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A My Name Is Alice

Ellen Perry Berkeley

A my name is Alice
And my husband's name is Alan
We come from Alabama
And we raise ants.

We bounced a ball to this little sing-song when we were children—in the days when it went unquestioned that all little girls grew up to have husbands and went off to live in interesting places and do exciting work.

We went through the alphabet several times on a summer's afternoon, taxing our imaginations to find ever-more-congenial husbands, ever-more-exotic places, ever-more-obscure occupations.

And then we grew up. As women we live now in a variety of circumstances and in a variety of places, some very far from what we imagined as children. I have tried to sketch the outlines of a few of these places, not just as physical environments but as places in which the full range of material, social, and emotional effects comes together—either to free us, putting us in full control of our creative and connective vitality, or more likely to enslave us, making us hate ourselves and everyone around us. Our housing is not to be measured in square footage and “facilities,” or in details of brick and mortar, but in what it costs us to live there (which is not the same as the rent).

Here are some of us, and some of our places, and some of what it costs us. I have written only the letters A through G. You may want to continue the alphabet.

A my name is Angie, and we're new in Avalon Acres
And I wonder if everyone else knows everyone
and I'm the only lonely one around.
Want to hear something crazy?
Sometimes I hate this brand-new house,
and I hate the shiny kitchen floor,
and I hate the kids, especially the kids,
and I hate the people I see at the A & P
who nod and smile, and back away smiling.
Those are the times I'm glad Arnie travels so much
So he can't see how bitchy I really am.

B my name is Bonner
That's my last name, and that's what they call us here.
Old ladies without first names.

They keep feeding us, and washing us, and walking us,
and putting us into clean beds,
And the view is very pretty from the day room.
I don't like to be so much trouble
But I wish they wouldn't call me Bonner
I had a friend here once who knew my Christian name
Hers was Martha, I think
We liked to be with each other, you know
But when they caught us, she got moved
to a different wing.

C my name is Celia
We have a marvelous new condo on the lake
I'd have liked something smaller
But Carleton says it's a marvelous investment.
Carleton says I should consider it my place
Since I'll be there a lot when he has to stay in town.
He wants me to do the fixing-up myself
never mind the cost
It'll be a staggering job
but I'm working with a marvelous decorator.

D my name is Deena
I was raped in this building.
In the basement. Doing the laundry.
He must have come in through the service alley
And he must have gone out the same way.
Damn Super is too damn lazy
to keep the damn door locked.
I lay in the corner, shaking,
curled against the last washing machine
And then I got up
and took the elevator back to the 12th floor.
I didn't get my laundry until the next day.
I didn't call the police until I stopped shaking.

E my name is Emma
My grandma was Emma before me
I remember her sitting on this same porch
looking out over these same hills.
My own grandchildren hardly know the place
They're city folks now.
Me, I've never known city life
and I don't miss it
I've never had indoor plumbing, either,
and I don't miss it

H My Name is Henrietta

We always meant to add a real lavatory
but something always came up
And now I wouldn't add it just for me alone
Even if I had the money.

F my name is Francie and my husband's name is Fred
We bought a mobile home in Florida
when he retired.
There's always something to do,
and someone to do it with,
So I don't spend much time thinking
about what a hurricane
could do to these little tiny toy houses
When I do think about it, though, I hope we go together,
Fred and I.

G my name is Garnet
My mother named all us girls after precious stones.
I think of her sometimes, when I'm out in the fields
and I see an old woman
bending and stooping and picking
But I'm too busy myself,
bending and stooping and picking
to think much about her
And when I'm home I'm too tired to think
of anything at all.
Seems I've always got someone to be yelling at.
Too many of us in this leaky place.
At night the four oldest are in the next room
and the littlest one is in our room
That's the way I grew up, hearing things I shouldn't hear,
and wondering what my parents
were always fighting about.
I remember wanting it to be different for my children
but I'm almost too tired now to remember exactly
how.
I wonder if my mother ever got this tired.
I wonder if she ever kept pictures in her head
of the house she'd like to live in some day.

Editor's note:

Ellen Perry Berkeley's article includes an open invitation to others to complete the cycle, so we forwarded the article to three authors and seconded the invitation. Their letters follow.

Karen A. Franck

H My name is Henrietta
This here is my home,
This is where I live and where I dream.
Some people call it an SRO but I dunno
if they rightly should
Cause when they do, they try to put me down.
They dunno many of us is clean
And careful
And lives by all the rules
And don't bother no one
And don't be no druggies and no winos.
Where we gonna go
If they tears down this SRO?

I My name is Irene
I moved to Manhattan after I graduated
From Harvard Law School.
I'm now an associate in a Wall Street firm
You may have heard of
Or maybe not.
I live in a loft on Green Street,
In Soho, that is.
It was written up in the *New York Times*
Sunday Magazine a few weeks back
The loft, that is.
I live there with my husband.
He works on Wall Street, too.
When we bought the loft, there were mostly painters and
sculptors living there.
Now it's mostly lawyers and stockbrokers
And other professional people
Like us.
Sometimes I wonder where all the artists went.
When I have time, that is.

J My name is Jeanine
I'll just sit here a while
And get the feeling of being home.
I have to go back to the shelter and see my children
Before I go to work.
I got their assignments from the teacher
I don't want them to get behind.
At least I have a place to come to.
The lease is in my name
And I have a job to go to and people I can talk to.
The other women at the shelter don't have anything.