

READERS' GUIDE: *VANISHING*

About the Book

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies . . . Emily Dickinson*

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth. – Raymond Carver*

She'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her. – Raymond Carver

Raymond Carver and Emily Dickinson are two writers whose work and sensibilities are part of the air that Candida Lawrence breathes, mother's milk, even, with Dickinson. She is drawn to the minimalism of both, the directness of the one and the circuitry of the other, not to mention that Dickinson's writing is her biography, just as Lawrence sees her own. Lawrence also must be drawn to both writers' essential understanding of pain as central to the human condition, the underlying anger borne of that pain, and how they each write about it, however differently. These affinities can be helpful to keep in mind when reading ***Vanishing***, because Lawrence, a brilliant memoirist, is not overly concerned with genre purity in this book. She has larger fish to fry.

That being said, ***Vanishing*** is a collection of 17 pieces written over the past 65 years, arranged chronologically, reshaped and edited for inclusion in this collection. They start when Lawrence is a college girl in 1942 and come full circle with the death of her sister in 2007. Some, like the central and longest narrative, "We're All in This Together: A Memoir," are pure memoir. Others, although clearly autobiographical, are told "slant," with the feel more of fiction than of personal essay, or memoir -- one suspects because the material or its subtext were too painful to deal with straight on. The title of one of these, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" was originally subtitled "Or House of Lead," a direct reference to one of Dickinson's most famous lines about surviving pain – "This is the Hour of Lead." Several pieces told in other voices arguably relate however obliquely to the book's autobiographical arc. "My Past Tense," for instance, is a true story – a memoir -- told her by one of her nine years old Montessori students. This is surely one of the events she tries to tell her elderly parents to "catch them up on my life," in "We're All In This Together," stories that "splinter, pieces falling around me," in the face of her father's self-absorbed insistence that all stories be told as he would tell them, and her mother's deafness. This leaves her feeling "large and useless." Here she can finally tell that story, uninterrupted. And perhaps the three pieces that follow "Mom Wants to Write" are responses to her young friend Michael's criticism of her writing, early on: "It's not good enough. Elevate it! Tell the Danny thing in a poem and then make a song out of it and then put it back into words. All you're doing is diary, therapy. There's got to be more!"

The lynch-pin and tour-de-force of ***Vanishing*** is "What Raymond Carver and I Talk About . . ." As criticism, it would make a perfect tool for any instructor trying to teach his stories, and to get them right. But it also teaches us as much about Lawrence as it does about Carver. Informed by her perfect pitch familiarity with his work, it is inspired by the poems in Carver's last collection, ***A New Path to the Waterfall*** (1989), wherein Carver's lines engage in dialogue with work by other poets and writers. Accordingly, Lawrence "calls up" the five years dead Carver for a Halloween midnight conversation in the full moon, out in her driveway, a location deliciously familiar to any Carver fan. Also wicked clever is the mug of vodka water in her hand, which he, sober for the "grave years," the last ten of his life, tells her to pour "onto the asphalt," because "it's not good for you." It is Carver the Writer who appears, trapped in his famous back cover photo on ***Where I'm Calling From***, wearing his scarf, bomber jacket, and jeans. This matters because he is of course an extension of herself, in the sense that we are all the characters

in our dreams. Anyway, she's been bothering him with all her questions. He is here to listen to her story. He's not clear why she called him. So they talk. She "tattle tales" about the butchery committed by Robert Altman on nine of Carver's stories and their characters in his film, **Short Cuts**. In so doing, she tells us the things that are most important to her about Carver's work and, by extension, many of the things that matter most to her in her own writing, like voice, dialogue, its silences, things not said that say the most. Finally, she gets to what is really on her mind about **Short Cuts**. Of all the crimes against Carver's stories committed by Altman in this film, she is most indignant about how badly he treats the women, blaming them for the misdeeds of the men. She is absolutely right about this, and it is hard not to connect her outrage here to how she was treated in the custody trial that resulted in the loss of her children to her abusive husband, which she writes about in "Vanishing." Altman has done the same disservice to Carver's women that was done to her, and she is understandably furious about it. Carver for his part is dismayed by this news, and tells us half of what is at the heart of his work: "Fault? My characters are caught in their lives. They bump against each other and ricochet off and then back. They can't move very far from each other. Their feet are stuck in one of those humane glue traps for mice, and all they can do is wave their arms and squeak." The other half of the heart of his work is his attitude towards those characters. Before he leaves, Carver asks, "You said that I am beloved?" She replies, "You are beloved." Why? We hold him beloved for his compassion towards his characters in those stories and poems. When she asks him if she is misreading him on that one, he replies, "I hope not. I tried, but sometimes the characters themselves, their words and deeds, convicted them with scant mercy, and I had to move on." The same could be said about Lawrence's work, and she, too, a writer who insists that her writing is her biography, all there is, would surely wish to feel herself "beloved on this earth" for the same reasons.

