In an impressive body of work that crosses fiction and nonfiction, Kim Chernin excavates memory and metaphor from beneath repression and denial, beneath even the cunning power of forgetting. Such liminal spaces are the places from which the narratives of *Reinventing Eve, A Different Kind of Listening*, and *Crossing the Border* unfold, uncovering what Annis Pratt describes as archetypes that are “often encoded, frequently hieroglyphic, but nevertheless present as possibilities to be assimilated and emulated.” Entering into and revising the ancient, mythic journeys of Western literature, Chernin searches for “some kind of forgotten code or buried script underlying the normative plots which women authors in a patriarchal culture internalize.”

Like numerous feminist writers in the latter half of the twentieth century, Chernin suggests that while women’s modern and postmodern literary sensibilities may share with men a sense of hollowness, such hollowness is differentiated from men’s in that it does not derive from either the “anxiety of influence” expressed by male modernists, nor from the futility of self-representation to which postmodernists tend to fall prey. Ultimately, the hollowness to which Chernin is referring is “a selflessness that derives from her rejection of the discursive plots of contemporary Western culture. Fracturing the “I” as are assuring rhetorical device, Chernin likens memory to “a liar, a cheat, a thief, a pirate.” Such an approach not only acknowledges the fractured nature of memory, but the active role its unreliability plays in self-representation.

In her mythic novel, *The Flame Bearers*, Chernin’s protagonist, Rae Shadmi, speaks of *Kovahl*, the Jewish tradition of repeating while revising the old stories. “It is the story we write, each woman for herself,” she proclaims, “from the story that is already written.” “But what happens if a woman tries to write the story another way? And what happens if a woman runs from the story already written?” Chernin’s significant body of work, which crosses genres of fiction and nonfiction to include novels, biography, autobiography and memoir,

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responds to both questions, while providing reflexive insight into the process she undergoes when writing.

In Reinventing Eve, a nonfictional narrative subtitled “modern woman in search of herself,” Chernin draws on images of a garden “gone wild” to describe a self who wants to break out of its allotted cultural and literary plot but fears the consequences.

I began to admit that I had been drawn out of my house by a wish to disinvent myself as patriarchal female, to give myself back to the nature that was in me, grow profusely, overstep my bounds, step out of the confined plot to which I had been assigned, and finally admit, in the most radical possible way, that I as a woman did not exist.²

Although disinvention of the culturally constructed woman is her desire, Chernin’s narrator fears that such a deconstruction will leave her “[s]elfless in the most severe sense of the word. A woman with no self, facing the female void.”³ If she follows desire and leaves the domesticated garden, if she “step(s) out of the confined plot to which [she] has been assigned,” she may cease to exist.

In acknowledging the various plots by which she has been cultivated—the cultural plot creating specific gender roles, the literary plot setting forth a tradition in which she does not fit, the Judeo-Christian plot subordinating woman to man—Chernin comes to terms with her dismay that she has been constructed in an image that does not represent her deepest sense of self. Chernin faces a frightening conundrum: dissolution of her sense of selfhood. Having come to a personal crisis and feeling confined by cultural definitions of her identity, Chernin chooses to break out anyway.

Setting her narrative in relation to and yet outside of the modernist literary canon and its assumed representativeness, Chernin wonders who she would be if she negated cultural assumptions about “the nature of [herself] as a woman”⁴ Comparing her situation as a woman with T. S. Eliot’s claim that he and his fellow poets are “the hollow men … headpiece filled with straw,” she argues that for women the situation is even worse, because:

[t]his straw with which we had been stuffed wasn’t even our straw. Woman, keeping to her place in patriarchal culture, was nothing more than an accumulated terror, a blind fear of what we might become if we dared, just once, create ourselves.⁵

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³ Chernin, Reinventing Eve, 15.
⁴ In their introduction to De/Colonizing the Subject, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that women who position themselves as autobiographical subjects find themselves in the position of facing previously constructed paradigms of theme and structure within which they do not “fit.”
⁵ Chernin, Reinventing Eve, 15–16.