

menopause

GRAPHIC MEDICINE

Susan Merrill Squier and Ian Williams, General Editors

EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

MK Czerwiec (GraphicMedicine.org)

Michael J. Green (Penn State College of Medicine)

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Scott T. Smith (Penn State University)

Books in the Graphic Medicine series are inspired by a growing awareness of the value of comics as an important resource for communicating about a range of issues broadly termed “medical.” For healthcare practitioners, patients, families, and caregivers dealing with illness and disability, graphic narrative enlightens complicated or difficult experience. For scholars in literary, cultural, and comics studies, the genre articulates a complex and powerful analysis of illness, medicine, and disability and a rethinking of the boundaries of “health.” The series includes original comics from artists and non-artists alike, such as self-reflective “graphic pathographies” or comics used in medical training and education, as well as monographic studies and edited collections from scholars, practitioners, and medical educators.

Other titles in the series:

MK Czerwiec, Ian Williams, Susan Merrill Squier, Michael J. Green, Kimberly R. Myers, and Scott T. Smith, *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*

Ian Williams, *The Bad Doctor: The Troubled Life and Times of Dr. Iwan James*

Peter Dunlap-Shohl, *My Degeneration: A Journey Through Parkinson's*

Aneurin Wright, *Things to Do in a Retirement Home Trailer Park: . . . When You're 29 and Unemployed*

Dana Walrath, *Aliceheimers: Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass*

Lorenzo Servitje and Sherryl Vint, eds., *The Walking Med: Zombies and the Medical Image*

Henny Beaumont, *Hole in the Heart: Bringing Up Beth*

MK Czerwiec, *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371*

Paula Knight, *The Facts of Life*

Gareth Brookes, *A Thousand Coloured Castles*

Jenell Johnson, ed., *Graphic Reproduction: A Comics Anthology*

Olivier Kugler, *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees*

Judith Margolis, *Life Support: Invitation to Prayer*

Ian Williams, *The Lady Doctor*

Sarah Lightman, *The Book of Sarah*

Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock, *Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*

Ephameron, *Us Two Together*

Scott T. Smith and José Alaniz, eds., *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability*

Susan Merrill Squier and Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff, eds., *PathoGraphics: Narrative, Aesthetics, Contention, Community*

Swann Meralli and Deloupy, *Algériennes: The Forgotten Women of the Algerian Revolution*

Aurélien Ducoudray and Jeff Pourquié, *The Third Population*

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acknowledgments

This is the first anthology I've edited, and it's been a learning experience. Editing an anthology is something that, in the idea stage, feels very straightforward, but in execution it isn't. Thank you to each of the artists in this volume for their willingness, timeliness, enthusiasm, patience, and encouragement.

Thank you to Susan Squier for advice, insight, editing, and role modeling; to Ann Fox for her great mind and generous spirit; to Kendra Boileau for believing in

and supporting this project from my first mention of it; to Nicola Streeten for additional resources and encouragement (and for being Nicola); to Judith A. Houck for historical background on the treatment of women during perimenopause; to Peggy Mason for information on the neurology of menopause; to Mita Mahato and Sarah Leavitt for always having my back; to our amazing worldwide Graphic Medicine community who inspire me every day; and to my wife Cindy, once again, for everything.

introduction

MK Czerwiec

My mother died when she was ninety-three years old, in October of my forty-ninth year. Her older sister died in March of my fiftieth year. Caring for the two of them had consumed much of my time, and my identity, for the preceding decade. Once they were both gone, the way my life suddenly changed was disorienting. Because I had also helped care for my disabled father and had worked as a nurse, much of my life had revolved around caregiving responsibilities. But after the death of my mother and my aunt, and for the first time since I was seventeen years old, no person was looking to me for care. No one needed my help with checkbooks, groceries, dressing, errands, house maintenance, the bathroom. No more weekly anxious morning drives to the western suburbs of Chicago or exhausted, late-night drives home. No more desperate phone calls between visits requiring me to vacate my life to salvage theirs.

Then, in April of my fiftieth year, hot flashes arrived—and with them came weight gain, palpitations, sudden bouts of sadness, fatigue, bloating, unexplained agitation, swollen feet, food cravings, random anxiety, and tingling hands. Which was more disorienting, my elder-care empty nest or this cascade of symptoms that culminated with my bursting into a profuse sweat every fifteen minutes?

It didn't matter, because it was all happening at once. It became impossible to separate the symptoms of grieving from the symptoms of perimenopause, the emotional from the hormonal. I felt like I was being pulled into a dark abyss.

I also felt woefully unprepared for all of this.

