

---

## A HISTORY OF BURNING WOMEN

---

*her fire burns hot.*

*flames lick through me.*

*but, there's no stake holding me here.*

*no, here she burns **for** me,*

*the goddess of fire,*

*to remind me that*

*deep in my belly a fire should be raging,*

*burning,*

*consuming.*

...

*the women of my line,*

*did they fear this fire?*

*was fire too close to the history of this line of women immemorial?*

*I see them, their faces dark,*

*no firelight in their souls,*

*no burning in their core,*

*no fuel to fire longing and desire, to give volume to voice.*

*this fear of fire,*

*how deep does it run?*

*I see them,*

*a line bleeding back into the dark bowels of centuries past where  
no flame burns.*

*dark faces, tightly drawn skin reminding me of my own jawbone.*

*how powerful was this message?*

*put out your light, woman.*

*by fearing our own fire,*

*we douse our own flame.*

*we cannot live what we are here to do without fire.*

**Julie Daley**

In order to fully understand our own limitations, hesitations, blocks and anxieties we have to delve into our his-story. Both the official his-story that we have learned, as well as her-story that has been suppressed. We need to become conscious of the culture that we have numbed to in order to survive. We have to bring into conscious awareness that which goes sensed but unspoken: the threat of being a woman who lives to her own tune in this world.

The next part of this book was hard to write. And may be hard to read. But I believe it is necessary to join up the dots and to feel the emotions that are evoked by the facts: to recognise what we have become blind to, so that we may see more clearly the way ahead.

## W IS FOR WITCH

*Whenever I hear a guy say, 'She's too wild, too much, too hard to figure out, too complicated, too intense, too hard to handle, too emotional, too opinionated, or crazy.' I hear, 'I'd have burned her ass at the stake back in Salem. She is too connected to the Goddess. I won't be able to tame her.'*

**Jenny G. Perry**

*We are the granddaughters of the witches they were never able to burn. If history teaches us that a 'witch' is nothing more than a woman who doesn't know her place, then damn straight, I consider myself a witch.*

**Ruby Hamad**

When I learned my alphabet, W was for witch. The archetypal Burned Woman, there in front of my pre-school eyes. R wasn't for rapist or P for paedophile or psychopath. But there it was: W for witch.

We are taught about the dark feminine early, we imbibe the warning of the witch with our nursery stories. *Beware the solitary woman who lives in the forest, casts spells and will eat human children for breakfast.* And as a perceived pretender to patriarchal power, of course she was depicted in a silly black hat with a phallic broomstick poking out from between her legs.

Want to discredit a woman in the real world? All you need is one word.

Witch.

Still. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just this week an Australian Federal Minister called a respected political journalist who wrote about a sexism scandal that a senior colleague had just resigned over, "a mad fucking witch".

The W word has been a one-word death sentence to women for centuries. The fire starter. It has been used to condemn

women who inhabit the outlying edges of our patriarchal culture and flatly refuse to have their lives decided for them. It has been used to shame and silence those who speak up. As well as those who chose not to marry or have children, who healed using unknown means, who cursed the wielders of power for their inhumanity, who attended deaths and births, or have followed their own spiritual and sexual impulses.

The witch represents the patriarchal fear of women's power, embodied in an individual. She who must be destroyed so that society can prosper. But look a little closer and her spells, her abilities to do the supernatural, to enchant, to shapeshift are, I would argue, paranoid reversals of the equally imaginative claims of the Bible. Her powers are spookily analogous to those assigned to the great heroes of the Bible. But if patriarchs' were done through men, via the power of the male God, then hers, done not in the name of God, must be done in the name of his shadowy counterpart—the Devil.

The witch (AKA a powerful woman) has been pitched as a direct threat to the carefully constructed male dominated system of "divine right". And so the System has done everything within its power to erase, discredit and disconnect women who exhibit any form of power, and label them witches. With society's blessing. Because, throughout history, where women have never been considered as human as men, witches were not human at all. *They do not deserve our pity or defence, we are told, we are well rid of them. They would destroy everything we hold dear. And so we must destroy them first.*

We have been told enough fairy stories in our girlhood to know to beware of the witch. We have read enough his-story to know that as women we don't want to be mistaken for her. The desire to live, to be accepted and to belong, keeps most of us in our places. And so we spend our lives running from the darkness, trying our hardest to be good and work hard and keep others happy.

*To me, a witch is a woman that is capable of letting her intuition take hold of her actions, that communes with her environment, that isn't afraid of facing challenges.*

**Paulo Coelho**

So when we feel the fire rising in our bellies, we also smell smoke in our nostrils. We feel passion and sense danger. And so we step back, pipe down, play it safe. For fear of what if. Because his-story has taught us clearly: bad girls are branded as witches. Bad girls get burned.

When we feel the upwelling of power within us, our bodies respond with deep fear. Far deeper than just a worry about losing face or looking silly. But rather the threat of losing our lives or those we love. The fear is real. Our bodies know it.

Whether you believe in past lives, in the collective unconscious, the recent scientific discoveries of the cellular transmission of trauma down the generations, or simply in historical awareness, we remember the Burning Times. We remember the high price that was paid for living according to your own inner voice, following your heart, questioning societal norms and being different to your tribe. But don't just take my word for it, this is what a few women have shared with me:

*I can't tell you how many times during healing sessions or meditations I have felt the sensation of being burnt. Killed for being who I am, for speaking my truth.*

*I don't know if this comes from past lives or if it's an ancient echo of human persecution stored in the collective unconscious that I have felt in my own cells. I don't need to know. But each time it's arisen I have felt it as a tangible body experience and each time I have moved through the fear and let it go. This has been part of my healing over the past twenty years—to work with the deep fears that made me feel unsafe to be here, many of them ancient, irrational and deeply ingrained.*

**Jackie Stewart**

*When I was doing past life therapy training I had memories often with the sensations of the smoke. I could literally smell the smoke and feel it in my nostrils. Often during physical pain like sinus infections I would have the same memories. We really are stepping away from these centuries of old beliefs.*

**Marion Rose**

*Suddenly I dropped to my knees and was transported back to an ancient time, when I was naked, tied to a post with ropes wrapped around my whole torso, dropped to my knees, persecuted as a witch during the Burning Times and left to die, while not only the men but MY SISTERS walked away in fear of their own lives, saying nothing, pretending they didn't know me. Leaving me to die. The ultimate injustice and betrayal. Under the same full moon, I bawled, releasing so much grief for those times of torture, persecution and betrayal, and all the pain, ignorance and suppression that still inflicts our culture to this day. . . and I am SO excited the veils are being lifted now, the pain is being released because it's time for us to RECLAIM our power. And I have no fear now. The witch hunts are over. It's time to come out from the shadows. . .*

**Avalon**

Times are changing.

