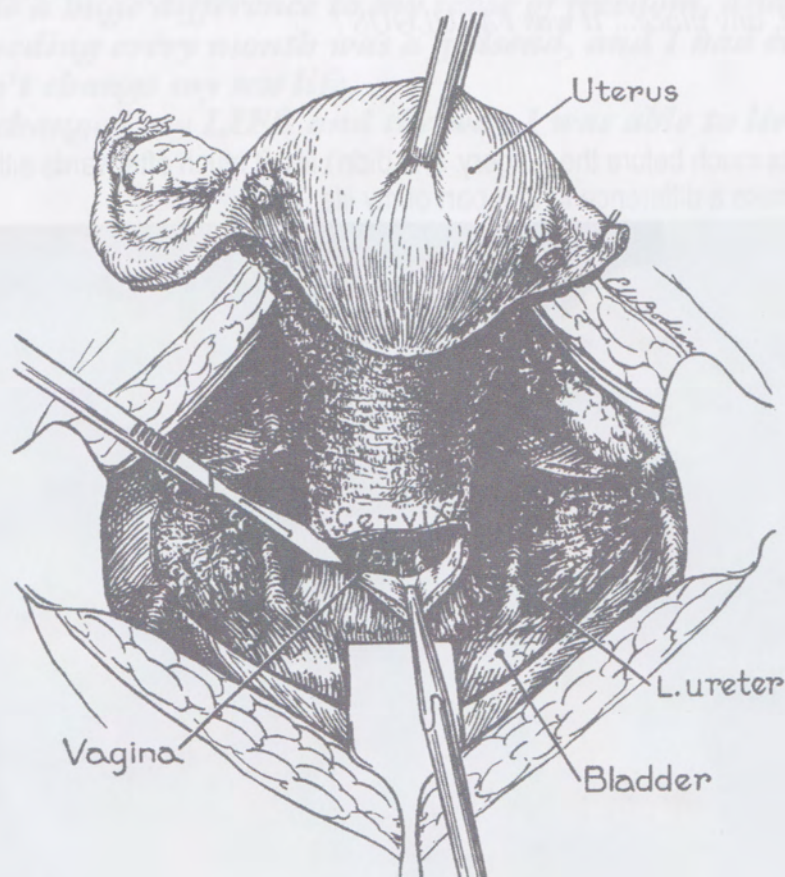




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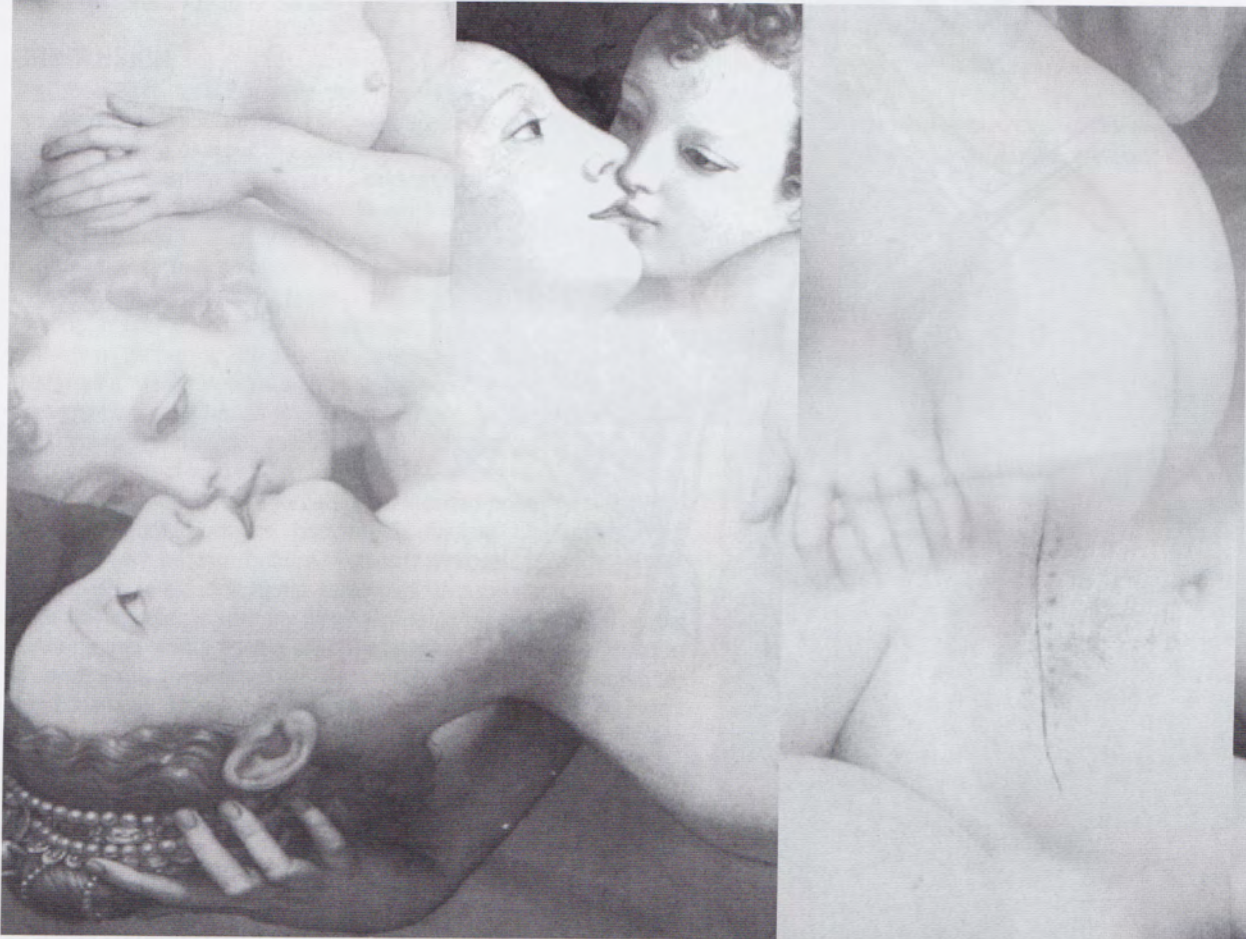
HYSTORIES

A book work about hysterectomy
by Pam Hall



*You didn't have to worry about getting pregnant,
you didn't have to worry about birth control...
So you could make love in the middle of the afternoon if you wanted to...
Any time, any place... It was FABULOUS !*