Eventually, I did what I have done in previous challenging times of my life: I turned to popular culture. More specifically, I turned to comics. Unfortunately, the comics I could find about menopause were not very helpful, and sometimes they were even hurtful. Most of them were either single-panel jokes about hot flashes or expressions of this or that symptom of perimenopause as an inconvenience to a husband or a male partner. Instead of feeling seen and empowered, I felt further isolated and belittled.

The first (and only, as far as I can tell) book-length collection of comics about menopause seems to have appeared in 1950 and was titled *Minnie Pauses to Reflect*, by Nora Preddy. The dedication of Preddy's forty-panel collection of single-page comics sets the tone for the work. It reads, "To my husband for his patience with me in mine."

The women in *Minnie Pauses* are frequently portrayed as judging one another



TILLIE THE TEARFUL

He: "Buckets of tears! Buckets of tears! Why don't you dry up? I've tried everything. Now I'm going home to Mother! Good-by!"

She: "Boo-hoo-hoo-hoooooo oo o!"

through menopause, or who have already been through it, to make comics about their experiences and about how they coped. This book collects those responses. The comics in this collection represent a range of life experiences, professions, ages, gender and sexual identities, ethnicities, and health states.

I feel deep gratitude not only for the wonderful comics in this collection but also for what the contributors shared about what they gained from making these comics. For some, these are the first comics they have made. Others, who have been making comics for years reported that this one was different. Many expressed being changed by the process, as their understanding of menopause was deepened by the experience of drawing about it.

Managing this time of our lives takes a team. We feel as though we go through menopause alone, but that's only true if we allow it to be. Constantly struggling to pull ourselves out of torpor, stiffness, and ache is not easy work. We need to be supportive of one another and of ourselves. I was fortunate enough to find an older therapist, who has the vitality of a woman who has survived menopause, and a young athletic trainer, who has the advantage of not really knowing that any of it is coming. After I established a support system, more life change required that I move two states away. In doing this I realized the importance (and fragile nature) of my new support system. My period returned after a five-month hiatus, as did the fatigue, grief, food cravings, seeking comfort in drinking—all of it—and I felt alone. Again. I'm now remembering what helps and what doesn't, and finding the will to reach out. Again.

for inappropriate management of symptoms (not seeking surgery or taking hormone medications, eating or drinking excessively). Most of the comics demonstrate how inconvenient perimenopausal women are for just about everyone around them, particularly the men in their lives.

A new collection of comics was needed—one that shared stories that might actually be helpful, stories that encourage those of us facing the symptoms of perimenopause to find our voices rather than remain silent, to invite us into strength rather than push us further into shame. Thanks to the incredible energy of the growing Graphic Medicine community, the people who were perfectly suited to create this new collection of comics about menopause were a visit to social media, a website, or an email away.

I asked my comics idols and cherished colleagues to help me out. I asked powerful and inspiring role models who are going

We need to help one another brainstorm effective strategies for coping with menopause, knowing that there will be many different paths, many ups and downs. The comics in this collection testify to the importance of sharing our stories. My hope is that the work that appears in this collection can begin to offer a community of support. While it may be comforting to find humor in the absurdity of some of our symptoms, it's important to remember that menopause itself isn't a joke. Comparing stories—and breaking the silence around menopause—in ways that make us feel safe, valued, and empowered is important. It's freeing, and feeling free makes challenging things easier, giving us the communal space in which to find our own styles for living through the challenges of perimenopause. I hope this book of comics will be conducive to finding and embracing one's own style, the way artists must do for their work.

My artistic and academic work has been informed and deepened by perspectives arising from the disability rights movement, particularly by the idea of *adaptation*, which asks: How do we adapt to the bodies we find ourselves in? How must our adaptations change with our bodies over time? Portrait artist and disability rights activist Riva Lehrer writes in her August 2017 *New York Times* op-ed piece, "Where All Bodies Are Exquisite," that "the magical thing about bodies [is that] they respond to the unexpected with their own forms of poetic genius." The symptoms of approaching menopause *feel* unexpected and unpredictable. Most of us aren't told about the complexities of what is coming. We are left searching for a trail of clues leading to an

understanding of our own bodies and what they are doing.

We can benefit greatly from teaching and learning truths about our bodies, such as how menopause works for a range of individuals and how we can find ways to adapt. What better medium than comics to do this important work? Comics have a long history of taking on stigmatized topics. They make literal the metaphors we use to describe our bodies, and they can be playful and enjoyable, even if the topic they tackle is not. Most of all, comics give us a sense of community. The work that Graphic Medicine does so well is crucial because it pulls the focus away from what one person (you, or I) needs to do to manage menopause. Rather than making it a problem of the individual (as in Predy's comics), Graphic Medicine allows us to focus on understanding how the knowledge we gain as a collective, and the options this opens for us, can move us from isolation to community, from problem to poetic genius.

