced by the Vinarterta Lady sketch on the cover. This stylized woman speaks to the rich rhythms and shadings of our moods and approaches to life. As well, there is a mystery about this sketch that reminds us of the impossibility of capturing in any medium of expression all of what we are and what we experience. There are still blank spaces before us, and women are still asking, as one of our young contributors does, "What shall I tell my daughter?" When we scan through the topics that even this collection has skipped over – mother-daughter relationships, lesbian experiences, life without partners or children, to mention some, we realize that women's conversational weaving will forever be a work in progress.

In the meantime we're reminded not to forget the joys and potential growth from the uncharted. In the afterword Carol Shields writes a characteristically wise, gentle unfolding of the central theme as it relates to her personally. She tells of meeting the "surprises of self-discovery" with "gratitude" and then nudges the reader into embracing the unexpected: "Who isn't renewed by startling scenery or refreshed by undreamed-of freedoms? Surprise keeps us alive, liberates our senses."

Our wish is that this anthology will be liberating for readers. It offers a community of voices that are relevant to everyone, not just women, because the experiences recounted are ultimately those that give us our jagged human dimensions of joy and sorrow. We hope readers of all ages and backgrounds will be inspired by how the contributors answered the initial question we posed and will be drawn to examine their own crevices of surprise and silence.

Marjorie Anderson, July 2000