

# Tellings



a selection of poems  
by Rochelle Ratner

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## Biography & Acknowledgements

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I began writing poetry as a high school student and continued writing in isolation for the next five years. In the fall of 1969, shortly before my 21st birthday, I moved to New York City and, for the first time, had exposure to poetry workshops and the first-hand critiques of my contemporaries. My first volume of poetry, *A Birthday of Waters* (New Rivers Press), was published in 1971. It was followed by 11 other poetry books and chapbooks, plus two novels, one book

of translations, and the anthology I edited: *Bearing Life: Women's Writings on Childlessness* (The Feminist Press, 2002).

My experiences growing up in Atlantic City, N.J. have played a large role in much of my writing. The landscape and tenor of the deteriorating resort in the 1950s and 1960s, before gambling was legalized, form the backdrop for my first novel, *Bobby's Girl*, as well as the poems in *Sea Air in a Grave Ground Hog Turns Toward*. The sea and beach have served as inspiration for other poetry books, including *Pirate's Song*, and *Combing the Waves*.

The poems in *Tellings* were written at a point when my poetic concerns were moving closer to the personal. The first untitled, introductory poem, is in my own voice. Everything which follows is in the voice of my mother, based on stories she told me about her own life. As a child, I adored these stories, and hearing them change slightly over the years taught me how telling, or writing, can transform ordinary events into tales of wonder. The stories captured in these poems belong to my mother; the emotion which comes through is clearly my own.

More work and full biographical information can be accessed on my website: [www.rochelleratner.com](http://www.rochelleratner.com).

**Some of these poems** previously appeared in the following magazines and e-zines: *Cafeteria, Confrontation, Cross Country, Glassworks, Green House, Greenfield Review, Hand Book, Hanging Loose, Luna, Poetry Now, Pound of Flesh Review, Shuttle, Tamafyhr Mountain Poetry, The Free Cuisine Art, Wise Womens' Web*

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## The Voice Is Familiar

---

*The voice is familiar.  
Power transferred to the brain  
and then the heart.  
Or is it the heart first?*

*Two weeks ago  
mother asked what she'd taught me.  
Hands twisting in her lap.  
Sure she'd given nothing.*

*These are all her stories,  
chants before bed  
to make the shadows vanish  
or on rainy days  
to remember sun by.*

*I knew her childhood  
better than my own.  
Easy to get lost there*

*so that, some twenty years later,  
we come back, join hands,  
turn the lights down.*

*She searches for her mother,  
I search for my mother.  
Is she under the bed,  
beneath the glass of a picture,  
in hair which even now  
hasn't lost its color?*

*I'll recognize her on sight.  
She looks like both of us.  
She comes in, sits by the door,  
loosens the scarf from her neck,  
turns to her good ear, inclines her head:*

## The Game

---

Mother's too weak to get up.  
Nettie's wicker cradle  
has been moved beside her:  
two weeks old, our sister.  
Manny and I keep them company.

The grey flowered wallpaper  
thrives on sunlight.  
Under sheets  
and a freshly washed spread  
mother's a soft white mountain.

She's making a chain  
from cigar bands,  
winding them all in a circle  
and telling us how  
when she's done  
it'll be a centerpiece, a placemat.  
Brighten the house up a bit.

She's laughing.  
We throw a doll across her bed,  
back and forth to each other.  
Manny's curls blow in his face,  
my arms aren't long enough.

## Memory

---

When I was three years old  
I spilled milk on my dress.  
Mother's nurse spanked me.  
A few days later  
mother died.  
For the rest of that year  
they had to pour the milk down.

## Moving Day

---

We huddle close to the wall.  
There are three of us and four of them.  
I press the baby against me:  
we must all stick together now.

There's nothing to say to them.  
Funny, we used to talk a lot,  
screaming up and down the street.  
Their big white house closes its windows.

Mother's chair moves to the side  
to make room for them.  
One coffee table follows,  
then another.

I wish there were something  
we could give them.  
We have a father, they have a mother.  
We have last names, they only have first names.

## Day Piece

---

Adolph sleeps in his parents' room  
in what used to be Nettie's crib.  
Each of us has outgrown it.

Adolph smiles when I rock him  
and cries when I leave the room.  
Yetta's older, but I take care of him.

Adolph is everyone's brother.  
He's the only one in this house  
everybody loves

so much weight  
on such little shoulders.

I make up a song  
to teach him all about his family  
and until he's able to talk  
I'll sing it for him.

It tells how pretty his mother was.  
Not Dora, his mother now,  
but his make-believe mother — my mother.

## The Far Bedroom

---

We lie four to a bed.