When my mother was descending into the dementia that dominated her last few years, her parting words to me were always, "Take care of yourself." Though I appreciated her thoughtfulness, I also wondered what message she was actually trying to send me. Was it some kind of warning arising from her life regrets? Her advice also frustrated me. I had heard the same words as a nurse—that to survive prioritizing the needs of others over our own needs, we should "take care of ourselves." But what does this really mean? Get manicures and occasional massages? Buy a fancy new pair of shoes now and then? Have a glass or three of wine every night? (There is constant messaging around us to self-soothe with alcohol. For an eye-opening

examination of this phenomenon, see *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol* by Ann Dowsett Johnston.) Too many of us are forced to resort to quick ways of numbing ourselves because that is the easiest thing to do, and we don't have the time or energy for more than what we are already doing.

How can we instead invite ourselves to respond to menopause with poetic genius? How can we respond with style? How can I adapt the way I have tried to generously love others in my life to how I love myself? How

can I revise my life's role models away from women who perhaps felt their only option for survival was to give themselves away, or to judge their own and others' failures, toward people who know their worth, possess their own power, and support one another?

These comics are, I hope, a strong push in that direction. There are more to be made. Consider picking up a pen and trying one.

Now that's taking care of yourself.

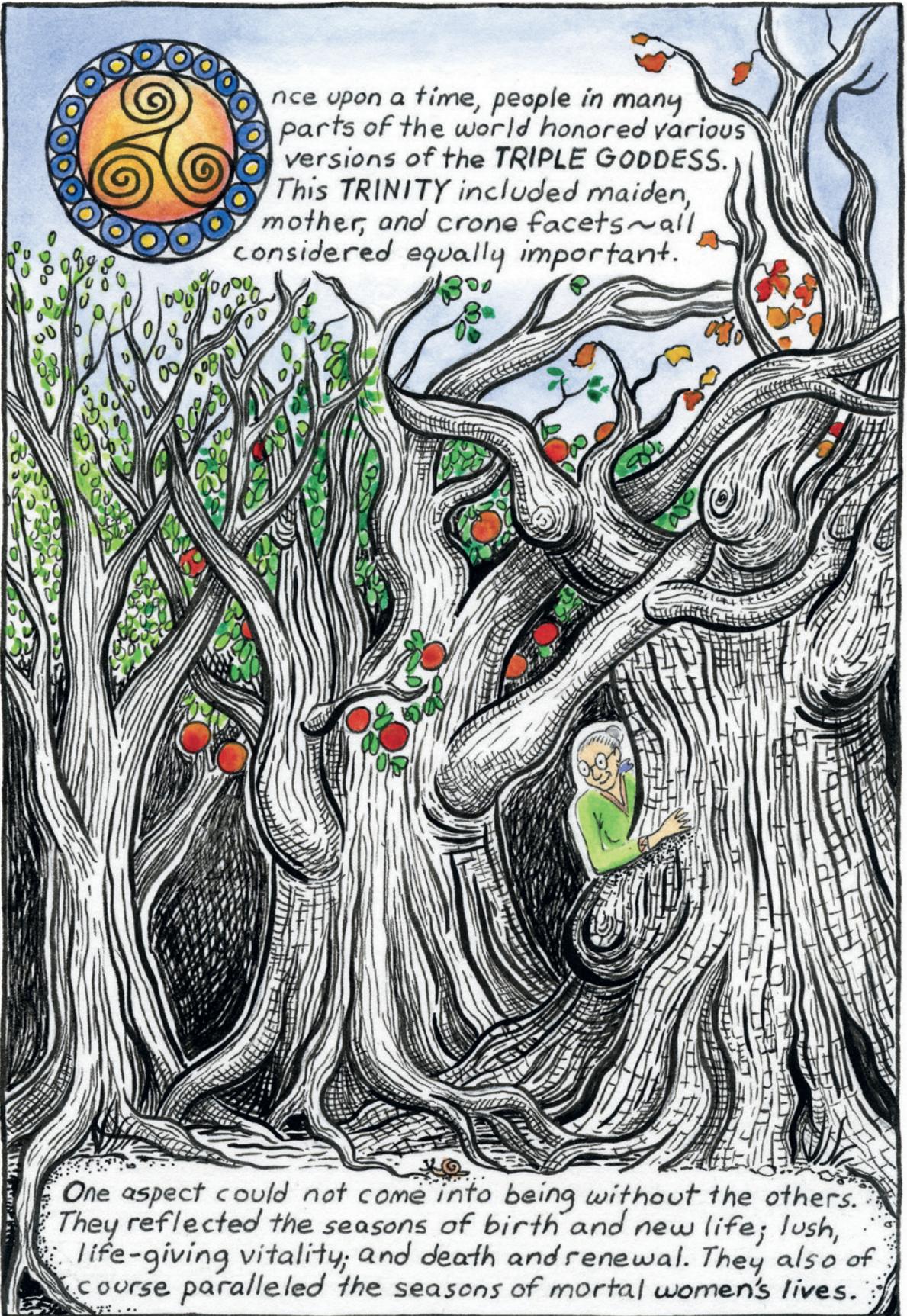
MENOPAUSE



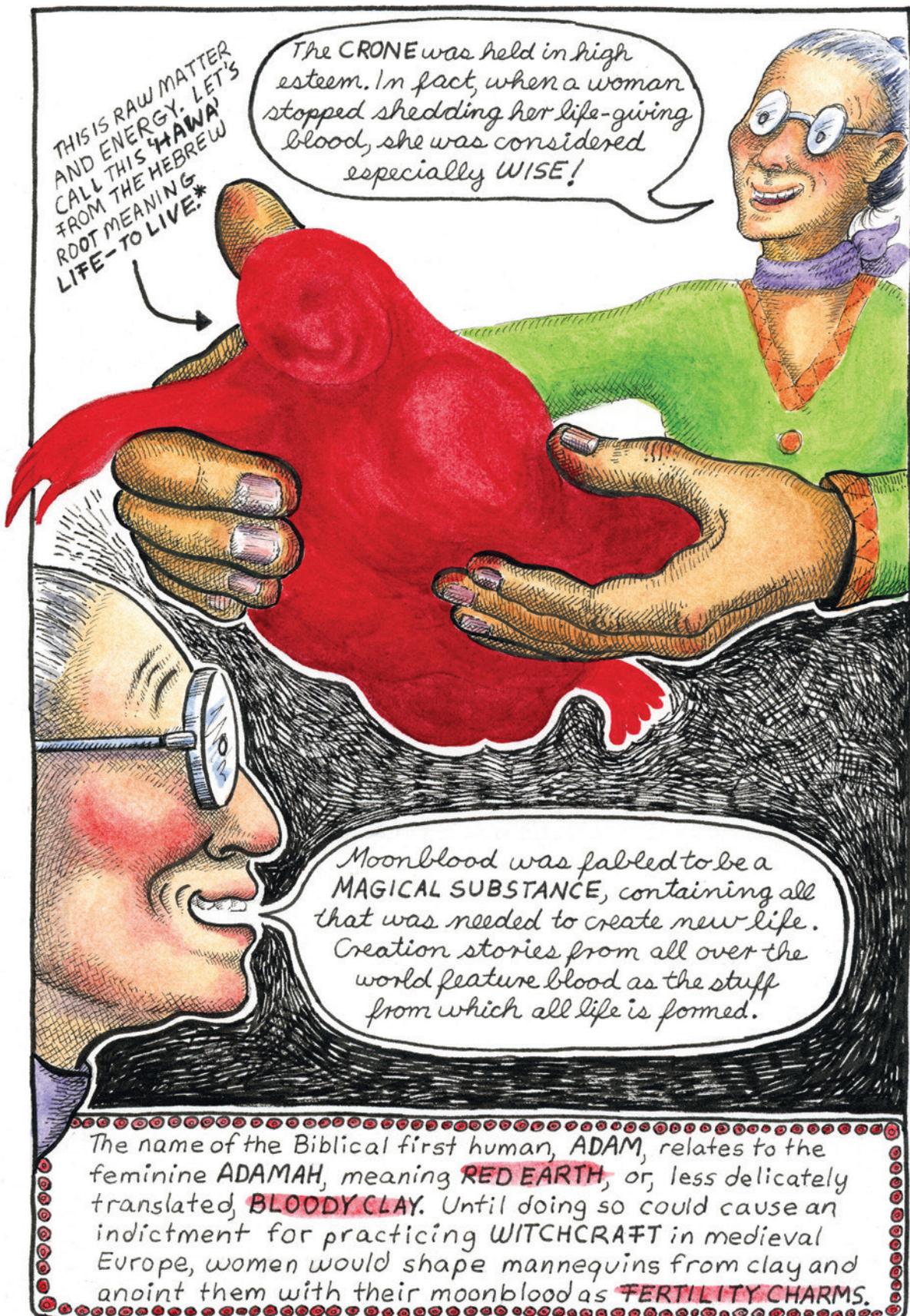
Maureen Burdock



nce upon a time, people in many parts of the world honored various versions of the **TRIPLE GODDESS**. This **TRINITY** included maiden, mother, and crone facets ~ all considered equally important.