Finally, we can borrow from Thoreau, as does Lawrence in an editorial statement she wrote for the website of *Memoir (and)*, and say that Lawrence tracks her life in this collection with a chain of observations from her personal history both as a writer and as a woman, some of them intensely, excruciatingly private. And she does it with relentless honesty and no apologies, whether they are told straight or slant. By the end of **Vanishing**, it is equally clear that Lawrence has arrived at a time in life when she feels that she has "been upon this earth too long," that her frame of reference for basic and crucial life matters – especially seminal relationships – is vanishing around her in the wake of cultural desensitization -- lap dancing (literally) and the ubiquitous swarm of technology, emailing and text messaging. With a touching lack of irony, Lawrence tells at the end of **Vanishing** of calling her beloved and recently dead sister's phone, just to hear her voice on the answering machine. **Vanishing** is Lawrence's message left on our answering machines, so to speak – her **Where I'm Calling From** – told to us in understated, non-judgmental prose, put on record before it and she vanishes from this earth.

About the Author

Candida Lawrence was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay area and went East to college. When asked for more detail about her personal history, she says that her writing is her biography, all there is. She lives in Mill Valley and San Francisco, California with her third dog, Milo, a rescue. **Vanishing** is her fourth book. The first three are memoirs: **Reeling and Writhing**, **Change of Circumstance**, and . . . **Fear Itself**. The first two tell of her creating new identities for herself and her two children and living underground with them for 20 years, after losing a bitter, transcontinental custody battle to an abusive husband. . . . **Fear Itself** is about dealing with the discovery that she had for years been exposed to low level radiation poisoning working in government labs, leading to several miscarriages and breast cancer. Her work has also appeared in *Missouri Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Ohio Journal*, *Sonora Review*, *Passages North*, *Soundings East*, and various anthologies. She is also founding editor of the distinguished journal, *Memoir (and)*.

Interview with the Author

Is it true that you own several manual typewriters for fear they are going to go out of existence, and that you still write on a manual typewriter?

I still write on a manual typewriter and I have five of them. They are all in perfect condition because there is a man in South San Francisco who has a little hole in the wall shop and repairs manual typewriters. They are all very old. One of them belonged to a woman who was related to Nathaniel Hawthorne and my other name is Hawthorne, so that's the best machine I have. It's very old. My favorite is the Underwood.

You say your other name is Hawthorne?

Yes, when I took the children and went underground, I had to take a new name. I chose the name Hawthorne because of *The Scarlet Letter*. And Candida to remind myself that I would never again speak candidly in a court of law. When I needed a writing name, I chose Lawrence, because D. H. Lawrence is a favorite of mine. Literary, literary, all the way! (laughs)

For readers who haven't read your other books, how did you get credentials together in your new name so that you could get a job and make a living?

By lying. (laughs) No, seriously, I already had a BA but I wanted to continue teaching, so I laboriously took adult education classes [in my new name] until I had enough credits to qualify. Actually, it was very perilous, because I was using a friend's transcript, and our ages didn't mesh, so I had to change that. The Department of State picked up on that and asked, "What are you trying to do?" and I said, "Oh I don't know." It was very hard, because I had never in my life lied before, except maybe accidentally, and I just had to learn how to lie.

In the title piece, "Vanishing," you talk about how you have to be very careful if you pick an accomplice when you go underground. What about "Jack," [she also refers to him as "John"] your partner of the past 40 or more years? Did you stay in touch with him and if so, how?