Yetta's bony arm searches the sheet;  
every night she has nightmares.  
They say she hasn't been the same  
since her father died.  
I don't understand.

Little Esther dreams she's alone,  
takes up most of the mattress.  
She's two inches taller than I am  
but they still call me 'big'  
and her 'little'.

She hasn't washed all week.  
Neither has Yetta.

Nettie and I are awake  
counting the footsteps  
first downstairs then upstairs.  
It won't be long now till the quiet comes.  
Her warm body presses against mine.

The moon, peeking in on us,  
knows which two are sisters.

## Special Delivery

---

*for my stepbrother, dead*

Dear Bernie,  
we're learning to write today,  
and I can't think of anyone else  
I want to write to.  
It's easier than I thought.  
You would enjoy it.

Nobody ever found out  
who hit you with that baseball bat.  
The boys still play after school.  
Their team won yesterday  
and the day before.  
Joey, Leon, Henry, and Manny  
send their love.  
We all hope you're happy  
and not in pain anymore.

Have you spent the dime yet  
that \_\_\_\_\_ gave you  
not to squeal on him?  
Buy licorice sticks — the red ones.  
It'll rust if you keep it too long.  
Don't forget to wash your hands  
before you eat.

I wish you could see how I've grown.  
My feet almost touch the floor  
if I stretch forward.  
School's not the same without you.  
Billy Perkins got your desk  
and keeps poking me with his pencil.  
It was fun being in the same class.  
I'm six now.

## Thunder

---

I lie awake and listen.  
Aunt Sadie's away for the weekend.  
There's no one to lock us in the closet  
this time.

The others are sleeping.  
I put my head under the covers  
but the sound still comes through.  
Once Manny said God was angry.  
Maybe mother's angry, beside him.  
The bed's metal headboard  
scolds us loudly.

I lift one leg over Nettie,  
like a famous dancer  
hoist my body up.

The door creaks  
but the thunder hides it.  
I run fast as I can  
down the hall to the boys' room.  
The kids lie together in the big bed.  
Uncle's in a corner of his cot.

Nobody sees me.  
Suddenly I don't know why I came.

It sounds again: think quickly.  
There's a picture father used to keep —  
Uncle's in a uniform,  
he's a soldier, thin and handsome.  
Protecting me.

## The Aliens

---

Auntie doesn't know the proper word.  
The shopkeeper stares at her.  
He has other customers waiting.

Her lips pulse like a heart:  
*tsuker, tsuker.*  
At last I understand:  
sugar.

It's a good feeling  
clasping her package like a baby.  
She's twenty-two, I'm nine.  
Mother and daughter.

## Daughter

---

It's all they can do  
to know how old we are  
or how many children  
they have now.  
No one thinks of birthdays.  
But I'm special,  
I was born on Thanksgiving  
when there's already celebration  
in the house.  
The date changes every year.  
It seems only right  
that I be honored.  
Brighter than the flash of a camera,  
my half-dollar winks at me.  
Special and privileged.  
Of course, let mother hold it.  
The same coin over and over.

## Power of the Hands — 1926

---

I tell myself I'm not sick,  
I just have a headache  
and a slight sore throat.  
It's nothing but a cold.  
I'll be fine in a day or two.

The doctor confirms it.  
He comes in  
and asks where the patient is.  
Sits down on the bed,  
takes my hand —  
his feels cool and refreshing.

"Let's see,  
how many children  
do your parents have now?"  
"Eight." I beam back at him.  
I want to add I'm the healthiest.

Then on examination  
"My god, girl.  
you have scarlet fever."  
Perhaps the shock  
will drive it out of me.  
He must know what he's doing.

The rash is starting to form  
on my neck and chest.  
"Of course  
we'll have to wait three weeks  
to see if your skin peels.  
We can't be certain till then."

My hand backs out of his,  
my head sinks in the pillow:  
rest is the best medicine.  
I'll have the bed all to myself  
for a month or two.  
Inconveniencing everyone.

I'm old enough to be aware  
when the body's weakened

---

other things often set in.  
But I won't build up any illusions.

My eyes are burning:  
things blur in the distance.  
I clasp my fingers on my wrist  
to make sure the pulse works.  
The doctor smiles and leaves.  
He doesn't touch my hand again.

## Shoes

---

They're worn for warmth,  
not fashion.

Father lets us know that.

Once a year  
he brings home a bag full,  
dumps them on the floor,  
and we each take the pair  
that fits best.

It's late October.  
I almost skip to school,  
my jacket open,  
a light feeling about me.

I join girls in the schoolyard,  
but they draw back and point:  
those are the heavy shoes boys wear.  
Mildred's my best friend  
and she's laughing.