One aspect could not come into being without the others. They reflected the seasons of birth and new life; lush, life-giving vitality; and death and renewal. They also of course paralleled the seasons of mortal women's lives.



THIS IS RAW MATTER AND ENERGY. LET'S CALL THIS **HAWA** FROM THE HEBREW ROOT MEANING **LIFE--TO LIVE.***

The **CRONE** was held in high esteem. In fact, when a woman stopped shedding her life-giving blood, she was considered especially **WISE!**

Moonblood was fabled to be a **MAGICAL SUBSTANCE**, containing all that was needed to create new life. Creation stories from all over the world feature blood as the stuff from which all life is formed.

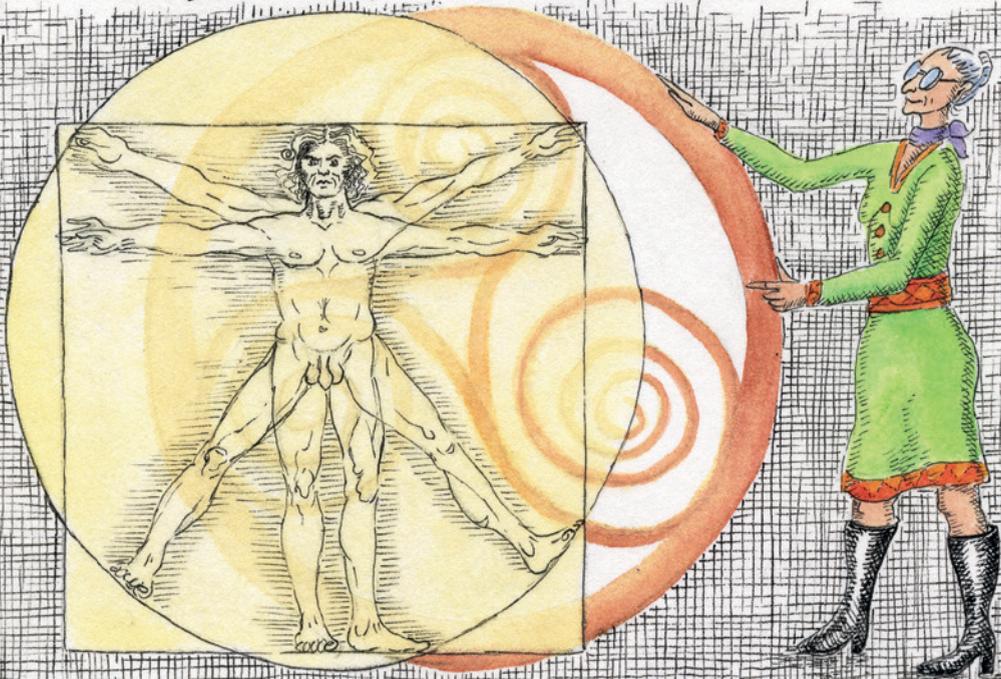
The name of the Biblical first human, **ADAM**, relates to the feminine **ADAMAH**, meaning **RED EARTH**, or, less delicately translated, **BLOODY CLAY**. Until doing so could cause an indictment for practicing **WITCHCRAFT** in medieval Europe, women would shape mannequins from clay and anoint them with their moonblood as **FERTILITY CHARMS**.

* **HAWA** IS ALSO THE ROOT OF THE NAME **EVE**.

