



Alice Friman on writing
The Book of the Rotten Daughter

An Interview by Kate Melles

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The Book of the Rotten Daughter

Alice Friman



The first poem of your collection, “The Dream of the Rotten Daughter,” inspired the title of your book. Your father called you “the rotten daughter”, why did you choose to use what had to be such a painful self-description?

The initial title of this collection was *Underground Parking*, chosen because the book’s central theme was death. How could it not be? For seven-plus years I had been living in a world filled with end-of-life issues: illness, nursing homes, grief, guilt. I was actively engaged in the putting down of my father and the care of my mother who died when she was ninety-five. Those years, the most difficult of my life.

The poem “The Dream of the Rotten Daughter” was written after I put the book together. It was written after my mother died, while in the rest of the book, she is still very much alive. (I might argue here that your parents never really die. They are with you always, in dreams as well as in waking hours, whether you like it or not.) But as I said, that piece was written much later. I had a great deal of difficulty putting this manuscript together. How to keep it from becoming a one-note samba—death, death, and more of the same. It’s when, with Michelle Boisseau of BkMk’s help, I realized that the book isn’t about death, but about the living’s reaction to it—me, the rotten daughter—that I added that poem, and the collection fell into place. A painful statement? Those seven years were a painful statement. How could I turn my back on them and look away?

Tell us about the provocative photograph of you on the cover of your book. What does the tattoo, Pegasus, symbolize for you?

The story of my getting a tattoo is explored in depth in the essay, “Inking In the Myth,” which appears in *Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival* (University of Georgia Press). To make a long story short, my getting a tattoo was more like experiencing a visitation than anything else. Understand, I had it done twenty years ago, well before today’s tattoo/piercing craze. Too, I come from a middle-class Jewish family which would have seen getting a tattoo as something only drunken sailors do. Indeed, I probably thought so too.

It took me five years of being haunted on and off by this desire before I had it done. Who can explain it? In 1986 in Indiana, where I lived, except for medical tattooing, tattooing was illegal. Then one day I saw a photograph of “The Tattooer of the Stars”—Kevin Brady, friend of Mellencamp, tattooer of Steve McQueen—fighting for his license in Bloomington, Indiana. I studied his face a long time and knew that if he were allowed to open shop, he was it, the bringer of the gift. I chose Pegasus the flying horse not knowing then that it was the sign of poetry. Only later did I find out that Pegasus rose from the blood of the slain Medusa, kicked a hole in the side of Mount Helicon, home of the muses, to let loose the fountain of poetic inspiration—the Hippocrene. Then, all I knew was that I wanted something that was mine, and nobody else’s, something I could take with me when I died. I put it on my back. So there it is, always behind me, pushing. This poetry, this sweet hell. It was later that I found out that only a poet can ride Pegasus.

The photograph was taken by my daughter, who, at the time, was a photography major at Purdue University. I was her senior project. When her classmates asked her where she got the model, and she confessed it was her

mother, I guess I got some points for that. The idea of putting that photo on the cover was hers. A mirror image of self-reflection. Perfect.

The poems in this collection are full of intricate detail; “After Shooting the Barbados Ram” is an excellent example of this detail. In this poem you write about watching your brother-in-law dissect the ram, because you must watch. Are you conscious of being drawn to detail, and do you see yourself as an observer?

All people who create are see-ers. An artist is someone who knows how to see. You can teach anyone to draw, to write poems—even good ones. You can teach people to compose music. But you can’t teach people how to be who they are. And who they are matches the way that they take in the world. In other words, how they see. How many people do you know who really see? When was the last time you really looked at, say, an orange? A chair? How birds fly? We don’t even look at each other. An artist is someone who looks at the world and writes what he/she sees. That’s an artist’s job. Not too many people do that work for us.

You’ve included several poems, “Osteoporosis,” “The Fall,” and “Dressing the Skeleton,” which focus on caring for your mother while she was living in a nursing home. Did writing help you deal with the intense pain of this situation?

Well, I wish I could say yes, because I think that’s what people want to hear. Maybe the writing kept me sane. Maybe. But no, it did not help with the pain of the situation and the emotional wringer I was going through. That took its toll on me physically, I’m afraid. Writing isn’t a catharsis. Not for me. Maybe experiencing other people’s finished work acts as a catharsis as Aristotle implied, but not the act of writing my own. Here’s an example: let’s say you are knee-deep in garbage. You take it and form it into a lovely design; in other words you made art out of it. It still remains the essential ingredient it is. Nothing takes that away. Writing about the holocaust doesn’t change the holocaust: horror is horror. Writing about great pain doesn’t reduce it; if anything, in the act of writing it, you experience it again and again in recollection. It’s like looking for the bad tooth in your mouth with your tongue to make it hurt so you can describe it. When I re-read those poems you refer to, I experience again the misery I was steeped in. At the time I wrote those pieces, there seemed to be no way I could write about anything else. My despair was too big, filling up the spaces, taking up all the room.

The “rotten daughter” has, at least, pulled something out of the fire. She has created something.

—Alice Friman

After reading several of the poems—“The Dream of the Rotten Daughter,” “Ghost Story for December,” “Footnote”—I see that unresolved issues with your parents are a major theme running through the collection. Did writing the poems help you reach a resolution?

Perhaps the answer to the previous question informs this one. No, there was no resolution. That’s a hard thing to accept I know—that there are certain things, betrayals for instance, that can’t be resolved, made sense of. They just have to be swallowed down, an act I liken to swallowing a sofa. It doesn’t get easier, and you never get good at it.

This book, *The Book of the Rotten Daughter*, seems to come from such a different place than your previous *BkMk* collection, *Inverted Fire*. Looking at the theme of the poems and artistic development, how would you compare the two?

I think if you look closely, you can see the seeds of this book in *Inverted Fire*, surely in the opening piece of that collection and in such poems as “Flying Home” and “Snake Hill” where I am predicting what will happen in a not too distant future. *The Book of the Rotten Daughter* is darker, of course, and more concentrated. The fact that the poems cover a shorter time frame adds to its concision. I’m afraid there’s little comic relief in this one. Between these two books, I published *Zoo* (University of Arkansas Press), based on my travels in Africa and Hawai’i, in which I turn outward, the poems not as personal as they are in the two *BkMk* collections. A new manuscript, *The Mythological Cod*, is a different kettle of fish altogether—funny and a bit wacky. I add this information so that readers will not give up on me altogether.

Is there a change in your self-conception/appreciation from the beginning to the end of the book? Do you still see yourself as “the rotten daughter” in the end?

This is a wonderful question to illustrate the difference between life and art. Art, after all, makes sense. There’s cause and effect, beginning and end, logic, order. Maybe there’s sometimes even justice and redemption. At the end of *The Book of the Rotten Daughter*, there is acceptance, yes, and, I hope, a sense of completion. The rotten daughter has, at least, pulled something out of the fire. She has created something. Does the rotten daughter in the book see herself differently by the end? That’s for the reader to decide. But if the question is whether the author still sees herself as “the rotten daughter,” the answer is, of course, of course.