## The Tooth Fairy

---

The tooth fairy  
replaces a child's loss  
with chocolate.

But the hurt remains.  
Then of course  
they said  
don't believe in fairies

why pretend  
somebody loves you.  
Just the same  
she's always nice to us.

A family is only  
what's put into it —  
all the bits of gold dust  
candy saved all week.

I place it under  
my stepmother's pillow  
to surprise her.

...

I always went for corners. The candy was a penny — I remember I would give the man my money and then reach into the large box. If you pulled out the bonus piece, which was a different color, you got another piece free. My hand always liked to feel the edge of the box safely around it. All the other kids would dig their fingers greedily into the center. I went for the corner nearest me. If I pulled the bonus piece, I gave one to my stepmother, one to my brother. Manny was never able to hold his tongue, and more often than not ended up going to bed without his dinner. We all thought he'd grow up to be a lawyer. He won a prize in a school talent show once just for reciting the Gettysburg Address. I wanted to win an extra piece for his sake.

## Power of the Hands — 1930

---

When her hands are clasped she feels  
her thoughts are clear.

But it hurts to bend the fingers.  
Mother stares off in the distance —  
She seems to expect someone.  
"Father's still at the market,  
he'll be here tonight.  
Father..."

She isn't listening.  
One tube breathes for her,  
another pushes food in.  
In her eyes one can see the train  
as it approaches.  
Manny slams on the brake again.  
Her head is thrown all the way back,  
her mouth opens.  
She no longer screams, though;  
the hospital forbids it.  
Her fingers, still clutching the door,  
are met by a nurse drawing blood:

this afternoon's gift for Dr. Barbash.  
She asks me to comb her hair  
so she'll be prepared for him.  
"You know  
he doesn't come just once a day;  
he stops in for a moment  
every time he's in the building.  
He's more of a friend than a doctor."

The words leave her trance-like.  
Her shoulders relax,  
the pain seems to lessen.  
We hear steps in the hall,  
right on time as always.  
A tall man, he ducks as he enters,  
but today his head doesn't rise again.  
Her palm rests in his palm  
while two fingers stroke the knuckles.  
Anything at all to bring them closer.

---

He leans toward her as he speaks,  
barely a whisper.  
An operation — he would recommend it  
but the risk is great  
and the choice is up to her. She nods weakly.  
If he thinks it's best, go ahead;  
never any question.  
In goodness and mercy  
she's placing herself in his hands  
for three short weeks, till death parts them.

## Imaginary Words: Taking Leave

---

Just another game. you say?  
I'll keep my eyes closed.  
As if I don't already know  
who could walk so softly.

I toss in my sleep.  
Adolph, what are you doing  
up so early?  
Sit and talk to your sister:  
we can work it out.

This porch is the field  
I've taken you to play in.  
We're looking at the ground  
and we find a nickel.  
Another one next to it,  
seven in all — a gold mine.  
We won't give them to father.  
For once we'll keep them  
ourselves.

Twelve years later  
your hand's at my side again.  
You're breaking loose,  
running away  
for good this time.  
No, I won't waken.

Sixteen isn't so young,  
you'll be okay out there.  
Why, when I was your age...

but I'm older  
and so is everyone else  
Mother was your final chain  
and she's not here now.

Your birth united our families:  
by leaving you're splitting us.  
Don't hold your breath,  
father won't go and get you.

---

I can't find the words  
to make you stay.

Your blue eyes turn back:  
one last look.  
Brown curls catch the sunlight.  
Anyone handsome as you  
ought to be an actor.  
When you're rich and famous  
write home.

## Armed Forces

---

Name: Tischler, Esther Lenore.

Rank & Serial Number: to be provided.

'Lenore.'

I whisper it to myself—the new name added  
between start and finish.

This is the midway point all around,  
a place to catch hold of myself  
perhaps change direction.

Draw the whole into perspective.

The bus tilts on its side,  
turns too fast into the base.

The flag greets us at the entrance  
and my arm raises in salute:

Esther Lenore.

...

I want the bunk on the bottom,  
frightened of high places.

Propping my head on my arm  
and my arm on the pillow.

I want to talk.

No, I want to sleep.

I want to listen.

I want these giddy little things  
to turn their mouths off.

I want them all to be nice to me.

It's as bad here as at home.

I should have realized.

...

Let me make it clear:

Hitler's the enemy

---

as a Jew  
I'm entitled  
to the same rights  
that you are

as bunk captain  
it's my job  
to see things get done

everyone pitch in  
and help me

look out the window  
you can see the flag  
meet wind head on,  
our mascot

don't look at the men, girls  
that's not what we're here for.