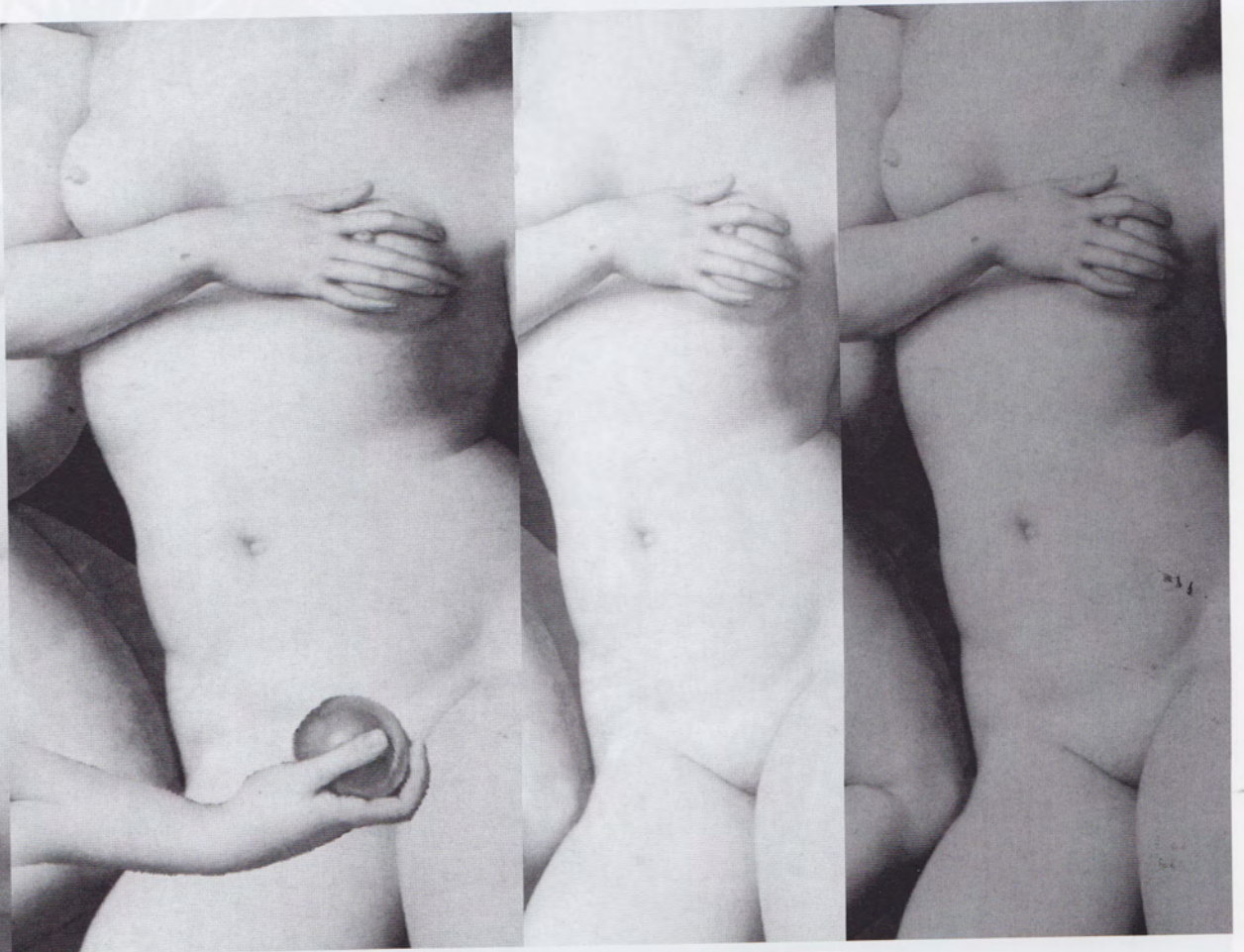
*I didn't like sex much before the surgery, and didn't like it much afterwards either.
It just didn't make a difference to that part of my life.*



**AFTER THE SURGERY I BEGAN TO ENJOY SEX AGAIN.
WITHOUT PAIN, WITHOUT WORRY, WITHOUT FEAR.
IT WAS THE BEST SEX I COULD REMEMBER HAVING.**

*You have to remember that I was really not in great shape before the surgery...
And of course that effected my libido. Once it was done, and the symptoms were gone,
it came raging back full force... So it was fabulous! Yeah...*

*It made a huge difference to my sense of freedom, and to my energy.
Not bleeding every month was a godsend, and I had energy to burn...
It didn't change my sex life,
but it changed my LIFE and the way I was able to live it.*



IT WAS LIBERATING IN MANY WAYS...

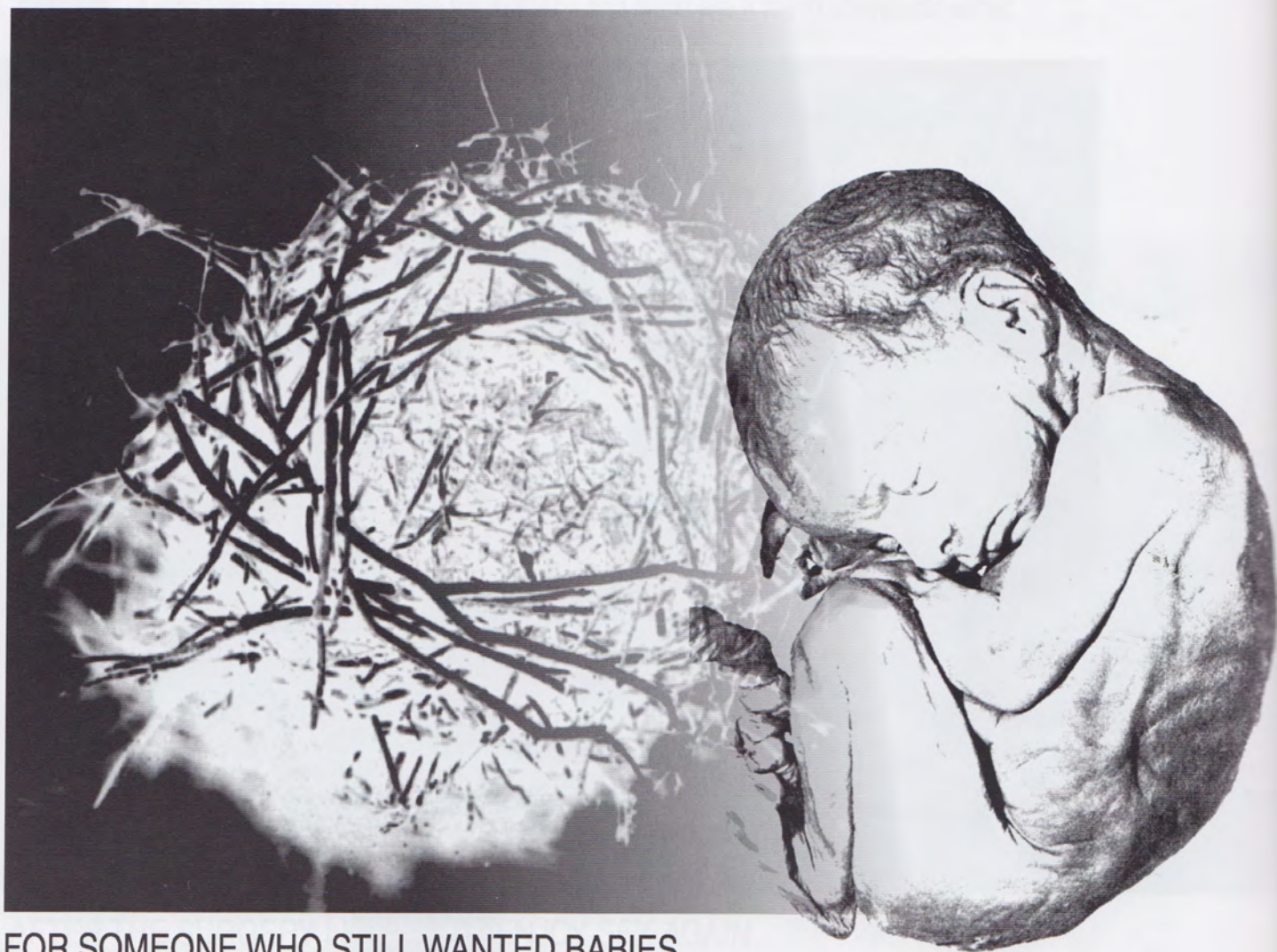
For me... As far as sex was concerned, life began after that hysterectomy!

