

Barbara Mor
Earth Letters 1



to Joe Napura



August 6, 1985

Dear Joe,

Here we are in Bisbee & two daughters.

Meridel writes she will come later, end of August, after writing about the **Nairobi Conference**. Imagine what she will have to say! 15,000 women, mostly African, Asian, Indian—a Rumble in the Daytime.

I'm glad you've seen Bisbee. So I don't have to try to describe it to you! As I've been doing in letters to friends who've never been here, & imagine not much more than Flat Heat. In fact it is cooler than I expected, I guess because we arrived at launch of Monsoon Season, it really rains here. And so it is greener than I expected too. We live in Warren, very quiet conservative town on South end of Pit where Bisbee is the Sin Section (Old Bisbee it's called, Brewery Gulch et al). Warren must be the Virtue Section. Many old guard here, Fundamentalists, Mormons nostalgic for the Father Rule of **Phelps-Dodge**; many who deny **the Deportation**, or Justify it (Strikers were Commie Symps or German Symps or From Mars, definitely Un-American), or, most



common, are upset / outraged that it exists as a Topic for Discussion, it being not appropriate to talk about, like VD or menstrual cramps.

It is that mechanism which causes “the people” to betray themselves that fascinates me, drives me crazy the mechanism of justifying one’s exploiter in his exploitation of One’s Self. Such an American Mechanism, for the Exploiter is no longer a King but a Company & our political ideals of freedom extend only to the Tyranny of Kings to borrow a name from the Toy Company somehow, “Companies-R-Us.” Here, an interesting sidelight, all the really big, double-story rico homes in Warren are built smack up against the Tailings Pile, a huge toxic Mesa of heavy metals dumped there in 1973 the mansions stand there with back up against the Pile, shrieking “Mine!”

I really appreciate your **Butte & Bisbee poems**, therefore, in themselves & also as some background for this place, which is such a bizarre mix of Jurassic plants & rusted metal, century plants & electric power stations, Gay 60s Old Bisbee, a Bonsai San Francisco with its Eternal Hippies Hanging in there, & where we



live, Warren, a dead town sort of, many gringos walking around, retired from capitalism & its capers, shells of people with emptied out Guts & Hearts, it seems. They hate Old Bisbee! The Poets, Artists, Degenerates! But, it seems it is Old Bisbee nowadays which brings in the revenue, like one more Zoo the tourists throw dollars at. Downtown Old Bisbee IS FUN here in Warren not fun but quiet & none of those 150 stair flights & steep streets for Meridel to climb. Meridel! I don't make those streets or stairs either, on a bike!

Much thanks also for your **Ordinary Wisdom**. There's not too many people I would look forward to sharing life with, for however long. With Meridel I KNOW there's something vital I must learn from her. It's that SURVIVAL you write about, not as a Negative Endurance. (which I'm good at) but as Active Revolution, or Positive Resistance. I have a bad melancholy streak a view of depression in my mind! which saps my energy & my work; I can't feel or believe it matters, is important. I learn most from the non-human, from animals & land, & a lot of Human Pep Talk leaves me wholly



unconvinced. But Meridel has that Human Conviction which feels as solid & impressive as any Mountain or 150 year old Tortoise or Redwood Tree. Hers is elemental, as you know. So I believe it, in her; I believe her. And I'm hoping her Present Gifting the Future rubs off on me, you put it very Well!

I often write more Convinced than I truly am. The 603 page manuscript I finished in Mid-June is really a strong, positive book tho I am not! It might be called The Religion of the Earth, which the editor pulled from the text. It will be printed May or Sept 1986, the month depending on how fast they get strong endorsements back from people now reading it Robin Morgan, Merlin Stone, Marija Ginbutas, Barbara Walker, Lucy Lippard, others. A 400 page paper! with a lot of good pictures I hope, but trying to keep it under \$15.00 retail. Now I would like to get back to poetry, but so far I'm unpacking boxes & all the moving-in stuff, & wondering if I will ever write again! Prose is draining, for me doesn't recycle energy as Poetry does. But prose Does respond to Will, for me anyway; I can Will myself to work 6-8 hours



a day on some manuscript of prose, history, religion, Whatever but the Poetry Neurons don't fire by Will! Maybe they would fire by Tom, Dick Harry ! or Jose!

Can't write "Will" without thinking of Inman who I meet end of August for first time after 10 years of correspondence. Yeah, you & Will reading in Bisbee & you doing your Earth Water poem in Bisbee, would be wonderful double bill & if you got sent to Sonora in a boxcar with Will, at least you would mutually be good company!

