

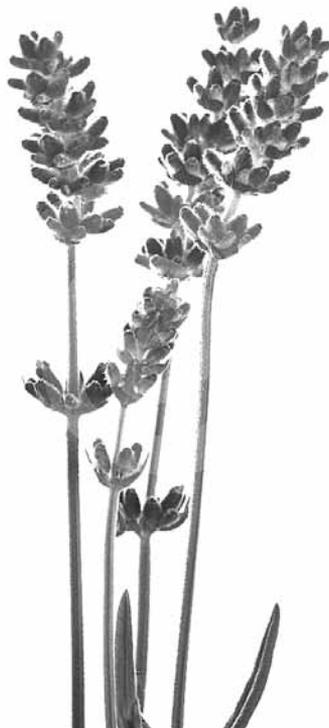
Collected Works

Jacqueline Feldman



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Table of Contents

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I. Mothers

- A Lavender Box Revisited—2
- Delivery (1856)—4
- In The Labor Room (Before Lamaze)—8
- Well-remembered Hands—10
- Two Deer—14
- The Dressing (To Natalie)—16

II. Children

- Below the Surface (To Harold)—20
- Fractions—22
- I . . . DROP . . . COOKIE—26
- The Chair—30
- Delayed Departure—34
- To Jane—38

III. Separation

- Decree Nisi—42
- The Joust—44
- Illusion—46
- Deception—48
- Final Encounter—50
- Elegy—52
- Reunion—54

IV. Endings

Rezoning—58
Summer Solstice—60
Flight's End—62
The Cost—64
Autumn Dissidents—66
The Hour—68
Spare Parts—72

To those who knew and loved Jackie Feldman,
and those who come after.

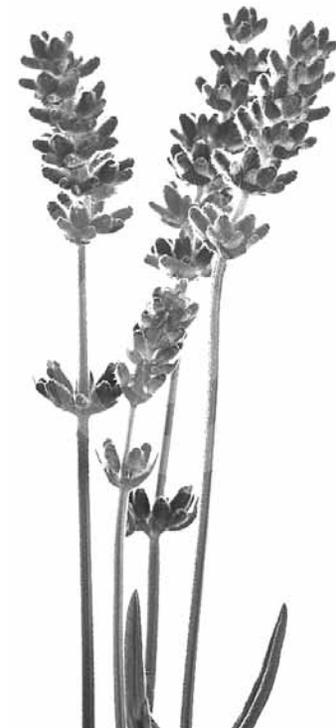
V. Perspectives

Perspective from a 747—76
Duplicity—78
The Showing—80
At the Market—82
Harvey—84
Pinter Play—86
A True Story—90
Free Verse (To Paul)—94
Thesis—96
History—98
Midnight: Aboard a Stalled Train—100
Late Afternoon, New York: Winter 1900
(A painting by Childe Hassam)—102
A Friendly Call, 1895
(A painting by William Merritt Chase)—104
Venice: Nocturnal Counterpoint on the
Grand Canal—106
Sonnet—108

VI. A Singular Saga

A Singular Saga—112
About the Author—128

I. Mothers





A Lavender Box Revisited



I open the lid and faces
gaze, voices speak,
moments long-forgotten
materialize.

From among a potpourri
of siblings and cousins,
suddenly my children,
unblurred,
at three, six, eleven,
thirteen, and seventeen—
their poems, letters, and
New Year's resolutions
with wishes, hopes,
x's and o's,
vowing to do better,
tend pets, be satisfied,
patient, respectful,
spend wisely, be kinder
to brother, to sister . . .

Years have passed since they
scrambled to pack their bags,
carelessly leaving behind them
bits of themselves;
they are still here,
in this lavender box.
I had only to open the lid
to find them again.





Delivery (1856)



She lay pale and listless
 against the pillows
 until the midwife
 brought the baby.
 Then she turned away.
 “No,” she said. “This one
 I cannot nurse.”

Too often she had resurrected
 from three tiny graves,
 the others,
 felt each breathing
 at her breast again,
 then wrenched from her arms
 within a day.
Eighth month babies did not live.

Perhaps she'd been remiss
 those times,
 committed a sin unwittingly,
 mixed two dishes, meat with milk,
 or carried a kerchief
 on the Sabbath.

But this time
 she'd been vigilant,
 working each task
 with a critical eye,
 repeatedly ripping out
 some ritual until it conformed
 to the strictest design.

Her lips unbidden
 muttered prayers
 on her way to market,
 as her needles flew,
 or watching from her doorway
 the women nursing babies,
 their easy laughter ringing
 as they gossiped in the courtyard.

She'd shrugged away
 the random claws of pain
 that clutched her
 midway through
 the dreaded month,
 but soon was prey
 to spasm after spasm,
 each barbed with its augury.

The doctor sent for now
 to treat her minor lacerations
 soon took his leave, yet lingered
 to study her guarded face—
 her eyes held by the farthest
 rose that climbed the wall ahead—
 then hastily set down his bag
 and asked to see the child.

His practiced eye
 surveyed that tiny form
 sucking wildly on its fist.

“Frau Eisler,” he said suddenly,
 “you must have been mistaken.

This cannot be an eighth-month baby—
 her finger nails have not yet grown.
 But have no fear, Frau Eisler.
 She is strong—and fortunately
 still is in the *seventh* month.”

His words reverberated
 through the quiet room,
 and when she felt the baby
 in her arms,
 echoed and reechoed
 like a sounding
 of the shofar
 among the hills.

She lived to know
 her children's children.

Her days ran out
 before my own began,
 leaving to the others
 the echo of her words,
 her syllables of song.

But from her portrait
 on my wall, her oval face,
 with high-piled hair
 spilling to one shoulder,
 gazes at me as I pass.

I look at that face and say,
 “Grandma.”





In the Labor Room

(Before Lamaze)



The pains were coming faster now,
turning my head from side to side
on the pillow. In second intervals,
I glimpsed my husband's pale face,
my mother's smile twisted
into a caricature of itself
at the foot of the bed.

In the next room, a woman
began to scream—a wild,
high-decibel, prolonged
scream—released unabashed
from deep within.

The sound held me enthralled,
drew me toward it and into it,
until I was inside it,
locked away from pain.

As it faded, I could feel its echo
in my throat, my voice returning
from some far-off place,
and as light mended
the fragmented faces before me,
a hand's gentle pressure on my own:
I was the woman who had screamed.

Then came the counterpoint—
the answering notes
of our baby's first cry.