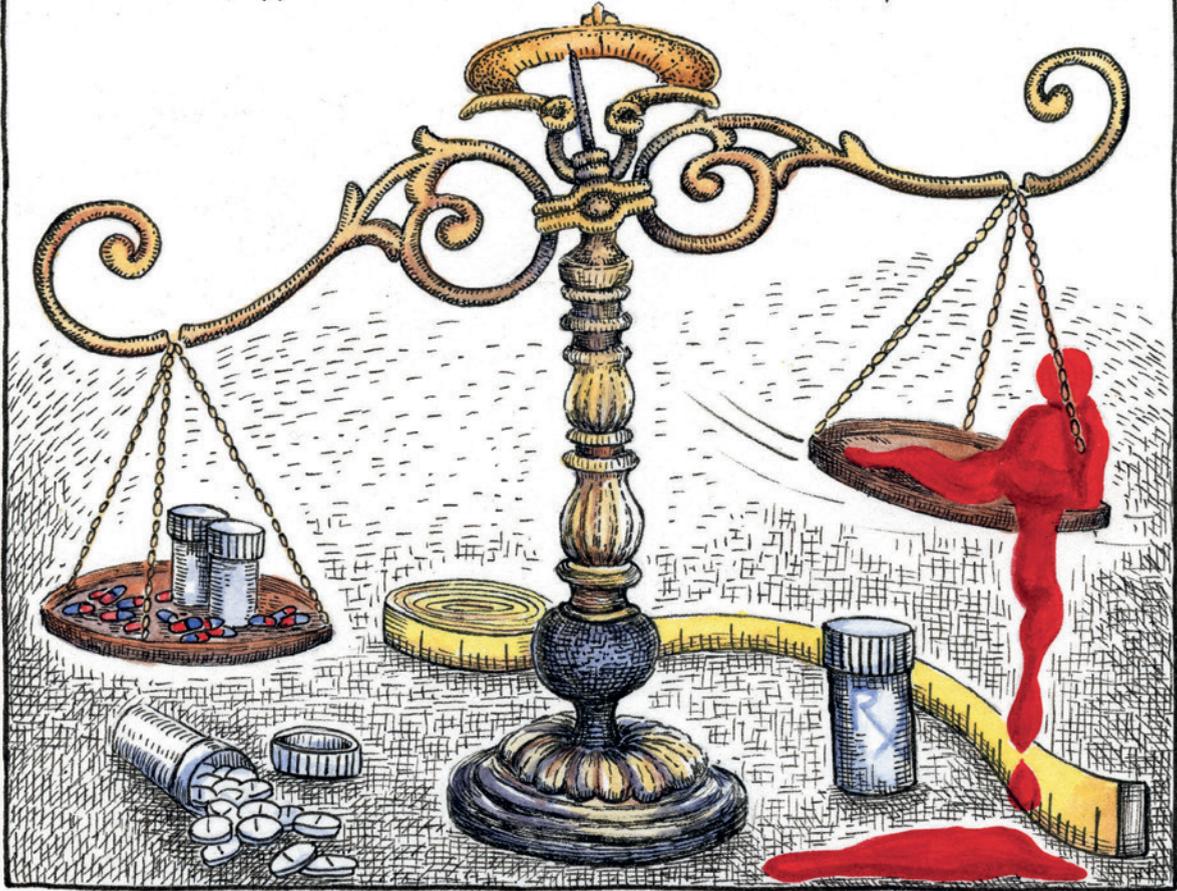
So...when a woman stopped her menses, it meant she kept all of that vitality **WITHIN**. Instead of using her magical power to gestate babies, she was **FREE** to create **ANYTHING** she chose.



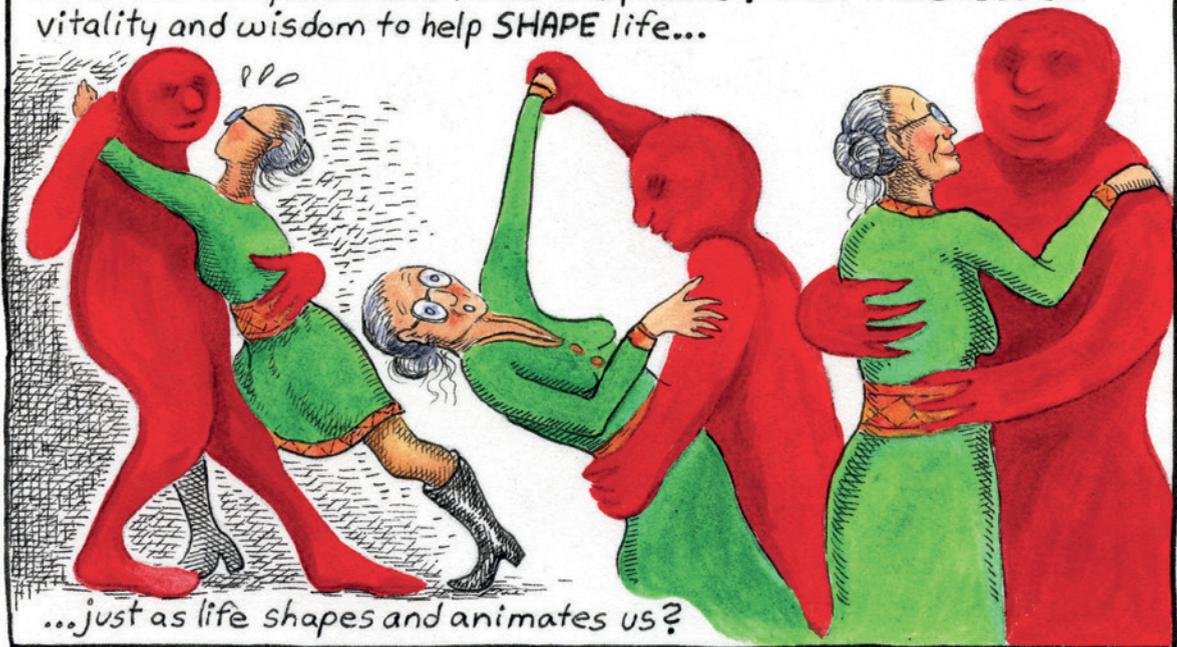
Speaking of **WHEELS**, when patriarchal sensibilities took over, instead of the ever-turning wheel of life that honored seasons and life's cycles, the central image of perfection and health began to feature an idealized male. Deviations from this "norm" were pathologized. Menopause became a condition to be managed.