I'll send these 2 chapbook size manuscripts this is the way I put them together to send to a Santa Fe press, Sunstone, but he was backed up for two years & didn't find anything in these that worked for him. I think there are individual good things Mustang Ranch, e.g. & the bicycle poem, & parts of Pueblos, but don't feel they are a balanced package, that's a problem with long poems, they can be rearranged, by anyone with a better idea! I'm saying all this to reveal what I feel about these as a package (or 2 pkgs) & if you & Walter end up feeling the same, that it



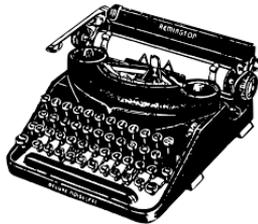
doesn't work, I will understand. That's why I've mostly sat on them for 8 years tho many have been printed individually as the credits show.

My typewriter made it gallantly thru 603 pages, & some letters, & then sheared off one of its visceral screws so, I'm on foot again. Hope this is readable, I'm writing with a pair of magnifying glasses on!

Love to you & yours, Joe

I'll give Meridel a hug from you when she arrives at least from the East, via the Planet Nairobi, populated by women.

Barbara



A note on the typewriter reference: I sent Barbara my dad's old portable Remington typewriter. She used it for many years before returning it. We both were much pleased by her using the weapons manufacturer's machine for writing against violence.

A Note about the Notes:

The notes contain brief explanations of references in the letter marked in **red** type as well as the following:

“Meridel Le Sueur in Cochise County”

by Barbara Mor

“Where Strength is Cached”

by Joe Napora



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Meridel

Meridel Le Sueur in Cochise County

by Barbara Mor

Bisbee AZ is a charming arty town west of the old PhelpsDodge copper digs: the Copper Queen Mine, the Lavender Pit are now offered as tourist sites. Copper, i.e. PhelpsDodge, drove the state's political economy in the early 20th century. Warren, AZ (where Meridel, my 2 daughters and I rent-shared a hillside house in 1985) was NOT arty, and its charm was more surreal. Located east of the Pit and the huge tailings pile that formed its western horizon, Warren was a PD Company Town full of Ghosts. A few mansions of dead mine owners, retired PD workers dying in terminal loyalty to the copper industry, the restive spirits of dead miners: it was a preternaturally quiet place, occupied more by the living past than its dead present.

During WWI this region was the scene of vicious Union-busting activity. The IWW was there, and Mother Jones visited regularly. Circa 1917 the Cochise County Sheriff's Dept., local police, plus Pinkerton and FBI called in to protect the "war-related interests" of the mine owners, rounded up over 500 mine-workers in a predawn raid on their homes. They were marched at gunpoint to the baseball field in Warren and from there loaded onto boxcars: hundreds of men packed like sardines into closed



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cars with at best one big jar of water, some with no water at all. This “deportation train” was sent on a one-way trip eastward into the New Mexico desert, with orders to leave them abandoned there, unopened, regardless of the death toll. Luckily, the Mayor of Columbus, NM ordered the boxcars unlocked and the men freed. No one died, no one was compensated, and the perpetrators were never brought to court. Warren was a town composed predominantly of people who had been denying, for 68 years, that this infamous “Deportation of Miners” ever happened. Or, if it had, the hundreds of men in the boxcars deserved it, or, if they were too young to have been there, they knew it had never happened because official Warren history told them so (by omitting the notorious event entirely from the local universe of discourse).

Meridel knew all this history, of course. Then 85, with a lot of pain in her lower spine, she’d come to the high dry mountains and Apache heat of Southeast Arizona to stretch her bones in the sun, a respite from the Minnesota winters of her home. She had a big bedroom on a yucca-sprayed hillside, dotted with ocotillo, small cactus and rocks emerging from the nagual. She loved it; she loved to sit out on the front porch, in late autumn, with her legs exposed to the sun. And she loved the presence of that history, the struggle of the extraction of copper which stained the earth blood red. The week of her arrival she began to dream. In sleep, she entered the red hills and found Mescalero Apaches and a group of



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miners alive inside them. They welcomed her, all sitting around in a kind of kiva-space deep in the earth, and they talked and told stories every night. Meridel was struck by the intensely beautiful mineral colors of inner earth, colors normally hidden unless exposed by the brutality of open pit mining. The resultant wound was terrible, but beautiful, in what it revealed of the earth: a living pulsing presence. This was Meridel's recurrent dream in Warren: it was a vision of healing.