And yet still we are haunted by the Burning Times of old. They are still alive in us. We must dig deeper.

### THE BURNING TIMES

*There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that uses divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.*

**The Bible, Deuteronomy 18:10**

For centuries around the world, the ultimate punishment for women was public death by fire. Perhaps the most well-known

Burned Woman was Joan of Arc who was burned at the stake for her actions and beliefs.

She was not alone. In Europe between 1450-1750 figures ranging from a conservative 35,000<sup>viii</sup> to a truly terrifying (though discredited by mainstream historians) 9 million women were burned as witches. But as Brian A. Pavlac, PhD, Professor of History at Kings College, London, who specialises in the history of the witch hunts reflects, "even the lower figure of under fifty thousand dead would have meant over a hundred thousand put on trial. Then, considering all the personnel involved in the justice system as court officials and witnesses, friends and family members, and those who even felt the 'fear' caused by the hunts, millions of people's lives changed, usually for the worse, because of the witch hunts."<sup>ix</sup>

Whilst the Catholic church started the craze, with the publication of *The Hammer of the Witches*, from 1542 and 1735 a series of Witchcraft Acts were enshrined into law by parliaments around Europe. The punishments — imprisonment, torture and death — were focused on individuals who were deemed to practice witchcraft and magic.<sup>x</sup> Common accusations of witchcraft included: raising storms, giving the evil eye, killing people or livestock or causing bad luck.

To justify the killings both Christianity and secular institutions created ever broader definitions of witchcraft including being "associated with wild Satanic ritual parties in which there was much naked dancing."<sup>xi</sup> Ah, yes, naked dancing. Dangerous stuff that!

And whilst the victims of witch burnings included men and children, Brian A. Pavlac notes that "some witch hunts did almost exclusively target women, in percentages as high as 95% of the victims." Whilst Anne Barstow, author of *Witchcraze* reminds us that the members of the legal system its "judges, ministers, priests, constables, jailers, judges, doctors, prickers, torturers, jurors, executioners" were nearly 100% male.

Radical feminist, Marxist scholar, Silvia Federici, points out in her acclaimed book, *Caliban and the Witch*, that the witch burnings were systematic, happening at the same time as bloody land grabs in Europe and the New World, concurrent with massive increases in the Catholic church and nation states' power and wealth. This domination and brutalisation of nature, native peoples and women was one and the same. It has been argued that witches were burned to coerce women into accepting "a new patriarchal order where women's bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources." <sup>xii</sup>

Notes Alex Knight in his essay, "Who Were the Witches? — Patriarchal Terror and the Creation of Capitalism": "The witches were those women who in one way or another resisted the establishment of an unjust social order — the mechanical exploitation of capitalism. The witches represented a whole world that Europe's new masters were anxious to destroy: a world with strong female leadership, a world rooted in local communities and knowledge, a world alive with magical possibilities, a world in revolt."

But it wasn't just witches who were burned. In England burning was the most common punishment for women for many other crimes against the patriarchy: plotting to kill the king or any other superior (i.e. male) including her husband. Or for coining (counterfeiting money) which, when you are kept out of the economic system by dint of your gender, would be a reasonably common way to try to gain currency for yourself. <sup>xiii</sup>

It matters. It does. Because those flames that burned our foremothers in their hundreds of thousands burn us still today, albeit metaphorically, for exactly the same reason.

They were burned simply for speaking their own truth. Otherwise known as heresy, "any provocative belief or theory that is strongly at variance with established beliefs or customs."

To be heretical was to be dead.

Look again at that word: Heresy. . . Her say. . .

A woman lived under threat of being burned alive for living, speaking or acting in any way which contradicted or questioned the cultural norms which surrounded her: medical, spiritual or hierarchical. She was burned for earning a living on her own terms. The very systems which told her at every turn that she was a sinner, was less than a man, limited her power, authority, sexuality and economic survival.

Men were burned at the stake it's true, but with far less frequency. The official reason given for the dominance of burning women is that they did not want to expose a woman's body — heaven forbid, we must ensure her modesty even in death — as happened when a person was hung, drawn and quartered. But even the (male) commentators of the time, could see the contradictions: "There is something so inhuman in burning a woman, for what only subjects a man to hanging" (The Times, 1788).

The woman on fire was not a private act. She was burned in public, as a warning to all women: disobey and this will be you.

Women have not been burned at the stake in England since 1790 <sup>xiv</sup> and the last trial for witchcraft in the US was as recent as 1833. <sup>xv</sup> But sadly it is not ancient history.