I discovered after I adopted my son, that there was no difference in the love I felt for him and that which I felt for my daughter, who had been born before the surgery. I feel lucky, to have experienced both of these children, and even more fortunate that I am still alive to be their mother.

NEUTERED? No, I didn't feel neutered.

But I felt cheated, somehow.

*Cheated out of the opportunity to be pregnant,
to grow a life inside me... To experience that.*



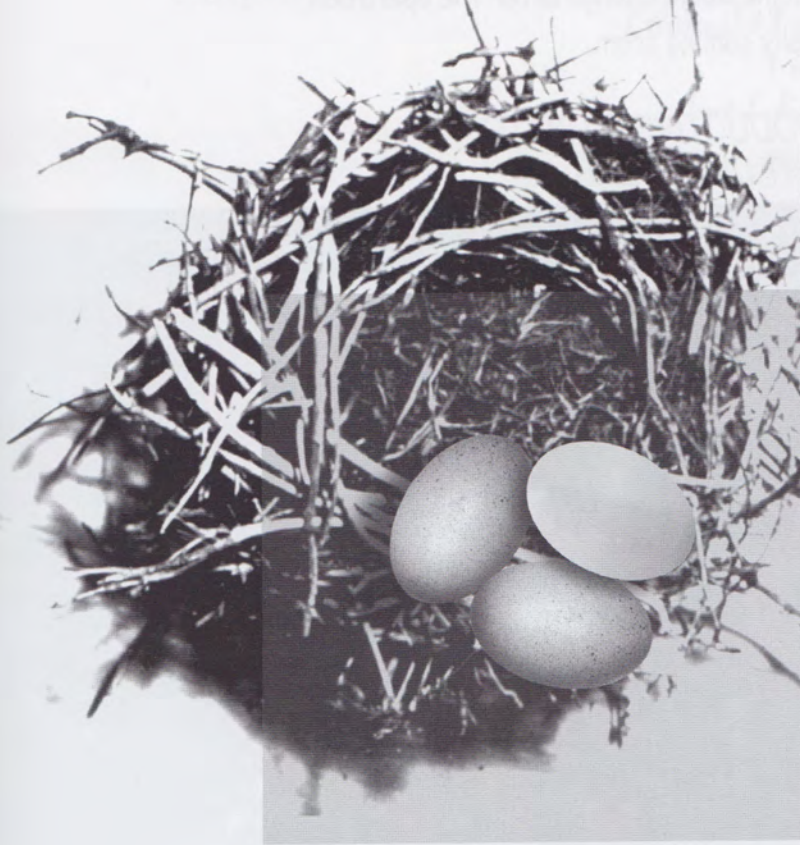
FOR SOMEONE WHO STILL WANTED BABIES,
A HYSTERECTOMY WOULD BE HEARTBREAKING...
TRAGIC... A HUGE LOSS AND DEFINITELY A MAJOR TRAUMA.



I was so angry when I discovered that the surgery was only one of many options. I was only 30, a graduate student, and hadn't given any thought to having a family. But now that I know I can't, I am beginning to long for one.

It was confusing... I had feminist friends who saw giving up reproduction as a radical political act, and other feminist friends who believed my ability to reproduce was the foundation of my womanliness.

I never really wanted children... And felt that child-bearing was imposed on me. So, after having four babies, the hysterectomy was like an act of liberation.



My Doctor said that my uterus was just a little bag for having babies, and if I didn't want more babies, then why did I need that little bag ?



FOR ME, THE LOSS OF MY ABILITY TO BEAR CHILDREN WAS NOT AN ISSUE... I HAD MY KIDS AND WAS CERTAIN I DIDN'T WANT ANY MORE...

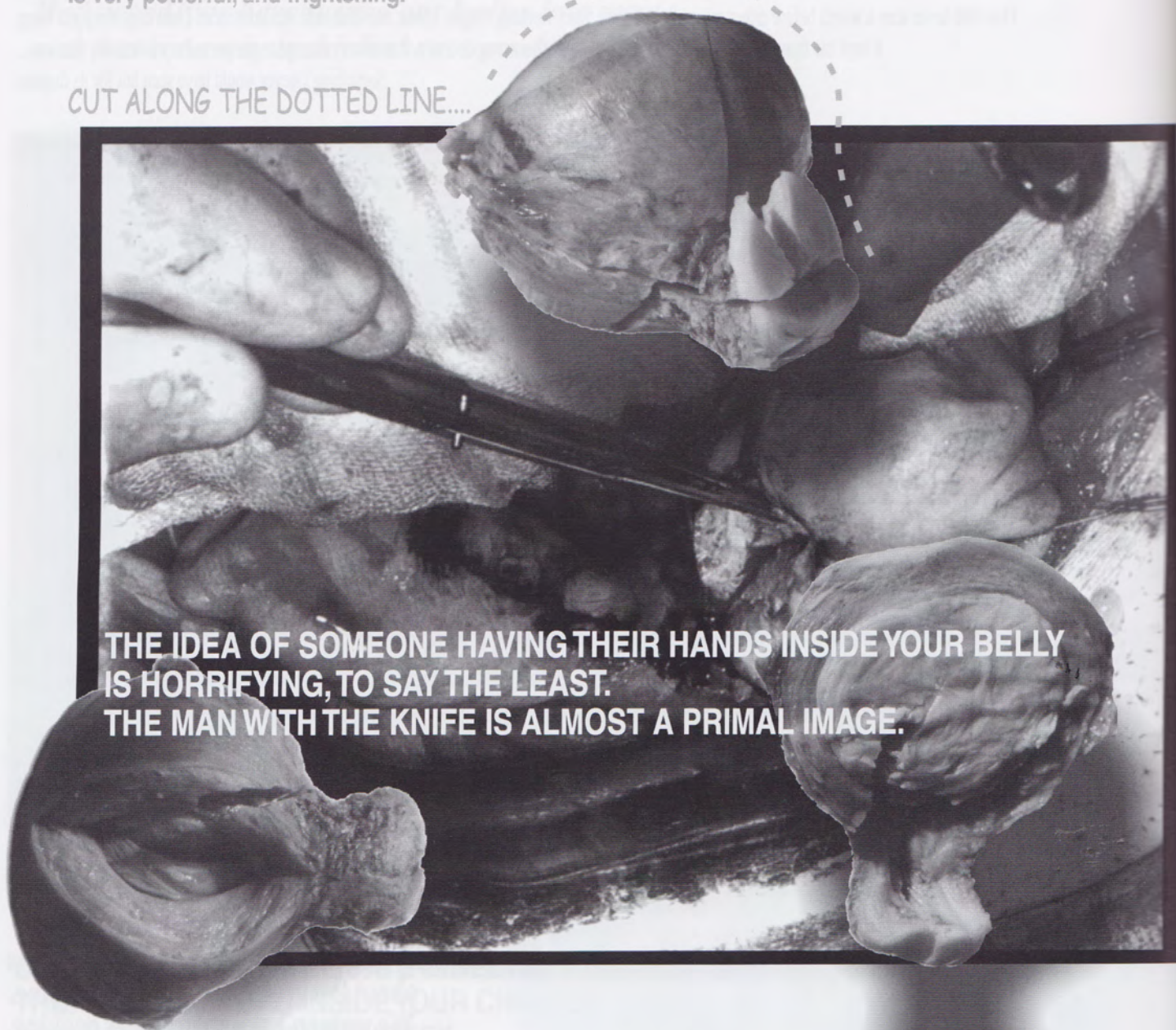
I had never defined myself by my ability to mother...to bear children, so that consequence of the surgery did not bother me at all. It saved my life, and that was the most important thing about it.

