MY SECRET GARDEN
WOMEN'S SEXUAL FANTASIES

“You’ll blush, your pulse will race.”
—The New York Times

NANCY FRIDAY

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS
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Now, here at the beginning, let me set the record straight. I don’t want this to get lost halfway through these introductory pages: Sexual freedom was never a part of modern feminism, never celebrated as such at Feminist Headquarters.

Because so many of us marched in both the Women’s Movement and the Sexual Revolution, and because they happened simultaneously, those events remain in memory as one glorious upheaval. Wouldn’t it seem irrational to exclude sexual freedom from all the other rights—political, social, economic—for which we fought? Why separate sex and state?

I automatically assumed that those of us who marched and wrote in the late 1960s and early 1970s knew there would be no joy in the workplace without sexual freedom, by which I don’t mean fucking in the Ladies’ (Oops!, Women’s) Room. Simply put, I knew that we would never be equals staying in the traditional sexual straitjacket. Sex is energy and although it was a fundamental tenet of patriarchy that men held the key to eros, some of us knew in our bones that women, not men, were
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and remain the permission givers when it comes to sex. It is through other women's voices that we hear our own. Without fear of their disapproval, all our sexual fuel can run into every facet of our lives—political, personal, and economic.

Our mistake, however, was believing that everyone on the march had the same agenda. When I sat down to write this book, I thought the feminists would embrace it. I didn't realize that it was unwelcome at Feminist Headquarters until a former friend turned editor at Ms. magazine, gave me a rap on the knuckles, proclaiming that “Ms. will decide what women's fantasies are.” Soon after, a review in that magazine followed with the opening line “... this woman is not a feminist.”

I was shocked, couldn't believe that I had been called a bad girl for writing about something as joyful as women's sexual liberation. I didn't realize then, as I do now, that the Matriarchal Feminists were consciously determined to leave sex off the agenda. Not that they discussed it. But they knew they couldn't control an army of women pursuing sex with men. Sex between women? That was safe, and still is.

They knew intuitively that other women's voices enable us to hear our own and that keeping men the enemy, up to, and especially, today, allows for a fertile dumping ground for everything that is wrong in women's world.

My initial reaction to the nasty review in Ms. was to forget it. The millions of women who bought My Secret Garden reaffirmed my belief in the importance of understanding sex. Besides, upon completing this book, I had too many questions of my own to pursue.
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Why, for example, did women, as many do today, feel so guilty about sexual fantasies? We were just thinking, after all, not acting on our thoughts. The answer hit me the day I put down the manuscript for this book: Mother. So I sat down to write an outline, then entitled "The First Lie." It subsequently became *My Mother/My Self*, my study of mothers and daughters. I went on to write five more books, two about women's sexual fantasies, *Forbidden Flowers* and *Women on Top*; one on men's sexual fantasies, *Men in Love*; and *Jealousy* and *The Power of Beauty*.

But the Ms. review and all that it implied never went away, and writing my most recent book, on how our looks influence our lives, it returned with full force, an horrific belch from the unconscious. I had come to understand that competition among women was the last taboo, something the Matriarchal Feminists were unwilling to acknowledge or discuss. Better to opt for noncompetitive quilting, as Gloria Steinem proposed in her last book, than accept the reality of competition, for looks, in the workplace and, certainly, for men. No wonder these feminists were and remain so rigid about sex. It wasn't just that they wanted to be taken seriously, as I do, and not as sex objects. It was just as important that they outlaw competition over sex and beauty among women.

That continuing need helps explain its opposite, the enduring popularity of this book's erotic themes. These fantasies are perennials that speak to women today as they did twenty-five years ago. A woman masturbated wants to reach orgasm. To do so, she has to win the competition against those who would
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deprive her of owning her own sex. Who are her competitors? Well, as I learned writing *My Mother/My Self*, it begins with the Giantess of the Nursery, a loving Giantess as often as not, but one who would not tolerate sexual independence.

No man can cut me as another woman can. Feminism's refusal to address issues of competition leaves us eternally vulnerable to the dangerous power that women hold over one another. All this comes to mind when I think about today's Lesbian Chic, which is in part a celebration of the easy access women have always had to one another's bodies and in part a "natural" solution for women conditioned by the Matriarchal Feminists' anti-male agenda. A woman lies down with another woman and the world shrugs.