Witch hunts still occur today in societies where belief in magic is prevalent, including sub-Saharan Africa, <sup>xvi</sup> rural north India and Papua New Guinea. According to the World Health Organisation around 500 women a year are killed as witches in Tanzania, and between 2010 and 2012 over 2,100 women were burned as witches in India. <sup>xvii</sup> In Ghana the BBC reported (in 2012) on six witch camps where women who have been accused of witchcraft can flee to safety. <sup>xviii</sup> And in Saudi Arabia (a country with a 57% male population) witchcraft is still legally punished by death. <sup>ix</sup> In 2015 ISIS was reported as having burned two women as witches, and their husbands too,

on accusations of “sorcery” and using “magic for medicine”.<sup>xx</sup>

In India the practice of “widow burning” or *sutee* was officially outlawed in 1829, but continued well into the twentieth century. Women who had been widowed would “voluntarily” be burned alive beside their husbands. Though many were bound and forced in order to “show their devotion”. This is even more hideous when it is understood that young girls would be married off to much older men. So a girl may be widowed at eleven, having been married for two years, and would then either face a life of shunning and starvation as a “widow” whose sins — in this life, or karma from a previous incarnation — were believed to have brought about the death of her husband. A man’s death was always considered the “fault” of his wife.

I want to stop. I want to stop these words and stories, but still they keep tumbling out. I want that writing it will stop this happening. I want to never read or write another list of facts like that again.

But we must learn to see and feel. To feel it fully in our bodies allows us access to the Feminine. We cannot flinch from this reality, from the fear and control and domination of the Feminine by the masculine as it is played out by fathers and husbands and priests and judges in village squares and kitchens and mosques and churches and courts of law around the world.

We must learn to dig down for the very real roots of our fears as they are played out in the world.

*We are not crazy.*

*We are not paranoid.*

*We are not imagining things.*

*This is what we fear when we feel our power rising.*

*This is what we know.*

*This is real.*

## HONOUR KILLINGS

*The purpose of honour killings is to maintain men’s power by denying women basic rights to make autonomous decisions about marriage, divorce and sexuality.*

**Madre**

*The right to life for women is conditional on their obeying social norms and traditions.*

**Hina Jilani**

Hear me when I say, this is not just dry history. It is still happening. Women around the world are being burned, simply because they are women.

Acid throwing, breast ironing, bride burning, domestic abuse, female genital mutilation, dowry death, female infanticide, genocidal rape, honour killing, sexual slavery. . . the list of abuses on Wikipedia is there for all to see. Crimes perpetrated on women’s bodies. Crimes which have no masculine equivalent.

I feel the bile rising, the acid in my throat.

The rise of acid attacks around the world is a newer form of burning. This is a relatively new way of destroying a woman’s highest currency within patriarchy: her beauty and sexual desirability, as revenge for perceived disloyalty. The belief being, if *that* man can’t have her, then *no one* will. He will brand her for her wrongdoing and mark her for life in the eyes of the world, melting her identity and female self, imposing his passion and rights on her body.

As Rebecca Solnit notes, “Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and their credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist.”

Especially when those people are physically smaller, economically and socially weaker than you. . . and you have the law on your side.

In India, Pakistan and the Middle East — home to over two billion people — women suspected of adultery, who seek divorce, are raped, or refuse to marry the partner chosen for them by their families can be burned alive by their families in “honour” killings. According to the UN over 5,000 women a year die this way. At the hands of their family members. In the name of honour.

Honour killings use violence and fear as tools of control. In many cultures where honour is a person's greatest social asset, men are seen as sources or agents of that honour, whereas the only effect that women can have on honour is to destroy it. Once the honour is destroyed by the woman, there is a need for immediate revenge to restore it, in order for the family to avoid losing face in the community. The murders are often performed in public to warn the other women within the community of possible consequences of engaging in “illicit behaviour”.

The human rights body, Amnesty International, notes:

*The regime of honour is unforgiving: women on whom suspicion has fallen are not given an opportunity to defend themselves, and family members have no socially acceptable alternative but to remove the stain on their honour by attacking the woman.*

In India and Pakistan there is also the culture of bride-burning, when a young woman is murdered by her husband or his family for her family's refusal to pay an additional dowry. The woman is typically doused with kerosene and set alight. This practice is relatively recent and has been particularly virulent since the 1980s. Over 2500 women a year die this way.

Whilst the Western world no longer burns women physically, we still have a culture viciously intent on shaming and destroying the livelihoods, reputations, bodies and mental health of women who challenge the status quo. And we still use the term “witch hunt” to describe this act of seeking and persecuting any perceived enemy, particularly when the search

is conducted using extreme measures and with little regard to actual guilt or innocence. Still we “burn” those who step too far out of line: see the shocking treatment of home birth midwives, feminists and female activists who are treated disproportionately in comparison to male counterparts.

And women still die violently today — three women daily in the US — at the hands of partners, or ex-partners. Three. A day.

In all these cases, honour is defined by the patriarchy. And judged by the patriarchy. And women pay the ultimate price.

Why?

I'll tell you why.

## WOMAN AS SINNER

*The word 'sin' is derived from the Indo-European root 'es' meaning 'to be.' When I discovered this etymology, I intuitively understood that for a [person] trapped in patriarchy, which is the religion of the entire planet, 'to be' in the fullest sense is 'to sin'.*

**Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology**

*They said I destroyed the world with my sin — it was my fault. My wickedness was to blame — and Jesus, a man, had to suffer a terrible death to make it right. I, a woman, and all the other women like me, carried the burden for everything that was not right with the world. And I believed them. I did not disagree. At the trials, when they accused me, said what I did was evil — I could not remember, was I? I became confused. They said I was unclean, that their god regarded us as filth, that our kind had brought pain to the world. I was guilty. After a while, I couldn't remember — perhaps I was. I now remember, my confusion clears, the veils are lifting. I remember my innocence. I lift the burden from my shoulders, and from other women's shoulders. I again walk proud and free.*

**Glenn Livingstone, PaGaian Cosmology**

Because we're women. And women are bad. That's what most major cultures and religions have taught.

Women as harlots and sinners, as temptresses and wicked mothers litter the pages of the sacred texts and children's fairy tales alike. Women deserve to suffer and die.

As we have seen in this chapter, to be a woman is to be a constant actor in a moral universe created and judged by men. Your best way of surviving it is to be good.