We really don't seem to know that much about everything the uterus does... I mean, of course it is responsible for growing babies, but what else does it do? And what might we be missing if we remove it unnecessarily? So it wasn't the maternal thing that made me want to keep it, it was the lack of knowledge about its other functions.

The idea of being put to sleep scared me more than the idea of the knife... The stories you hear about surgeons making jokes while you are under, the idea of not waking up again, and the notion of being exposed like that... Revealed to strangers... Is very powerful, and frightening.

You shouldn't feel like a piece of meat, up there on the table... And I did...

CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINE....

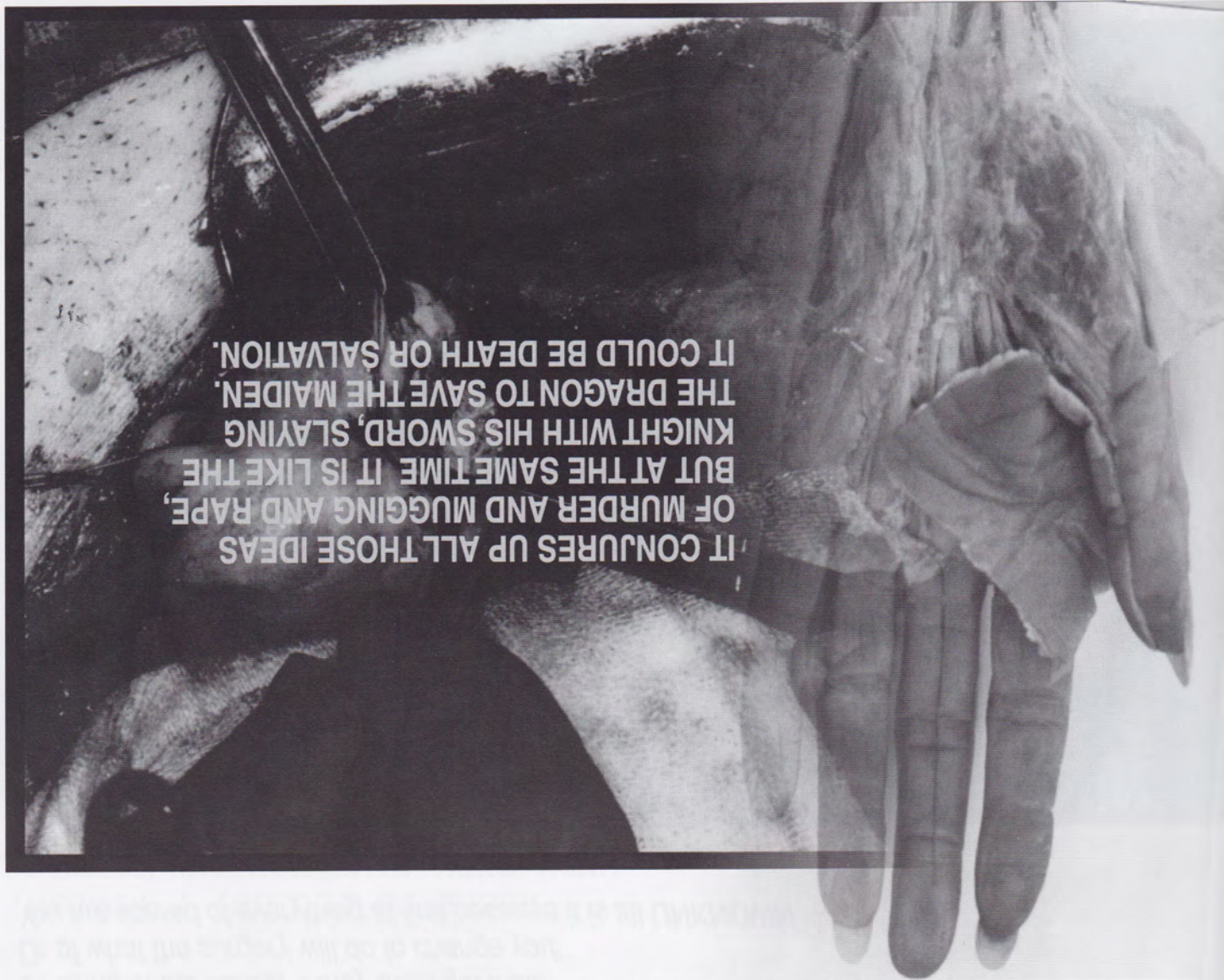


THE IDEA OF SOMEONE HAVING THEIR HANDS INSIDE YOUR BELLY IS HORRIFYING, TO SAY THE LEAST. THE MAN WITH THE KNIFE IS ALMOST A PRIMAL IMAGE.

Compared to the idea of cancer, the idea of surgery was not scary at all.

You try everything you can before you decide to have a hysterectomy...I mean, it is major surgery, after all, and anyone who thinks you make the decision lightly, is crazy. I had two D and C's, was on hormones to try and stop the bleeding, and only made the decision to have the surgery when it became clear that nothing else was working. It was the knife or blood transfusions... What else could I have done?

I trusted my doctor completely... And I don't trust people easily. We had a long conversation about my ovaries, which I wanted to keep, and I remember him asking if I trusted him enough to make a decision once he was in there, and could assess their condition. It was a hard question, but when I said YES, I really meant it. If something went wrong with my heart, I would call this doctor and ask him to brush up on his cardiology skills.