Few women care to live with exclusion from women's world. And so the garden of sexual desire and fulfillment becomes the "secret" garden, and the sentence I first heard from women twenty-five years ago continues today: "Thank God you wrote that book. I thought I was the only one."

How could it be, you might ask, that women today, at the turn of the century, would still think they were the only Bad Girls with erotic thoughts? What kind of prison is this that women impose on themselves? It is, of course, an unconscious pressure, where we seemingly do things against our will. Some part of us chooses the pressure that perfectly fits our need to be taken, to be bad—yes, ultimately, to reach orgasm.

Need I add that we win in all of our fantasies? Yes, even those involving the so-called rapist, that *deus ex machina* we roll in to catapult us past a lifetime of
women's rules against sex. That fantasy is as popular today as ever. The women whom I have interviewed don't really want to be hurt or humiliated. His male presence, that effective battering ram, neatly "makes" her relax sufficiently to enjoy orgasm and then allows her to return to earth, her Nice Girl, Good Daughter self intact. The rape fantasy fools them into thinking the loss of control isn't their fault.

What tribute to the power of the unconscious that in the day of the internet, of pornographic videos, not to mention of the erotic assaults on television, that with all this seeming permission, there is still a nay-saying voice that requires answering before we can reach orgasm.

As I have said, Mother isn't an ogress. She is merely human. Love isn't without ambivalence. What we do when we lie down for sex is to reconcile the power of that most important person in our early lives with the power of our own sexual appetites.

Women's lust has always been feared as that extraordinary force that, left unbridled, could bring down not only individuals but also society itself. The bridling comes so early, in mother's milk—and, oh, my dears, how fixated the infant remains as she grows to girlhood, watching her, that source of love, warmth, food, life. We never take our eyes off her, and in these earliest preverbal lessons, we learn those lifelong feelings about our bodies.

Nothing plants the seeds of our private sexual guilt more deeply than her admonitions, threatening loss of love should we ever love our own body. Nothing need be said. Little eyes learn life's lessons most efficiently when we are most dependent. Little girls
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copy her hatred of her own flesh, assuming it unconsciously though we may later deny that we are in any way like her. We may disobey her anti-sex rules in adolescence when our erotic muscle so demands, but it is temporary, this war with her. Eventually, most women cave in to one or another's anti-sex rules which demand that no woman get more sex or be more sexual than any other.

That is what the Matriarchal Feminists understand and why they have eliminated sexual fulfillment from their agenda. The Matriarchals would keep us all the same. You rarely hear them talk about birth control and the ravages of unwanted pregnancy. Few of them came to the defense of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders when she dared suggest that our schools teach the role and importance of masturbation.

My fury is only tempered by people like you, who share my interest in true feminism, striving for equality in matters sexual as well as everywhere else. When I first started this journey twenty-five years ago, it was so hard to find women who would even admit to having such sexual reveries. It took me years to find women in numbers who knew what I was talking about when I would ask if they had sexual fantasies. But as the years have passed, more and more women have been willing to talk about enjoyment of our sexual selves and to acknowledge its inextricable link to true liberation of women.

Nancy Friday
Key West, Florida
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1.

"**TELL ME WHAT YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT,**" HE SAID.