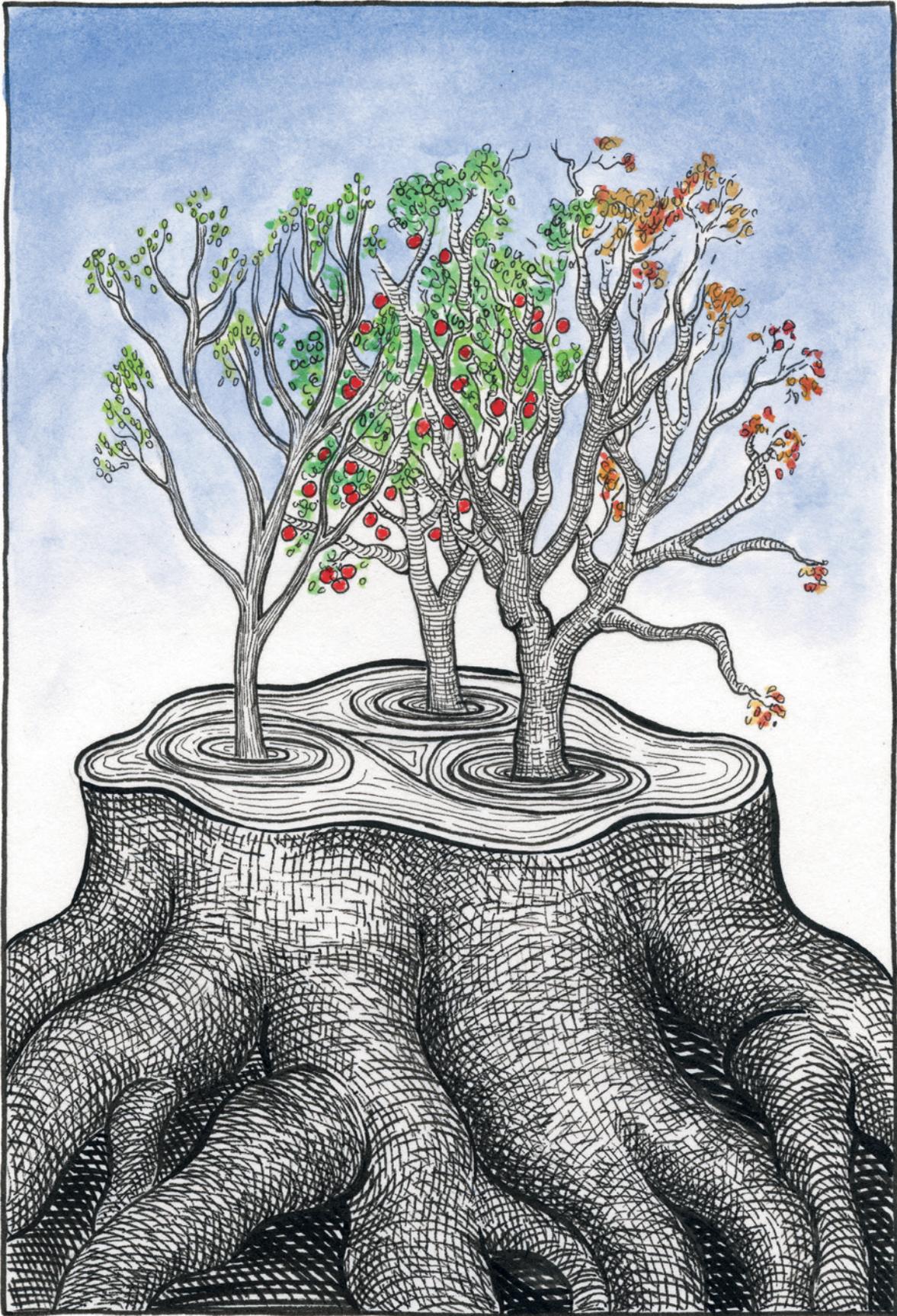


What if we stopped *MANAGING* and *MEASURING* life quite so much?



