

## Stamp Collecting: Writing the Memoir, Bit by Bit

April 2024 Workshop at the Hoffman Center for the Arts

Writing Samples from Natalie Serber

### Shopping & Divorce

Stepping through the wide glass doors I entered a realm of calm, piano music delicate as a soufflé, thick carpet, tender lighting. The atmosphere was a valium to persistent agitation. My shoulders relaxed, I stood taller, breathed deeply the air perfumed with *White Shoulders*, or *L'air du Temp*, or *Chanel No. 5*. All out of my reach but for the tiny, plastic capped vials handed out as samples. I'd select a few garments from the sale rack, a Mohair sweater in July, sleeveless blouse and linen slacks in October, which a saleswoman deposited in a vast dressing room with a velvet chaise and what my mother would've called a 'skinny mirror.' One in which you always looked inexplicably better than real life. The women knew my size and included more clothes for me to try on, things that needed dry cleaning. A pleated wool skirt, a sapphire toned silk blouse with a self-scarf at the neckline, kitten-heeled suede pumps. All of it more Nancy Reagan than me—too short, too poor, too young, and terribly unhappy in my marriage, in my life. The women, with chignons and powdered cheeks, buttoned and zipped and clasped, held my hair off my neck as they gazed over my shoulder at my reflection and told me I looked lovely. They tended to me like devoted aunties, showed me possibilities beyond the me who'd walked through the doors in a vintage skirt with moth holes, an accidentally shrunken sweater that rose up when I moved my arms, revealing a sliver of belly, the plastic Candies heels, ground down from long walks I took after dinner each night, preferring the silent, cool evening to the spot on the couch beside my husband.

### A Body that Bled

The school bus driver swung open the door and off we tramped. Me, Alice, the Queen of Hearts, and the Caterpillar with her hookah. First graders sat on the gym floor in front of the risers. I was the white rabbit, scurrying across the stage, checking a cardboard pocket watch, muttering, "I'm late."

I twitched my whiskers in the trial scene, staying in character while an umbrella flared open again and again inside my body. Cramps were real. Now my rabbit-fretting was real. The gush was real. My white costume bloomed scarlet.

Because the embarrassing stain down my leg had to be disguised, the Cheshire Cat and I devised a plan. A fake fight in the parking lot. We screamed at each other. She pushed me into the mud. At fourteen, I believed cruelty, jealousy and pettiness were less shameful than having a body that bled.