To be a Good Woman is to constantly work to atone for your inherent unworthiness. To sacrifice yourself, your time, your vision, your dreams in the service of others. To be a Good Woman is to uncomplainingly do the work of others and never say "no". To be a Good Woman is to tame yourself, to shave your body hair, curl your eyelashes, paint your face and hide your soul in a quiet corner. The Good Woman, the ideal woman is domesticated, beautiful to look at, doesn't take up too much space, is quiet, obedient, hard-working, God-fearing and dispensable. A Good Woman is submissive and compliant—always sexually available, but only to her assigned partner.

In a universe where the rules are always set externally and can change at a whim, a woman must always be on her guard. She is expendable, so she has to work extra hard to keep favour. A woman is never enough as she is. She has no intrinsic value but exists only in relationship to her usefulness to others, mainly to create and sustain life.

The best sort of woman, patriarchy tells us, is the silent, invisible woman. The woman shrouded in a veil, the woman hidden away at home, the uncomplaining mother pulling the double shift, the smiling assistant. Society has been intent on erasing women from the arts and sciences, from healing and spiritual practice, from positions of public power, political influence or independent wealth. Her entire identity was, over the course of several hundred years, legally erased until she became merely her father's chattel to be handed on to

her husband. A married woman at the turn of the twentieth century had no identity in law: her possessions, her children, her name were her husband's. She was not a being in her own right. This is what our grandmothers experienced. This is what we are recovering from: a total annihilation of being.

Many conservative patriarchal traditions from Christian to Muslim in the twenty-first century still worship at the altar of the invisible woman. And those of us that are not controlled by such strictures have still learned to erase ourselves through dieting, and not speaking up for ourselves, using quiet voices, and apologising for ourselves. In the wise words of Rebecca Solnit:

*Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story [. . .] The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt.*

But it is not just our bodies we are taught to hide, we are also warned of the darkness inside, which, we are told, women have more of: moodiness, anger, depression, resentment, lust, jealousy. Deny them, we are taught early on, resist them, leave them in the dark, inside of you. These are sins, the devil's work, signs of mental illness. Never let them see the light of day, we are warned—do not speak of them and certainly don't express them. Lock them up in your own personal Pandora's box within, throw away the key. Never even admit to its existence. Death to the Dark Feminine. Erase your basic instincts.

The rules are clear: if you will not be a Good Woman, if you will not be silent or sacrifice yourself, quietly happy, if you will not domesticate yourself fully, comply unquestioningly, or work double time, you will be sacrificed on the altar of patriarchy. You will be burned.

And you will deserve it.



## WOMEN ON THEIR BACKS

*Passionate, free-thinking women have never been appreciated by the religions of the world. Because passionate free-thinking women raise passionate, free-thinking children who grow up to be passionate, free-thinking adults, who are very difficult to manipulate, and almost impossible to control.*

**Marianne Williamson,**

**address to the 2015 World Parliament of Religions**

Almost every major culture in the past 2,000 years or more has sought to control women's power, by controlling their bodies and energy — sexual, creative and spiritual. They have limited and controlled women's sexual expression, where and how they give birth, how they display their bodies in public and private. Women have become a finely choreographed performance, directed by male stage directions, for the purpose of the male gaze.

For centuries women have been kept on their backs by the system: the most vulnerable, least empowering place to be. We have been forced into birthing on our backs in hospital beds and making love in the missionary position. One in five will be raped or sexually abused in our lifetimes.

The result of this? The World Health Organisation is clear:

*Depression, anxiety, psychological distress, sexual violence, domestic violence and escalating rates of substance use affect women to a greater extent than men across different countries and different settings. Pressures created by their multiple roles, gender discrimination and associated factors of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, overwork, domestic violence and sexual abuse, combine to account for women's poor mental health. There is a positive relationship between the frequency and severity of such social factors and the frequency and severity of mental health problems in women. Severe life events that cause a sense of loss, inferiority, humiliation or entrapment.* <sup>xxi</sup>

In healthcare, love making and childbirth — three of the most potentially transformative and empowering processes of a woman's life, the "woman on her back" model has brought pain, trauma, fear and systematically removed a woman's sense of control over her own body. It has actively blocked or removed pleasurable hormonal feedback loops, which are her biological markers for optimal health and power. Pain overtook pleasure as a woman's default body state. Trauma has become standard.

None of these "woman on her back" practices are natural to us: they are literally man-made. The missionary position was introduced as a "more civilised" and "godly" form of procreation to tribal peoples around the globe as part of Christian missionaries' duty to rid "baser" peoples of their more "animalistic" practices. Missionary position sex was advocated by Victorian mothers to their daughters with the recommendation that they "lie back and think of England." Hardly a ringing endorsement of pleasure or passion. Sexual numbing had begun, one which was continued through the practice of mainstream pornography, as women learned to perform sex in the male gaze, rather than to feel it.

The lithotomy position or birthing on the back is not practiced by indigenous peoples who prefer upright birthing positions on all fours or squatting, which engage the mother's muscles and use gravity to aid delivery. Nor is it recommended today by the World Health Organisation, who note that it only improves working practice for physician, rather than the birthing experience of the mother. Or the birth outcome. The position was introduced by Louis XIV so that he could observe his mistress in labour as an erotic thing (note, the male gaze), and caught on as a fashionable way to give birth. As male doctors (who did not know what labour felt or looked like — and more male gaze) took over from female midwives, they increased their involvement in the birthing process. Birthing women moved from actively birthing their babies, to being

patients. This became the norm, under the guise of progress, spurred on by shaming and scaremongering those who would not comply. There became a growing focus on numbing the woman through anaesthesia. Greater interventions were carried out — or required — which left the women further traumatised — physically and emotionally — and further disempowered.

And so, whether in sex or birth or medicine, the numb, patient, supine woman with her legs splayed under masculine gaze became the norm. She was not the active subject of her own life but a (traumatised, dominated) object acted upon by the masculine.

Think for a moment of a beetle — turn it over onto its back and it is helpless. The same goes for most animals — chickens, pigeons, guinea pigs — turn them onto their backs and they are defenceless, their soft bellies and vital organs exposed.