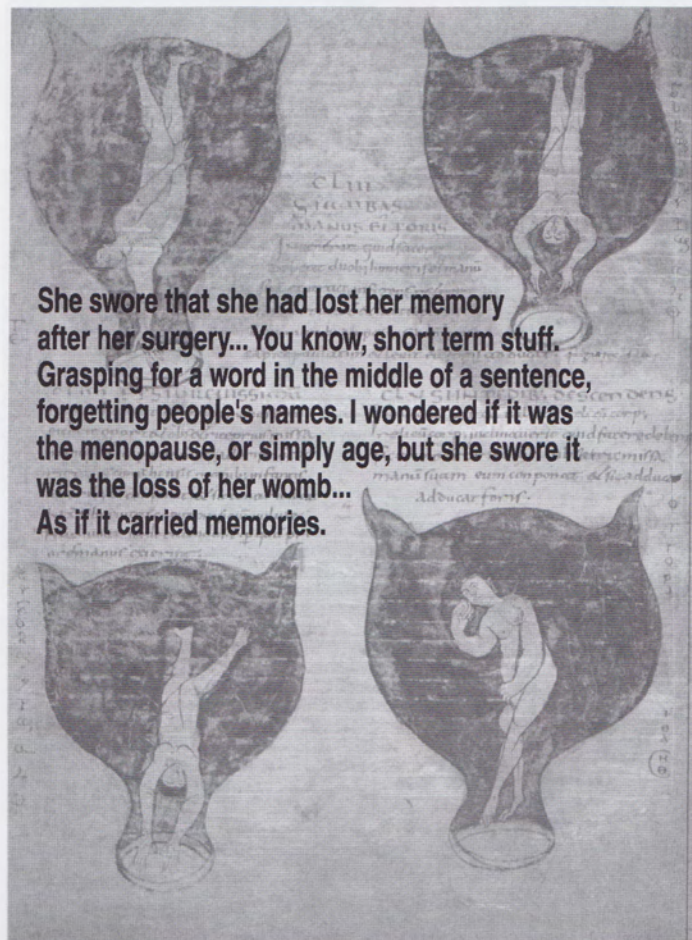
IT CONJURES UP ALL THOSE IDEAS
OF MURDER AND MUGGING AND RAPE,
BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT IS LIKE THE
KNIGHT WITH HIS SWORD, SLAYING
THE DRAGON TO SAVE THE MAIDEN.
IT COULD BE DEATH OR SALVATION.

The first surgeon I spoke with was like a car mechanic...
Made me feel stupid and incapable of being a partner in the process.
So, I did what anybody would do... I found another doctor.

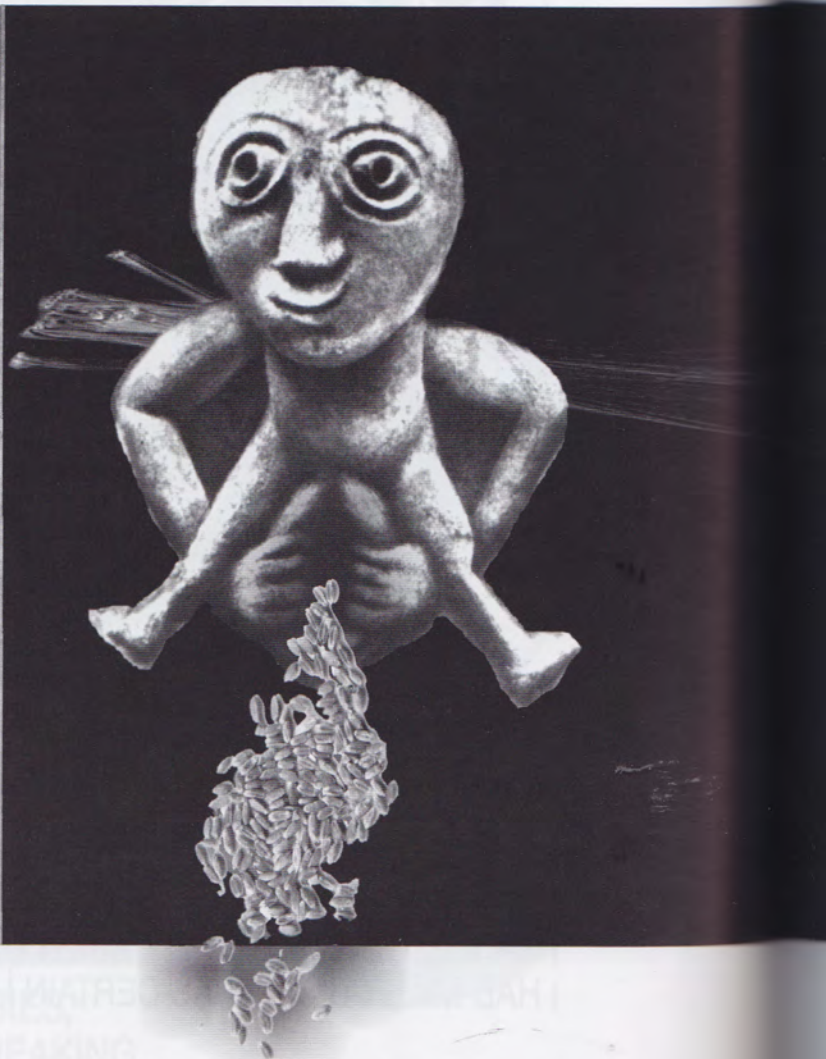
THEY SHOULD REALLY TEACH SURGEONS
HOW TO DEAL BETTER WITH THEIR PATIENTS.
JUST BECAUSE IT IS A TEMPORARY RELATIONSHIP
DOESN'T MEAN THEY SHOULD BE CRUEL,
UNCOMMUNICATIVE, AND PATRONIZING.

One of my girlfriends asked me if I was worried about my orgasms after the surgery. She claimed that her's were located in her womb and I scoffed, but began to worry that perhaps mine would change after the operation, even though I wasn't sure where they were actually coming from.

*YOU KNOW ABOUT LOSING YOUR REPRODUCTIVE CAPACITY.
BUT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE MIGHT DISAPPEAR.*



She swore that she had lost her memory after her surgery... You know, short term stuff. Grasping for a word in the middle of a sentence, forgetting people's names. I wondered if it was the menopause, or simply age, but she swore it was the loss of her womb... As if it carried memories.