In my mind, as in our fucking, I am at the crucial point: . . . We are at this Baltimore Colt-Minnesota Viking football game, and it is very cold. Four or five of us are huddled under a big glen plaid blanket. Suddenly we jump up to watch Johnny Unitas running toward the goal. As he races down the field, we all turn as a body, wrapped in our blanket, screaming with excitement. Somehow, one of the men—I don't know who, and in my excitement I can't look—has gotten himself more closely behind me. I keep cheering, my voice an echo of his, hot on my neck. I can feel his erection through his pants as he signals me with a touch to turn my hips more directly toward him. Unitas is blocked, but all the action, thank God, is still going toward that goal and all of us keep turned to watch. Everyone is going mad. He's got his cock out now and somehow it's between my legs; he's torn a hole in my tights under my short skirt and I yell louder as the touchdown gets nearer now. We are all jumping up and down and I have to lift my leg higher, to the next step on the bleachers, to steady myself; now the man behind me can slip it in more easily. We are all leaping about, thumping one
another on the back, and he puts his arm around my shoulders to keep us in rhythm. He's inside me now, shot straight up through me like a ramrod; my God, it's like he's in my throat! "All the way, Johnny! Go, go, run, run!" we scream together, louder than anyone, making them all cheer louder, the two of us leading the excitement like cheerleaders, while inside me I can feel whoever he is growing harder and harder, pushing deeper and higher into me with each jump until the cheering for Unitas becomes the rhythm of our fucking and all around us everyone is on our side, cheering us and the touchdown . . . it's hard to separate the two now. It's Unitas' last down, everything depends on him; we're racing madly, almost at our own touchdown. My excitement gets wilder, almost out of control as I scream for Unitas to make it as we do, so that we all go over the line together. And as the man behind me roars, clutching me in a spasm of pleasure, Unitas goes over and I . . .

"Tell me what you are thinking about," the man I was actually fucking said, his words as charged as the action in my mind. As I'd never stopped to think before doing anything to him in bed (we were that sure of our spontaneity and response), I didn't stop to edit my thoughts. I told him what I'd been thinking.

He got out of bed, put on his pants and went home.

Lying there among the crumpled sheets, so abruptly rejected and confused as to just why, I watched him dress. It was only imaginary, I had tried to explain; I didn't really want that other man at the
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football game. He was faceless! A nobody! I'd never even have had those thoughts, much less spoken them out loud, if I hadn't been so excited, if he, my real lover, hadn't aroused me to the point where I'd abandoned my whole body, all of me; even my mind. Didn't he see? He and his wonderful, passionate fucking had brought on these things and they, in turn, were making me more passionate. Why, I tried to smile, he should be proud, happy for both of us. . . .

One of the things I had always admired in my lover was the fact that he was one of the few men who understood that there could be humor and playfulness in bed. But he did not think my football fantasy was either humorous or playful. As I said, he just left.

His anger and the shame he made me feel (which writing this book has helped me to realize I still resent) was the beginning of the end for us. Until that moment his cry had always been "More!" He had convinced me that there was no sexual limit to which I could go that wouldn't excite him more; his encouragement was like the occasional flick a child gives a spinning top, making it run faster and faster, speeding me ever forward toward things I had always wanted to do, but had been too shy even to think about with anyone else. Shyness was not my style, but sexually I was still my mother's daughter. He had freed me, I felt, from this inappropriate maidenly constraint with which I could not intellectually identify, but from which I could not bodily escape. Proud of me for my efforts, he made me proud of myself, too. I loved us both.

Looking back over my shoulder now at my
anything-goes lover, I can see that I was only too happily enacting his indirectly stated Pygmalion—D. H. Lawrence fantasies. But mine? He didn’t want to hear about them. I was not to coauthor this fascinating script on How To Be Nancy, even if it was my life. I was not to act, but to be acted upon.

Where are you now, old lover of mine? If you were put off by my fantasy of “the other man,” what would you have thought of the one about my Great Uncle Henry’s Dalmatian dog? Or the one member of my family that you liked, Great Uncle Henry himself, as he looked in the portrait over my mother’s piano, back when men wore moustaches that tickled, and women long skirts. Could you see what Great Uncle Henry was doing to me under the table? Only it wasn’t me; I was disguised as a boy.

Or was I? It didn’t matter. It doesn’t, with fantasies. They exist only for their elasticity, their ability to instantly incorporate any new character, image or idea—or, as in dreams, to which they bear so close a relationship—to contain conflicting ideas simultaneously. They expand, heighten, distort or exaggerate reality, taking one further, faster in the direction in which the unashamed unconscious already knows it wants to go. They present the astonished self with the incredible, the opportunity to entertain the impossible.

There were other lovers, and other fantasies. But I never introduced the two again. Until I met my husband. The thing about a good man is that he brings out the best in you, desires all of you, and in seeking out your essence, not only accepts all he finds, but settles for nothing less. He brought my fantasies
back into the open again from those depths where I had prudently decided they must live—vigorous and vivid as ever, yes, but never to be spoken aloud again. I'll never forget his reaction when timidly, vulnerable, and partially ashamed, I decided to risk telling him what I had been thinking.