Peter Levine writes compellingly in his ground-breaking book on healing trauma, *In An Unspoken Voice*, about experiments where animals were turned onto their backs, and not held down. If they were caught calmly and were not fearful, they would pause for a second or two and then flip themselves back over and run off. If they were stressed or fearful when they were caught, they would either attack, or would remain prostrated on their backs for several minutes, or even a couple of hours, despite not being restrained in any way, before getting back up. This is known as *tonic immobility*. It is a natural instinctive behaviour, which kicks in in some positive circumstances — such as a kitten being carried by the scruff of its neck by its mother, or in humans after orgasm. But it is also activated in times of trauma, a sort of systemic playing dead, which we see in rape victims or prey being caught by a predator.

This pattern of putting women on their backs, the embodied trauma which we now know is passed on — both genetically and through upbringing — all have compounded the submission and systemic disempowerment of women. Women have been

turned into living dolls: submissive, infantilised, hard-working, uncomplaining, baby-making and minding playthings for men.

If you scare a woman about some of the peak power experiences of her life, the places where she touches her power — menstruation, sex and birth, healing from illness — and if you do this consistently, before, during and after, you can bypass her innate power. Add in the dynamic of practitioners — doctors or husbands — who are in a higher social position, possessed of greater physical strength, and holders of unimpeachable cultural power. For good measure, teach a woman to be ashamed of the powerful parts of her body — her vulva, vagina, womb, breasts and brain — to the extent that she cognitively disengages from them and cannot speak about them, then you hold her power. She will not, cannot, oppose you. She is energetically castrated. She will not burn you down.

This is how trauma has been used as an act of war against the Feminine through the bodies of women.

And it works.

In her constant numbing and shutting down to her body, a woman has to experience greater levels of pain before she will respond. So, for example, during birth, if you also remove from her the coping mechanisms of pain — movement and sound, safety and a known, trusted attendant — then her senses are wide open and her neural pathways are burned with powerful memories. Her body stores the trauma in her cells and activates genes responsible for anxiety in her baby, as has been shown by recent studies in epigenetics.<sup>xxii</sup> Furthermore, trauma in birth commonly triggers attachment issues between mother and baby, and post-natal anxiety and depression in the mother. Trauma upon trauma, generation upon generation all the way down the Motherline.

But then, when the ordeal is over, you force more cognitive dissonance by insisting that her experience is of no importance, everything is okay. Her feelings and experience are both

negated and denied, and her physical pain dismissed. She is encouraged to be strong and hold her counsel by all the fellow traumatised women who have been through the process before her — her membership of the sisterhood requires her silence. Her initiation is complete.

This is the submission of women. This is its complexity. The many-edged sword of tribal shaming, biological trauma and systemic disempowerment, reinforced by morals, a hierarchical system and cognitive dissonance, inherited genetically and through upbringing for multiple generations, with plenty of systemic abuse and supernatural threats thrown in for good measure, plus economic and social sanctions and the ever-present threat of death or incarceration for those who do not comply.

No wonder women are scared. No wonder women's empowerment is such a big deal. No wonder it is so complex.

But we have not finished. It goes deeper still.

### STARVING WOMAN

*As women we have been taught to fear our hunger.*

*We have learned to fight it, to diminish it and to be disgusted by it.*

*Our hunger is real and will not be denied, no matter how much we compromise, settle, shrink or try to hide it.*

*Our hunger is holy.*

*May we see our hunger in the light of truth, for what it really means.*

*It means we are alive—alive in the face of enormous obstacles and challenges.*

*It means that we are hungry for larger visions and expressions of*

*ourselves and our potential. . .*

*The only thing that will ever satisfy and fill this hunger.*

*The hunger to occupy every cell fully and completely,*

*To abide unapologetically in every nook and cranny of your complex and brilliant self. . .*

*This hunger may bring with it an ancient anger.*

*This anger comes from the frustration of being separated from ourselves—starving for ourselves!*

*Generations upon generations of hungry women, ravenous for what is real and true in ourselves and in the world.*

*Feel into the legitimacy of this hunger. Own this hunger.*

*Because only in owning it can it ever be really satisfied.*

*Anger will eventually give way to a fierce clarity—*

*A clarity of what must be done to access and live from the inner nourishment.*

*Let nothing stand between you and your overflowing banquet, your inner abundance of Being.*

*Give guilt no place at the table of your Self.*

*You are all yours.*

*Every last morsel.*

**Bethany Webster**

The starvation of women, enforced feminine emptiness, has been the endgame of the System around the world, for generations. Food, the basic energy source of life, has been used to communicate women's inferior power status. And then in a last insult, our hunger has been twisted into some spiritual high for the personal and, even greater, good.

Around the world women eat separately. Differently. In many cultures they eat after the men, and the children, often in a

different room.<sup>xxiii</sup> Or they eat vegetables where the rest of the table has meat. In Western countries they survive on salad and smoothies, pass on dessert and pinch their thighs in disgust. Or they eat junk on the go. . . whilst packing nutritious lunches for their families.

It starts young. Women have been found to breastfeed their girl babies for a shorter time than their boy children.<sup>xxiv</sup> In developing countries throughout Asia and Africa studies show that by the age of five considerably more girls than boys are malnourished.<sup>xxv</sup> In America half of three- to six-year-old girls worry about becoming fat. 81% of ten-year-old girls have admitted to dieting. In the words of Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, "Women eat last and eat least."<sup>xxvi</sup>

We start our lives hungering for more than we are given, and find it hard to accept that we deserve less, just because of our female anatomy. But we are taught it time and again: as women we are less than, our needs are surplus to requirement.

Until, eventually, we swallow this lie down as truth.

Women's hunger is political. We have not just been starved of energy from physical sustenance, but kept from the table in all ways — from boardrooms to men's clubs to swanky business dinners — these are the places that the deals that are made and circles of power cemented. We have cooked the food, and served the food, arranged the flowers and washed the plates. But we have not sat down to the table as equals.