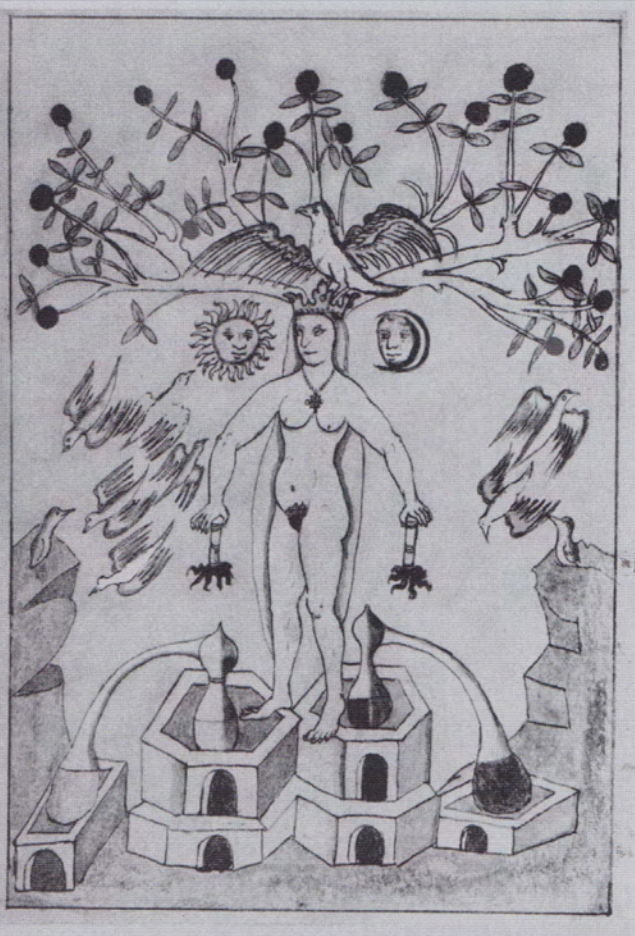


*I grew up drinking only red wine.
After the surgery I couldn't even smell it without feeling sick.
So, at fifty-three, I suddenly had to learn to drink white wine.
I still wonder if my taste for red was there, in my womb.*

*I guess a lot of my sense of my womanliness
was based on my ability to bear children.*

*Even though I had finished doing that,
I thought I would feel less female... Less like a woman.
I mean... I know a lot of that stuff is learned,
but I did wonder if I would feel somehow unsexed.*

I ALWAYS THOUGHT WOMEN WERE
MORE CREATIVE, SOMEHOW,
THAN MEN...
AND NOT SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY
COULD MAKE BABIES.
IT WAS JUST THE WOMEN I SAW
GROWING UP, I GUESS...
THEY MADE THINGS
FOR THEIR CHILDREN,
FOR THEIR HOMES...
EVEN THE WAY THEY MADE JAM,
AND KEPT THEIR GARDENS
SEEMED LIKE CREATIVE LABOUR .
SO WHEN I LEARNED I WAS GOING
TO LOSE MY WOMB,
I WAS CERTAIN THAT MY
CREATIVITY WOULD DISAPPEAR.
IT DIDN'T, OF COURSE,
BUT THAT WAS MY BIGGEST FEAR.



Does our sense of specialness as women
come from our knowledge that we can breed?
Make babies? Grow the species?
It is all so mysterious,
the doctors can tell you everything
about the physical loss,
but nothing about any other kind.

*Half the fear comes from having no way to imagine it...
At least no way that hasn't been somehow influenced by
Hollywood...we have turned our bodies into meat
and that is no way to think about ourselves.*



**YOU NEVER REALLY KNOW
HOW THINGS LOOK.
YOUR IMAGINATION IS FUELED, OF COURSE,
BY ALL THE HORROR MOVIES,
BY THOSE IMAGES OF ENDLESS GORE AND GUTS**

**OF LIVER IN THE SUPERMARKET
OF THOSE TINY AND DELICATE GIBLETS
THAT COME IN A BAG INSIDE YOUR CHICKEN
OR YOUR THANKSGIVING TURKEY...
BUT YOU NEVER APPLY THESE IMAGES...
NOT TO YOURSELF,
OR EVEN TO OTHER HUMANS.**



Something I never would have seen but for its disease.

WHY NOT, I WONDER?
HAVE WE PUT OURSELVES
SO FAR BEYOND
THE ANIMAL WORLD
THAT WE CAN
NO LONGER
IMAGINE OURSELVES
AS FLESH AND BONE...
AS MUSCLE,
BLOOD,
AND GUTS ?

Just as necessary.

*Of course you are frightened of dying under the knife...
Or dying of the cancer if they don't get it all.
Or of what the surgery will do to change you.
You are scared of everything at first because it is all UNKNOWN.*



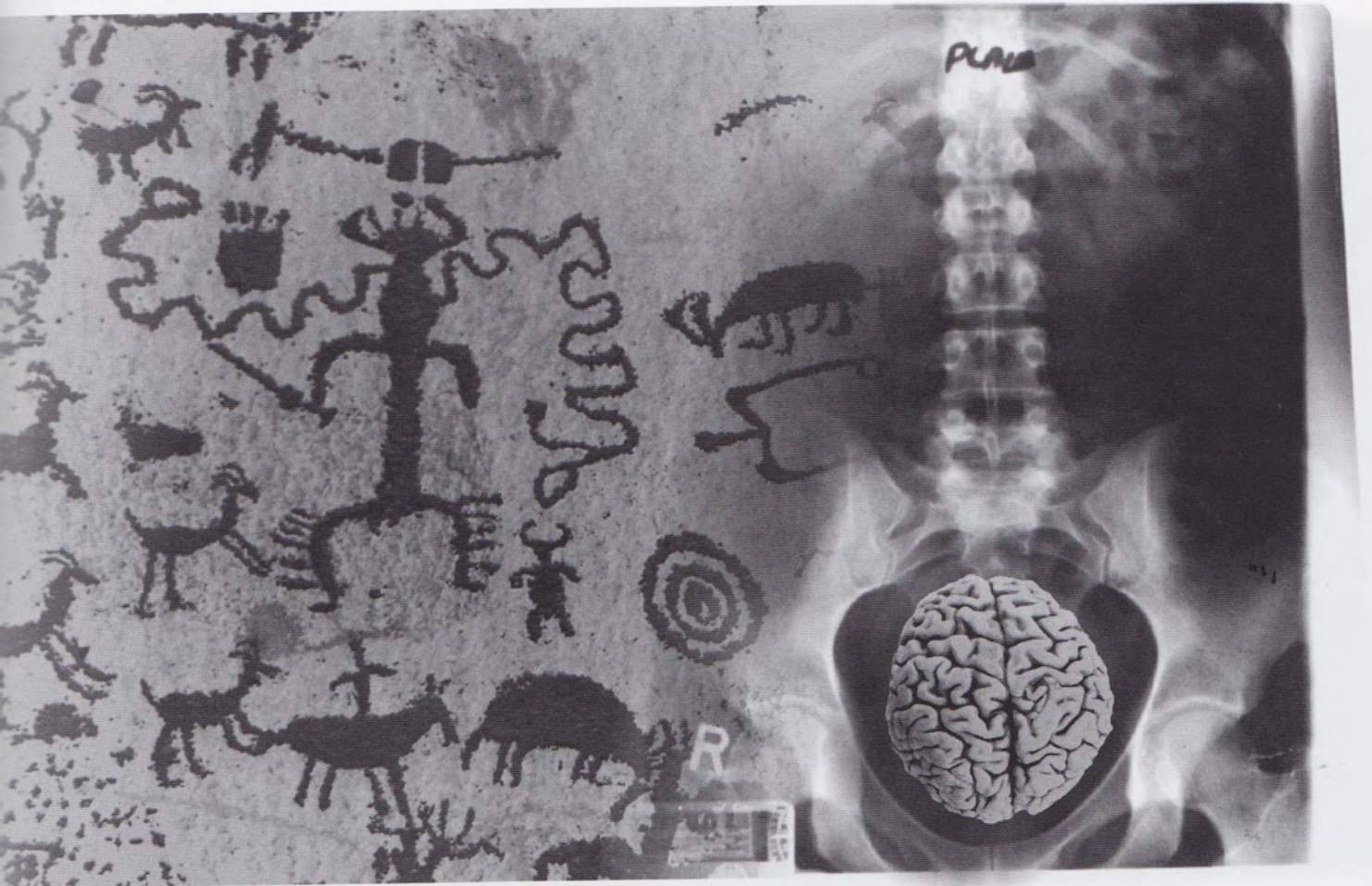
**IT WAS TERRIFYING AT FIRST
MY MIND WAS FULL OF FEAR.
THE IDEA OF BEING MADE UNCONSCIOUS
...OF HAVING SOMEONE
CUT THROUGH YOUR FLESH
IS HORROR-MAKING...**