...

I enlisted to fight  
not to be placed at some desk.  
What's the sense of it?

They take tramps half my age  
and ship them off.  
Not the way I planned.

Just give me a helmet and gun,  
let the battle start —  
when it comes to war  
I'm good as any man is.

Get me out of this skirt,  
for God's sake,  
get me out of these offices.  
Give me an old pair of overalls.  
Drape my coffin with the flag if need be,  
only keep me covered.

---

...

Nine uneventful months  
and the war is over.  
I'm free to do as I please.

I wipe the slate clean.  
I ask a few friendly girls  
to sign our group picture,  
and block out the names  
of the rest.  
One by one  
I draw mustaches on them.  
I take the bus back to Los Angeles  
dozing on the way: a nightmare.

Oh yes,  
they pleaded with me to re-enlist,  
promised a commission —  
highest in the office.  
I can earn twice as much in civilian life.  
There's truly no reason to fight now.

In these same nine months  
some women went insane, some had babies.  
Esther Lenore, you've made your bed.  
Lie in it.

## A Woman's Face

---

*I've always wanted to get married,  
to have children,  
to belong to the human race . . .*

Thirty years old,  
released from the army now,  
I crouch in my seat, anonymous,  
while on the screen Joan Crawford  
plays out the role for me.  
Friends tell me we look alike,  
and yes, we look alike.

*I've always wanted to get married . . .*  
not the voice I'm used to,  
but somehow slow and sure.  
Nothing will excite it,  
not the numerous lovers  
in film after film.  
Here her face is scarred  
and the men run away from her.  
She's more like I am now,  
only my scar's hidden.

She fondles the child  
while his eyes gaze into hers  
and for a moment  
there's a love between them.  
Against her will she succeeds  
at the very thing I fail at.

What is it I really want?  
I know I can't be a mother  
to a child who's not my own.  
I was raised by an aunt  
then a stepmother  
and I would be afraid always,  
unable to touch all the memories.

Marriage seems so final.  
There will be other boyfriends  
and, if nothing else,  
childhood taught me patience.

---

Dorothy's so different than I was:  
at six she already wears anger  
like a toy she's inherited.  
The beach, the circus,  
amusement parks —  
I'm pushing to keep her beside me  
until we've both run out of steam.  
The part doesn't suit me.

She needs a mother who's stronger,  
more confident, more assertive.  
Mossy's kind and gentle —  
the father she wants all for herself.  
I don't blame her.

Losing myself in the movie.  
Joan, you've grown up to be beautiful;  
don't keep your past locked inside you.  
So proud, in the doctor's office,  
full face to the camera.  
At last you can take off your hat,  
you can stare at the sun again.

## Maroon Satin

---

We must be practical, my love.  
Wedding gowns are foolish.  
I will wear a strand of pearls  
and carry orchids.

It's all here in black and white  
on our marriage license:  
Herman, age 29.  
We laugh about how I didn't  
find out your age till just now  
and made myself a year younger:  
28; I'm really 35.

Any woman would have done the same.  
Besides, I'm going back to California  
as soon as my father remarries;  
how many times must I tell you that?  
Subconsciously, it's as if  
I were hurrying you: PROPOSE.

Ours isn't really a wedding —  
there will be no bridesmaids or flower girls.  
Make sure not to accept engagement gifts  
for they bring bad luck, my love.  
We can take no chances.

## Pregnancy Cycle

---

### *i. Ouija*

This is woman's work  
we are making children

Let the fingers do it

The one across from me  
has lived through childbirth  
Trust her

The board does the naming

Pregnant,  
at last, at last  
I will be my mother

The hands move ever gently  
Please, a daughter

When I am not here think well of me

A test:  
the woman down the hall  
carries also —  
if her baby is born before mine  
what will it be?

BODY

### *ii. Delivery*

Stillborn.  
Not even a dwarf's chance in hell  
to meet its maker:  
her child.

### *iii. Companions*

I pat my stomach

---

---

and it responds  
kicking.  
Our first love act.

If only there were  
a window  
there, where the navel is  
  
some ship's porthole.

Two weeks more,  
maybe three.  
I assure my other lover:  
go to work  
but don't forget,  
call me.

Can't you see I'll be fine.  
I'm not alone here.

*iv. The giving in*

He will not come back.  
This time he's left me.

The pain  
then the giving in  
then the struggle to understand  
*which* pain.

Never so lonely,  
my confused body  
writhing and screaming.  
It's the thunder again.  
Aunt Sadie hates me.

