

March 2006

Dear Friend,

I've wanted to see my mother's room for as long as I can remember. That is what strikes me as I think about how to help people understand her experience, and mine, over the past twenty-four years. I wanted to know what it looked like where my mother lived long before I wanted to know what she had done to be in prison or why she had done it. Every weekend when I was younger, my grandfather drove me to visit my mom and at some point in each visit I asked to see her room. Every week my mother sent me a letter filled with drawings and stories and each time I received her letter, I tried to imagine what it looked like at the desk where she had written it. As I requested, she drew me pictures of her room and described over and over what was on her walls, what her window looked onto, what she saw when she was lying in bed. "I paste watercolors all around me," she wrote. "Blue skies, rust red deserts, endless turquoise seas." I wrote back, "At night I lie in bed and try to hear grandma's TV."

This curiosity about each other's surroundings, the intense desire to imagine our way into the other's daily setting and activities, has always been a part of my life and my mother's life. As she and I take the questions we've passed back and forth between each other and open them up to more people, I come back to those first questions: What does it look like where you are? What does it feel like?

When I was five years old my mom was placed in solitary confinement. While I was too young to understand most of what was going on then or to recall much of it now, I can remember clearly the matching bird books my mother asked my grandfather to buy each of us. During our visits or over the phone, my mom would describe to me the birds she saw from the window of her cell. At home each night my grandfather and I paged through my book and imagined the birds my mom had seen that day. In the visiting room of the Children's Center, there were various arts and crafts materials and one Saturday my mother and I built a birdhouse out of cardboard and popsicle sticks. "You put this up at home and tell me about the birds that come," my mother suggested. And that weekend my grandfather and I made a place at our window for the makeshift feeder.

At the age of twenty-five I understand now how those books and the birdhouse were early steps of repair and reconnection within my family; I can understand how my mother and grandfather both worked to take those steps. As a child, though, I knew only that they did work, that I leafed through those books each night and believed very much that I could see what my mother saw. I watched the birds collect around our feeder and I could not wait to tell my mom about them. In the midst of missing my mother and worrying about her, the books and birdhouse were very real to me. They were solid comforts in the face of what was then and is still now painful and confusing.

A few years ago my mother sent me a poem she had written that begins, "My daughter says, 'Draw me a picture of your room, Mommy,'" and then asks, "What do I draw for my daughter? A tomb or a womb?" The poem was part of a series of poems that she had written for me and collected into a book as a gift for the Jewish New Year. Each piece in the collection touches on a question that she and I have discussed, developed and returned to throughout my growing up. As a whole, the book points to the conversations my mom and I have built our relationship and our lives around. It opens with the poem *Why* and begins, "Because I could not live in the world as it

was, because I did not want to be what I was born for.” And through the poem my mom winds her way to answer me in the final sentence, “Because I felt weak and afraid and wanted to dare courage into me.”

This poem, like all my mother’s poems, was not an attempt to justify herself or her actions, nor to shield anyone, including me, from the destruction of her crime or her own remorse. Instead her poems have been a way to explore and share who she is and was, what drives her, scares her, shames her and moves her. In the first one she wrote after her arrest and long before I would read it, she tells me, “For your sweet baby soul is magic life hope.” And later, when I was old enough to understand, she ended a piece by writing, “This I know: despite my failures and defeats, my sorry solitude and the burden of guilt . . . still I crave life . . . child poems dreams.”

While the separation from my mother has been the major loss of my life, our relationship has always developed alongside the losses of other people, most significantly the nine children who have grown up without their fathers as a result of the crime in which my mother participated. That I have been able to share my life with my mother, even through separation, has never been something I could take for granted. And so my mom and I have always been committed to each other, grateful for each other. At the moments and places where my mother’s remorse and mourning could have broken her apart, she has worked instead to break herself open. And from there she has spent the last two decades working to become the mother she wants me to have, the woman she first set out to be. It is a process she initiated largely out of a responsibility to me and it is the course by which she has faced a far greater sense of responsibility and the implications of these responsibilities.

Some of the most important work my mom has done throughout this time is with other incarcerated mothers in the parenting classes she facilitates in the prison’s nursery. It has often seemed to me that the self-respect required in order to parent can be hard for mothers inside the prison system to build and maintain. So it is the respect my mom communicates in every one of her interactions with people, whether they are her fellow inmates, visitors, or officers, that has made me most proud of the woman she has become. Her desire to understand and to be understood is now clear in all of her relationships; I see this in the warmth with which my mother is greeted as she moves through the prison visiting room. I believe that she helps the women inside with her understand what she has helped me understand: that living graciously and honestly and thoughtfully is ongoing difficult work and that it is necessary.

Recently I moved to a new apartment in a new town and my mom mailed me an envelope filled with paintings and photographs that had been a part of her room. One of the pictures was Georgia O’Keefe’s *Tree*, and beside it my mother wrote, “I’ve had this on my wall forever. It was my periscope out of here, a reminder to raise my eyes to the possibilities around and beyond me and to always look for a new perspective, to be surprised, awed, uplifted. It is for your wall now, a shared marker between us as you break new ground.” My mom is heading toward new ground. In the months and years to come, she will need the help of a broadening community of people who are willing to bring her work into the forefront of their life and thoughts. I ask you to help my mother as she continues her movement forward and out.

Thank you,

Harriet Clark