**FOR MONTHS BEFORE THE SURGERY
I HAD NIGHTMARES.
ABOUT THE WRONG THINGS TAKEN OUT
AND THE WRONG THINGS LEFT INSIDE
AND TOOLS AND THINGS
SEWN UP IN SIDE ME.**

**MY GOD,
I HAD NO TRUST AT ALL
FOR THOSE MEDICAL GUYS.
YOU ARE NEVER REALLY SURE
WHAT THEY WILL TAKE OUT OF YOU.**

*I had experienced surgery before, so I wasn't too scared of the process.
I trusted my doctor so wasn't worried about what she would do to me
when I was put under. But the putting under...
The being put to sleep... That always scares me.*

WHERE DO YOU GO, I WONDER,
WHEN THEY GIVE YOU ANESTHETIC?



THEY SAY YOU CAN HEAR THINGS... THAT SOMEWHERE IN YOUR BRAIN
YOU MAY REMEMBER EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS TO YOUR BODY.
I WAS CURIOUS ABOUT THAT, BUT DIDN'T REMEMBER ANYTHING AFTERWARDS...
THAT MAY BE A GOOD THING TOO, IT WAS PROBABLY PRETTY GROSS.

cc: Dr. R. Windrim
Dr. S. Fairley
IP chart ✓

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THIS DIFFERENCE IN POINTS OF VIEW IS FUNDAMENTAL.
IT MAKES IT HARD FOR THEM TO IMAGINE YOUR FEAR, YOUR ANXIETY,
YOUR JUBILATION... WHATEVER YOU MIGHT BE FEELING ABOUT IT.

*I didn't want a friend or a counselor... I wanted a great technician who would get that cancer out of my body.
I had lots of support from friends and family, so what I wanted from my doctor was skill,
expertise, and a good track record.*

**YOU CAN'T SEE THE WAY THEY SEE.
WHAT YOU IMAGINE
AND WHAT THE DOCTORS SEE
ARE VERY DIFFERENT, I THINK.**

**FOR YOU IT IS EXTRAORDINARY...
A ONCE IN A LIFETIME KIND OF THING.**

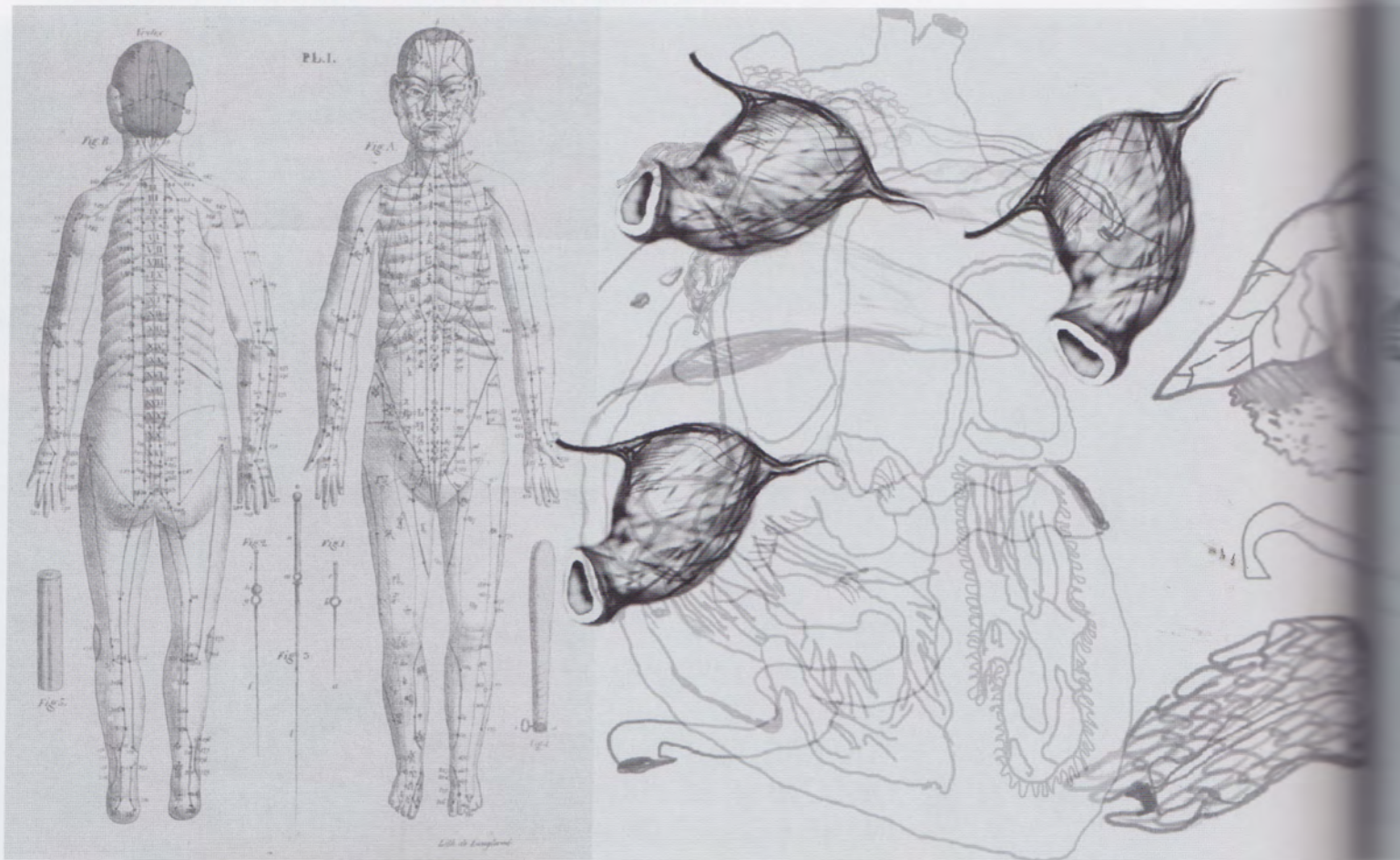
**FOR THEM IT IS ALMOST BANAL...
THEY DO THIS KIND OF SURGERY EVERYDAY
UNLESS YOU HAVE SOME RARE DISORDER
YOU ARE JUST ONE OF HUNDREDS
OF CUTS THE SURGEON HAS MADE
IN THE BELLIES OF WOMEN.**



Once I found out that it wasn't cancer, a lot of my fear dissipated.
I began to get into the process of learning about my body
and the options I had available.. Compared to a lot of my friends who had been through this,
my doctor was exceptional, and we worked together to try to solve the problem without surgery.
So when I finally decided to have the operation, I was confident about my choice,
and felt fortunate to have a physician who was a partner in that process. I was lucky.