Oh yes. We had a PO [post office box] drop. We also had a friend of my sister's in the Bay Area, and I would write her and she would transfer the letter to him. But we couldn't talk on the phone at all, because the FBI was watching him. With my parents, there was a friend of theirs that I could write to, and they would take my letters to them. But I was very careful. My ex-husband died shortly after I published my first book, *Reeling and Writhing*, and it was only then that we [the children and I] thought we would be safe.

How about your father, who was a well-known newspaper columnist? Has anyone ever tracked you down from that connection?

Well, by the time I was published he was retired, and nobody knew my maiden name. But the FBI was still after me. They would show up at my parents' house and say "Well we want to ask you some questions," and my father would tell them "Get out. Get lost. I'm not answering any questions!"

Where were you living in the pieces from 1968 to 1984?

Santa Cruz, California. I lived there for 20 years, and I really miss it. There was a wonderful community of writers there, and I so miss them, although some of us are still in touch.

How long did it take you to write *Vanishing*?

I simply went through my files, and pulled things that I didn't think would give Fred [her editor] a heart attack (laughs), and little by little it took the shape it has now, which is a passing of the decades. I would take the pieces I had pulled, edit them, and if I continued to like them, I would include them.

The way the book is organized is very interesting. The pieces are arranged chronologically, but it reads as though the end is the beginning. In the last section of the book, "I'm in a state," you say that the state you are in is as an octopus, with its tentacles reaching out into the past, suggesting that the other sections of the book are some of those tentacles.

Well yes, you could say that. It's a little bit about teaching, a little bit about mothering, it's a little bit about sisterhood, writing, and so on.

And former lives! That's what you go into in that last section, "I'm in a state," and the other sections of the book also deal with incidents from your former lives. A very elegant structure, all told. In the next-to-last selection, ". . . Gone, All Gone," you say "Often lately I feel I've been on earth too long, far past understanding the adjustments, the new ways boys and girls, men and women, get to know each other. Blowing, undulating [refers to lap dancing]. E-mail. Chat rooms." That was written in 2006. Do you still feel that way?

Oh yes! Yes I do! I sit down to have dinner with my son and John [her partner], and they are immediately on little tiny machines, looking something up, checking what they remember, checking, checking, checking. And I might as well not be there. We never have a regular conversation anymore. One day my grandson was in one room and I was in another, and he kept trying to call me in to see what he was doing. When I told him once and for all that I couldn't, right then, he said if I didn't come he was going to throw me in the trash! I didn't know that on computers, there is something called the "trash bin!" I thought it was literal.

I understand that the selections in this collection are pieces that you have been working on over the years. And for me, this book has the feel almost as much of fiction as of memoir. How do you respond to that?

Oh my, what a question! Well there are a couple of pieces in there that are mostly fiction, such as "Based on Experience," which is however based on fact, because I have been in that house in Arizona many times, and traveled there as in the piece, but never under those circumstances. That was a dream. As is "Natural Attractant," but the image of the hummingbird caught in the "natural attractant" is real – that really happened. Now that we're talking about it, I guess that [in *Vanishing*] I mix fact and fiction, dreams and all kinds of things together. And mix it up and stir it up.

The reason I ask about that is because I wanted to know, especially because of all the hubbub over the past few years about memoirs that turned out not to be true, what the line is, for you, between memoir and fiction, or at least in the technique you have to bring to bear in writing a memoir, in order to organize material?

I read a lot of submissions to *Memoir (and)* [the journal she edits], and on some of them I write, "This reads like a short story. It does not read like a memoir." And that's because the structure is like a short story. It's too perfect. We want all of our memoirs to be factual and in the first person, if possible, although it's possible to disguise that part somewhat, and we are pretty steady on that. But those requirements don't apply to what I write in *Vanishing*. The three earlier memoirs, *Reeling and Writhing*, *Change of Circumstance*, and . . . *Fear Itself*, are extremely factual, however.

Another place I wanted to ask you about in this context is in "We're All in This Together." That narrative is obviously memoir, and yet you have these passages where your mother and father talk to themselves. Did you overhear them doing that, or are those passages projections on your part as to what they were thinking?