Most women are hungry: whether it be for food, for equality, to be seen, to be heard, to express themselves, to be acceptable, to be enough. These needs are what smoulder in the guts of every Burning Woman, just waiting to be fed with enough oxygen to take flame.

The breath of life must come from deep within.

But instead of breathing deep into our bellies, we are told to hold them in. Our waists have been constricted by centuries

of fashion from corsets to skinny jeans. We have been taught to turn the tools of oppression upon ourselves, our sisters and daughters. We have been taught to starve ourselves, deny our appetites, restrain ourselves in public, to make ourselves smaller. We have learned to circumvent our hungers in all sorts of creative ways: exercising obsessively; bingeing in the darkness; taking appetite suppressants; snatching and grabbing what we desire shamefully in private; stuffing ourselves to satiation and beyond into bloating and discomfort. We do it with food, and we do it with commitments that we take on. We are never in charge of our own enough. We are not allowed, we do not allow ourselves, breathing space.

Hunger is the enemy with which most women are engaged in a Cold War for most of their adult lives. 65% of the female US population between the ages of 25 and 45 report disordered eating, with a further 10%, displaying symptoms of full-blown anorexia or bulimia.<sup>xxvii</sup> Of the 30 million people diagnosed with eating disorders in the US, 90% of them are female,<sup>xxviii</sup> yet only one in ten receive treatment.<sup>xxix</sup> 91% of female college students have attempted to control their weight through dieting.<sup>xxx</sup> 25% of them engage in bingeing and purging as a weight-management technique.<sup>xxxi</sup>

So often it is marked down as a women's problem: weak, flawed, vain, unstable women. Rather than the political issue it is. We have been taught that we are too much: too loud, too needy, too emotional, that we take up too much space for what we are worth. And so we are silently shamed into smallness. Our concerns are trivialised. Our relationship with our own right to exist is deeply conflicted. We are always in some form of apology for our flawed existence.

I believe in the power of the body. And so does the patriarchy. It's why they've shamed our female bodies so long. A woman's body has not been her own. It has been dictated and controlled by governments, families and religions. It's why in so many

cultures around the world, throughout history, women have been shrouded in shame—full body clothing, veils and covered hair. Where a man can go bare-chested on the street, a woman doing so is committing a criminal offence. Breastfeeding is hidden away in toilets or under shawls. Abortion is controlled by male law makers and religious leaders. Menstruation is depicted with blue “blood” in TV ads. And whilst penises are doodled everywhere and joked about on day time TV, a woman’s genitals are invisible in our culture—from graffiti to art—they are the ultimate taboo. Except in porn. Which has become increasingly violent.

Control and punishment of the female body is the most defining factor of patriarchy. And as the women’s movement to power rose in the Western world, and women began to take up more space in public, it is no coincidence that new forms of impossible physical perfection were demanded of them, in order to reinstate control. Naomi Wolf was right on the money when she observed in *The Beauty Myth* that, “Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women’s history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one.”

Diets and body shame are distractions — distractions from our power, our creativity, our unique beauty, our ability to make a difference in our own lives and in the world. If we are focusing on the size of our butts, or our blocked pores, we are not focusing on inequality outside of us. If we are focused on surviving our own self-imposed starvation, we are not able to focus on our other hungers.

*We have been starving for too long.*

*And it’s worked to keep us out of our power.*

*Until now.*

*Change is coming, we can smell it, we are ravenous for it,*

*Like anyone who has been starved*

*For a few thousand years.*

## SEEING RED

*We see red, not as a mist but clear and scarlet. Cherish it, for this is how the future will be made.*

**Suzanne Moore**

*I was taught as a girl  
in a patriarchal household that rage was not an  
appropriate feminine feeling, that it should be not  
only not be expressed but be eradicated.*

**bell hooks**

How are you feeling? Are you angry yet? Seeing red? Enflamed? Fuming? If so, good! Really feel that fire in your belly and let it simmer.

As women we get so numb to the System, we shrug our shoulders at the sheer scale of it. Even the thought of it makes us feel powerless. We try to shut it out. *It’s too big*, we tell ourselves, *there’s nothing I can do*. And so we choose to live in our own relatively safe little bubbles of daily life. Or we try to convince ourselves that it’s not so bad, or it’s happening elsewhere, to someone else. It’s not our problem. We turn off the news and try to carry on, ignoring the little twinges as we read of another rape or traumatic birth or beaten woman or honour killing or the kidnapping of four hundred African schoolgirls or another girl losing her life to an eating disorder.

Nice girls don’t feel angry. We are taught that early on. We should focus on the positive. Send love and light.

And so we push it down, distract ourselves, and learn to turn the anger in on ourselves, to pick ourselves apart. And gradually we become fragmented in order to survive, cutting off from our bad body parts, our big feelings, our traumatic memories, the horrific news stories.

And rather than get mad, we get sad. It’s easier to cry quietly

under the covers than yell in someone's face. We have been socialised to express anger as sadness. It's the safety valve for when it all gets too much. Or we turn the anger in on ourselves. It makes us sick. Makes us bitter.

Bitter women express their anger the only way they are allowed — in nagging, complaining, group bitching, passive aggression and with side swipes of shadow power. Women who aren't allowed to be angry wolf down tubs of ice cream that they don't want. Or starve themselves, or dye their hair, or go on shopping sprees. Or they get angry with the wrong people about the wrong things.

What women tend not to do is take their anger to the man. Or rather to the System. Because the System is faceless and irreproachable. We dare not say what we really feel: *HOW DARE YOU!* For fear of what will happen. And so we stew in our own juices, making ourselves and those around us crazy instead. We swallow our anger down so often, justify reality so frequently, that we become numb to it all.

In the System, the masculine has the stranglehold on anger. The divine right to rain wrath down on the heads of those who displease him. *Wait till your father comes home, and he'll set you right*, we are warned as children, or *God will punish you*.