"What an imagination!" he said. "I could never have dreamed that up. Were you really thinking that?"

His look of amused admiration came as a reprieve; I realized how much he loved me, and in loving me, loved anything that gave me more abundant life. My fantasies to him were a sudden unveiling of a new garden of pleasure, as yet unknown to him, into which I would invite him.

Marriage released me from many things, and led me into others. If my fantasies seemed so revealing and imaginative to my husband, why not include them in the novel I was writing? It was about a woman, of course, and there must be other readers besides my husband, men and other women too, who would be intrigued by a new approach to what goes on in a woman's mind. I did indeed devote one entire chapter in the book to a long idyllic reverie of the heroine's sexual fantasies. I thought it was the best thing in the book, the stuff of which the novels I had most admired were made. But my editor, a man, was put off. He had never read anything like it, he said (the very point of writing a novel, I thought). Her fantasies made the heroine sound like some kind of sexual freak, he said. "If she's so crazy about this guy she's with," he said, "if he's such a great fuck, then why's she thinking about all these other crazy things . . . why isn't she thinking about him?"
I could have asked him a question of my own: Why do men have sexual fantasies, too? Why do men seek prostitutes to perform certain acts when they have perfectly layable ladies at home? Why do husbands buy their wives black lace G-strings and nipple-exposing bras, except in pursuit of fantasies of their own? In Italy, men scream "Madonna mia" when they come, and it is not uncommon, we learn in *Eros Denied*, for an imaginative Englishman to pay a lady for the privilege of eating the strawberry cream puff (like Nanny used to make) she has kindly stuffed up her cunt. Why is it perfectly respectable (and continually commercial) for cartoons to dwell on the sidewalk figure of Joe Average eyeing the passing luscious blonde, while in the balloon drawn over his head he puts her through the most exotic paces? My God! Far from being thought reprehensible, this last male fantasy is thought amusing, family fun, something a father can share with his son.

Men exchange sexual fantasies in the barroom, where they are called dirty jokes; the occasional man who doesn’t find them amusing is thought to be odd man out. Blue movies convulse bachelor dinners and salesmen’s conventions. And when Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer—to say nothing of Genet—put their fantasies on paper, they are recognized for what they can be: art. The sexual fantasies of men like these are called novels. Why then, I could have asked my editor, can’t the sexual fantasies of women be called the same?

But I said nothing. My editor’s insinuation, like my former lover’s rejection, hit me where I was most sensitive: in that area where women, knowing
least about each other's true sexual selves, are most vulnerable. What is it to be a woman? Was I being unfeminine? It is one thing not to have doubted the answer sufficiently to ever have asked the question of yourself at all. But it is another to know that question has suddenly been placed in someone else's mind, to be judged there in some indefinable, unknown, unimaginable competition or comparison. What indeed was it to be a woman? Unwilling to argue about it with this man's-man editor, who supposedly had his finger on the sexual pulse of the world (hadn't he, for instance, published James Jones and Mailer, and probably shared with them unpublishable sexual insights), I picked up myself, my novel, and my fantasies and went home where we were appreciated. But I shelved the book. The world wasn't ready yet for female sexual fantasy.

I was right. It wasn't a commercial idea then, even though I'm talking about four years ago and not four hundred. People said they wanted to hear from women. What were they thinking? But men didn't really want to know about some new, possibly threatening, potential in women. It would immediately pose a sexual realignment, some rethinking of the male (superior) position. And we women weren't yet ready either to share this potential, our common but unspoken knowledge, with one another.

What women needed and were waiting for was some kind of yardstick against which to measure ourselves, a sexual rule of thumb equivalent to that with which men have always provided one another. But women were the silent sex. In our desire to please our men, we had placed the sexual constraints and secrecy
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upon one another which men had thought necessary for their own happiness and freedom. We had imprisoned each other, betrayed our own sex and ourselves. Men had always banded together to give each other fraternal support and encouragement, opening up for themselves the greatest possible avenues for sexual adventure, variety and possibility. Not women.