Mother, please —  
it was Nettie's birth  
not mine  
that killed you.

---

You have gotten the facts wrong.  
Don't believe what they're telling you.

*v. A multitude*

See, I'm not alone.  
There are walls around me.  
There is this table  
to cling to,  
a rag in my mouth  
to bite down on.  
All the ghosts attend me.

Then the sound of crying —  
that's not a spirit  
but human.

My husband smiles at me.  
His teeth are flowers.

## Deathsong

---

My daughter sleeps awhile.  
And while she's safe in her crib  
I will also rest.

I must be over-tired.  
Each time I close my eyes  
the walls seem to press in on me  
while the furniture moves away.  
I can't find my body.

Whatever it is out there  
it pulls me toward it.  
My arm grips my chest:  
I give in.

No, I can't give up yet:  
she will waken shortly.  
I'll have to warm myself  
or she'll cry when I lift her.

I'll dry her tears  
I'll force a smile for her  
I'll raise her in the air  
and hold on tight.  
If I can just make it into her room...

Slowly I enter the maze,  
steps short, body drawing backward.  
If this is to be our meeting place  
I'll meet my face in a mirror  
before all else.

The color comes back to my cheeks;  
I look better now than I have in months.  
My child can sleep however long she wants.  
I'll be waiting up for her.

## Love Chant

---

I smile like in my wedding picture  
each night when my husband comes home.  
My mouth makes room for him  
though my hands are busy.  
My smile's a landmark.  
And it will not bite, but kiss.  
I feel tall as my cheeks.

I smile like in my wedding picture.  
Everyone I meet  
says she capped those teeth.  
Though cigarettes have stained them.  
I smoke even in the morning  
when I swore I'd never do that.  
Burns on the furniture.  
I'd have thought at thirty-eight  
I'd be calm of my own accord.

I smile like in my wedding picture  
when I'm in the car.  
No matter how fast he drives  
I must not show I'm frightened.  
The curves grind my teeth down.  
Mother used to sit tall in her seat  
and that car was the death of her.  
I'm afraid to look.  
He keeps only one hand on the wheel,  
one arm reaches out to me.  
My lips tighten into seatbelts.

I smile like in my wedding picture  
as I watch my daughter play.  
She has more nerve than I do.  
Look at her dig in the sand  
while water comes straight at her.  
My smile drinks it in calmly  
as my lips bare themselves  
to the other mothers.  
I am forcing this.

I smile like in my wedding picture  
if I pass a mirror.

---

---

There's my house reflected.  
I saved the money myself,  
my husband didn't know how much I had.  
I can afford this smile.  
It has a lifetime behind it:  
three mothers, men I really tried to love.  
But that's all water under my tongue now.

## Power of the Hands — 1953

---

Nettie, don't cling to my hand so.  
You've hardly any strength left,  
save it.

I must be going,  
school will be out soon.  
I'll pick up Danny  
and take him to my house awhile.  
He shouldn't see you this way.

He'll remember his mother as beautiful.  
Just don't louse it up, Nettie,  
get someone in to take care of him.  
See, you can barely hold onto me.

To think how I envied your beauty.  
Day by day I've stood around  
and watched you wither.  
You always feared you'd have cancer,  
but don't look at me to confirm it.  
I'm as weak as you are.

...

If only you'd simply stayed weak.  
But your body's cold now,  
no love in it.

Hands crossed on upper chest  
in one final attempt  
to force submission.  
The undertaker's pride.  
He doesn't understand you.

Sam stands back.  
The perfect husband  
folds his arms,  
extends one leg forward.  
Lets everyone see he's still here:  
the guise of caring.

---

For Christ's sake,  
lash out like you used to.  
Come on, make a fist.  
Make a claw.  
Draw your thumb away from your palm,  
put up some resistance.  
Fight back for Danny's sake.  
He had a mother for seven years;  
seven more than you did.

He has a lot to be grateful for.  
Take a deep breath,  
there might still be some time yet.  
Nettie, try to caress your son.

## To My Daughter

---

Please don't hate me.  
I thought  
just in case I die  
you should have a sister.  
And I tried my best.  
You would have been  
three years old  
when she was born,  
the same age I was  
at Nettie's birth.  
Already I pictured her  
wearing all your dresses  
and balancing you  
on the see-saw.  
But then in a dream  
she fell off  
and she lay there crying.  
When I woke there was blood  
on the sheet beneath me.  
Our apartment is three flights up  
and as always you insist  
on being carried.  
It's too much I suppose,  
but I don't have the heart  
to disappoint you.  
It's easy to blame you.  
Perhaps I could still  
have given you a sister.  
I give you a mother instead.