What if we spent more time *EMBRACING* and *CELEBRATING* life, in all of its many malleable forms and phases? What if we used our vitality and wisdom to help *SHAPE* life...



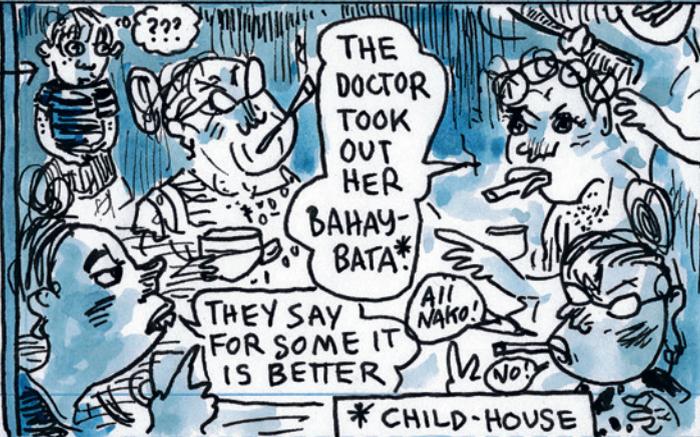


MENO POSITIVE!

LYNDABARRY

2018

LIKE A LOT OF KIDS, MY IDEAS ABOUT CERTAIN THINGS CAME FROM EAVES-DROPPING ON ADULTS, LIKE MY GRANDMA, MY AUNTS, AND THEIR FRIENDS SMOKING AND DRINKING COFFEE



(AND) SO SHE HAD A BABY HOUSE INSIDE OF HER. WHO? AUNTIE COOKIE. AND THE DOCTOR TOOK IT OUT.



THIS WAS IN THE 1970'S WHEN A RECORD NUMBER OF WOMEN UNDERWENT HYSTERECTOMY, INCLUDING MY MOTHER AND MANY OF MY RELATIVES.

MENOPAUSE DIDN'T HAPPEN IN A NATURAL WAY FOR THEM, AND EVERYONE SEEMED TO FEEL PRETTY GOOD ABOUT HAVING NO UTERUS, EXCEPT MY GRANDMA WASN'T INTO IT, THOUGH.



ACROSS THE STREET THE REACTION TO ME SAYING "GOD LOVES UTERUS" WAS MIXED.



THEY CALLED IT 'THE CHANGE.'



THEY HAD AN ARGUMENT ABOUT TAKING HORMONES. TURNS OUT 'GOD DON'T LIKE HORMONES.'



I DON'T THINK I MENTIONED MY CHANGE ONCE.



I LOVED EAVES-DROPPING IN A WAY THAT JUST VANISHED ONCE I HIT MY TEENS AND GOD'S HORMONES HIT ME.



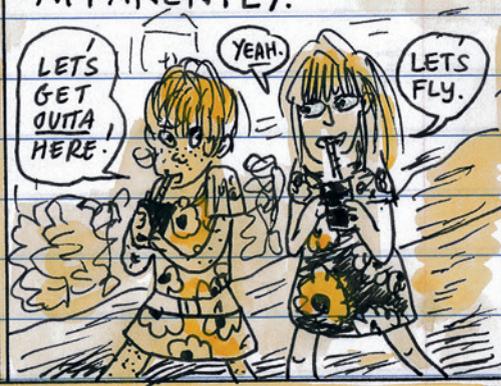
THE LAST PLACE I WANTED TO BE WAS IN A ROOM FULL OF WOMEN BITCHING ABOUT NOT BEING YOUNG. I WAS SO YOUNG, → THAT WAS HOW I SAW IT: THEY LOST WHATEVER THEY HAD HAD.



THE UTERUS SEEMED TO HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH IT.



IT TURNS ON YOU, APPARENTLY.



THAT'S ABOUT ALL I KNEW ABOUT MENOPAUSE FOR THE NEXT 40 YEARS.



MY FIRST HOT FLASH WAS A LOT LIKE MY FIRST PERIOD IN TERMS OF EXCITEMENT AND MY DISBELIEF.



MAY 2002
KROCH'S AND
BRENTANO'S
BOOKSTORE