An angry man is a valid reflection of a righteous Father God and his aggression is seen as a natural part of a testosterone driven male. The feminine, however, is supposed to be pure in her devotion and gentle in her manner, like the Virgin Mary, the ultimate Good Girl. The angry woman is seen as an anomaly, totally possessed by her rage. She is literally mad, the crazy woman. . . and in times gone past would have been locked up in the mad house for an outburst at authority.

Only bad women get angry. Bad women, like. . . I don't know. . . feminists. Interestingly enough the most common way of defining feminists is angry. In the fine tradition of Burning Women, feminists have been described as bra burners, though,

as Mary Daly points out, the actual cases of women burning bras were few and far between.

It's all rather depressing isn't it?

Ah, but that's how we've responded, as women, by getting depressed, rather than angry. Depression in adult women is twice as common as in men.<sup>xxxii</sup> Depression has its roots in profound hopelessness and systemic exhaustion. No wonder women struggle so much with it. Depression is a turning inwards of anger and despair on the self, rather than the outward focus of anger.

But anger is the key. As Mary Daly so ably says: "Unlike depression, which is a defeated withdrawal and turning one's energy against the Self, righteous anger is expression of creativity and hope." Burning up injustice in white hot words and furious emotion. Anger is explosive and raw and real. Anger hurts. . . but it can also heal.

*Anger is like water: the shape it takes comes from the container you put it in.*

**Leymah Gbowee, Nobel Peace Prize winner**

Anger is the opposite energetic pole of obedience, passivity, submission. Anger shows your inner fire is still burning when someone else tries to define you, to take your power away and destroy what you love.

The feeling of anger can be scary. Burning through logic and love until we are raw, bare and trembling. Anger is a primal emotion — it comes from the reptilian, primitive brain — the part of the brain that does not work with logic. This is why we have to express it in other ways — through yelling, screaming, hitting and in less destructive ways painting, movement and sound.

Now it's all very well talking about anger, but I, like so many women, hate confrontation. Having grown up around intermittent fire storms between my feuding divorced parents,

I learned to run and hide at the sound of a raised voice. Where my father thrives on it — the name of his autobiography was *Warrior Spirit!*—I will do anything to avoid it.

I remember a conversation with him when I was twenty in a Japanese restaurant in London. He was reading *Anger* by the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh and recommended it to me and my then-boyfriend. I said I didn't get angry. Just sad. And so didn't feel able to take part in the conversation which ensued between these two men I loved. That moment has stuck with me throughout the years.

*How come I don't get angry?* I wondered. And then I realised: *I do.* I am angry most of the time. It is my default setting. But it is a silent, fuming inner anger, an unexpressed shaking of my fists at the world. I am terrified of expressing it. I have tried it a couple of times and it was met with fury I found unbearable. At times it erupts in a deluge of words and tears to friends or my husband when it builds up too high. Fire storms of premenstrual rage. But not expressing anger at those who anger me.

Bestselling parenting author, Steve Biddulph, raised an interesting point in a recent column in *Juno* magazine, about how boys learn to turn sadness into anger from a young age. He noted how they then go out into the world destructive and emotionally disconnected. . . but powerful. Women, I realised, on reflection, do the opposite, turning anger into sadness. We learn to turn the potential power of anger and the ability to protect oneself emotionally into excessive emotionality. We are socialised from a young age out of our anger, out of our power. . . and into tears and powerless victimhood.

Just imagine for a moment what would happen if women, individually, united, got angry about the injustices they face. Imagine if we focused our power. The walls of civilisation as we know it would come tumbling down pretty fast. This is already happening in the groups of mothers in Argentina who demand

to know the whereabouts of their "disappeared" loved ones; the vigilante gangs of women in India who give vicious reprisals to men known of raping or beating women in their communities; Malala Yousafzai risking death to campaign for girls' rights to education; brave women speaking out about female genital mutilation leading to its criminalisation in many countries; birth activists — including myself — campaigning for the right to birth at home; the young women of Femen who bare their breasts in public and protest at social injustice.

Dare you feel your anger? Dare you express it?

*Anger says enough.*

*This stops here.*

*The sparks light the pyre*

*Come dance round the fire!*

## BURNING THE RULEBOOK

*Down with the Fatherland!*

*Here rises a brave new world,*

*Shimmering in possibility.*

*Alive with feeling.*

*My ticket there is to*

*Burn the complications*

*Burn the need to please*

*Down on my knees*

*I long to be free*

*To be me.*

*Burn my high heeled shoes, my his-tories*

*My bra, with ease,  
 Naked and free  
 I stand on my own two feet.  
 Free.  
 From my obligations  
 And your assignations  
 The control of nations. . .  
 This is my body.  
 On fire with my life  
 Two feet planted  
 Under the flag of me  
 Breasts jutting  
 Hips strutting  
 Eyes shutting  
 The mystery void  
 The Universe's wondrous vagina  
 Opens for me  
 And births me out free.*

We live in the context of patriarchy, by patriarchal rules, in patriarchal reality. We know nothing else. We are offered no alternatives, no other frame of reference. It is the air we breathe. We are so used to living in a foreign land and feeling like strangers trying to talk in a language that is not our mother tongue. But because this is all we have known, since birth, we are used to always feeling at odds, divided from ourselves, fragmented, crazy or just plain wrong. We have been taught to keep silent every time we feel this divergence; we have learned to second-guess our instinctive responses. We have learned not

to trust our feelings. And so we become avid rule followers, or rebels. Either way, it is the rules, our adherence or rebellion to them, that dictate our lives.

I long to declare an end to playing by the rules (says the woman who is just about to assiduously file her tax return!) Oh, I see the irony. The Good Girl inciting rebellion from her armchair.

I get so bored of rules, so tired of being the Good Girl, for fear of *what if*. More and more of our lives seem wound round and round by red tape, it wraps me so tight I can hardly breathe. Everywhere I look the walls are closing in on my freedom, the noose is getting tighter and tighter as they demand more money, more perfectly filled out forms, more obedience. I want to scream.