For men, talking about sex, writing and speculating about it, exchanging confidences and asking each other for advice and encouragement about it, had always been socially accepted, and, in fact, a certain amount of boasting about it in the locker room is usually thought to be very much the mark of a man's man, a fine devil of a fellow. But the same culture that gave men this freedom sternly barred it to women, leaving us sexually mistrustful of each other, forcing us into patterns of deception, shame, and above all, silence.

I, myself, would probably never have decided to write this book on women's erotic fantasies if other women's voices hadn't broken that silence, giving me not just that sexual yardstick I was talking about, but also the knowledge that other women might want to hear my ideas as eagerly as I wanted to hear theirs. Suddenly, people were no longer simply saying they wanted to hear from women, now women were actually talking, not waiting to be asked, but sharing their experiences, their desires, thousands of women supporting each other by adding their voices, their names, their presence to the liberating forces that promised women a new shake, something "more."

Oddly enough, I think the naked power cry of Women's Lib itself was not helpful to a lot of
women, certainly not to me in the work that became this book. It put too many women off. The sheer stridency of it, instead of drawing us closer together, drove us into opposing camps; those who were defying men, denying them, drew themselves up in militant ranks against those who were suddenly more afraid than ever that in sounding aggressive they would be risking rejection by their men. If sex is reduced to a test of power, what woman wants to be left all alone, all powerful, playing with herself?

But if not Women's Lib, then liberation itself was in the air. With the increasing liberation of women's bodies, our minds were being set free, too. The idea that women had sexual fantasies, the enigma of just what they might be, the prospect that the age-old question of men to women, "What are you thinking about?" might at last be answered, now suddenly fascinated editors. No longer was it a matter of the sales-minded editor deciding what a commercial gimmick it would be to publish a series of sexy novels by sexy ladies, novels that would give an odd new sales tickle to the age-old fucking scenes that had always been written by men. Now it was suddenly out of the editors' hands: Women were writing about sex, but it was from their point of view (women seen only as male sex fantasies no more), and it was a whole new bedroom. The realization was suddenly obvious, that with the liberation of women, men would be liberated too from all the stereotypes that made them think of women as burdens, prudes, and necessary evils, even at best something less than a man. Imagine! Talking to a woman might be more fun than a night out with the boys!
With all this in the air, it's no surprise that at first my idea fascinated everyone. "I'm thinking of doing a book about female sexual fantasies," I'd say for openers to a group of highly intelligent and articulate friends. That's all it took. All conversation would stop. Men and women both would turn to me with half-smiles of excitement. They were willing to countenance the thought, but only in generalities, I discovered.

"Oh, you mean the old rape dream?"
"You don't mean something like King Kong, do you?"

But when I would speak about fantasies with the kind of detail which in any narrative carries the feel of life and makes the verbal experience emotionally real, the ease around the restaurant table would abruptly stop. Men would become truculent and nervous (ah! my old lover—how universal you are) and their women, far from contributing fantasies of their own—an idea that might have intrigued them in the beginning—would close up like clams. If anyone spoke, it was the men:

"Why don't you collect men's fantasies?"
"Women don't need fantasies, they have us."
"Women don't have sexual fantasies."

"I can understand some old, dried-up prune that no man would want having fantasies. Some frustrated neurotic. But the ordinary, sexually satisfied woman doesn't need them."

"Who needs fantasies? What's the matter with good old-fashioned sex?"

Nothing's the matter with good old-fashioned sex. Nothing's the matter with asparagus, either.
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But why not have the hollandaise, too? I used to try to explain that it wasn't a question of need, that a woman is no less a woman if she doesn't fantasize. (Or that if she does, it is not necessarily a question of something lacking in the man.) But if a woman does fantasize, or wants to, then she should accept it without shame or thinking herself freaky—and so should the man. Fantasy should be thought of as an extension of one's sexuality. I think it was this idea, the notion of some unknown sexual potential in their women, the threat of the unseen, all-powerful rival, that bothered men most.

"Fantasies during sex? My wife? Why, Harriet doesn't fantasize..." And then he would turn to Harriet with a mixture of threat and dawning doubt, "Do you, Harriet?" Again and again I was surprised to find so many intelligent and otherwise open-minded men put off by the idea of their women having sexual thoughts, no matter how fleeting, that weren't about them.