Those were mostly projections, although I did hear my father say things to other people about me, and I heard my mother complain about my father a lot, when he wasn't around. So I just imagined what they were thinking.

What about “My Past Tense”?

Yes, that really was a story told to me by one of my Montessori students. We used to take long walks on the beach, when he was seven, eight, and nine, and after he told me that story, I went home and wrote it down, because it was so vivid. People have tried to tell me that children that age don't talk like that, but Nicky did, and still does! He's in his 20's now. (laughs)

I wanted to ask you about your imagined visit with the late Ray Carver in “What Raymond Carver and I Talk About . . .” What is it that you like so much about his work?

I like the minimalism. I understand that he became “minimal” because of Gordon Lish's editing, which is a sad story, but I like his short work because he says just enough, and no more, and he doesn't emotionalize. It's very Hemingway-ish. He simply jumps in, starts out, and you're hooked. You want to know what happens to these people, and how they mess it up. And then he backs out, very gracefully.

What about Emily Dickinson? How does your apparent affinity with her work show up in your writing, if it does?

My mother started me on Emily Dickinson's poetry when I was just a little girl. I have a terrible memory for poetry usually, except for her. Her lines are so rhythmic. When I'd get my daughter together to go the beach, for instance, I'd say “I started Early -- Took my Dog . . .” [Poem 520] and I used to walk all over the UC [University of California – Berkeley] campus quoting her to myself. John and I every morning for years before breakfast would read from her poems to each other. But I don't know that her work shows up in mine at all. Someone else would have to tell me that. I certainly would never aim so high. And I have to say that there's a lot of Emily Dickinson that I don't understand. John and I would finish reading a poem and say, “What did *that* mean?” (laughs).

In “Mom Wants to Write,” you say “Mom does not enjoy writing.” (laughter) So my question is “Why do you write?”

(laughter) I can't help it! (more laughter). We're having a fire next door? Well of course I have to write it down. Of course I had been writing before, but when I was writing *Reeling and Writhing*, I was thinking, how could my children ever make sense of that marriage and that custody fight unless I wrote it down for them? So I did.

In that same piece you quote Theodore Sturgeon: “I write what I write to find a way home.” How do you interpret what he is saying there?

If I am floating around in daily occurrences, and meeting with people, and fighting with people and not seeing people, going to school and working and so forth, it's all a chaos. Unless I write it down. And that's like having a home to go to. To go back and make sense of my day. But keeping a journal has never been the answer for me. My journal writing is so whiny! (laughs)

I want to ask you about identity. In the title piece, “Vanishing,” you say that you “had to discover the power of fiction” in order to live in this new identity. Has it been, was it hard, to keep your sense of self, who you really are, all that time?

I wouldn't say it was hard. I would say it was exciting. I was just so sick of this woman who was fighting a transcontinental custody battle. It was exciting to be set free from that, and to have to think every moment of the day, “Now wait a minute. I'm Candida, not that person I was before, I have to remember it, to walk like her and think like her, and make her up as I go along.” And John [“Jack”] says, “You know, this was

your finest hour. To change kind of a silly, whiny Berkeley nut-case into someone who has some substance!"

Do you think that person did become your real self, that you reinvented yourself?

Oh yeah, sure. Sure. Yes, I reinvented myself.

So who are you now? (laughter)

Well, when people want to record me, I tell them, no, just read my writing. That's who I am. Although I'm a lot harder to get along with than I show in my writing. I'm irascible!

So there's a Candida Lawrence *persona* that you write from, and it's not the same person that you are in private?

No. I'm a lot looser and I make a lot more slip-ups and mistakes, and I get cranky and cross and rude. That sort of thing.

Well you're 86! You've got a right! (laughter)

Right! I have a right. And you know how elderly people are supposed to be gentle and kind, the sort of people who bake cookies and the like? I don't even cook! (laughs)

Dogs are a big part of your life, and a big part of your writing. How many dogs have you had?