I don't drive. I did Meridel's shopping on my bike, taking her list to the Bisbee healthfood store and carrying home her miso and tabouli and cheeses and veggies 3 miles back around the Pit. Health food, in Warren, was still a Wobbly Plot. Warren had only one food store, the PhelpsDodge Market, definitely NOT a NewAge OrganicFood outlet. The people, shoppers and employees were decently subdued and sad; PhelpsDodge had moved on and left the town as wispy and forlorn as an outgrown cicada shell. In her second week, Meridel wanted us all to go shopping there together, so she could "see the town." This venture became much more like "the town seeing Meridel."

She wore her long Iroquois braid with many beads and gewgaws given her by people all over the world. On this day she was very flamboyant, her blouse and scarves in fuchsia, magenta, purple, rose, all flowing in the late afternoon breeze. She smoked a few long MORE cigarettes each day, held in a stylish ivory holder. So her



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“image” on this particular outing was somewhere between The Corn Mother of Iowa and Gloria Swanson of Sunset Blvd. Warren had one main street, with most of the small stores empty (emptied by a new shopping mall built 15 miles away in Sierra Vista) There were several churches, a few CourtHouse buildings, a small postoffice, no bars, no movie theater. A very parochial, indeed, other planetary eerie SILENCE on the main drag even during weekends: everyone was either dead or terminally bedridden inside their houses, or gone shopping 15 miles away. A very weird place!

So here comes Meridel, in her electric wheelchair, bright yellow and black, a blazing bumblebee accompanied by my young daughters and me venturing down the long crumbly street between our hillside house, and the main intersection where PhelpsDodge Market ruled the corner. The sidewalks were discontinuous, running broken and slanty for half a block and then abruptly ending in a jagged clump of cement buried in dirt, with luck some weedy grass growing through it. So we just paraded down the middle of the street, with Meridel in the lead. Her scarves flew in the arid, hallucinated air like Radical Flags. None of us were “the Warren type” but Meridel was outrageous: fuchsias flying, cigarette holder, SquashBlossom silver and turquoise around her neck . . . AND, of course, a “renowned Communist,” and IWW heroine. AND a Feminist. AND a Poet.



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Walking with Meridel down the middle of the street to the PD Market that day in Warren, AZ was the best parade I've ever been in. We went inside to shop while Meridel stayed in her wheelchair outside, to "see what she could see." Meridel loved candy, and had asked me to buy her some caramels. So when we emerged from the market with grocery bags there she was: surrounded by children on a street of historic ghosts, a sidewalk typically disused, in a town where I rarely saw kids except on the school playground. Meridel, like a spaceship had landed in their main street, had drawn a crowd of kids; none of them, I know, had ever seen such a Babe in their young lives. She took the big bag of Kraft caramels, opened it and began handing out her candy, half the bag at least, to the kids. In about 15 minutes, they all seemed to know her and love her. She was Très Exotic but she was also the Universal Grandma handing out goodies.

In that bag of caramels there was a page of stick-on alphabet letters and a miniature plastic License Plate, for kids to put on their bikes. Meridel spelled out "RIPENING" and we attached it to her wheelchair.

(Meridel's relation to her beloved chocolate was not 100% altruistic or self-sacrificing. on Halloween 1985, my daughters and I went around Warren in costume, with 2 bags collecting a lot of small candy, gum, chocolate bars and TootsiePops. Afterward I made them leave their bags of loot in the kitchen, with instructions: "don't pig out all at once, make them last" - and normally their Halloween



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candy did last a few weeks. We were a disciplined crew. But for Meridel. Within a few days after Halloween both daughters went to their bags and sent up howls. All the chocolate bars were gone! Meridel had snuck down the long hallway late at night, in her stealth wheelchair without telling anyone, and pirated all their candy bars, Yes! I found all the crumpled wrappers in her bedroom wastebasket. What we got from her was a gleeful unrepentant smile. Hey! She was 85 years old, with 12 more years to go. She needed her Quick Energy.)

Of so many delightful “Meridel stories” there was a serious point: she was in great pain. Some of her medicine contained morphine, and I believe that endorphin-producing chocolate also helped take the edge off her suffering. Her spine was deteriorating, compressed and crumbling, and she strove to work out a schedule of medications and sleep that would give her a few hours - usually at night - when she was pain-free enough, but not too groggy to write. She was working, there in Warren on her manuscript for DREAD ROAD. I would wake up many times at night, in my room, hearing her moans (a pain she never expressed in our daytime company). Then the moans were punctuated and then erased by the passionate clicking of her typewriter keys.

