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The Writer's Presence

A Pool of Readings

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Jamaica Kincaid

THE ESTRANGEMENT

Born in Antigua in 1949, JAMAICA KINCAID moved to the United States at seventeen to work as an au pair in New York. Although she is known primarily for her fiction, Kincaid is by no means a stranger to nonfiction: she began her writing career as a journalist, penning articles for the *Village Voice* and *Ingenue* magazines. In 1976, she became a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, a position she kept for nine years. Her first book of fiction, a collection of unified short stories centering on the coming of age of a Caribbean girl and titled *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), won the Morton Darwen Zabel Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Her first novel, *Annie John* (1983), was a finalist for the 1985 international Ritz Paris Hemingway Award. Her 1996 book, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Her most recent book, *See Now Then: A Novel*, was published in 2013. She teaches literature and creative writing at Claremont McKenna College, in Claremont, California.

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THREE YEARS before my mother died, I decided not to speak to her again. And why? During a conversation over the telephone, she had once again let me know that my accomplishments-becoming a responsible and independent woman-did not amount to very much, that the life I lived was nothing more than a silly show, that she truly wished me dead. I didn't disagree. I didn't tell her that it would be just about the best thing in the world not to hear this from her.

And so, after that conversation, I never spoke to her, said a word to her of any kind, and then she died and her death was a shock to me, not because I would miss her presence and long for it, but because I could not believe that such a presence could ever be stilled.

For many years and many a time, her children, of which I was the only female, wondered what would happen to her, as we wondered what would happen to us; because she seemed to us not a mother at all but a God, not a Goddess but a God.

How to explain in this brief space what I mean? When we were children and in need of a mother's love and care, there was no better mother

to provide such an ideal entity. When we were adolescents, and embracing with adolescent certainty our various incarnations, she could see through the thinness of our efforts, she could see through the emptiness of our aspirations; when we fell apart, there she was, bringing us dinner in jail or in a hospital ward, cold compresses for our temples, or just standing above us as we lay flat on our backs in bed. That sort of mother is God.

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could not believe such a presence could be stilled.

I am the oldest, by 9, 11, and 13 years, of four children. My three brothers and I share only our mother; they have the same father, I have a different one. I knew their father very well, better than they did, but I did not know my own. (When I was seven months in her womb, my mother quarreled with the man with whom she had conceived me and then ran away with the money he had been saving up to establish a little business for himself. He never forgave her.) I didn't mind not knowing my real father, because in the place I am from, Antigua, when people love you, your blood relationship to them is not necessarily the most important component. My mother's husband, the father of my brothers, loved me, and his love took on the shape of a father's love: he told me about himself when he was a boy and the things he loved to do and the ways in which his life changed for better and worse, giving me some idea about how he came to be himself, my father, the father of my brothers, the person married to my mother.

She was a very nice person, apparently; that is what everybody said about her at her funeral. There were descriptions of her good and selfless deeds, kindnesses, generosity, testaments of her love expressed in humor. We, her children, looked at one another in wonder then, for such a person as described was not at all known to us. The person we knew, our Mother, said horrible things to us more often than not.

The youngest of my three brothers died of AIDS when he was 33 years of age. In the years he spent actively dying, our mother tended to him with the greatest tenderness that was absent all the time before he was dying. Before he got sick, before he became afflicted with that disease, his mother, my mother too, quarreled with him and disparaged him. This was enabled by the fact that he did not know how to go off somewhere and make a home of any kind for himself. Yes, he had been unable to move out into the world, away from this woman, his mother, and become the sole possessor of his own destiny, with all the loss and gain that this implies.

The two remaining brothers and I buried her right next to him, and we were not sure we should have done that: for we didn't know even now, if he wanted to spend eternity lying beside her, since we were sure we would rather be dead than spend eternity lying next to her.

Is this clear? It is to me right now as I write it: I would rather be dead 10
than spend eternity with our mother! And do I really mean that when I say it? Yes, I really mean just that: after being my mother's daughter, I would rather be dead than spend eternity with her.

By the time my mother died, I was not only one of her four children, I had become the mother of two children: a girl and then a boy. This was bliss, my two children in love with me, and I with them. Nothing has gone wrong, as far as I can see, but tears have been shed over my not being completely enthusiastic about going to a final basketball game in a snowstorm, or saying something I should have kept in my mind's mouth. A particularly unforgivable act in my children's eyes is a book's dedication I made to them; it read: "With blind, instinctive, and confused love to Annie and Harold, who from time to time are furiously certain that the only thing standing between them and a perfect union with their mother is the garden, and from time to time, they are correct."¹

I wrote this with a feeling of overbrimming love for them, my children. I was not thinking of my own mother directly, not thinking of her at all consciously at that exact time, but then again, I am always thinking of my mother; I believe every action of a certain kind that I make is completely influenced by her, completely infused with her realness, her existence in my life.

I am now middle-aged (59 years of age); I not only hope to live for a very long time after this, I will be angry in eternity if this turns out not to be the case. And so in eternity will my children want to be with me? And in eternity will I, their mother, want to be with them?

In regard to my children, eternity is right now, and I always want to be with them. In regard to my mother, my progenitor, eternity is beyond now, and is that not forever? I will not speak to her again in person, of that I am certain, but I am not sure that I will never speak to her again. For in eternity is she in me, and are even my children speaking to her? I do not know, I do not know. D

The Reader's Presence: Using the writing process, answer 1 highlighted and question 2.

1. Note how frequently Kincaid uses repetition in her brief essay—for example, the repetition of the word "eternity" toward the end of the selection. How does her use of repetition throughout the essay affect your response? Select a paragraph to read aloud. How would you describe Kincaid's tone of voice? For example, how would you interpret her tone of voice in her final sentence, which is also deliberately repetitive?
2. When Kincaid writes that she "would rather be dead than spend eternity with our mother" (paragraph 10), what do you think she means? In what way is that remark puzzling? How do you interpret it?
3. CONNECTIONS: Kincaid wrote this essay for a magazine in 2009; compare it with her miniature, one-paragraph short story "Girl" (page 813), published in 1978. Based on this essay, do you think the story is autobiographical? In what ways does the story inform the essay?

I Kincaid is a dedicated gardener and has written several books on gardening. — Eos.