I CAN REMEMBER READING ABOUT HOW
HIPPOCRATES BELIEVED THAT THE WOMB
WANDERED THROUGHOUT THE BODY...
CREATING HYSTERIA AND OTHER
WOMEN'S "PROBLEMS"

I MEAN, MEDICINE HAS BEEN WRONG BEFORE...



Sometimes reading history is not helpful...

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into extremist anguish and provokes all manner of diseases aside. (Plato)

Thus women are treated for diseases of the stomach, liver, kidneys, heart, lungs, etc.; yet in most instances, these diseases will be found, on due investigation, to be, in reality, no diseases at all, but merely sympathetic reactions or the symptoms of one disease, namely, a disease of the womb.
(Dr. D. M. Dirix, 1869)

WHY ARE WE SO CERTAIN ABOUT EVERYTHING NOW ?



*It wasn't until things went wrong with my womb,
 that I really began to learn about my own body...
 And of course, almost everything I could find to read in those days,
 was written by men...I kept thinking...How do they know?*

*I guess it's not all that surprising that there were so many
 false notions about the uterus in the early days of medicine.*

*After all, they were only human...
 And only men were asking the questions.*

*You don't really think about your uterus much,
unless or until something goes wrong with it.
So when you begin to imagine losing it,
you're not really sure what you might be losing,
aside from the periods, and the childbirth.*

I REMEMBER THINKING THAT I WOULD BE SILENCED

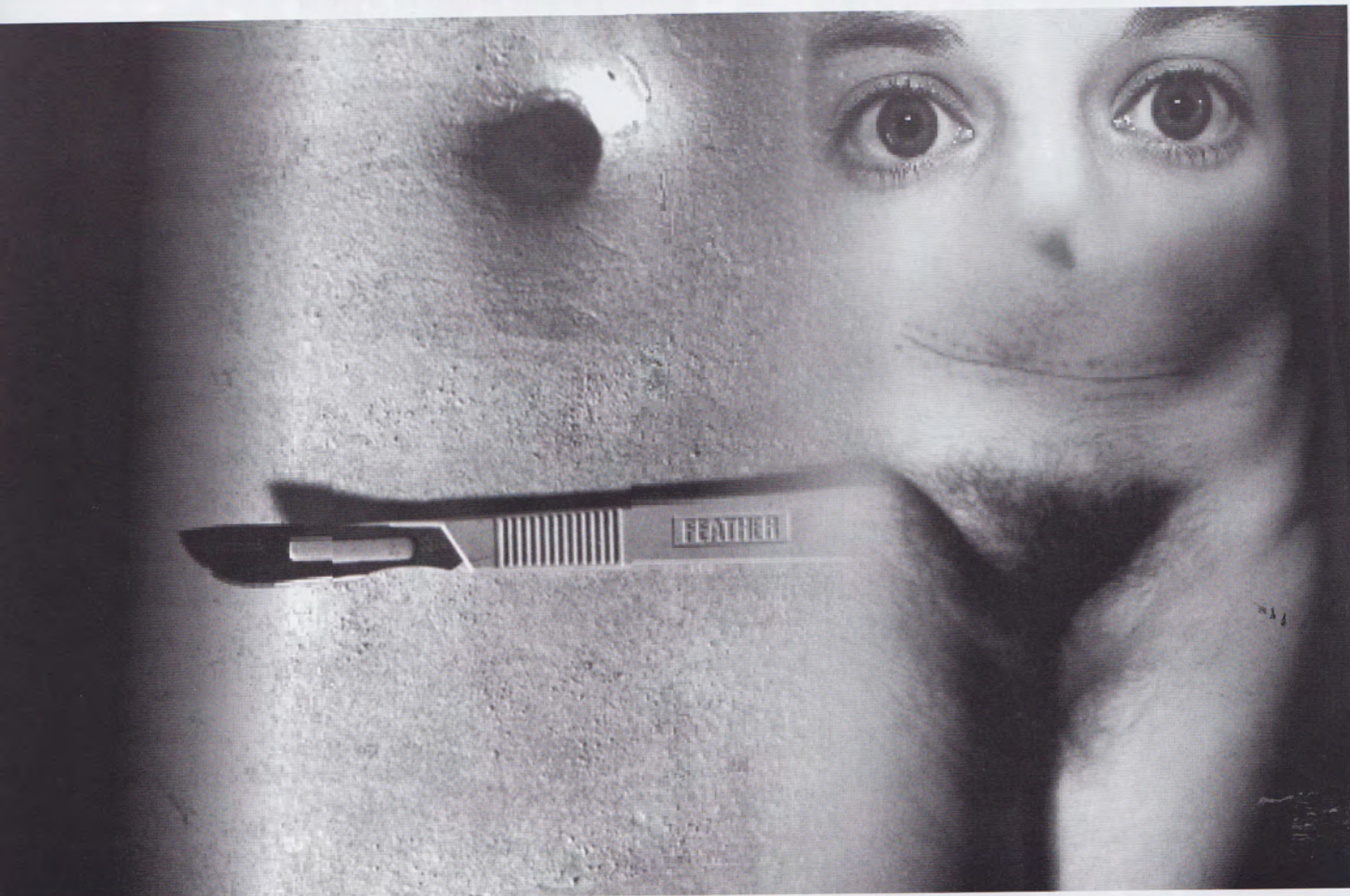


The things you fear are quite amazing ...
For me it wasn't cancer, or even death.
It was the loss of my daughter's "homeland" ...
As if losing that organ where she had grown,
would somehow cut me off from her.

No one really spoke to me about the emotional or psychological consequences I might expect.
When it happened to me, there was still a great silence surrounding it all... No one spoke about it.
I think that has changed a lot in the last ten or twenty years, and that's a great thing... ending that silence.

*Were they taking my soul ? My instinct ? My female-ness ?
One friend told me she was sure her memory was in her womb,
since after her hysterectomy she couldn't remember things as well.
My God... Were they taking my memory ?*

THAT IT WAS MY VOICE THEY WERE REMOVING



A friend asked me if I was worried about my sex life, you know about my orgasms changing after the surgery. I had no idea if my orgasms were uterine or not... Then of course, I imagined the worst... You know, having the hysterectomy and hating sex.

My mother had one when I was about fifteen. She NEVER talked about it and I thought she was ashamed, as if it was her fault somehow, that she had trouble "down there."