Dogs I've loved very much. I had a dog named Liebe, a coyote shepherd cross, and she was a terror! She was so protective that no one dared come near her. And we brought Missy in because we thought she could cheer up Liebe, who was getting so old, and she did! Got Liebe up on her feet and walking again. Missy also lived for a very long time, and was so sweet and gentle. And now I have Milo, a rescue dog, named for the shelter where we got her. She's not Cinder, the dog in ". . . Gone, All Gone." She didn't work out, and we had to take her back.

There are two very sweet homages in this volume that bring a number of elements together. One is in the Raymond Carver piece, when he asks you why you had called him, suggesting his own title, "Where I'm Calling From," and then that is echoed at the very end, when you write about missing your sister, and calling her answering machine, just to hear her voice.

Yes, I do miss her a lot. We didn't get along at all as teenagers, but after we got out of the house, and both went off to college, and the war intervened, we had to write to each other. And after the children were born she would make the long trip to Connecticut or wherever we were at the time to visit. She was never able to have children herself, so that became another bond between us. And we both knew our parents very well, and didn't approve, so there was a lot of shared experience there, and we didn't even realize we were sharing it. We didn't talk about it till much later, after they had died. But we became very close over the years. Through letters, mainly.

If there is any one thing that you would like the reader to take away from this book, what would that be?

Probably it would not be anything about life and how to live it, but it would be a message to writers, to loosen up and write what you see going on around you. And try to make it interesting, and just keep on writing.

Do you have an ideal reader that you write for?

The ideal reader is the person who wants to read your writing! (laughs) I do have a dear writer friend, the one in "Pacific Heights," who reads everything I write, and I read everything she writes. She is a

wonderful reader, because she comments and critiques in detail, so she's very valuable to me. Every writer needs someone who reads intelligently.

Questions for Discussion

What was your immediate response to this book? Were there subjects or issues in it that you could particularly and/or personally identify with, such as taking care of aging parents?

How would you describe the tone and style of this book?

How would you describe the structure of this book?

What theme or themes do you find that run throughout the individual pieces in this collection? Do you find any one theme that you think unifies the entire volume?

Discuss some of the imagery in this book, and what it might tell you about the author's sensibility, or the theme(s) of the book. For instance, one image that the author has said is very important to her is of the hummingbird that loses its feet in the "natural attractant," in the piece of the same name. A similar image shows up again as Raymond Carver describes his characters in "What Raymond Carver and I Talk About . . ." How do you interpret those images in the context of this volume?

The author remarks that "Based on Experience" and "Natural Attractant" are dreams. What clues do you find in them to back up the author's claim? What do you think these two pieces might really be "about"? Or, if they are dreams, how would you interpret them, based upon the rest of the autobiographical material in this collection.

The author says that she writes out of a persona that is different in some ways from her private self. What do you think she means by that, and how would you describe the Candida Lawrence of this book? Is it consistent from piece to piece? Does it change over time? Do you feel that the persona of "I'm in a state" is the same as that of "Everything She Does, and Says, and Is," for instance?

Why do you think the title of the volume is *Vanishing*? How or why is it appropriate as the title for the volume as a whole?

How would you describe the portrayal of marriage and family, of relationships, as depicted in this book? How would you compare and contrast the author's attitude(s) towards men and towards women in this book?

Would you recommend this book to a friend, to read? Why, or why not?

Recommended Reading

"Memoir – What is it?" by Candida Lawrence – An editorial statement from the website of *Memoir (and)*.

Reeling and Writhing, by Candida Lawrence

Change of Circumstance, by Candida Lawrence

. . . *Fear Itself*, by Candida Lawrence

Pentimento, by Lillian Hellman

The Year of Magical Thinking, by Joan Didion

Sins of the Innocent, by Mireille Marokvia

The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Little Brown) -- Poems 258 ("There's a certain Slant of light . . ."), 341 ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes . . ."), 441 ("This is my letter to the World . . ."), 465 ("I heard a Fly buzz – when I died . . ."), 520 ("I started Early, Took my Dog . . ."), 986 ("A narrow Fellow in the Grass . . ."), and 1129 (Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --).

Where I'm Calling From, by Raymond Carver – 37 collected and new stories, published in 1988, the year of his death.

A New Path to the Waterfall, by Raymond Carver -- poems, published in 1989, the year after his death.

Short Cuts, a film by Robert Altman