Meridel had wonderful dimples in a wonderful face, and although I knew she was in constant pain, never once did I see it. She looked, in fact, like Desmond



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Tutu - when I told her this, she loved the comparison. We agreed that having such a Face was a great POLITICAL ADVANTAGE, because it is impossible to argue indefinitely with anyone flashing such extraordinary DIMPLES. But there was (perhaps) a personal disadvantage in that Meridel's real experience of pain wasn't manifest. She was writing that terrible story of the Ludlow Massacre, she was steeling herself to work despite her body's staggering back and forth between raw and medicated stupor: moment by moment day and night, she was exerting on herself a terrific DISCIPLINE and HEROISM to accomplish her task. But when you looked at her, you didn't see this starker aspect of her character, this stern warrior. What you saw was Meridel's merry and witty face, her beaming countenance. Ice, True Grit.

Everyone knows Meridel's favorite parable, in which the butterflies outlast the dinosaurs. War machines, bulldozers, tanks and stomping armies of brute stubborn things become extinct, while the poetry of Life, its generous instinct to be not only useful but BEAUTIFUL, survives. Such parables are easy to believe, but hard to live. Meridel was not sentimental, but Heroic. Pain is real, it cannot be escaped, only transformed. Meridel had arrived in Warren directly from Nairobi, Kenya. It was 1985, the year of the 3rd International UN Conference on Women, held in Nairobi, and Meridel had "sent herself" there as part of an NGO delegation (the "official delegation" included women like Maureen Reagan, the then-president's daughter, and other



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predictable “boozhywoozhy” as she called them). The gift of an electric wheelchair allowed her to travel to Kenya and be mobile throughout a grueling 2 week Conference. Arriving in Warren, Meridel carried many gifts from Africa: carved animals and women’s heads and dress beads. Most of all she brought the Poetry of what she’d seen and experienced there: Nairobi itself towering multinational corporate structures the monoliths of global brandnames: ITT, MOBIL, COKE, \$\$\$\$. Familiar icons. At street level, simple squalor: tin shacks, beggars, kids, shoestring barter. Meridel’ record these images as a tourists of course but as a politically-acute radical feminist and poet. It was 1985: she was seeing Our Global Future. Amidst the stark juxtapositions of the Nairobi streets the African women moved so vibrantly she said, that she had a vision of their swirling, colorsplashed robes and headscarves as “beautiful bandages” covering the wounds of Africa, comforting and healing without denying: a TRANSFORMATIONAL PRESENCE. Our wounds are not “personal” but Planetary. Meridel knew her personal pain was the anguish of the whole earth. She did not speak from this in victim language but in BEING the Earth’s wounds, of and within the continuous living story of struggle and pain. Like the Kenyan women, she wove her textures, colors and memory heroically into a Poem, a fist, a flower, a Brazen Banner : WE ARE ALIVE HERE AND NOW WE ARE TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD.



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If everyone could learn to move through the past and future rubble of our present world like those women, Meridel thought even the deepest wounds of our human anguish could be healed. And then flowered into a brave beauty.

“Meridel Le Sueur in Cochise County” © 1998 by Barbara Mor.

[This essay and mine appeared in “A Multivoice Memorial for Meridel Le Sueur 1900 - 1996” at Karl Young’s Light and Dust Website along with tributes by Karl, Linda Montano, and Paulene Oliveros.

Conference

1985 World Conference on Women

Nairobi, Kenya, July 15-26, 1985

I’m glad you’ve seen Bisbee.

I’ve never seen Bisbee. This must be a reference to my Bisbee poem in Sentences & Bills: 1917

Ordinary Wisdom

Perhaps a mistake. I think she may be referring to this review.

Where Strength is Cached

by Joe Napura

Now, in a moment of crisis and cold,
they point out where the warm ash of the old
fires can give you warmth, where strength is
cached.



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Meridel Le Sueur, from *The Crusaders*, *The Radical Legacy of Marian and Arthur Le Sueur*

She repeats herself. And this is also a promise, like the example of Demeter: not death but re-birth. In conversation as in life, for conversation is life, she repeats, not the straight line, not that lie leading directly to the bomb from the linear mind, the mind formed by print. Charles Olson turned this awareness into theory: Projective Verse, “COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line...”. Long before Olson left the post office to be a poet, she was composing “by field.” She said and lived it all of her long life, from the year 1900 to near to the century’s end. She repeats herself in those of us who remember, as she repeated in every conversation I had with her Albert Parsons’ last words before he was hung as a conspirator for the Haymarket bombing: “Let the Voice of the People be Heard.” And through her it is.