And of course their anxiety communicated itself to their Harriets. I soon learned not to research these ideas in mixed company. Naively at first, I had believed that the presence of a husband or an accustomed lover would be reassuring and comforting. Looking back now, I can see that it had been especially naive of me to think he might be interested, too, in perhaps finding out something new in his partner's sexual life, and that if she were attacked by shyness or diffidence, he would encourage her to go on. Of course, that is not how it works.

But even talking to women alone, away from the visible anxiety the subject aroused in their men,
it was difficult getting through to them, getting through the fear, not of admitting their fantasies to me, but of admitting them to themselves. It is this not-so-conscious fear of rejection that leads women to strive to change the essence of their minds by driving their fantasies down deep into their forgotten layers of mind.

I wasn't attempting to play doctor in the house to my women contributors; analyzing their fantasies was never my intention. I simply wanted to substantiate my feeling that women do fantasize and should be accepted as having the same unrealized desires and needs as men, many of which can only find release in fantasy. My belief was, and is, that given a sufficient body of such information, the woman who fantasizes will have a background against which to place herself. She will no longer have that vertiginous fright that she alone has these random, often unbidden thoughts and ideas.

Eventually, then, I developed a technique to enable all but the shyest women to verbalize their fantasies. For instance, if, as in many cases, the first reaction was, "Who, me? Never!" I'd show them one or two fantasies I'd already collected from more candid women. This would allay anxiety: "I thought my ideas were wild, but I'm not half as far out as that girl." Or it would arouse a spirit of competition which is never entirely dormant among our sex: "If she thinks that fantasy she gave me to read is so sexy, wait till she reads mine."

In this way, without really working at it too hard, I had put together quite a sizeable, though amateur, collection. After all, everything to date was from
women I knew, or from friends of friends who would sometimes phone or write to say they had heard of what I was doing and would like to help by being interviewed themselves. Somewhere along the way, though, I realized that if my collection of fantasies was going to be more than just a cross section of my own narrow circle of friends, I would have to reach out further. And so I placed an ad in newspapers and magazines which reached several varied audiences. The ad merely said:

**FEMALE SEXUAL FANTASIES**

*wanted by serious female researcher. Anonymity guaranteed. Box XYZ.*

As much as I'd been encouraged by my husband and also by the spirit of the times in which we live, I think it was the letters that came that marked the turning point in my own attitude toward this work. I am no marcher, nor Red-Crosser, but some of the cries for help and sighs of relief in those letters moved me. Again and again they would start, “Thank God, I can tell these thoughts to someone; up till now I've never confided mine to a living soul. I have always been ashamed of them, feeling that other people would think them unnatural and consider me a nymphomaniac or a pervert.”

I think it fair to say that I began this book out of curiosity—about myself and the odd explosive excitement/anxiety syndrome the subject set up in others; the male smugness of my rejecting lover and that know-it-all editor kept me going; but it became a serious and meaningful effort when I realized what
it could mean, not only to all the sometimes lonely, sometimes joyful, usually anonymous women who were writing to me, but to the thousands and thousands who, though they were too embarrassed, isolated, or ashamed to write, might perhaps have the solitary courage to read.

Today we have a flowering of women who write explicitly and honestly about sex and about what goes on in a woman's mind and body during the act. Marvelous writers like Edna O'Brien and Doris Lessing. But even with women as outspoken as these, they feel the need for a last seventh veil to hide acknowledgment of their sexuality; what they write calls itself fiction. It is a veil I feel it would be interesting and even useful to remove as a step in the liberation of us all, women and men alike. For no man can be really free in bed with a woman who is not.

Putting this book together has been an education. Learning what other women are like, both in their fantasies and in their lives—it is sometimes difficult to separate the two—has made me gasp in disbelief; laugh out loud occasionally; blush; sigh a lot; feel a sense of outrage, envy, and a great deal of sympathy. I find my own fantasies are funner than some, less poetic than others, more startling than a good number—but they are my own. Naturally, my best fantasies, my favorites of the moment—numbers 1, 2, and 3 on my private hit parade—are not included here. One thing I've learned about fantasies: they're fun to share, but once shared, half their magic, their ineluctable power, is gone. They are sea pebbles upon which the waters have dried. Is that a mystery? So are we all.