

Verse as Mother, Savior, Muse

Helane Levine-Keating

It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics
Pat Falk

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Reading Pat Falk's engaging nonlinear memoir, *It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics*, is a reminder that the personal is still political, though the phrase may now feel dated for those who lived through the early days of the Second Wave of the Women's Movement. While moving both backward into the fifties to reveal the privileged yet unhappy suburban world from which she sprang and forward into the twenty-first century to the violent present she inhabits, Falk writes from the perspective of one whose work has been largely defined by the seventies and eighties, when many welcomed the term "feminism" as a synonym for "enlightenment" and when Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970) could hardly have anticipated that Phyllis Chesler, author of the ground-breaking feminist treatise *Women and Madness* (1972), would be compelled to write *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (2002) and *The Death of Feminism* (2005) three decades later. However, let me be clear: this is not a memoir about feminism's death, but rather one that chronicles the continuing quest for a way to continue to live one's feminism as a divorced mother, poet, academic scholar, and college professor.

While some reviewers have referred to *It Happens As We Speak* as a "hybrid" text, I see it more as a text written in a new language created out of the often contradictory lexicons of the worlds of poetry, academe, and feminism. Much as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) blends poetry and prose, the personal and political, and various dialects of Spanish and English to show what it means to be "a border woman [growing up] between two cultures," Falk has fashioned a feminist poetics out of her quest to "locate a center" as she seeks to answer the question

she poses in a passage situated early in the book though written in 1977: “Without a familiar dualistic pattern of polarities and the dialectical process they engender, how can we create paradigms that embody female form?”

Born in 1950, Pat Falk grew up in a Jewish family in Jamaica Estates, New York, where, as she tells us, her narcissistic mother self-medicated, had affairs, attempted suicide, landed in mental institutes, and was likely to beat her daughters. However, underneath this madness, the author discovered, her mother was a talented writer who might refrain from beating her daughter if Falk “would write a poem and slip it to [her mother] before she went into a fury.” Indeed, since writing “poetry helped me stay connected to my mother, my body, myself,” albeit through “negative, polarized energy,” writes Falk, “it is fitting that the memoir’s prologue opens in 1974 with Falk, a student at City College, telling poet Adrienne Rich, “I have come to consider you my literary mother.” Not long after this, it will be Rich she seeks out when she learns of the suicide of Anne Sexton, for Sexton seems to represent the writer Falk’s own mother might have been had she been validated. Yet, to be a poet is dangerous, the author learns, given her mother’s breakdowns and Sexton’s suicide, while to be an intellectual like her father, an attorney, allows her to stay connected to people safely, rationally, sanely” and to find solutions. As the young wife of a resentful, substance-abusing man and the mother of a small daughter, Falk sees in Rich a mother and a poet who might provide a positive role model different from the one she has had, much as Denise Levertov will later serve the same function. Moreover, although she continues to write poetry and Rich has warned her that “The institution will fuck you up,” Falk will eventually pursue the academic credentials she needs to teach on a college level and in order to marry her father’s “control” to her mother’s untamed art.

From traumatic memories of collecting newspaper articles chronicling murderous abortions by the family doctor, who also happens to be Falk’s father’s client, through antifeminist land mines the author must circumvent if she is to survive in the academy, to comments on the crucial feminist treatises that become mile markers on the long journey toward “the feminization of form” at the center of this “poetics,” Falk’s carefully organized diary entries leap back and forth through six decades in order to allow her to reflect on the role the past has played in informing her quest. Readers who have traveled

these very roads and have been shaped by them will recognize the landscape – its dense forests into which women were discouraged entry, the shifting deserts where the assumed outcome might hide quicksand rather than *terra firm*, the sunlit vistas of a “promised land” of equality that beckoned — as well as the uncharted territories that still lie ahead.

***Falk creates new language out of the
often contradictory lexicons of poetry,
academe, and feminism.***

Though *It Happens As We Speak* chronicles a personal journey, one of its major strengths is how successfully it transcends one individual’s quest by vividly portraying an era familiar to many of us who came of age with Falk. As a feminist, poet, professor, and divorced mother of a child the same age as Falk’s, I know this landscape not as if it were my own, but because it is. Having been marked by every book she mentions, having written about the same poems and myths, faced identical issues in academe, and learned to let my grown child go, I was startled to recognize even the street Falk grew up on as the very one where I used to visit my uncle and his family throughout those years, her schoolyard one where I scraped my own knees. Although I’ve never met the author, I believe her memoir not only speaks to those who lived through this period and continue to seek a new language to write in, but also to those who have come after us and want to grasp how vast a paradigm shift was undertaken with a firm belief that the outcome would be positive — no matter how difficult the passage or the losses along the way. As Falk writes in an entry dated “Lindenhurst, July 25, 1996:”

Poetry — no matter how violent the content, no matter how terrifying or fragmented — because of its music, can integrate and heal; it can embody a vision of wholeness and peace...

Re-arrange the paradigm. Change the rhythm. Take out one

star, replace it with another. Shift. Draw a line that rises to another star...; make a new design...Open up the constellation. Let music in.

Indeed, Falk's *It Happens As We Speak: A Feminist Poetics* is a testimony to this healing as it chronicles the author's need to storm interior and exterior barriers, follow her feminist vision, and make her own peace.

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