Contemporary Authors tells us that Meridel’s father, Arthur Le Sueur, founded the Industrial Workers of the World, a line and a lie repeated in several entries in that reference work that now stands as truth in all the libraries in the country. Her father and mother, along with Eugene Debs, Helen Keller, and a few other progressives were founding members of the People’s College in 1914. Perhaps this is what the scholars are referring to. Arthur Le Sueur had nothing to do with the founding of the IWW (1905), though he continually



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fought with Big Bill Haywood and other IWW leaders over tactics and policy. Do scholars know anything? Can they be trusted? One of the many lessons Meridel has taught us: it's not just "Don't let the bastards beat you down"; it is also "Don't let the bastards re-tell our history."

One example:

...a print version of Funk & Wagnall called Microsoft chief Bill Gates a "tough competitor." But an electronic Microsoft version describes him as "known for his...contributions to charity." - Wall Street Journal, Nov. 14, 1997

In Meridel's novel, *The Girl, Clara*, prostitute, friend, dreamer, receives electric shock treatments instead of food, shelter, nourishment. As Clara dies:

Memory is all we got. I cried, we got to remember. We got to remember everything. It is the glory, Amelia said, the glory. We got to remember to be able to fight. Got to write down the names. Make a list. Nobody can be forgotten. They know if we don't remember we can't point them out. They got their guilt wiped out. The last thing they take is memory.

And it is. It is not just the electric media, its control, ubiquity, power. The burden upon us, writers, is now even greater. Memory is the first thing they take. It's not just Clara, the women of the Depression, it's the world, the electric media shock treatment that destroys



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memory, replaces it, over-writes it, with trash, information only. In every library sits the Library of Congress Subject Headings, and they are different than they were: the Ludlow Massacre, Colo. 1913-1914 has been changed to Coal Strike, Colo. 1913-1914. A massacre perpetrated by the private army of the Rockefeller family cooperating with the National Guard of Colorado has been changed to “a strike.” The only thing that hasn’t changed is the universal constant of government: blame the victim.

The Ludlow Massacre was, as she said of it, her defining moment. As a young teenager, she went to the Colorado mine fields and recorded the stories. And from those voices evolved her last published novel, *The Dread Road*. And from all of her stories, the hundreds and thousands of recordings and from her memories came the works of hers that may never be published but which constitute her greatest writings: her notebooks, her partially finished novels, her music-made writings, her unfinished symphonies.

Meridel said that “Someone has been shaking commas all over my notebooks.” Changing them. Changing her legacy. Changing her to fit an acceptable mold. She criticized Robert Coles for changing the Appalachian speech of his “subjects.” We need to know how people talk, and we need to know how Meridel writes. Hers was an organic form, based on, rooted in, faith in the land and the people who love it. And she has taught us the most important lesson we can learn about



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community. It's a lesson that her feminist, Marxist, Communist, realist, midwest folklorist admirers have never learned: there is a solidarity based on something other than victimization. And she is a writer, greater, more of a stylist, than any of the most honored of the novelists who were her contemporaries when she developed her writing style (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Lawrence). She is a writer who has left us more to learn from than any other. And she repeats herself in us, where strength is cached.

The Religion of the Earth

This was the title that Barbara preferred for *The Great Cosmic Mother*.

Inman

Will Inman, noted for his enthusiastic support for other poets.

Earth Water poem

A reference to a poem in my Sentences and Bills: 1917

Phelps-Dodge / the Deportation / Tailings Pile

Information about these and other references to Bisbee can be found in many books and online sources such as Teaching History: The Bisbee Deportation of 1917.

Butte and Bisbee poems



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This is a reference to my poem “Earth Water” in my Sentences and Bills: 1917.

Mustang Ranch, e.g. & the bicycle poem, & parts of Pueblos

A short excerpt from Winter Ditch shows the raw power and fierce beauty of her poetry, the way she makes her personal experience mythic:

unwarm, she tends the fire,
listening to winter.
dim crack of pinon
like far bones. something
shushing in the high black air,
sap sizzle
along the slow spine,
the brains desire. 1 million years
in the mother cave, hearing
the stars
cold speaking. core-fires
& star-veins
over distances, become pure lines
of thought, & ice.

Walter

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