I want revolution but I don't want to go to war with the warrior. I have no desire for more hatred and hurt, more fear or trauma. I am sick and tired of this. I have been making myself safe to appease daddy, God our Father, Big Brother and keep him on side, something, anything to live in peace. But it's not working. The more we stay silent, the more power they grab, the more laws they write limiting our power.

How can we change the system and free ourselves from its shackles without perpetuating the cycle of violence? How can we burn the old life-denying culture without loss of what we treasure?

Revolutions in the masculine sphere tend to be enacted by force from without. How can we create an internal revolution? How can we burn the rulebooks in our own lives, so that we can become inflamed with life herself and then unleash THAT power out in the world? What would happen if we stepped into the fire? Not one by one, but *en masse*? What would happen if we unleashed our collective roar on the world?

Feel it rise, your burning passion, your anger, your fury, your hunger for more and different.



I am feeling it to. You are not alone. Dare we commit to it and stand our ground in the swirl of these feelings?

There, in the midst of it all, is your roar. Your Feminine power which will spark your fire. This is your sacred truth that you were born into the world to share. It is time to step into it. To unite your passion with action. To express your deepest self. To come fully alive.

Watch the smoke rise as the dead wood of his-story goes up in the flames of Burning Women around the world. Let us find the courage to join them. Let the undergrowth burst into flame until the skies darken with the shame of the aggression towards the Feminine throughout his-story. Let the fire heal and purify the old. Let it create fertile ground for the new.

We are leaving this reality behind, stepping out of the man-made world, walking beyond his-tory and into our own stories. Telling them in our own words, painting them in our own images.

As the smoke from the bonfires of the past engulf us and darkness overcomes our senses, let us turn our vision inwards to find the new sparks of life which will power this new world.

In order to find the Burning Woman within, we must keep moving into the darkness. We must learn to work in the dark, in order to find the source of the fire.

Take courage and follow me, sister. Into the darkness.

## BURNING QUESTIONS & FIRESTARTERS

At the end of every section there are burning questions and firestarter exercises to help integrate what you have read into your body and soul. These should start sparks in you and help deeper reflection in your creative, spiritual practice and growth. They are listed by section for ease of reference. The intention is to create an immersive, multi-sensory somatic experience, much as the writing of this book has been for me.

So grab your journal and a pen, or your computer. . . meditate on these questions. . . paint or dance your responses. . . bring your answers into the world through your life.

### FIRE AND THE FEMININE

What does the Feminine mean to you?

What does it look like?

Who or what represents it for you?

How is your definition similar or different to mine? What have I said that has changed—or clarified—your own understanding?

What has your relationship to the Feminine been over the course of your life?

How and why has it changed? What helped you to form your views?

How does the Feminine relate to the Masculine for you? Ideologically and in your own lived experience?

## BURNING WOMAN

Have you come across Burning Woman before? If so, where?

What resonance does she have for you? What mystery does she hold?

What do you burn for? How have you been burned?

What has your image of women and the Feminine been up to now? Watery? Fiery?

Where are you frozen?

Where are you silenced and do not dare to speak?

What Burning Women do you have in your life? Authors, teachers, friends. . .

What do they stand for?

How might you add your voice to theirs?

How can you build your community of Burning Women?

### Firestarter

Create an image of the archetype of Burning Woman. What does she look like? What symbols represent her? Paint her, draw her, collage or art journal her. Sculpt her from clay or papier maché, needle-felt or knit her. . . what colour and form suits her best? Where might you keep her so her presence is visible to you as you read?

## BURNING MAN

What has your experience been of Burning Man?

What Burning Men do you have in your life? Authors, teachers, friends. . .

How can you build your community of them? How do you work in partnership with them?

How do Burning Women and Burning Men interact?

## THE WORD

What is your relationship to the word *witch*? How much power does it hold for you?

Have you had any experiences of the Burning Times? Dreams, memories, visions? What did you learn about them in school?

Has this section awoken anything in you?

### Firestarter

Listen to this Christy Moore song, *The Burning Times*, <https://youtu.be/RntnpYTfpSc> and allow your body to move to it if you feel it, allow yourself to sing along. . . and afterwards write or draw or paint what comes up for you.

## STARVING WOMAN

What is your currently relationship with your body like?

In what ways have you been starved, and how do you starve yourself?

What do you believe you gain by starving yourself? How do you compensate for your starvation?

What are you hungry for? Have you ever considered your hunger as holy?

How long have you been denying or ignoring your hunger?

What do you believe will happen if you allow yourself to have what you desire?

**Firestarter**

Body photography or art projects on the subject of your body are powerful transformative tools. Possibilities include:

- › Self-portraits of your face in a variety of styles and media.
- › Self-portraits of your whole body.
- › An intimate self portrait of your yoni.
- › Taking a photograph each day which truly reflects your inner world.
- › Writing a love letter to your body.
- › Five Rhythms dance.
- › Sculpting your body in clay.

## ANGER

What are you angry at right now? Write out a whole list—new angers, old angers, everything that is churning in your body. Dare to give them voice and see what happens.

Where in your body do you feel them?

What does your body and inner self believe will happen if you express your anger? Has this ever happened? If so, how did you respond?

What do you do with your anger?

**Firestarter**

Feel your anger. Dare to write it out. Shout it out. Paint it out. . . feel its force and express it. Not necessarily *at* anyone. Just let it out. Don't channel it at me! Don't channel it at yourself. Follow its river of fire. Where does it lead you? What new terrain does it take you to, however crazy and "illogical" it may seem? Remember that branding our deep intuition as illogical is the first way of be-witching women and making them "crazy". Let it tell you what it needs to.

## BURNING THE RULEBOOK

**Firestarter**

Write out a list of rules that you currently follow—consciously or unconsciously. Consider as you write them out: who set these rules and when? What are the penalties for breaking them. . . according to whom? Have you ever experienced punishment for breaking them? What did this teach you?

Create a burning ceremony. Burn this rulebook.

Now, write your own. . . based on your values.